

NATION

STATES 360°

In focus this week: Haryana, Jharkhand, Odisha, Bihar



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NATION

SAY HELLO TO BLIND FAITH

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Straws in the electoral wind

All its bluster notwithstanding, there's enough and more circumstantial evidence that the BJP is struggling in these elections

Uttam Sengupta

It's becoming clear that the BJP is under pressure in the ongoing elections. Even in the northern states, where barely weeks ago few would have given the opposition parties a fighting chance. His critics and admirers are both listening closely to prime minister Narendra Modi's words, alert to the tiniest inflections. In his campaign speeches and in the sudden rash of interviews he has obliged various media players with. Those words, straight from the horse's mouth, should indeed be revealing, considering all the trusty sources that provide ground-intelligence inputs to the horse.

If the bare fact of these staged interviews were not already a signal that there was a perceived need to (re)build a narrative, there are also noticeable changes in theme, tone and tenor, and those changes are revealing to all but those who make and sell all the paraphernalia of the cult of Modi.

His critics obviously wish the BJP loses this election and loses it badly. They are finding his speeches incoherent and his U-turns an indication of how rattled he is. For example, his assertion that a Congress government would take away everything from everyone else and give it to Muslims. The prime minister has obligingly provided this lot with more grist in his campaign speeches (just say 'mangalsutra' or 'buffalo' and watch their reaction).

His admirers focus on the prime minister's energy, his ability to meet punishing schedules at the age of 74. For them, there is no question of Modi retiring from active politics at 75, never mind that the rule applies to lesser mortals in the BJP. He is unquestionably fit for another term, they gush, countering Arvind Kejriwal's recent bombshell that Amit Shah, who is still in his 50s—even if he looks deceptively older—will replace Modi as prime minister next year, should the NDA win. His devotees still expect Modi to pull a rabbit out of the hat and ensure that the NDA sails past the 400-seats mark. They still find his election speeches 'clever', 'smart', designed to grab headlines and confuse the Opposition.

The most noticeable U-turn he made in the interviews was to completely disavow that his campaign speeches had communal overtones. Doing so, he said in one such interview to a TV channel, would render him unfit for public life. For his fans in the media, this was ample proof he was not rattled, that he was now certain of victory, and didn't have to pretend to be, in the colourful vocabulary of right-wing trolls, a 'sickular librandu'.

However, Congress's data analytics man

Praveen Chakravarty, also now the chairman of the All India Professionals' Congress, says nobody really knows the election score at this point in time. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union home minister Amit Shah, by virtue of being the PM's confidant, are the two most likely, he says, to know the approximate numbers. They will be receiving daily progress reports from the Intelligence Bureau and friendly foreign powers, and are the best election weather vanes.

Chakravarty calculates that the prime minister delivered as many as 81 speeches between 9 March and 8 May this year. Till mid-April, his speeches were peppered with boasts of 'Abki baar, 400 paar'. The reference to '400 paar' tapered off, then stopped, as the prime minister started amping up the anti-Muslim rhetoric. He started talking of Muslims usurping national resources. He began attacking the Congress manifesto, and said a Congress government would be weak, divisive and disastrous. In a return to the BJP's old favourite Muslim-appeasement song to berate the Congress, he said the party just wanted to appease its favourite minority, and end all reservations for OBCs, SC and STs and give them to Muslims.

In the first week of May, he changed direction. Somewhat out of the blue, he accused the two largest business houses in the country, owned by the Adanis and Ambanis, of sending sackfuls of black money in "tempos" to the Congress. That comment set a cat among the pigeons—the stock market crashed and the Congress seized the opportunity to demand an

"There is a point to this backtracking—the BJP is getting word from the ground that the Yadavs, OBCs and Muslims are consolidating behind the INDIA bloc"

Photos courtesy: narendramodi.in



PM Modi on an interview spree: (Clockwise from top left) With Amish Devgan (News18), Chitra Tripathi (Aaj Tak), Arnab Goswami (Republic TV) and Rubika Liyaquat (News18)

investigation by the ED (Enforcement Directorate), the Income Tax department and the CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation). Never again, though: just as suddenly as he had lashed out, he fell completely silent on the Amabni-Adani "black money to Congress" charge. Significantly, not a single interviewer asked him to explain what he meant.

Earlier this week, in the face of video evidence to the contrary—quickly brought to public attention by fact-checker Mohammed Zubair—the prime minister denied ever describing Muslims as infiltrators and people who breed like mice. "I have never spoken of a Hindu-Muslim divide; if I do, I will no longer be fit for public life," he told Rubika Liyaquat of News18, when she asked if it was necessary for him to speak of Muslims in those terms. "Main hairan hoon ji... kisme aapko kah diya... Musalmaan ki baat kyun karte hain... gareebon ke bacche zyada hote hain... maine na Hindu kaha, aur na Musalmaan kaha," he said with righteous indignation.

A few days earlier, in an interview with Navika Kumar of Times Now, he was asked the same question. The prime minister presented a

picture of injured innocence. He grew up among Muslims, he said; he had several Muslim friends, and on Eid, Muslim neighbours sent food to his family. How could he possibly "do Hindu-Muslim"? He was merely stating facts and exposing the Congress manifesto, he said. To a third interviewer from another channel, he claimed he grew up participating in Muharram processions.

"There is a point to this backtracking—the BJP is getting word from the ground that the Yadavs, OBCs and Muslims are consolidating behind the INDIA bloc. Modi does not give a flying fish for Muslims, but he cannot afford that kind of consolidation. So, damage control," posted political analyst and commentator Prem Panicker.

The flurry of media interviews in the first fortnight of May, upwards of 20 by some estimates, have by themselves set tongues wagging. It is unlike Modi to offer clarifications and justifications. Why, then, is he giving so many interviews, sometimes more than once to the same channel in one week? On questions doubtless prompted by the PMO in advance. Paid PR? None of these scrupulous TV inter-

viewers, from media companies that all claim to bring you the unvarnished truth, has interviewed Rahul Gandhi even once.

Some say the prime minister wants to create a more personable persona for himself, that he may even be preparing for a graceful exit, just in case... Elections are farthest from his mind, he told Times Now. Yeah, right!

After the fourth round of polling, Amit Shah blurted out that by his reckoning, the NDA was set to win 190 of 380 seats where voting had concluded. The inscrutable mask was back on the next day: "Modiji has already won 270 seats and secured a majority"; the target now is '400 paar'. Asked by CNBC to comment on the stock market crash, Shah advised investors, with an all-knowing smile, to buy now because on counting day (4 June), the markets would surely shoot up again. He could be bluffing to keep up the morale of party workers or scheming behind the scenes to engineer a victory or he may know for certain. Who can tell?

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STATES 360° WEST BENGAL



Hope springs left, right and centre

...and why it looks like the BJP high command has miscalculated the gains it can make here

Shikha Mukerjee

Everyone has high hopes in West Bengal, this time. Each of the four principal contestants—the Trinamool Congress, the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Congress and the Left, led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist)—believes it will win more seats in 2024 compared to both the 2019 Lok Sabha elections and the 2021 state assembly elections.

On the face of it, the political space in West Bengal seems fairly settled after the radical rearrangements it underwent, first in 2011 with Mamata Banerjee's spectacular triumph over the CPI (M)-led Left Front, which ended 34 uninterrupted years of the Left being in power. The second shakedown was in 2019, when the BJP, riding a wave of

nationalist fervour post the Pulwama attack, won 18 Lok Sabha seats, and its vote share shot up from 17 per cent in the 2014 general election to over 40 per cent in 2019.

In many ways, the 2019 Lok Sabha election was a watershed. The Trinamool Congress seat tally dropped sharply, from 34 seats in 2014 to 22 seats in 2019, though its vote share increased to 43.3 per cent, keeping it ahead of the BJP as the new challenger.

The major shift in voter preference was from the Left to the BJP. In 2014, its vote share was close to 30 per cent—this dropped to 7.5 per cent in 2019. The decline in the Congress vote share was around 5 per cent, a big loss but one that did not radically alter its ranking.

Given that between them the Trinamool Congress and the BJP snared 40 out of the 42

Lok Sabha constituencies in West Bengal, with the Congress winning two seats and the CPI(M) none, the expectation that each will improve its position in 2024 is intriguing.

It is not as though the dominant Trinamool Congress is visibly weaker or in turmoil, thereby creating an opportunity for the BJP to expand its footprint and usurp territory. As of now, there is no challenge to Mamata Banerjee's leadership, there are no succession fights underway and the control of the organisation is still very much in her hands.

As the party with the most at stake in this general election, the BJP declared at the outset that it would win 35 seats in West Bengal. Adding 18 seats would take it closer to the target of 370 seats announced by prime minister Narendra Modi in his last speech at the concluding session of the 17th Lok Sabha.

That was an unrealistic target.

From establishing leads in 121 assembly segments in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP's tally dropped to only 77 seats in the 2021 state assembly elections, registering a loss of advantage in 44 seats. These losses included assembly seats in North Bengal where it had scooped seven out of eight seats in the Lok Sabha election.

Since the rout in the 2021 state assembly election, the BJP's problems have actually grown. There is friction within the party between the old guard who nurtured the BJP's expansionist drive and the new entrants, almost all of whom moved from the Trinamool Congress, led by Suwendu Adhikari and his associates.

There are differences within the BJP on political strategy and which issues to pitch to



Mamata Banerjee with the Matua community in Betai, West Bengal, 2 May 2024

voters. The disconnect between the party's high command, middle rung and grassroots is likely to damage its prospects in this election.

The BJP may also have miscalculated on the return it can expect from a botched notification of the rules under the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The failure of its relentless communally divisive campaign, as proven by the 2021 state assembly results, suggests that the BJP has limited understanding of the political-social-cultural issues in West Bengal.

What the BJP lacks is what the CPI(M) has in large quantities—deep roots and formidable organisational muscle memory that came into play in full force during the enforced and abrupt Covid lockdown. Without needing directions, bands of Red Volunteers sprang into action organising relief and emergency services. This is what the CPI(M) has always done and it earned the party the goodwill it had lost in recent years.

Reconnecting with the people in urban areas and working at recovering its rural bases over the past three years leads the CPI(M) to believe its vote share will increase and that it can win more than one seat in this election.

With spiralling confrontations between the opposition and the Modi-led BJP over fundamentals enshrined in the Constitution, the successful establishment of an opposition bloc—the Indian National Inclusive Developmental Alliance—is proof that the CPI(M) and the Trinamool Congress can work together when it is politically imperative.

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STATES 360°

HARYANA

Farmers turn up the heat on the BJP

Posters have come up across the state warning BJP candidates and campaigners against entering villages

Rashme Sehgal

The timing and ferocity of the farmers' protests across Haryana has caught the BJP by surprise. Having successfully driven wedges between different farmers' organisations, sowed doubts and kept leaders busy in protracted dialogues over the last two years, how could it realistically expect their anger to have dissipated? With campaigning in full swing for the 10 Lok Sabha seats in Haryana (all won by the BJP in 2019), the BJP has received a rude shock.

Posters have come up across the state warning BJP candidates and campaigners against entering villages. As farmers intensified protests in Hisar, Sirsa, Fatehabad, Jind, Sonapat and Rohtak districts, candidates forcing their way through have often been physically stopped.

Last week, farmers blocked former deputy chief minister Dushyant Chautala's mother Naina Chautala's entourage from entering Roj Khara in the Hisar Lok Sabha constituency. In the violent clash that followed, some of her supporters were hurt. Most BJP and Jannayak Janta Party (JJP) candidates have now been provided security cover to enable them to campaign.

Even so, the entire Chautala clan, including father Ajay Chautala and his other son Digvijay, as well as BJP's Hisar nominee Ranjit Singh Chautala, are being heckled and prevented from entering village after village. Farmers holding black flags opposed Dushyant's cavalcade from entering Nara and Gamra villages, forcing him to walk.

BJP candidates in Punjab have met with similar expressions of anger by villagers who are in no mood to overlook the wounds inflicted on them during the 2020-21 agitation against the three draconian farm laws and the sacrifices made by their 'brothers' in order to get them repealed.

Memories of the 'Dilli Chalo' agitation have been revived. The way authorities used iron nails, barbed wire and concrete barricades to prevent the farmers from bringing their protests to the doorstep of the capital is something they are not willing to forgive or forget.

Farmers' organisations in Punjab have put up posters stating, 'Kisana da Delhi jana bandh hai, BJP da pinda vich auna bandh hai (Farmers are banned from entering Delhi, BJP is banned from entering villages)'. Videos have gone viral on Facebook and Instagram.

Baldev Singh Zira, general secretary of the BKU (Bharatiya Kisan Union) Krantikari group, condemned the government for the death of Shubhakaran Singh and the use of



Farmers protest at the Haryana-Punjab border at Shambhu, 21 February 2024

Photo: Getty Images

tear gas and pellets that have blinded many. The long shadow of those actions saw farmers laying siege to the Moti Bagh Palace residence of former Punjab chief minister Amarinder Singh after a protester was killed at a poll meeting being addressed by Preet Kaur, his wife and BJP candidate from Patiala.

Confusion has been compounded by the switching over of several Congress candidates, including Preet Kaur, who has been a four-time MP from the Congress and had worked along with her husband Captain Amarinder Singh (then also in the Congress) to put pressure on the Modi government to repeal the farm laws in 2021. Or take the case of Ravneet Singh Bittu, a sitting Congress MP from Ludhiana who has recently moved to the BJP which has fielded him from the same seat this time. Bittu has also been at the receiving end of the farmers' ire, despite his reminding them that he supported them right through their agitation, even sleeping on the ground in the freezing cold at Jantar Mantar in solidarity.

The one candidate who has succeeded in mollifying the angry farmers somewhat is Hans Raj Hans, the popular Sufi singer who was earlier an MP from north-west Delhi but is now contesting from Faridkot. He goes from village to village begging for

forgiveness. Though he has been shown away on occasion, he believes their anger is somewhat tempered. Off the record, he likes to joke that his name should now be changed to 'Minnat Raj Minnat' (Pleader Raj Pleading) since all he has done in this election is plead with the farmers.

Former Haryana chief minister Manohar Lal Khattar's recent tactless remark, "Kuch log sirphirey aise hote hain jo apni dabang chahate hain (some people are so crazy and wayward, flaunting and flexing their authority), the more they protest, the more people associate themselves with the Bharatiya Janata Party", has spurred further protests.

On 21 April, a day after Khattar's comment, farmers staged a protest against BJP's Sirsa candidate Ashok Tanwar during his public meeting in Dabwali town. The farmers' intention to gherao him was stymied by a police cordon around him.

According to Pagri Sambhal Jatta Kisan Sangharsh Samiti, a farmers' union which is part of the Samyukta Kisan Morcha, these protests are all part of 'Jawab Do, Hisab Lo' (Answer and be accountable).

The BJP brass had hoped that getting a large number of Congressmen to cross over into their fold would mollify the farmers' anger but this has not happened. Since

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Straws in the electoral wind

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Shah's reputation as a cunning, know-it-all Chanakya was dented, however, in his home state of Gujarat. The party appears to be in turmoil, even after polling got over in the state on 7 May. Newspaper headlines screaming 'BJP ma babaal' (Turmoil in the BJP) are hard to miss. A failure to prevent a BJP legislator from withdrawing in favour of his nominee for the post of IFFCO (Indian Farmers Fertiliser Cooperative) director. Shah himself called on the rebel MLA, Jayesh Radadiya, but Radadiya was defiant and defeated Shah's candidate Bipin Patel. Is the hold of the Modi-Shah duo weakening in their home state?

There are other signs of churn. Uttar Pradesh, where the BJP had appeared invincible, especially after the consecration of the Ram Mandir, looks far more vulnerable now, especially in eastern Uttar Pradesh, where polling is due in the next three phases. Priyanka Gandhi's presence in Amethi and Rae Bareilly has brought the election alive even in adjoining constituencies. Mayawati has tried to arrest the drift of Dalit voters from the BJP to the INDIA bloc, and the BJP will hope she succeeds.

Even a few weeks ago, close contests seemed unlikely in Uttar Pradesh, but the BJP no longer looks invincible, not even in its strongholds. Akhilesh Yadav's decision to contest from Kannauj, which the BJP had won in 2019, is seen as a game-changer in the region, and may well affect the outcome in Kanpur as well.

Controversial former BRI (Wrestling Federation of India) chief Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, dropped by the BJP in favour of his son, embarrassed the party by saying that he did not agree with Yogi Adityanath's 'bulldozer Raj'. Another Rajputan close to the BJP, Raja Bhaiyya, a.k.a. 'Kunda ka Gunda' (so named by former UP chief minister Kalyan Singh), declared that his supporters were free to vote for whoever they liked.

Reports that Amit Shah was camping

in Uttar Pradesh and officials strengthened speculation that chief minister Yogi Adityanath was being sidelined and would be replaced after the election.

In Bihar, Tejashwi Yadav is on a roll. He caused a flutter when he said that Nitish Kumar may be in the NDA physically, but he was spiritually with the INDIA bloc. Nitish gave prime minister Modi's nomination in Varanasi a miss on grounds of illness, providing further grist for the rumour mills.

In West Bengal, Left voters who had swelled the BJP's vote percentage in 2019, are said to be returning to the Left, a possibility the BJP had not foreseen. Despite the deployment of CAPF (Central Armed Police Forces) personnel in large numbers at the request of the BJP, at least three BJP candidates in Bengal—Jaganath Sarkar in Ranaghat, Dilip Ghosh in East Bardhaman-Durgapur and 'Rajmata' Amrita Roy, who is taking on Mahua Moitra of Trinamool Congress in Krishnanagar—have accused the CAPF of helping Trinamool Congress. Sandeshkhali and CAA (the Citizenship Amendment Act), issues the BJP was banking on to corner Mamata Banerjee's TMC, seem to have fizzled out.

Even in BJP-ruled Uttar Pradesh, sitting BJP member of Parliament from

Akhilesh Yadav's decision to contest from Kannauj, which the BJP had won in 2019, is seen as a game-changer in the region, and may well affect Kanpur too



Photo: Getty Images

Kannauj Subrat Pathak fumed at security forces in a polling booth and warned that he would initiate vigilance inquiries against them all. At the very least, these are signs that the ruling party's grip is slackening. Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav, who is taking on Pathak and is widely expected to win, also complained that the police were not allowing voters to reach booths to cast their votes.

Two hundred kilometres from Kannauj, in Bareilly, also in UP, another video went viral of two home guards assaulting a man and berating him for accepting free rations from the government and yet voting against the government. The victim was reportedly a Dalit watchman and had objected to the home guards mouthing obscenities at people voting against the BJP.

Political scientist Suhas Palshikar articulated what may be on the minds of many citizens. 'A worrying thought: if, after numerous machinations and system takeovers, the ruling party is cut to size, what sabotage and mayhem will it unleash?' A voter in Bengaluru last month warned that voters must ensure

that the person inking their finger actually releases the control unit before they cast their vote. Some polling personnel are in cahoots with political parties, he said, warning that they may try to dupe gullible voters into thinking that they had cast their votes when, in fact, the control unit has not been released to record the next vote. In Ujjain, voters accused a presiding officer of influencing voters with her chant of 'Modi-Modi' inside the booth. She was later suspended for her mistake.

At the end of the fourth round of polling, Yogenendra Yadav, co-founder of political party Swaraj India and a well-regarded psephologist in his earlier life, reasoned, with a state-wise break-up at the ready, that the BJP and NDA were struggling to reach the half-way mark. He said they would end up well below their 2019 tally, but he also agreed with Pradeep Gupta of polling agency Axis My India in ruling out a 1977-like scenario.

He still does not see the INDIA bloc securing below 200 seats or the NDA alliance securing 300 seats. So much for which way the wind is blowing. Go figure! ■

Hope springs left, right and centre

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The impact in West Bengal will be evident in the Lok Sabha election. The rivalry between the Trinamool Congress on the one hand and the Congress-CPI(M)-led Left on the other is no less: the difference is in singling out the BJP as their common enemy. While this is not a strategy chalked out in any dialogue between these parties, it seems to be a mutual understanding. As a nudge to voters, it could work. Dismayed by the rampant corruption in the Trinamool Congress, voters now have a choice—they could vote for the Congress-CPI(M) instead of the BJP. A decline in the latter's vote share would hurt its prospects in this election, while benefiting the former.

There is always the risk that the micro-motives that underlie individual voter preferences may not add up to the macro-outcome desired by the anti-BJP opposition. That is a chance both the Congress-CPI(M) and the Trinamool Congress seem prepared to take, because the stakes are very high at this point.

All three parties in opposition to the BJP share a common goal <beyond> the 2024 Lok Sabha election in West Bengal. The vacuum created after the CPI(M) was decimated was an open invitation to the BJP to step forward and fill it, which is what happened between 2016 and 2019 as the party's vote share and presence grew. Reclaiming the political space ahead of the 2026 state assembly elections is necessary as much for the Trinamool Congress as it is for the Congress-CPI(M) to prevent the BJP from disrupting social equilibrium with its agenda of triggering majoritarian paranoia in a state where there is little hostility against the widely dispersed primarily Bengali-speaking Muslim minority.

With three phases of polling still remaining in West Bengal, the contest has narrowed to a fight between the BJP on the one hand and the three parties in opposition to the BJP on the other. Every party hopes to emerge the winner, knowing that there will inevitably be a loser. ■

STATES 360° JHARKHAND



BJP's mineral-rich 'ATM' state has had enough of it

Nandal Sharma

The Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) is disappointed that President Droupadi Murmu, a former governor of Jharkhand, couldn't spare time to meet a delegation of party leaders led by chief minister Champai Soren, who had sought audience with Murmu. The new chief minister gave vent to his frustration by saying that BJP leaders seem to treat mineral-rich Jharkhand like an ATM machine. "They neither have any emotional connect with the people of Jharkhand nor are they serious about our issues", he added. Amusingly, the present state president and former chief minister Babulal Marandi had quit the BJP saying he was expected to raise money all the time. Marandi, whom critics call 'Babulal Marwari' for his alleged proximity to businessmen, is back to being the BJP president but his anti-corruption plank has lost much of its luster with his party patronising mine-owners and moneybags.

This is also the reason why the continued incarceration of former chief minister Hemant Soren has not dented his image or popularity. It has impacted JMM's election campaign and alienated tribals who believe that Soren was implicated in a frivolous case to prevent him from campaigning in the Lok Sabha election. The sense of hurt and alienation was evident in the traditional spring festival of Sarhul, when several floats in the pageant figured Soren behind bars. Adivasis tend to be stoic about injustice and prisons do not intimidate them; but the simmering anger one senses beneath their surface calm is unmistakable.

The Bharatiya Janata Party is finding it hard to justify Soren's imprisonment on corruption charges, and not only because their own hands are not quite clean. Soren is in prison for a benami land deal, an allegation he has denied. His arrest, however, is not the only grievance that tribals, who constitute less than one-third of the population of the state, hold against the saffron party.

Its troubles have been compounded by the PM and the home minister's anti-Muslim rhetoric. Jharkhand, though no stranger to communal riots and mob lynching incidents, has seen a spurt in communal rhetoric over the last decade. When Modi, addressing a rally in Chaibasa, asserted that he would not allow Jharkhand to be turned into Bengal, there was incomprehension among the people, simply because Muslims have lived in relative harmony in the state for so long.

Modi and Amit Shah's claim that reservation for SC-ST-OBCs is safe only as long as they are in power has failed to cut any ice. This is partly because it was the Hemant Soren-led government that passed the Bill to give OBCs 27 per cent reservation, which was stalled by the Governor, a nominee of

the Centre. (State-level BJP leaders are unable to explain why.) And partly because, contrary to the BJP's expectations, the Congress manifesto has actually become a reference point.

On a campaign stop in the state, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi spoke of the Opposition's commitment to a 'Sarna' code. The BJP and the RSS have always treated non-Christian tribals as Hindus. Tribals, however, have been demanding a separate identity, pointing out that they worship nature and follow the 'Sarna dharma'. They want the state to recognise their distinct identity, a demand to which the BJP has been cold.

There are other undercurrents. Resentment has been brewing against outsiders and migrants into Jharkhand after the state was formed in November 2000. These 'rent seekers' have usurped jobs, land, mining leases and contracts. They are also seen to dominate political parties, especially the two national parties. While the BJP, after experimenting with non-tribal Raghuraj Das as chief minister has fallen back on Babulal Marandi, the Congress continues to be led and micro-managed by non-tribal leaders from outside the state.

The clamour for a 'domicile' policy based on land records or the Bihar Bhumi Khatiyani dating back to 1932 is another major electoral issue, but is not reflected in the media. The INDIA bloc is cushioned somewhat because a bill proposing a new domicile policy was passed by the state assembly and sent to the Governor for assent by the JMM-led coalition government. The Governor has neither returned it nor given his assent. BJP leaders have stayed mum on an issue which it recognises as a minefield. On the ground, though, it is an important talking point not only for older people, but for both tribal and non-tribal youth. They want preference to be given to local residents in at least Group C and D jobs in the state and central government, as well as in the PSUs.

The sizeable and politically empowered Kurmi community, known as the 'Mahatos' in Jharkhand, are also up in arms. They had played an important role in the Jharkhand movement. Leaders like Binod Bihari Mahato and Nirmal Mahato had led the agitation from the front with Shibui Soren and A.K. Roy. The restive Kurmi youth have now come together under the banner of 'Jharkhand Loktantrik Krantikari Morcha' led by Jairam Mahato. The Morcha has fielded eight candidates for the Lok Sabha and could chip away the votes of both the BJP and the INDIA bloc, making elections in the state even more unpredictable.

The BJP was pressured to drop its sitting MP from Dhanbad, P.N. Singh, who has been winning the Lok Sabha seat for the last three elections, and forced to field one of its 'local' MLAs, Dhulu Mahato, from the seat. In the



JMM workers demonstrate against the BJP over the arrest of former chief minister Hemant Soren

Giridih Lok Sabha seat too, three Mahato candidates fielded by different political parties are the main contestants. The domicile policy is a key issue in both these constituencies. The BJP was compelled to field a new candidate from Hazaribagh as well, to counter the heat generated by the Morcha, which has spearheaded agitations in the region, demanding employment for local people in this belt dotted by coal mines, thermal power plants and steel plants.

In the last Lok Sabha election, the BJP had won 12 of the 14 seats in the state. The party had won the Dhanbad seat by a margin of over four lakh votes while the Giridih seat was also won by the BJP's ally, Chandra Prakash Choudhary of the AJSU (All Jharkhand Students' Union). This time the stiff challenge comes not just from the INDIA bloc but also the Morcha.

The Kurmis in the state, it is believed, had voted en masse for the BJP in both 2014 and 2019. The community has been asking for reservation and inclusion in the Scheduled Tribes list. In 2022 and in 2023, agitations had led to three 'Rail Roko' campaigns, which effectively brought train movement to a standstill for several days. The BJP had then promised to consider their dual demands. With the realisation that this

could alienate tribal voters in several states, the BJP has now decided to maintain a studied silence. Kurmis feel betrayed and are infuriated.

When Union minister Arjun Munda was the chief minister in 2004, recalls Ranchi-based activist Manzar Imam, he had forwarded a recommendation to include Kurmis in the ST list to New Delhi. As a Union minister dealing with tribal affairs, however, Munda dragged his feet and sought a report and recommendation from the Tribal Research Institute (TRI) in Ranchi. This too has added fuel to the fire and Munda, who is contesting from Khunti, is also feeling the heat. Ram Tahal Choudhary, a veteran Kurmi leader who had briefly left the BJP this year before returning to the fold, was heckled and manhandled when he went to campaign for Munda in the Tamar assembly constituency.

Jharkhand is a microcosm of India with diverse communities, cultures, languages and dialects. The BJP's one-size-fits-all prescription and its anti-minority virulence and talk of infiltrators from Bangladesh do not have the traction they receive elsewhere. The chances that the BJP would be able to repeat its 2019 performance in the state are slim. ■

The BJP's one-size-fits-all prescription and its anti-minority virulence and talk of infiltrators from Bangladesh do not get much traction in Jharkhand

STATES 360° ODISHA



Modi and the martial art of losing allies

Ashutosh Mishra

As the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ramps up its campaign in Odisha, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's desperation is mounting. The niceties that once characterised his relationship with the Odisha chief minister Naveen Patnaik—who is among the few regional satraps on whom the BJP-led NDA could rely to bail it out in Parliament—have been abandoned. The ferocity of the PM's attacks on Patnaik has compelled the usually mild-mannered chief minister to respond to the barbs of his one-time friend. This kind of a recriminatory campaign has rarely been seen in the state.

The first salvo in this war of words was fired by Modi when he addressed his maiden election rally in Odisha at Berhampur on 6 May, taunting Patnaik for his poor knowledge of Odia and Odia culture. On 11 May, while addressing rallies in Kandhamal, Bolangir and Bargarh Lok Sabha constituencies, Modi even questioned his knowledge about the state he ruled.

"Naveen Babu is the chief minister of Odisha for so many years. I want to challenge Naveen Babu. Why are people upset with you? Because (if) you make him stand anywhere and ask him to spell out the names of districts and their 'capital' he won't be able to do that. How can a chief minister, who cannot tell names of the districts and their headquarters, be expected to understand your plight?" asked Modi at Kandhamal.

In Bolangir, Modi invited people to ask Patnaik to name 10 villages in the Kantabanji assembly constituency from where Patnaik has filed his nomination papers this time along with his traditional seat (Hinjili in Ganjam). The Kantabanji assembly segment is part of the Bolangir Lok Sabha constitu-

ency, and Patnaik has chosen to contest it in a strategic move to contain the BJP's influence in western Odisha, where they had won all five Lok Sabha seats in 2019.

At Bargarh, the prime minister targeted Patnaik's Man Friday, the Tamil Nadu-born former IAS officer V.K. Pandian, who is the Biju Janata Dal's chief strategist in these elections. Taking a dig at Pandian, who is believed to be remote-controlling the government even after taking voluntary retirement from service and joining politics, Modi said, "Do you know the entire government in Odisha has been outsourced? There is a super CM (an obvious reference to Pandian) who is above the democratically-elected government and the chief minister. Do you want the state to go into the hands of those who have no understanding of Odisha?"

He then called upon people to vote for his party which, he said, was the only way of putting an end to BJD's misrule in the state. He also brought up the issue of the missing keys to the *ratna bhandar* (treasury room) of the Jagannath temple in an attempt to make an emotional connect with people while attacking the state government's alleged inefficiency.

Patnaik, who usually refuses to be provoked, responded in a video statement where he tore into Modi: "Honourable prime minister, how much do you remember about Odisha? Even though Odia is a classical language, you forgot about it. You have allotted Rs 1,000 crore to Sanskrit but zero to Odia."

He took a dig at Modi for forgetting about Odissi though the state had sent him proposals for the recognition of this classical dance

form. "Odisha's natural wealth is coal. You (the Centre) take coal from Odisha. But you forgot to hike the royalty on coal even once in the last 10 years," Patnaik reminded the prime minister.

Narendra Modi is taking a calculated risk by targeting his former ally. He seems ready to burn the bridges he had assiduously built with regional satraps like Patnaik over the years. With the BJP-led NDA government lacking the requisite numbers in the Rajya Sabha, there have been several occasions when Patnaik's party bailed it out in the Upper House, be it for the abrogation of article 370, triple talaq or the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA).

Patnaik, in fact, had exposed himself to criticism from minority community leaders by extending support to the CAA. His party's backing of the Modi government ever since it came to power for the first time in 2014 made a mockery of the BJD's stand of maintaining equidistance from both the BJP and the Congress. It also threatened to dent the secular credentials of the chief minister who had ended his party's alliance with the BJP in 2009 in the wake of communal riots in Kandhamal.

The regional party led by Patnaik not only extended support to NDA's presidential candidates, handpicked by Modi, it also

backed the candidature of Harivansh Narayan Singh for the post of Rajya Sabha deputy chairperson in 2020 in deference to the PM's wishes. Such was the bonhomie between Modi and Patnaik that BJP leader and railway minister Ashwini Vaishnaw was twice sent to the Rajya Sabha from Odisha with the BJD's support. What Patnaik got in return was financial assistance from the Centre in the wake of disastrous cyclones like Fani which left the Odisha coast completely devastated in 2019.

On balance, it was the BJP that gained the most from this friendly understanding, with the BJD holding 12 of the 21 Lok Sabha seats in the state, the BJP currently holding eight and the Congress one.

Modi's vitriolic campaign is apparently spurred by the hope of a major revival of the BJP in Odisha. The BJP's vote share in the state had jumped from 21.9 per cent in 2014 to 38.9 per cent in 2019. The BJD's vote share had dipped marginally, going down from 44.8 per cent in 2014 to 43.3 per cent in 2019.

Post-poll data showed that the BJP's vote share increased largely at the cost of the Congress, which fell from over 26 per cent in 2014 to 14 per cent in 2019. However, the BJP failed to translate its Lok Sabha success in the Assembly polls. Even though it emerged as the main opposition party, winning 23 seats in the Assembly, it was still far behind the BJD which won a record fifth term with 112 of the 147 seats at stake. The BJP's Assembly vote share, however, rose from just 18.2 per cent in 2014 to 32.8 per cent in 2019.

The BJP faced a major setback in the 2022 panchayat polls where it won 42 zila parishad seats compared to the 297 it had won in 2017. The BJD swept the 2022 panchayat poll, bagging a record 766 zila parishad seats out of the total 852. Things haven't changed much since then, and the BJP's wildest hope is to bag 15 Lok Sabha seats.

Similarly, in the 147-strong state assembly, the party can, at best hope to double its present tally of 23.

This hardly seems worth the risks that Modi is taking by attacking a reliable ally. Taking the BJD and Patnaik's support for granted in Parliament is poor politics, feel observers. The attacks may well make it difficult for Patnaik and Pandian to extend support to the NDA in future, even if they want to. ■



BJD supporters at a Lok Sabha election campaign rally in Odisha, May 2024

Modi's vitriolic campaign is apparently spurred by the hope of a major revival of the BJP in Odisha. The BJP's vote share in the state had jumped from 21.9% in 2014 to 38.9% in 2019

HERALD VIEW

A time to hope, a time to fear

Voters now in their thirties will probably remember the electoral storm that blew over India in 2014. Those older will have a deeper context. Every national election is arguably different, but the 2024 editions marked some important departures from the past. For one, they rang down the curtain on an era of coalition politics in India.

In 2014, Narendra Modi mounted his bid to power in Delhi on the back of his reputation as a doer. During his long stint as Gujarat chief minister between 2001 and 2014. For fence-sitters at the time, enamoured of his go-getting reputation, the Gujarat riots of 2002 and its 'management' by Modi's state government, were discomfiting but they were still willing to "give Modi a chance". His doer reputation—also largely a media creation—was in some ways the springboard for his ambition to recast the parliamentary election into a presidential-style gladiatorial contest, projecting himself as the strongman with a laser focus on getting things done.

The Sangh *parivar* saw both promise and purchase in the strategy. The capture of institutions over time, including most importantly the capture of the mainstream media narrative, cemented this strategy. The monstrous, overpowering influence of social media has coincided with Modi's reign and the BJP has been quick to learn how to maximise its reach and influence among the people. For that reason alone, Amit Malviya, the national convenor of the BJP's IT cell, is an important cog in the party's propaganda wheel.

Going into these elections, the collective wisdom of the BJP/ Sangh propagandists was that the time had come to go to the people to elect a monarch. In case anyone missed it, the ruling party is contesting the 2024 Lok Sabha polls not as the BJP's bid to return to power but a vote for 'Modi's Guarantee' that 'better things are in store'. That guarantee is supposedly worth its weight in gold in the popular imagination. The promise of a wet dream for swathes of the country that want the dawn of a Hindu—itsra, and it's a nightmare for others, who desperately want to shake off that very real prospect if the BJP returns to power, legitimately or otherwise.

To track back briefly, 2014 was a watershed election that gave the BJP a major win on its own—the first time for any party in 30 years since 1984. In that epochal election, though, the BJP, with 282 seats, went only slightly past the simple majority mark of 272. The general election in 2019 was again an unusual one with the BJP and prime minister Modi converting the Pulwama terror attack—a huge blot on the government and a glaring security failure—into a show casing the Modi government's muscular response to foreign/ Pakistani aggression, through the expedient of a token air strike inside Pakistan. When, in fact, even the strike (in Balakot) was botched, resulting in the tragic loss of a pilot and a fighter plane inside Pakistan and a helicopter and six personnel, shot down by mistake inside Indian territory. Nevertheless, the 'ghar me ghus ke maara' rhetoric generated a patriotic frenzy that secured the BJP a record 303 seats and the NDA 353 seats in the Lok Sabha, giving the government a free pass in the lower House to do what it desired.

How different is the ongoing election? The BJP should have found itself in a sweet spot, having hurriedly and somewhat clumsily gone through with the consecration of the Ram Mandir. And with central agencies going on a rampage against the Opposition. Putting opposition leaders in jail, freezing the bank accounts of the principal opposition party, intimidating opposition leaders to defect or else, welcoming defectors from everywhere and fielding the probable winners among them as BJP candidates should have put it in an unassailable position. With more men, more money than all the opposition put together—and by doing its damndest to strangle any resistance—the BJP should have found it easy to win this time too. Barely weeks ago, '400-paar' was made to look like a cinch, but with voting done and dusted for 381 (of 543) seats at the time of writing, there are indications (see *Straws in the electoral wind*, Page 1) that a different outcome is possible.

It is apparently visible on the ground, in the North as much as the South, in the East as well as the West. The arrogance of the BJP, its inability to convincingly address everyday issues of unemployment and inflation, the yawning gulf between people's lived experience and 'Modi's' guarantees, the veiled threats to rewrite the Constitution and a motley assortment of local issues are apparently rewriting a perceptible draught against the BJP. A traditional breed of independent analysts—seen mostly on YouTube, for reasons well known but best set aside for now—are predicting that the BJP, even the NDA, will fall short. Yet there are hushed whispers even among those who see a different outcome on the horizon that if 4 June does see a mandate for change, the current regime will resist a peaceful transfer of power. Be afraid!

Letters to the Editor

Modi's flip-flop on Muslims

Prime Minister Narendra Modi began his election campaign by claiming that if the Congress came to power at the Centre, it would snatch properties from Hindus and distribute them "among those who have more children". In the previous sentence he was talking about Muslims and thus nobody was in doubt about who he meant by those "who have more children". His remarks drew widespread flak and hundreds of people complained to the Election Commission that the prime minister was making communally divisive remarks. The ECI, as expected, took no action on these complaints. For two phases, Modi stuck to this line of attack on the Congress. But it did not seem to work. Then suddenly, during an interview with his 'tonic' pal Rubika Liaquat, Modi made a somersault and said that he never targeted Muslims and that the day he does it, he will have no right to remain in public life! Really? Dr Mehmoor Ali, Delhi

nationalisation under Indira Gandhi'. The author observes, "...the Congress has rejected Manmohan Singh and all that he brought to the table, whether it says so explicitly or not." The Congress manifesto is so strong that the ruling BJP and its supreme leader, instead of telling people about their achievements (are there any?), are endlessly talking about the Congress manifesto. Satyaprakash Sharma, Bhopal

No end to Human Greed?

A propos 'Why Uttarakhand is in flames' (NH, 12 May), it is worrisome that there are over 150 fires raging in the Garhwal region of Uttarakhand and nearly 500 fires burning in the forests of the Kumaon range, as is evident from satellite images. The question is how did these fires start at such massive scale? As per the report, the state administration claims that 90 per cent of the fires that have spread across Pauri Garhwal, Chamoli, Almora and around the Mussoorie hills are manmade. Although villagers do traditionally burn forest floors to stimulate the growth of fresh grass, environmentalist Reenu Paul sounds more realistic as she claims that the majority of fires are the handiwork of the real estate lobby which uses this (burnt) forest land to develop colonies—of course, in connivance with the local bureaucracy. Shikha Penuli, Dehradun

The Kejriwal case: 'democracy' really?

Facts peel away the fiction of 'free and fair' elections

Arvind Kejriwal has been released for a few days to campaign, after which he has to return to jail. He has not been convicted, of course, and is in jail merely because the BJP opposes his bail.

What the judges observed about Kejriwal is telling. He is 'the chief minister of Delhi and a leader of one of the national parties. No doubt, his serious accusations have been made, but he has not been convicted. He does not have any criminal antecedents. He is not a threat to society'.

The court also noted that the case was registered in 2022, but Kejriwal was arrested on 21 March this year, days before voting began on 19 April. Kejriwal missed more than a month of the initial campaign and was thereafter kept in jail while three phases of the election were carried out.

It was his wife who was campaigning on his behalf around the country. Will such an election be considered 'free and fair' when results are out on 4 June? Locking up your opponents while you are free to campaign is the sort of 'election' that happens in nations that are called autocracies.

Hemant Soren, the former chief minister of Jharkhand, Manish Sisodia, the deputy chief minister of Delhi, and Kalvakuntla Kavitha of the Bharat Rashtra Samithi, which ran the previous government in Telangana, are all in jail. Not a single one of these jailed politicians is a convict. They are merely accused, that too accused by the BJP, of having done something wrong.

The BJP's argument in court is that politicians should not be treated differently from others accused, so should not be granted bail simply to campaign. What it is *not* saying is that it considers democracy irrelevant and elections incidental to its desire to keep its opponents locked up.

Surely what the court noted in the Kejriwal case also applies to the rest? They have no antecedents of criminal activity. They are not an immediate threat to society. Their only crime seems to be that they are all leaders of political parties that are campaigning for these general elections.

Kejriwal got a rousing reception on his release; the BJP was not pleased. One of its national executive members tweeted that 'by picking a side right in the middle of elections, the lordships that be have made themselves a part of the campaign. When the billion ballots speak, they may not like it'.

The problem, of course, is that the courts



Aakar Patel

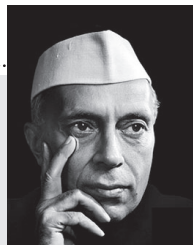
Today, the BJP jails its opponents during an election and still believes—or at least wants us to believe—that all it is doing is following the rules of democracy

are being forced into this. The real question is whether one should take the BJP at its word when it says that it is not attacking democracy with its actions. India is quite divided on this, with the prime minister's supporters egging him on.

For opposition's sake, let us assume that the Argument and its supporters are in fact totally biased, and therefore their opinions can be ignored. What does the outside world, which presumably has less of a stake or no stake at all in the results of the Lok Sabha elections, feel about the route India has taken?

We need only go back to what has been said several times, over several years, including in this column. The outside world says that India is not only sliding into authoritarianism, it is no longer even a democracy.

Views are personal



NEHRU'S WORD

The dangers of communal hatred

The ongoing Lok Sabha election campaign has been marked by blatant communal dog-whistling by the topmost leaders of the party in power, though reportedly with rapidly diminishing returns. But 73 years ago, the then prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru converted the first election campaign into a virtual referendum on the demand for a Hindu Rashtra, and delivered a rousing speech to its proponents with the firsts winning only 10 seats and six per cent of the vote! We bring to you this week extracts from a speech he gave in Amritsar on 22 December 1951 which demonstrates this.

For thousands of years now, there have been different religions in India and yet we are all Indians. The majority of us are Hindus, and Muslims are in great numbers, as also are Sikhs, Christians, Jains, Buddhists, Parsis and many others. This has been going on for thousands of years. All these religions have made India their home. India does not belong to any one of them alone. There has never been a question of one religion trying to suppress the others. If anyone tries to do it now, he will be very foolish and will cause great damage to the country.

India can progress in only one way and that is when all Indians, irrespective of their professions, province or religion, live in harmony with one another and march together. They may hold different views and opinions, but they must not live in compartments politically or otherwise.

You have gathered here in great numbers and perhaps most of you live in Amritsar. Almost all of you must be Punjabis. But you are not merely the citizens of Amritsar or of the Punjab—you are first and foremost the citizens of India. And as the citizens of India, you have certain rights, and at the same time some responsibilities too because there can be no rights without responsibilities...

The first step towards fulfilling our responsibilities is to learn the lesson of unity...Why is it that in spite of all our bitter experience of the past, these communal organisations raise their heads in our country and create problems and tension? What is the matter? It is something for us to consider. I can understand difference of opinion amongst us, on political or economic matters. I understand and accept the difference in ideologies of the various parties like the communist or socialist parties. There can be different ways of looking at the problems of a country. But I simply cannot understand communalism in politics and it simply shows that we are forgetting all our past experiences in India and in the Punjab.

Communalism has done incalculable harm in the past. The Muslim League, an intensely communal party, spread a bitter poison throughout the country and did great damage. But somehow it was removed

from here and it is no longer powerful at least in India. We thought that we were at last rid of this terrible disease. But it is our misfortune that the disease is spreading once again in a different form, among the new communal organisations of the Hindus and the Sikhs. It is strange that we have not been able to learn a lesson even now.

Can any intelligent man in Punjab think that there can be progress made here if there is constant tension between the Hindus and the Sikhs? You must think about this. Both will bring ruin upon themselves. And I cannot understand what there is to quarrel about? All their problems

Everyone in India, whether he is a Muslim or a Hindu or Sikh or Christian, has the right to follow his own religion and traditions peacefully. All religions are worthy of respect and there should be no obstacles in the way of anyone. But if you try to bring religion into politics and try to create barriers, then you are following an extremely dangerous path. Religion is a sacred subject and if you try to drag it into the mire, you will be degrading both religion and politics...

Let us work together to create a new India and a new Punjab. Remember that when individuals or nations are engaged in big tasks, they too grow in stature. I am by no means a big man. I am an ordinary Indian, with an ordinary education and some intelligence. What sacrifice have I made which has not been made over and over again by innumerable people in the Punjab and all over the country? Then how did I or the others grow?

We grew because of two or three factors. Firstly, we came under the shadow of a great man like Mahatma Gandhi and some of his greatness got rubbed on us. Secondly, we were engaged in a mighty task and that also added to our stature. Those who hold their heads high and gaze at the stars naturally grow taller. This is the case with nations too. You will find that periods of greatness in the history of any country always coincide with their being engaged in some mighty effort and not when they were busy in petty squabbles.

So we grew, and now once again we have an opportunity to grow. To try to make the condition of 35 crore people better is a mighty task. We can do it if all of us work together and each one of us stands on his own feet and does his duty. It will take time and means hard work, great toil and sweat and tears. But it is not impossible. So, I put all these thoughts of mine and make an effort to see that everyone marches in step. Ultimately, the best of governments cannot do anything unless the people are willing to cooperate. ■



If you try to bring religion into politics and try to create barriers, then you are following an extremely dangerous path

can be very easily solved. But the fundamental thing is that the Punjab can progress only if all the citizens of the Punjab whether they are Hindus, Sikhs or Christians learn to live together in harmony and do not isolate themselves into separate compartments.

This is a broad fact and it applies to the whole of India. India cannot achieve progress if there is no unity among her people...So we have to change our mental attitudes somewhat and get rid of these communal notions. It has ruined us in the past and lowered us in the eyes of the world. What is the sense in getting into the same old rut once again at a time when we have just won freedom and got an opportunity to progress? What is this foolishness?

So, I am laying stress on this repeatedly because we have to put an end to it.

Selected and edited by MRIDULA MUKHERJEE, former professor of history at JNU and former director of Nehru Memorial Museum & Library

CHAR DHAM YATRA

Say hello to blind faith

Reckless 'development' and heedless religious tourism are taking a heavy toll on the fragile Garhwal Himalayas, writes **Rashme Sehgal**

The rain gods have been kind. Heavy rainfall across Uttarakhand on 10 May helped put out over a thousand fires that had already burnt down vast tracts of its precious deodar and chir forests. Before it could recover from that calamity, this fragile state finds itself in the midst of another disaster.

The Char Dham Yatra to Gangotri, Yamunotri and Kedarnath started on 10 May. The doors to the Badrinath temple were opened on 12 May. Over one lakh pilgrims made a headlong rush to the shrine—and the arrangements to manage this sudden uncontrolled traffic were just not adequate.

Two pilgrims died in the melee making their way up to Yamunotri while several were injured. Traffic jams to Yamunotri extended for more than five kilometres with *yatris* complaining of being stuck in their vehicles for hours on end. *Yatris* trekking up to Kedarnath were ill prepared for the snow and heavy rain that awaited them at those heights. Hotels were charging astronomical amounts that they could ill afford, and no other provision had been made.

The story in Badrinath was no different. Pilgrims swaddled in blankets to keep out the cold began to form long queues outside the Badrinath temple from 2 a.m. in order to get a glimpse of the lord as soon as the temple doors opened after the long winter break. But with the *pandas* giving priority to VIP *darshans*, the common people, who had waited for 8 to 10 hours, broke into angry protests and sloganeering.

Why should there be so much mismanagement for such a prestigious event which fetches the state hundreds of crores in revenue and provides employment to thousands? The chief secretary of the state Radha Raturi has sent out a letter emphasising that since they were expecting 10 lakh *yatris* in the first ten days, she had requested 'dignitaries and state officials to avoid visiting the Dham from 10-25 May'. Raturi fails to specify how the situation is likely to improve after 25 May. Chances are it will only get worse given the unpredictable weather conditions and the fact that landslides have increased with soil further loosening because of the forest fires.

What brings millions of devotees to the Char Dham given that in 2023, more than 300 *yatris* died not only in landslides but also due to cardiac problems exacerbated by high



Visitors through the Kedarnath shrine in Uttarakhand, 10 May 2024

Residents demand that the flow to each dham be regulated. "Not more than 5,000 people should be allowed to visit each dham in a day. There is no space to accommodate more," said Amol Rawat, a businessman

altitudes? What is the psychology of the average *yatri* that makes them rush to these shrines without keeping in mind basic health and safety issues? The opening of the Char Dham yatra is preceded by a mesmerising advertising campaign on social media and television. The music and the words are so seductive that for the *yatris*, it is akin to setting foot in paradise. The bait is hard to resist.

Some changes have been introduced. For one, all pilgrims are now required to register online. Without this mandatory registration, they are not allowed entry into the temple precincts. This does not seem to have curbed the enthusiasm of the devotees.

The barrage of criticism that the administration faced in mishandling the first three days has forced them to initiate further changes. With vehicles being stuck for five to six hours on the road leading up to Yamunotri, district magistrate M.S. Bisht has stated that a minimum number of vehicles will now be allowed to ply on the roads leading up to both Gangotri and Yamunotri. Gates have been set up at 13

points along the route to divert all excess vehicles thereby enabling a smoother flow.

The locals living in these areas have taken to social media to register their complaints at this large influx of pilgrims. One hotel owner in Chamoli tweeted, 'We welcome the *yatris* but there must be some regulation. The government has failed to create proper infrastructure. The result is that we have to make arrangements in case of some emergency but we have limited means at our disposal'.

Residents demand that the flow to each dham be regulated. "At an average, not more than 5,000 people should be allowed to visit each dham in a day. There is no space to accommodate more," said Amol Rawat, a businessman from Badrinath.

Atul Sati, who heads the Joshimath Bachao Sangharsh Samiti, regrets the lack of health facilities along the length of the Char Dham yatra. "There are no cardiologists, no oxygen cylinders, no basic health facilities," he said, adding, "The public must be given time to acclimatise before reaching these heights".

Another major point made by local residents is that *yatris* must be warned not to throw garbage all over the place. By the time the yatra ends, there are huge mountains of garbage strewn across the hillsides which make their way into the rivers, polluting them even further. A social activist from Gangotri pointed out, "Many of the people who come on the first couple of days are social influencers and bloggers who are being paid to visit these places. This is a new trend".

Environmentalist Reenu Paul regrets that the government is putting so much strain on the ecosystem. "We had just finished with the forest fires and now we have hordes of people rushing up these mountains. Our Garhwal Himalayas are being given no time to regenerate."

Experts also raise questions about how this revenue-driven model is riding roughshod over such an ecologically sensitive environment, with no lessons learnt from the major subsidence that continues in Joshimath and several other towns in the state.

Hemant Dhyani, environmental expert and former member of the Supreme Court's high-powered committee on the Char Dham project, had warned that the state government was exploiting these fragile Himalayas much beyond their carrying capacity.

This commercial exploitation can be gauged from the fact that this year, massive posters of Paytm QR codes have been placed outside both the Kedarnath and Badrinath temples so that people can give *dakshina* by making online payments.

Unpredictable rainfall patterns, massive construction and hill cutting of arterial roads have seen an increase in landslides. However, the government seems unconcerned over the fallout of having such a large population descend suddenly on these slopes.

Chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhami is promoting the idea of building more dhams in the state obviously to attract more tourists. UP chief minister Yogi Adityanath, on his recent visit to the shrine of Neem Karoli Baba in Kainchi, insisted this too must be developed into a dham which would attract more than five lakh *yatris* a day.

What havoc these unsustainable practises will have on the environment does not worry our politicians. Such demonic exploitation of our sacred *devbhoomi* (abode of the gods) can only serve to destroy it. ■

STATES 360°



BIHAR

BJP workers all at sea over Modi's 'guarantees'

Soroor Ahmed on the prime minister's broken promises and the UPA's forgotten achievements

Lalu Prasad Yadav recently reminded prime minister Narendra Modi of a promise he had made in 2014. Not only had he pledged to ensure the reopening of the state's sugar mills—closed for four decades—he had also promised to come down for a cup of tea made with the sugar produced there. When prayed, he asked, would Modi have that sweetened tea, given that the mills were still closed?

An aggressive Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) has been relentless in reminding the prime minister of his past guarantees. What happened to the special economic package he had announced for Bihar, asked Lalu Prasad Yadav's daughter Misa Bharati. What about the special category status to the state? What have you done after winning the last two elections in 2014 and 2019?

Such questions are making it difficult for BJP and RSS workers to defend 'Modi's Guarantees' in the state. The very mention of those magic words leads to derisive laughter and lewd jokes. On his roadshow last Sunday (12 May), the PM made a bad situation even worse. In an interview to *NDTV's* Marya Shakil, he declared that while the NDA had won 39 of the 40 Lok Sabha seats in Bihar last time, this time they'd win all 40: "*Shayad iss baar hum ek bhi nahin harengay* (Perhaps this time we won't lose even a single seat)". With most observers convinced that the NDA could lose as many as 15-20 seats in the state, it's the 'perhaps' that pricks the PM's bombastic bubble.

This was Narendra Modi's first roadshow in Patna (indeed the first for any national leader). The litmus test has always been to address rallies at the historic Gandhi Maidan, as the INDIA bloc leaders did in March. More funereal than celebratory, the PM's roadshow also caused massive public disruptions with the closure not only of air-space but also Patna Junction. No trains were permitted to stop at Patna Junction that evening, and passengers had no choice but to board from Danapur station, 12 kilometres away. Missed flights and traffic jams marked the day.

The PM's expression was glum and his body language listless and mechanical. Standing by his side was the even more downcast chief minister Nitish Kumar,

holding the lotus in his hand. Old-timers recalled the predicament of his mentor George Fernandes, when he had insisted on contesting the 2009 Lok Sabha election as an Independent. Once a redoubtable leader from Muzaffarpur and one of the architects of the National Democratic Alliance, Fernandes had ended up fifth. Together, Nitish and he had helped mainstream the BJP.

The NDA cannot afford to lose too many seats in Bihar, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh in the remaining three rounds of polling till 1 June.

While Uttar Pradesh was clearly favoured by the PM, Bihar received a relative cold shoulder. For 13 of the 19 years since 2005, Nitish Kumar has been the BJP's oldest 'secular ally', though he did break away twice (in 2013 and 2022). Work on the ambitious Ganga Expressway was inaugurated by Nitish Kumar on 11 October 2013, four months after snapping ties with the BJP and when UPA-II was still in power in Delhi. The blueprint of the Patna Metro was also prepared before 2014.

Bihar fared better during the UPA years under Dr Manmohan Singh as prime minister. Neither NDA-I under Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1998-2004) nor the UPA (2004-2014) were discriminatory towards a state governed by a different alliance. This was partly because both the RJD and JD(U) were no pushovers and did not have to plead for grants and aid from the centre. Since 2014, however, Nitish Kumar has not been able to remind Narendra Modi that he had publicly promised a special package of Rs 1.25 lakh crore for the state while campaigning during the assembly election in 2015. Union ministers from the state have been reduced to being the PM's cheerleaders.

RJD and JLP (Lok Janshakti Party) leaders who were ministers in the UPA government did not oppose or stall grants for Bihar. On the contrary, Bihar received generous grants from the Backward Region Grant Fund (BRGF), created by the Manmohan Singh government in 2006. The state government received Rs 8,753 crore during the 11th Five Year Plan (2007-12) and Rs 12,000 crore during the 12th Five Year Plan (2012-17). Be it



Prime Minister Narendra Modi's roadshow in Patna, 12 May 2024

Photo: Getty Images

Bihar fared better during the UPA years. Neither NDA-I under Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1998-2004) nor the UPA (2004-2014) under Manmohan Singh were discriminatory towards a state governed by an opposing party

the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana, the East-West Corridor, the Golden Quadrilateral (work on which actually started during the Vajpayee era) or other National Highway projects and centrally-sponsored schemes, Bihar received its due share.

As railway minister, Lalu Prasad Yadav brought projects worth several thousand crores to Bihar including the Rail Wheel Plant in Saran and the electric locomotive factory in Madhepura. The then union rural development minister late Raghuvansh Prasad Singh was equally generous in granting funds for rural roads in Bihar. MNREGA was also introduced by the UPA.

Nitish claimed credit for construction-driven projects during that period, but New Delhi did not seem to mind and Union ministers from Bihar were not hostile.

Despite the development of road and rail infrastructure and the near total electrification of Bihar by 2014, industrialisation failed to take off. The only exception were the brew-

eries following the new excise policy which aggressively promoted liquor vendors in large numbers. (In April 2016, Nitish Kumar took a U-turn and implemented total prohibition.)

Even during the Vajpayee years, Bihar witnessed considerable development, despite the carving out of the mineral-rich region into the separate state of Jharkhand in November 2000.

Despite legendary tussles between the Rabri Devi government in the state and the NDA government at the Centre, 11 Union ministers from Bihar were instrumental in ensuring several significant projects such as the NTPC plant in Barh, a rail project in Harnaut, doubling and gauge conversion of various rail routes, the Koderma-Hazaribagh connection, rail bridges over the Ganga between Patna-Sonepur and Munger-Khagaria.

The UPA years also saw the central university of South Bihar come up in Gaya and a central university of North Bihar in Motihari, besides the off-campus branch of Aligarh Muslim University in Kishanganj. Initially, the project to revive Nalanda University as an international university also received the union government's attention, with Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen as chairman of the mentor group.

Nitish Kumar took a keen interest in opening the Chandragupta Institute of Management in Patna and the Chanakya National Law University. The Aryabhata Knowledge University was formed to administer all the technical institutes in the state and an Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) was established in Patna. All this before 2014. The Indian Institute of Management (IIM) in Bodh Gaya began functioning from 2015.

Come 2024, with very few exceptions, they are all languishing. Amartya Sen was chucked out unceremoniously, presumably because he was critical of Modi as chief minister of Gujarat. "Today nobody knows what is happening in Nalanda University and in the off-campus branch of Aligarh Muslim University," commented Basant Kumar Mishra, who retired from Patna University and writes regularly on education, adding that not much can be said about the rest either. ■

THE GAZA WAR / CAMPUS PROTESTS

What student outrage is really up against

Debabrata Biswas in Boston

The student movement against the brutal Israeli invasion of Gaza started with the first Gaza Solidarity Encampment at Columbia University, which saw more than a hundred demonstrators arrested on 18 April 2024. On 23 April, Columbia students staged a walkout at the university campus in Washington DC and posted a call on social media for students of other universities: 'We will seize our universities and force the administration to divest from any Israeli connections, for the people of Gaza! Join the popular university, take back our institutions.'

On 25 April, students at UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) set up a Gaza Solidarity Encampment inside their university campus. On 28 April, clashes occurred between pro-Palestinian students chanting "second Nakba" (a reference to the expulsion of Palestinians from their homes by Israeli forces in 1948) and pro-Israeli students staging StandWithUs rallies. On 26 April, police dismantled the encampment, arresting 132 protesters and shooting at them with rubber bullets. On the same day, students from Georgetown University and George Washington University established a joint encampment in response to the International Court of Justice's ruling that Israel has violated the Genocide Convention set by the UN.

They were later joined by students from Howard University, George Mason University, University of Maryland and Baltimore. It wasn't long before students from many other colleges/ universities including Ivy League universities—Harvard, MIT, Yale, Tufts, Boston, Emory, UNC-Capitol Hill, Brown, NYU, UPenn—joined the movement. April saw student protests escalating on more than 60 university campuses across the US, spreading to educational institutions in Europe (Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Ireland, Finland, Spain, UK), Australia, Canada, Egypt, Japan, Mexico, Kuwait, Lebanon, Yemen, marking global outrage against the genocide. Demands include severing financial ties with Israel and its affiliated entities, transparency over financial ties and amnesty for protesters, as well as an end to US military support for Israel as part of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanction (BDS) movement.

While 14 universities in the UK saw students setting up encampments, Edinburgh University students went on hunger strike, like their counterparts in Princeton. As in the US, the methods adopted were civil disobedience, the methods adopted were civil disobedience, and in Amsterdam, as in the US, the riot police were called out. French police, too, applied



Pro-Palestinian protests across the United States, Canada, Australia and UK

force to disperse student demonstrators at Sorbonne University.

As of 8 May, over 2,400 protesters have been arrested in the US, including faculty members and professors, with more than 30 protesters injured and hospitalized so far.

The Republican Party as a whole has vehemently criticised the movement as anti-Semitic, as has President Biden, former president Donald Trump, many US governors and, of course, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

While many Democratic leaders are not sympathetic to the students' movement, over 200 groups have expressed support for the protesters. Senator Bernie Sanders, leading Democrats and progressive members of Congress such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib and Irvine mayor Farrah Khan have rallied behind the students.

Sanders told *CNN*, "I worry very much that President Biden is putting himself in a position where he has alienated not just young people but a lot of the Democratic base in terms of views on Israel and this

It is hard to imagine university authorities agreeing to divest from companies that have direct business relations with Israel—Microsoft, Google, Amazon, Cisco, Lockheed Martin, Caterpillar, General Electric...

war". Sanders drew comparisons with Vietnam, noting former president Lyndon Johnson's decision not to run in 1968 amid growing anger over the war in Vietnam.

Just like the protesters of the 1960s and the 1980s (anti-apartheid in South Africa), today's students are being arrested, suspended and expelled for showing solidarity with Palestinians. The 54th anniversary of the 'Kent State Massacre' is also drawing unfortunate parallels. On 4 May 1970, the Ohio National Guard opened fire during anti-Vietnam demonstrations on the Kent State University campus, killing four students and unleashing a surge of protest across the country.

And while in terms of scale and motivation the campus protests over the past three weeks may seem much smaller, they could have a political fallout given the tight rematch between Biden and Trump.

America waged war directly with North Vietnam for five years, with nearly 1.9 million Americans drafted and more than 50,000 killed or missing in action. While no US troops are fighting in Israel's war on

Gaza, without its unconditional military and financial aid such an assault would not be possible.

The indiscriminate killing of civilians and the carpet-bombing of schools, hospitals, homes and infrastructure by Israel has rightly been termed genocide by the International Court of Law. Over 253 persons have been taken hostage, more than 80,000 injured and over 35,000 Palestinians killed—75 per cent of them women and children. All these atrocities have swayed public opinion against Israel—support for Israel's military assault dropped from 50 per cent in a November Gallup poll to 36 per cent in late March.

Senator Sanders commented that the US is actually waging a proxy war in Gaza and cannot avoid moral responsibility for the inhuma suffering inflicted on the civilians of Gaza by Israel. President Biden, who last month signed a bill to provide \$14 billion additional aid to Israel, has faced growing criticism over his handling of the crisis, with hundreds of thousands of voters casting 'uncommitted ballots' in Democratic primaries in recent months to express their frustration and anger.

"In 1968, one of the great failures of the party establishment was that they ignored anti-war youth and alienated the horrific war in Vietnam and continued the young voters, and I feel like they're at risk of doing the same thing," said political strategist Abbas Alawieh.

It is hard to imagine university authorities agreeing to divest from companies that have direct business relations with Israel: Microsoft, Google, Amazon, Cisco, Lockheed Martin, Caterpillar, General Electric... As for political parties, the Israeli lobby in America is very strong. The AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee), which advocates pro-Israel policies, is one of the biggest donors to the Democratic Party, and Joe Biden is very attached to them.

Yet one cannot overlook the role of public opinion in shifting policies and exerting political pressure. For example, Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington reached a deal with students to work towards divesting from 'companies that profit from gross Human Rights violation and/ or the occupation of Palestinian Territories'.

While demonstrations have spread to more than 154 campuses in 49 states, it's still too soon tell what impact might be achieved before classes let out for summer. But one thing is clear: with Presidential elections less than six months away, Biden is rattled by the magnitude of the protests. If they've had some role in his freezing the shipment of arms and ammunition to Israel on the eve of Israel's full-scale invasion of Rafah, it is no small victory. ■



Party-hopping in UK

If it's the season of 'Aaya Ram-Gaya Ram' in Indian politics with almost daily political defections, election-bound Britain is not doing too badly either on this front. In recent weeks, two MPs belonging to Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's ruling Tory party have defected to the Labour party as the latter appears set to win the coming general elections.

The latest to cross the floor is Natalie Elphicke, saying that the Tories "have become a byword for incompetence and division".

She accused Sunak of "broken promises" and abandoning key pledges, especially on immigration. His government was "failing to keep our borders safe and secure", with illegal migration touching "record levels".

Yet not so long ago, she was accusing Labour of having "no plan of their own to tackle illegal immigration" while hailing Sunak's controversial plan to deport illegal immigrants as "world-leading".

Perhaps this is what political opportunism looks like. Elphicke's defection came barely weeks after another MP and a former minister Dan Poulter left the party to join Labour. He said he was leaving the party against the government's "lack of focus" on public services, especially the National Health Service.

Labour leader Keir Starmer is facing criticism for betraying the party's values by admitting "unprincipled" right-wing Tories.

I beg your pardon? Politics and principles?

Gaza's shadow over London

The streets of London have become Palestine battlegrounds for pro-Palestinian supporters and Jewish groups with many of the capital's 160,000 Jews claiming they no longer feel safe.

They have accused pro-Palestinian protesters of intimidating them by raising anti-Semitic slogans. Police are having a field day trying to maintain peace between rival groups amid accusations that they are being "soft" on alleged Palestinian "provocateurs".

The Tory party has launched a campaign against Scotland Yard, which is controlled by Labour mayor Sadiq Khan's administration.

Police Commissioner Mark Rowley was forced to apologise after an incident in which Gideon Falter, the boss of the Campaign Against Anti-Semitism (CAA), was stopped by the police from approaching a noisy pro-Palestinian protest. He was advised to leave the scene as he was "openly Jewish" and his presence could be "provocative".

However, Rowley rejected calls for his resignation and defended his force's "professional" handling of the incident.

"A couple of turns of phrase were clumsy and offensive... and we've



apologised for that. The wider actions and intent of the officer were professional and in the best tradition of British police trying to prevent disorder," he said.

Meanwhile, the Gaza conflict looms large over the coming general elections with the Labour party's "pro-Israel" stance eliciting mounting anger from Muslim voters in London and cities in northern England.

The issue has already cost the party dozens of seats in recent regional polls. A grassroots Muslim vote campaign has given Labour leader Keir Starmer 18 demands to be met if he wants to win back the community's support. These include an apology from Starmer for his stance and a promise to sever military ties with Israel.

The campaign said it would support only like-minded candidates in the general election. About 3.9 million people in Britain identify as Muslim.

Look out, Mr Starmer.



Monty Panesar's botched-up political debut

Like many of his Indian peers, former English cricketer Monty Panesar has been on a political journey.

In 2016, he backed the Tory party's Zac Goldsmith—brother of the Jamaica Goldsmith and former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan's brother-in-law—for mayor of London. Goldsmith lost.

Eight years later, Panesar himself came close to joining frontline politics. He was to stand as a parliamentary candidate for the far-left demagogue George Galloway's Workers Party whose staunch pro-Palestinian stance has made him popular in the predominantly Muslim areas of northern England.

The House of Commons just missed out on having another Indian-origin member on its benches, as after a number of gaffes,

he is reported to have opted out of the race. However, he is apparently in no hurry to quit politics altogether and will live to fight another day.

Panesar is the latest in a long line of English cricketers—C.B. Fry, Robin Marlar and Ted Dexter—who joined politics with the aim of making it to Parliament, but failed.

Women's woes

Unhappy Indian women can take some comfort from the fact that British women are not wallowing in happiness either.

Research has found that they are 'sadder and more stressed' than their European counterparts. An annual study of almost 80,000 women from 143 countries concluded that 'negative emotions' (worry, stress and anger) have risen among the women of UK



since 2020, while falling across Europe.

And while women say they are not surprised by the statistics, feminist writer Claire Cohen wrote, 'What does surprise me is that it's not worse. Every woman I know feels this way to some extent—it's why the wellbeing industry, geared towards self-care, has exploded'.

How about a similar study about Indian women?

And, finally, a woman was recently told by a government hospital staffer that, according to their records, she had been dead for four months, to which she replied, "I'm not, I'm still talking to you".



The last handloom weaver of Gobindapur

Roopchand Debnath is not willing to part ways with his loom even as other weavers in this Tripura village have moved away amid dropping incomes and government apathy

Rajdeep Bhowmik
and Deep Roy

There is no shortage of weavers here on paper but it's all over (practically) once I die," sighs Roopchand Debnath as he takes a break from weaving on the handloom in his bamboo hut. Apart from the loom, which takes up most of the space, are piles of junk—broken furniture, metal spare parts and pieces of bamboo, among other things. There is barely any room for more than one person.

Roopchand, 73, lives in Gobindapur on the outskirts of Dharmanagar city, on the border of India and Bangladesh, in the state of Tripura. A narrow pitch road leads into the village, once home to 200 weaver families and over 600 artisans, according to the locals. The office of the Gobindapur Handloom Weavers' Association stands among the few houses in narrow lanes, its corroded walls a reminder of mostly forgotten glory.

"There was not a single house here that did not have a loom," recounts Roopchand, who belongs to the Nath community (listed as Other Backward Classes in the state). The sun is bright and he wipes the sweat off his face before continuing. "Society used to respect us. Now, no one cares. Tell me who would respect a profession that doesn't have any money?" he asks, voice cracking with emotion.

The veteran weaver recalls making the handwoven nakshi sarees which had elaborate floral motifs. But in the 1980s, "When Purbasha (the handicraft emporium of the government of Tripura) opened an outlet in Dharmanagar, they told us to discontinue making nakshi sarees and start making plain sarees," says Roopchand. These were low on detailing and overall quality, and hence cheaper.

Slowly, he says, nakshi sarees faded out in the region, and today, he adds, "there are neither any artisans left nor supply of spare parts for the looms". His words are echoed by Rabindra Debnath, acting

president of the Weavers' Association for the last four years who says, "There was no market for the clothes we used to make." At 63, he cannot keep up with the physical demands of weaving any more.

By 2005, Roopchand had stopped weaving nakshi sarees altogether and switched to the gamcha. "We never used to make gamchas. All of us wove only sarees. But we had no choice," recounts one of the last masters of the loom in Gobindapur.

"Since yesterday, I have woven just two gamchas. I will make barely Rs 200 selling these," says Roopchand and adds, "This is not my earning alone. My wife helps me with winding the yarn. So it is the earning of an entire family. How does one survive with this income?"

Roopchand gets down to weaving after breakfast, around 9 a.m. and continues till a little after noon. He pauses for a bath and lunch before resuming work. He usually does not work in the evenings now, as it causes his joints to ache. But when he was younger, Roopchand says, he worked "till late in the night".

At the loom, most of Roopchand's working day is spent weaving gamchas.

"Earlier, we used to dye these yarns ourselves. For the past 10 years or so, we have been purchasing dyed yarns from the Weavers' Association," he tells us and adds that he too uses his own gamchas.

But when did things change in the handloom industry? Roopchand says, "It was primarily with the introduction of power looms and a decline in the quality of yarns. Weavers like us can't compete with power looms."

Power looms are expensive, making it difficult for most weavers to make the switch. Additionally, in villages such as Gobindapur, there are no shops that sell spare parts for the loom, and repair work is challenging, which is a deterrent for many of the weavers. Now, Roopchand says, he is too old to use the machines.

"I recently bought yarns (22 kg) worth Rs 12,000 which used to cost me around Rs 9,000 till last year; with my current state of health it will take me around 3 months to make



Photos: Deep Roy & Rajdeep Bhowmik



Roopchand at his loom; wife Basana (left) divides her time between household chores and helping Roopchand

around 150 gamchas which I will sell (to the Weaver's Association) for just around Rs 16,000," Roopchand says helplessly.

Roopchand was born in Sylhet, Bangladesh around 1950 and immigrated to India in 1956. "My father continued weaving here in India. I studied till Class 9 before dropping out of school," he says. The young Roopchand then took a job in the local electricity department. "The work was too demanding and the pay too low. So, I quit after four years."

He then decided to learn how to weave from his father, a generational weaver. "The handloom (industry) paid well at that time. I have even sold sarees for Rs 15 a piece. I couldn't have paid my medical expenses or married off my (three) sisters had I not been in this craft," he says.

Basana Debnath, his wife, remembers that she started helping him to weave right after they got married. "We used to have four looms at that time and he was still learning from my father-in-law," she says over the sound of her husband operating the loom in the other room.

Basana's day runs longer than Roopchand's. She wakes up early, performs the household chores and prepares lunch before helping her husband with winding yarns. Only in the evening is she able to get some rest. "All the work of winding the yarn and making skeinings is done by her," Roopchand acknowledges.

Roopchand and Basana have four

children. Two daughters are married, and a jeweller's son (not a mechanic and other a jeweller) live not too far away from their residence. When asked if people are losing touch with traditional art and craft, the maestro introspects, "Even I have failed. Why else could I not inspire my own children [to take up the craft]?"

Across India, the household income of 93.3 per cent of handloom workers is below Rs 10,000 while in Tripura, 86.4 per cent of the household income of handloom workers is below Rs 5,000 (Fourth All India Handloom Census, 2019-2020). "The craft has been dying slowly here," says Arun Bhowmik, Roopchand's neighbour. "We are not doing enough to preserve it."

His thoughts are echoed by Nanigopal Bhowmik, another senior resident of the village, "People want to work less and earn more," he sighs and says. "Weavers have (always) lived in huts and mud houses. Who wants to live like that?" Roopchand adds.

Apart from a lack of income, persistent health issues plague the weavers. "My wife and I spend Rs 50,000-60,000 on medical bills every year," says Roopchand. The couple suffers from shortness of breath and cardiac complications, a fallout of the profession.

There have been some efforts by the government to preserve the craft. But Roopchand and others in the village think it is not making a difference. "I have trained over 300 weavers through the Deen

Dayal Hathkargha Protsahan Yojana (a central government initiative launched in 2000)," Roopchand says. "It is hard to get trainees," he continues, "people mostly show up for the stipend. It is not possible to produce skilled weavers like this." The state of affairs is made worse by "the mismanagement of handloom storage, wood mites infestation and destruction of yarn by rats," Roopchand adds.

Handloom exports have decreased by almost 50 per cent between 2012 and 2022, from around Rs 3,000 crore to around Rs 1,500 crore annually (Handloom Export Promotion Council) and the funds from the ministry have also dried up.

The future of the handloom in the state looks bleak. Roopchand says, "I feel this is beyond repair." But he pauses for a moment and is able to offer a solution. "More involvement from women would help," he says, "I have seen a tremendous workforce, almost entirely run by women, in Sidhai Mohanpur (a commercial handloom production site in West Tripura)." One way of remedying the situation, he says, would be to offer a fixed daily wage to the existing artisans.

When asked if he has ever thought of quitting, Roopchand smiles. "Never," he says with resolve, "I have never put greed ahead of my craft." There are tears in his eyes as he rests his hand on the loom. "She may leave me, but I never will." ■

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

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EAT. WANDER. REPEAT

Pickled, spiced and salted

Denise D'Silva on the enduring romance of preserving and bottling our seasonal bounty for the year ahead

One aspect of Indian cuisine that has always fascinated me is the art of preserving the best of our bountiful seasons for the leaner months. While most of India doesn't really have lean months—we are an agrarian economy after all—there is something lovely about our way of capturing the essence of a season.

Come summer and we see the peak of what can only be called the great Indian bounty. Mangoes, the most precious of them all, are fruiting. Fish are aplenty in markets. The humble jackfruit ripens and perfumes the air. Berries like the foraged *karvanda* and jamun make their appearance by staining the streets with purple hues. Pushcarts heave with ice apples or *tadgolas*. Cashew apples leave their trace on the tropical air. Watermelons are displayed as walls of dark green with pink stripes inside on highway pit-stops.

Summer is also the time for pickling. The freshest, ripest, sourest fruits that make an appearance in the heat, are lovingly collected and put into ancient receptacles and treated with much care till they are brined and spiced for the year.

As a child, growing up in cosmopolitan Bombay, summer was always the season of discovery. Not only was it the holidays, which meant more time at home, it was also time spent around neighbours. Oh, the smells! You could tell which neighbour was preserving



what, simply by sniffing. It helped that the things being dried, preserved or pickled were sharp to begin with.

I remember a particular Goan neighbour whose kitchen would be smelt from a mile away. You see, she would make *choriz* (Goan sausages) and hang their red beads around the walls of the kitchen and string them through the balconies.

What felt like a too-pungent aroma then, is now something that makes my mouth water, as I hunt through Goa for the finest homemade *choriz* beads.

Meanwhile, my Maharashtrian neighbour's home was a sight to behold. Deep red chillies and perfectly round papads spread over chatais and charpais lined the small compound outside their ground-floor house. The sun was used to its fullest potential to dehydrate goodies well before the coming rains.

Even now, not far from where I live, there are fields of drying fish. The Kolis (fishing community) of Mumbai stop all fishing activity during the monsoon and use the harsh summer sun to preserve their catch. How, you might wonder does fish last a year?

In square patches of shore adjacent to their villages—and often right next to swanky high-rises—the Kolis painstakingly spread the day's catch after sorting it on sand banks that have been used for this purpose for generations. Depending on which way the wind is blowing, streets far away are filled with the smell of salty fish. And while that might seem offensive to some, to me it is the smell of Bombay. A reminder that we are people of the sea.

The Kolis tell me that the dried fish market is quite lucrative and they actually make more money from this trade than from regular fishing. Judging by the heaps that are put on weighing scales and displayed by the road, it certainly looks like it.

The East Indian community of Mumbai goes a step further in the process of drying fish. They apply spices to the ubiquitous *sukkha bombil* or dried Bombay Duck, which is then packed and sealed,

Photos: Denise D'Silva



Each of the spices used in pickling is cleaned by hand and dried in the scorching sun; (below left) the dried fish market is quite lucrative and the Kolis actually make more money from this trade than from regular fishing

As a child, growing up in cosmopolitan Bombay, summer was always the season of discovery. Oh, the smells! You could tell which neighbour was preserving what, simply by sniffing

owners. They're usually on a first-name basis, and pleasantries and details of respective family members are swapped as the spices are handed over for pounding.

The East Indians have a fascinating tradition of hand-pounding spices that is done by a troupe of women from Gorai. Families book them in January for the summer season of April and May. Sadly, not many of these ladies are left to continue this profession.

I love to watch how the women of the houses all around me place all manner of spices on brightly coloured old saris under the sun. Each of the spices is cleaned by hand and turned till crisp in the scorching heat. Souring agents like the pretty kokum fruit and tamarind are also sun-dried and preserved in tall *barnis* that go to the back of dark stoves.

Mango, in all its stages of ripeness, is used in *murabbas*, aam papads, marmalades, jams, aamchur, squashes and aam ras to stock up for the rest of the year.

The monsoon and its melancholy will be here soon but summer is truly a time to tune into the nostalgia and romance of little jars brimming with seasonal goodness and the sweet lull of gossip in dappled corridors. ■

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

and bought by homesick families who secretly hide their stock in checked-in suitcases on their flights back to the west.

Pickling is one of the main summer routines in a traditional home. The best produce from the garden or the market is sourced, spiced and laden with oil to be savoured through the year. Each home has its own recipe and all of them are delicious. Pickling isn't just a matter of following a recipe from the books. It is a ritual. One that involves the entire family. There's usually someone to wipe the vegetables and fruits, someone to cut them, someone to prepare the *barnis* (ceramic jars) and always someone to eat the bulk of it before it reaches the salting stage.

In Mumbai's wadis and chawls, it was always a community affair. Women from different houses would clear up their schedules and spend afternoons together at one chosen lady's house, making pickle while sharing gossip.

Summer in Mumbai is also the time for Masala or spice mixes. Many communities like the Maharashtrians and East Indians make their own masalas for the entire year. Places like Lalbaug and Masjid Bandar see a steady stream of customers picking and choosing the best spices. Each lady comes equipped with a humongous bag and a tattered piece of paper that has the



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NATION

STATES 360°

In focus this week: Haryana, Jharkhand, Odisha, Bihar

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NATION

SAY HELLO TO BLIND FAITH

Heedless religious tourism is taking a toll on the Garhwal Himalayas

► P5



WORLD

CAMPUS PROTESTS OVER GAZA

What student outrage is really up against

► P6



Straws in the electoral wind

All its bluster notwithstanding, there's enough and more circumstantial evidence that the BJP is struggling in these elections

Uttam Sengupta

It's becoming clear that the BJP is under pressure in the ongoing elections. Even in the northern states, where barely weeks ago few would have given the opposition parties a fighting chance. His critics and admirers are both listening closely to prime minister Narendra Modi's words, alert to the tiniest inflections. In his campaign speeches and in the sudden rash of interviews he has obliged various media players with. Those words, straight from the horse's mouth, should indeed be revealing, considering all the trusty sources that provide ground-intelligence inputs to the horse.

If the bare fact of these staged interviews were not already a signal that there was a perceived need to (re)build a narrative, there are also noticeable changes in theme, tone and tenor, and those changes are revealing to all but those who make and sell all the paraphernalia of the cult of Modi.

His critics obviously wish the BJP loses this election and loses it badly. They are finding his speeches incoherent and his U-turns an indication of how rattled he is. For example, his assertion that a Congress government would take away everything from everyone else and give it to Muslims. The prime minister has obligingly provided this lot with more grist in his campaign speeches (just say 'mangalsutra' or 'buffalo' and watch their reaction).

His admirers focus on the prime minister's energy, his ability to meet punishing schedules at the age of 74. For them, there is no question of Modi retiring from active politics at 75, never mind that the rule applies to lesser mortals in the BJP. He is unquestionably fit for another term, they gush, countering Arvind Kejriwal's recent bombshell that Amit Shah, who is still in his 50s—even if he looks deceptively older—will replace Modi as prime minister next year, should the NDA win. His devotees still expect Modi to pull a rabbit out of the hat and ensure that the NDA sails past the 400-seats mark. They still find his election speeches 'clever', 'smart', designed to grab headlines and confuse the Opposition.

The most noticeable U-turn he made in the interviews was to completely disavow that his campaign speeches had communal overtones. Doing so, he said in one such interview to a TV channel, would render him unfit for public life. For his fans in the media, this was ample proof he was not rattled, that he was now certain of victory, and didn't have to pretend to be, in the colourful vocabulary of right-wing trolls, a 'sickular librandu'.

However, Congress's data analytics man

Praveen Chakravarty, also now the chairman of the All India Professionals' Congress, says nobody really knows the election score at this point in time. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union home minister Amit Shah, by virtue of being the PM's confidant, are the two most likely, he says, to know the approximate numbers. They will be receiving daily progress reports from the Intelligence Bureau and friendly foreign powers, and are the best election weather vanes.

Chakravarty calculates that the prime minister delivered as many as 81 speeches between 9 March and 8 May this year. Till mid-April, his speeches were peppered with boasts of 'Abki baar, 400 paar'. The reference to '400 paar' tapered off, then stopped, as the prime minister started amping up the anti-Muslim rhetoric. He started talking of Muslims usurping national resources. He began attacking the Congress manifesto, and said a Congress government would be weak, divisive and disastrous. In a return to the BJP's old favourite Muslim-appeasement song to berate the Congress, he said the party just wanted to appease its favourite minority, and end all reservations for OBCs, SC and STs and give them to Muslims.

In the first week of May, he changed direction. Somewhat out of the blue, he accused the two largest business houses in the country, owned by the Adanis and Ambanis, of sending sackfuls of black money in "tempos" to the Congress. That comment set a cat among the pigeons—the stock market crashed and the Congress seized the opportunity to demand an

"There is a point to this backtracking—the BJP is getting word from the ground that the Yadavs, OBCs and Muslims are consolidating behind the INDIA bloc"

Photos courtesy: narendramodi.in



PM Modi on an interview spree: (Clockwise from top left) With Amish Devgan (News18), Chitra Tripathi (Aaj Tak), Arnab Goswami (Republic TV) and Rubika Liyaquat (News18)

investigation by the ED (Enforcement Directorate), the Income Tax department and the CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation). Never again, though: just as suddenly as he had lashed out, he fell completely silent on the Amabni-Adani "black money to Congress" charge. Significantly, not a single interviewer asked him to explain what he meant.

Earlier this week, in the face of video evidence to the contrary—quickly brought to public attention by fact-checker Mohammed Zubair—the prime minister denied ever describing Muslims as infiltrators and people who breed like mice. "I have never spoken of a Hindu-Muslim divide; if I do, I will no longer be fit for public life," he told Rubika Liyaquat of News18, when she asked if it was necessary for him to speak of Muslims in those terms. "Main hairan hoon ji... kisme aapko kah diya... Musalmaan ki baat kyun karte hain... gareebon ke bacche zyada hote hain... maine na Hindu kaha, aur na Musalmaan kaha," he said with righteous indignation.

A few days earlier, in an interview with Navika Kumar of Times Now, he was asked the same question. The prime minister presented a

picture of injured innocence. He grew up among Muslims, he said; he had several Muslim friends, and on Eid, Muslim neighbours sent food to his family. How could he possibly "do Hindu-Muslim"? He was merely stating facts and exposing the Congress manifesto, he said. To a third interviewer from another channel, he claimed he grew up participating in Muharram processions.

"There is a point to this backtracking—the BJP is getting word from the ground that the Yadavs, OBCs and Muslims are consolidating behind the INDIA bloc. Modi does not give a flying fish for Muslims, but he cannot afford that kind of consolidation. So, damage control," posted political analyst and commentator Prem Panicker.

The flurry of media interviews in the first fortnight of May, upwards of 20 by some estimates, have by themselves set tongues wagging. It is unlike Modi to offer clarifications and justifications. Why, then, is he giving so many interviews, sometimes more than once to the same channel in one week? On questions doubtless prompted by the PMO in advance. Paid PR? None of these scrupulous TV inter-

viewers, from media companies that all claim to bring you the unvarnished truth, has interviewed Rahul Gandhi even once.

Some say the prime minister wants to create a more personable persona for himself, that he may even be preparing for a graceful exit, just in case... Elections are farthest from his mind, he told Times Now. Yeah, right!

After the fourth round of polling, Amit Shah blurted out that by his reckoning, the NDA was set to win 190 of 380 seats where voting had concluded. The inscrutable mask was back on the next day: "Modiji has already won 270 seats and secured a majority"; the target now is '400 paar'. Asked by CNBC to comment on the stock market crash, Shah advised investors, with an all-knowing smile, to buy now because on counting day (4 June), the markets would surely shoot up again. He could be bluffing to keep up the morale of party workers or scheming behind the scenes to engineer a victory or he may know for certain. Who can tell?

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STATES 360°

WEST BENGAL

KOLKATA

Hope springs left, right and centre

...and why it looks like the BJP high command has miscalculated the gains it can make here

Shikha Mukerjee

Everyone has high hopes in West Bengal, this time. Each of the four principal contestants—the Trinamool Congress, the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Congress and the Left, led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist)—believes it will win more seats in 2024 compared to both the 2019 Lok Sabha elections and the 2021 state assembly elections.

On the face of it, the political space in West Bengal seems fairly settled after the radical rearrangements it underwent, first in 2011 with Mamata Banerjee's spectacular triumph over the CPI (M)-led Left Front, which ended 34 uninterrupted years of the Left being in power. The second shakedown was in 2019, when the BJP, riding a wave of

nationalist fervour post the Pulwama attack, won 18 Lok Sabha seats, and its vote share shot up from 17 per cent in the 2014 general election to over 40 per cent in 2019.

In many ways, the 2019 Lok Sabha election was a watershed. The Trinamool Congress seat tally dropped sharply, from 34 seats in 2014 to 22 seats in 2019, though its vote share increased to 43.3 per cent, keeping it ahead of the BJP as the new challenger.

The major shift in voter preference was from the Left to the BJP. In 2014, its vote share was close to 30 per cent—this dropped to 7.5 per cent in 2019. The decline in the Congress vote share was around 5 per cent, a big loss but one that did not radically alter its ranking.

Given that between them the Trinamool Congress and the BJP snared 40 out of the 42

Lok Sabha constituencies in West Bengal, with the Congress winning two seats and the CPI(M) none, the expectation that each will improve its position in 2024 is intriguing.

It is not as though the dominant Trinamool Congress is visibly weaker or in turmoil, thereby creating an opportunity for the BJP to expand its footprint and usurp territory. As of now, there is no challenge to Mamata Banerjee's leadership, there are no succession fights underway and the control of the organisation is still very much in her hands.

As the party with the most at stake in this general election, the BJP declared at the outset that it would win 35 seats in West Bengal. Adding 18 seats would take it closer to the target of 370 seats announced by prime minister Narendra Modi in his last speech at the concluding session of the 17th Lok Sabha.

That was an unrealistic target.

From establishing leads in 121 assembly segments in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP's tally dropped to only 77 seats in the 2021 state assembly elections, registering a loss of advantage in 44 seats. These losses included assembly seats in North Bengal where it had scooped seven out of eight seats in the Lok Sabha election.

Since the rout in the 2021 state assembly election, the BJP's problems have actually grown. There is friction within the party between the old guard who nurtured the BJP's expansionist drive and the new entrants, almost all of whom moved from the Trinamool Congress, led by Suwendu Adhikari and his associates.

There are differences within the BJP on political strategy and which issues to pitch to



Mamata Banerjee with the Matua community in Betai, West Bengal, 2 May 2024

voters. The disconnect between the party's high command, middle rung and grassroots is likely to damage its prospects in this election.

The BJP may also have miscalculated on the return it can expect from a botched notification of the rules under the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The failure of its relentless communally divisive campaign, as proven by the 2021 state assembly results, suggests that the BJP has limited understanding of the political-social-cultural issues in West Bengal.

What the BJP lacks is what the CPI(M) has in large quantities—deep roots and formidable organisational muscle memory that came into play in full force during the enforced and abrupt Covid lockdown. Without needing directions, bands of Red Volunteers sprang into action organising relief and emergency services. This is what the CPI(M) has always done and it earned the party the goodwill it had lost in recent years.

Reconnecting with the people in urban areas and working at recovering its rural bases over the past three years leads the CPI(M) to believe its vote share will increase and that it can win more than one seat in this election.

With spiralling confrontations between the opposition and the Modi-led BJP over fundamentals enshrined in the Constitution, the successful establishment of an opposition bloc—the Indian National Inclusive Developmental Alliance—is proof that the CPI(M) and the Trinamool Congress can work together when it is politically imperative.

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STATES 360°

HARYANA

Farmers turn up the heat on the BJP

Posters have come up across the state warning BJP candidates and campaigners against entering villages

Rashme Sehgal

The timing and ferocity of the farmers' protests across Haryana has caught the BJP by surprise. Having successfully driven wedges between different farmers' organisations, sowed doubts and kept leaders busy in protracted dialogues over the last two years, how could it realistically expect their anger to have dissipated? With campaigning in full swing for the 10 Lok Sabha seats in Haryana (all won by the BJP in 2019), the BJP has received a rude shock.

Posters have come up across the state warning BJP candidates and campaigners against entering villages. As farmers intensified protests in Hisar, Sirsa, Fatehabad, Jind, Sonapat and Rohtak districts, candidates forcing their way through have often been physically stopped.

Last week, farmers blocked former deputy chief minister Dushyant Chautala's mother Naina Chautala's entourage from entering Roj Khera in the Hisar Lok Sabha constituency. In the violent clash that followed, some of her supporters were hurt. Most BJP and Jannayak Janta Party (JJP) candidates have now been provided security cover to enable them to campaign.

Even so, the entire Chautala clan, including father Ajay Chautala and his other son Digvijay, as well as BJP's Hisar nominee Ranjit Singh Chautala, are being heckled and prevented from entering village after village. Farmers holding black flags opposed Dushyant's cavalcade from entering Nara and Gamra villages, forcing him to walk.

BJP candidates in Punjab have met with similar expressions of anger by villagers who are in no mood to overlook the wounds inflicted on them during the 2020-21 agitation against the three draconian farm laws and the sacrifices made by their 'brothers' in order to get them repealed.

Memories of the 'Dilli Chalo' agitation have been revived. The way authorities used iron nails, barbed wire and concrete barricades to prevent the farmers from bringing their protests to the doorstep of the capital is something they are not willing to forgive or forget.

Farmers' organisations in Punjab have put up posters stating, 'Kisana da Delhi jana bandh hai, BJP da pinda vich auna bandh hai (Farmers are banned from entering Delhi, BJP is banned from entering villages)'. Videos have gone viral on Facebook and Instagram.

Baldev Singh Zira, general secretary of the BKU (Bharatiya Kisan Union) Krantikari group, condemned the government for the death of Shubhakaran Singh and the use of



Farmers protest at the Haryana-Punjab border at Shambhu, 21 February 2024

tear gas and pellets that have blinded many. The long shadow of those actions saw farmers laying siege to the Moti Bagh Palace residence of former Punjab chief minister Amarinder Singh after a protester was killed at a poll meeting being addressed by Preneet Kaur, his wife and BJP candidate from Patiala.

Confusion has been compounded by the switching over of several Congress candidates, including Preneet Kaur, who has been a four-time MP from the Congress and had worked along with her husband Captain Amarinder Singh (then also in the Congress) to put pressure on the Modi government to repeal the farm laws in 2021. Or take the case of Ravneet Singh Bittu, a sitting Congress MP from Ludhiana who has recently moved to the BJP which has fielded him from the same seat this time. Bittu has also been at the receiving end of the farmers' ire, despite his reminding them that he supported them right through their agitation, even sleeping on the ground in the freezing cold at Jantar Mantar in solidarity.

The one candidate who has succeeded in mollifying the angry farmers somewhat is Hans Raj Hans, the popular Sufi singer who was earlier an MP from north-west Delhi but is now contesting from Faridkot. He goes from village to village begging for

forgiveness. Though he has been shown away on occasion, he believes their anger is somewhat tempered. Off the record, he likes to joke that his name should now be changed to 'Minnat Raj Minnat' (Pleader Raj Pleading) since all he has done in this election is plead with the farmers.

Former Haryana chief minister Manohar Lal Khattar's recent tactless remark, "Kuch log sirphirey aise hote hain jo apni dabang chalte hain (some people are so crazy and wayward, flaunting and flexing their authority), the more they protest, the more people associate themselves with the Bharatiya Janata Party", has spurred further protests.

On 21 April, a day after Khattar's comment, farmers staged a protest against BJP's Sirsa candidate Ashok Tanwar during his public meeting in Dabwali town. The farmers' intention to gherao him was stymied by a police cordon around him.

According to Pagri Sambhal Jatta Kisan Sangharsh Samiti, a farmers' union which is part of the Samyukta Kisan Morcha, these protests are all part of 'Jawab Do, Hisab Lo' (Answer and be accountable).

The BJP brass had hoped that getting a large number of Congressmen to cross over into their fold would mollify the farmers' anger but this has not happened. Since

The BJP brass had hoped that getting a large number of Congressmen to cross over into their fold would mollify the farmers' anger but this has not happened

Straws in the electoral wind

Continued from page 1

Shah's reputation as a cunning, know-it-all Chakravarty was dented, however, in his home state of Gujarat. The party appears to be in turmoil, even after polling got over in the state on 7 May. Newspaper headlines screaming 'BJP ma babaal' (Turmoil in the BJP) are hard to miss. A failure to prevent a BJP legislator from withdrawing in favour of his nominee for the post of IFFCO (Indian Farmers Fertiliser Cooperative) director. Shah himself called on the rebel MLA, Jayesh Radadiya, but Radadiya was defiant and defeated Shah's candidate Bipin Patel. Is the hold of the Modi-Shah duo weakening in their home state?

There are other signs of churn. Uttar Pradesh, where the BJP had appeared invincible, especially after the consecration of the Ram Mandir, looks far more vulnerable now, especially in eastern Uttar Pradesh, where polling is due in the next three phases. Priyanka Gandhi's presence in Amethi and Rae Bareilly has brought the election alive even in adjoining constituencies. Mayawati has tried to arrest the drift of Dalit voters from the BJP to the INDIA bloc, and the BJP will hope she succeeds.

Even a few weeks ago, close contests seemed unlikely in Uttar Pradesh, but the BJP no longer looks invincible, not even in its strongholds. Akhilesh Yadav's decision to contest from Kannauj, which the BJP had won in 2019, is seen as a game-changer in the region, and may well affect the outcome in Kanpur as well.

Controversial former BRI (Wrestling Federation of India) chief Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, dropped by the BJP in favour of his son, embarrassed the party by saying that he did not agree with Yogi Adityanath's 'bulldozer Raj'. Another Rajputan don close to the BJP, Raja Bhaiyya, a.k.a. 'Kunda ka Gunda' (so named by former UP chief minister Kalyan Singh), declared that his supporters were free to vote for whoever they liked.

Reports that Amit Shah was camping

in Uttar Pradesh and officials strengthened speculation that chief minister Yogi Adityanath was being sidelined and would be replaced after the election.

In Bihar, Tejashwi Yadav is on a roll. He caused a flutter when he said that Nitish Kumar may be in the NDA physically, but he was spiritually with the INDIA bloc. Nitish gave prime minister Modi's nomination in Varanasi a miss on grounds of illness, providing further grist for the rumour mills.

In West Bengal, Left voters who had swelled the BJP's vote percentage in 2019, are said to be returning to the Left, a possibility the BJP had not foreseen. Despite the deployment of CAPF (Central Armed Police Forces) personnel in large numbers at the request of the BJP, at least three BJP candidates in Bengal—Jaganath Sarkar in Ranaghat, Dilip Ghosh in East Bardhaman-Durgapur and 'Rajmata' Amrita Roy, who is taking on Mahua Moitra of Trinamool Congress in Krishnanagar—have accused the CAPF of helping Trinamool Congress. Sandeshkhali and CAA (the Citizenship Amendment Act), issues the BJP was banking on to corner Mamata Banerjee's TMC, seem to have fizzled out.

Even in BJP-ruled Uttar Pradesh, sitting BJP member of Parliament from

Akhilesh Yadav's decision to contest from Kannauj, which the BJP had won in 2019, is seen as a game-changer in the region, and may well affect Kanpur too



Kannauj Subrat Pathak fumed at security forces in a polling booth and warned that he would initiate vigilance inquiries against them all. At the very least, these are signs that the ruling party's grip is slackening. Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav, who is taking on Pathak and is widely expected to win, also complained that the police were not allowing voters to reach booths to cast their votes.

Two hundred kilometres from Kannauj, in Bareilly, in UP, another video went viral of two home guards assaulting a man and berating him for accepting free rations from the government and yet voting against the government. The victim was reportedly a Dalit watchman and had objected to the home guards mouthing obscenities at people voting against the BJP.

Political scientist Suhas Palshikar articulated what may be on the minds of many citizens. 'A worrying thought: if, after numerous machinations and system takeovers, the ruling party is cut to size, what sabotage and mayhem will it unleash?' A voter in Bengaluru last month warned that voters must ensure

that the person inking their finger actually releases the control unit before they cast their vote. Some polling personnel are in cahoots with political parties, he said, warning that they may try to dupe gullible voters into thinking that they had cast their votes when, in fact, the control unit has not been released to record the next vote. In Ujjain, voters accused a presiding officer of influencing voters with her chant of 'Modi-Modi' inside the booth. She was later suspended for her mistake.

At the end of the fourth round of polling, Yogenendra Yadav, co-founder of political party Swaraj India and a well-regarded psephologist in his earlier life, reasoned, with a state-wise break-up at the ready, that the BJP and NDA were struggling to reach the half-way mark. He said they would end up well below their 2019 tally, but he also agreed with Pradeep Gupta of polling agency Axis My India in ruling out a 1977-like scenario.

He still does not see the INDIA securing below 200 seats or the NDA alliance securing 300 seats. So much for which way the wind is blowing. Go figure! ■

Hope springs left, right and centre

Continued from page 1

The impact in West Bengal will be evident in this Lok Sabha election. The rivalry between the Trinamool Congress on the one hand and the Congress-CPI(M)-led Left on the other is no less: the difference is in singling out the BJP as their common enemy. While this is not a strategy chalked out in any dialogue between these parties, it seems to be a mutual understanding. As a nudge to voters, it could work. Dismayed by the rampant corruption in the Trinamool Congress, voters now have a choice—they could vote for the Congress-CPI(M) instead of the BJP. A decline in the latter's vote share would hurt its prospects in this election, while benefiting the former.

There is always the risk that the micro-motives that underlie individual voter preferences may not add up to the macro-outcome desired by the anti-BJP opposition. That is a chance both the Congress-CPI(M) and the Trinamool Congress seem prepared to take, because the stakes are very high at this point.

All three parties in opposition to the BJP share a common goal <beyond> the 2024 Lok Sabha election in West Bengal. The vacuum created after the CPI(M) was decimated was an open invitation to the BJP to step forward and fill it, which is what happened between 2016 and 2019 as the party's vote share and presence grew. Reclaiming the political space ahead of the 2026 state assembly elections is necessary as much for the Trinamool Congress as it is for the Congress-CPI(M) to prevent the BJP from disrupting social equilibrium with its agenda of triggering majoritarian paranoia in a state where there is little hostility against the widely dispersed primarily Bengali-speaking Muslim minority.

With three phases of polling still remaining in West Bengal, the contest has narrowed to a fight between the BJP on the one hand and the three parties in opposition to the BJP on the other. Every party hopes to emerge the winner, knowing that there will inevitably be a loser. ■

STATES 360° JHARKHAND



BJP's mineral-rich 'ATM' state has had enough of it

Nandal Sharma

The Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) is disappointed that President Droupadi Murmu, a former governor of Jharkhand, couldn't spare time to meet a delegation of party leaders led by chief minister Champai Soren, who had sought audience with Murmu. The new chief minister gave vent to his frustration by saying that BJP leaders seem to treat mineral-rich Jharkhand like an ATM machine. "They neither have any emotional connect with the people of Jharkhand nor are they serious about our issues", he added. Amusingly, the present state president and former chief minister Babulal Marandi had quit the BJP saying he was expected to raise money all the time. Marandi, whom critics call 'Babulal Marwari' for his alleged proximity to businessmen, is back to being the BJP president but his anti-corruption plank has lost much of its luster with his party patronising mine-owners and moneybags.

This is also the reason why the continued incarceration of former chief minister Hemant Soren has not dented his image or popularity. It has impacted JMM's election campaign and alienated tribals who believe that Soren was implicated in a frivolous case to prevent him from campaigning in the Lok Sabha election. The sense of hurt and alienation was evident in the traditional spring festival of Sarhul, when several floats in the pageant figured Soren behind bars. Adivasis tend to be stoic about injustice and prisons do not intimidate them; but the simmering anger one senses beneath their surface calm is unmistakable.

The Bharatiya Janata Party is finding it hard to justify Soren's imprisonment on corruption charges, and not only because their own hands are not quite clean. Soren is in prison for a benami land deal, an allegation he has denied. His arrest, however, is not the only grievance that tribals, who constitute less than one-third of the population of the state, hold against the saffron party.

Its troubles have been compounded by the PM and the home minister's anti-Muslim rhetoric. Jharkhand, though no stranger to communal riots and mob lynching incidents, has seen a spurt in communal rhetoric over the last decade. When Modi, addressing a rally in Chaibasa, asserted that he would not allow Jharkhand to be turned into Bengal, there was incomprehension among the people, simply because Muslims have lived in relative harmony in the state for so long.

Modi and Amit Shah's claim that reservation for SC-ST-OBCs is safe only as long as they are in power has failed to cut any ice. This is partly because it was the Hemant Soren-led government that passed the Bill to give OBCs 27 per cent reservation, which was stalled by the Governor, a nominee of

the Centre. (State-level BJP leaders are unable to explain why.) And partly because, contrary to the BJP's expectations, the Congress manifesto has actually become a reference point.

On a campaign stop in the state, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi spoke of the Opposition's commitment to a 'Sarna' code. The BJP and the RSS have always treated non-Christian tribals as Hindus. Tribals, however, have been demanding a separate identity, pointing out that they worship nature and follow the 'Sarna dharma'. They want the state to recognise their distinct identity, a demand to which the BJP has been cold.

There are other undercurrents. Resentment has been brewing against outsiders and migrants into Jharkhand after the state was formed in November 2000. These 'rent seekers' have usurped jobs, land, mining leases and contracts. They are also seen to dominate political parties, especially the two national parties. While the BJP, after experimenting with non-tribal Raghuraj Das as chief minister has fallen back on Babulal Marandi, the Congress continues to be led and micro-managed by non-tribal leaders from outside the state.

The clamour for a 'domicile' policy based on land records or the Bihar Bhumi Khatiyani dating back to 1932 is another major electoral issue, but is not reflected in the media. The INDIA bloc is cushioned somewhat because a bill proposing a new domicile policy was passed by the state assembly and sent to the Governor for assent by the JMM-led coalition government. The Governor has neither returned it nor given his assent. BJP leaders have stayed mum on an issue which it recognises as a minefield. On the ground, though, it is an important talking point not only for older people, but for both tribal and non-tribal youth. They want preference to be given to local residents in at least Group C and D jobs in the state and central government, as well as in the PSUs.

The sizeable and politically empowered Kurmi community, known as the 'Mahatos' in Jharkhand, are also up in arms. They had played an important role in the Jharkhand movement. Leaders like Binod Bihari Mahato and Nirmal Mahato had led the agitation from the front with Shibui Soren and A.K. Roy. The restive Kurmi youth have now come together under the banner of 'Jharkhand Loktantrik Krantikari Morcha' led by Jairam Mahato. The Morcha has fielded eight candidates for the Lok Sabha and could chip away the votes of both the BJP and the INDIA bloc, making elections in the state even more unpredictable.

The BJP was pressured to drop its sitting MP from Dhanbad, P.N. Singh, who has been winning the Lok Sabha seat for the last three elections, and forced to field one of its 'local' MLAs, Dhulu Mahato, from the seat. In the



JMM workers demonstrate against the BJP over the arrest of former chief minister Hemant Soren

Giridih Lok Sabha seat too, three Mahato candidates fielded by different political parties are the main contestants. The domicile policy is a key issue in both these constituencies. The BJP was compelled to field a new candidate from Hazaribagh as well, to counter the heat generated by the Morcha, which has spearheaded agitations in the region, demanding employment for local people in this belt dotted by coal mines, thermal power plants and steel plants.

In the last Lok Sabha election, the BJP had won 12 of the 14 seats in the state. The party had won the Dhanbad seat by a margin of over four lakh votes while the Giridih seat was also won by the BJP's ally, Chandra Prakash Choudhary of the AJSU (All Jharkhand Students' Union). This time the stiff challenge comes not just from the INDIA bloc but also the Morcha.

The Kurmis in the state, it is believed, had voted en masse for the BJP in both 2014 and 2019. The community has been asking for reservation and inclusion in the Scheduled Tribes list. In 2022 and in 2023, agitations had led to three 'Rail Roko' campaigns, which effectively brought train movement to a standstill for several days. The BJP had then promised to consider their dual demands. With the realisation that this

could alienate tribal voters in several states, the BJP has now decided to maintain a studied silence. Kurmis feel betrayed and are infuriated.

When Union minister Arjun Munda was the chief minister in 2004, recalls Ranchi-based activist Manzar Imam, he had forwarded a recommendation to include Kurmis in the ST list to New Delhi. As a Union minister dealing with tribal affairs, however, Munda dragged his feet and sought a report and recommendation from the Tribal Research Institute (TRI) in Ranchi. This too has added fuel to the fire and Munda, who is contesting from Khunti, is also feeling the heat. Ram Tahal Choudhary, a veteran Kurmi leader who had briefly left the BJP this year before returning to the fold, was heckled and manhandled when he went to campaign for Munda in the Tamar assembly constituency.

Jharkhand is a microcosm of India with diverse communities, cultures, languages and dialects. The BJP's one-size-fits-all prescription and its anti-minority virulence and talk of infiltrators from Bangladesh do not have the traction they receive elsewhere. The chances that the BJP would be able to repeat its 2019 performance in the state are slim. ■

The BJP's one-size-fits-all prescription and its anti-minority virulence and talk of infiltrators from Bangladesh do not get much traction in Jharkhand

STATES 360° ODISHA



Modi and the martial art of losing allies

Ashutosh Mishra

As the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ramps up its campaign in Odisha, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's desperation is mounting. The niceties that once characterised his relationship with the Odisha chief minister Naveen Patnaik—who is among the few regional satraps on whom the BJP-led NDA could rely to bail it out in Parliament—have been abandoned. The ferocity of the PM's attacks on Patnaik has compelled the usually mild-mannered chief minister to respond to the barbs of his one-time friend. This kind of a recriminatory campaign has rarely been seen in the state.

The first salvo in this war of words was fired by Modi when he addressed his maiden election rally in Odisha at Berhampur on 6 May, taunting Patnaik for his poor knowledge of Odia and Odia culture. On 11 May, while addressing rallies in Kandhamal, Bolangir and Bargarh Lok Sabha constituencies, Modi even questioned his knowledge about the state he ruled.

"Naveen Babu is the chief minister of Odisha for so many years. I want to challenge Naveen Babu. Why are people upset with you? Because (if) you make him stand anywhere and ask him to spell out the names of districts and their 'capital' he won't be able to do that. How can a chief minister, who cannot tell names of the districts and their headquarters, be expected to understand your plight?" asked Modi at Kandhamal.

In Bolangir, Modi invited people to ask Patnaik to name 10 villages in the Kantabanji assembly constituency from where Patnaik has filed his nomination papers this time along with his traditional seat (Hinjili in Ganjam). The Kantabanji assembly segment is part of the Bolangir Lok Sabha constitu-

ency, and Patnaik has chosen to contest it in a strategic move to contain the BJP's influence in western Odisha, where they had won all five Lok Sabha seats in 2019.

At Bargarh, the prime minister targeted Patnaik's Man Friday, the Tamil Nadu-born former IAS officer V.K. Pandian, who is the Biju Janata Dal's chief strategist in these elections. Taking a dig at Pandian, who is believed to be remote-controlling the government even after taking voluntary retirement from service and joining politics, Modi said, "Do you know the entire government in Odisha has been outsourced? There is a super CM (an obvious reference to Pandian) who is above the democratically-elected government and the chief minister. Do you want the state to go into the hands of those who have no understanding of Odisha?"

He then called upon people to vote for his party which, he said, was the only way of putting an end to BJD's misrule in the state. He also brought up the issue of the missing keys to the *ratna bhandar* (treasury room) of the Jagannath temple in an attempt to make an emotional connect with people while attacking the state government's alleged inefficiency.

Patnaik, who usually refuses to be provoked, responded in a video statement where he tore into Modi: "Honourable prime minister, how much do you remember about Odisha? Even though Odia is a classical language, you forgot about it. You have allotted Rs 1,000 crore to Sanskrit but zero to Odia."

He took a dig at Modi for forgetting about Odissi though the state had sent him proposals for the recognition of this classical dance

form. "Odisha's natural wealth is coal. You (the Centre) take coal from Odisha. But you forgot to hike the royalty on coal even once in the last 10 years," Patnaik reminded the prime minister.

Narendra Modi is taking a calculated risk by targeting his former ally. He seems ready to burn the bridges he had assiduously built with regional satraps like Patnaik over the years. With the BJP-led NDA government lacking the requisite numbers in the Rajya Sabha, there have been several occasions when Patnaik's party bailed it out in the Upper House, be it for the abrogation of article 370, triple talaq or the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA).

Patnaik, in fact, had exposed himself to criticism from minority community leaders by extending support to the CAA. His party's backing of the Modi government ever since it came to power for the first time in 2014 made a mockery of the BJD's stand of maintaining equidistance from both the BJP and the Congress. It also threatened to dent the secular credentials of the chief minister who had ended his party's alliance with the BJP in 2009 in the wake of communal riots in Kandhamal.

The regional party led by Patnaik not only extended support to NDA's presidential candidates, handpicked by Modi, it also

backed the candidature of Harivansh Narayan Singh for the post of Rajya Sabha deputy chairperson in 2020 in deference to the PM's wishes. Such was the bonhomie between Modi and Patnaik that BJP leader and railway minister Ashwini Vaishnaw was twice sent to the Rajya Sabha from Odisha with the BJD's support. What Patnaik got in return was financial assistance from the Centre in the wake of disastrous cyclones like Fani which left the Odisha coast completely devastated in 2019.

On balance, it was the BJP that gained the most from this friendly understanding, with the BJD holding 12 of the 21 Lok Sabha seats in the state, the BJP currently holding eight and the Congress one.

Modi's vitriolic campaign is apparently spurred by the hope of a major revival of the BJP in Odisha. The BJP's vote share in the state had jumped from 21.9 per cent in 2014 to 38.9 per cent in 2019. The BJD's vote share had dipped marginally, going down from 44.8 per cent in 2014 to 43.3 per cent in 2019.

Post-poll data showed that the BJP's vote share increased largely at the cost of the Congress, which fell from over 26 per cent in 2014 to 14 per cent in 2019. However, the BJP failed to translate its Lok Sabha success in the Assembly polls. Even though it emerged as the main opposition party, winning 23 seats in the Assembly, it was still far behind the BJD which won a record fifth term with 112 of the 147 seats at stake. The BJP's Assembly vote share, however, rose from just 18.2 per cent in 2014 to 32.8 per cent in 2019.

The BJP faced a major setback in the 2022 panchayat polls where it won 42 zila parishad seats compared to the 297 it had won in 2017. The BJD swept the 2022 panchayat poll, bagging a record 766 zila parishad seats out of the total 852. Things haven't changed much since then, and the BJP's wildest hope is to bag 15 Lok Sabha seats.

Similarly, in the 147-strong state assembly, the party can, at best hope to double its present tally of 23.

This hardly seems worth the risks that Modi is taking by attacking a reliable ally. Taking the BJD and Patnaik's support for granted in Parliament is poor politics, feel observers. The attacks may well make it difficult for Patnaik and Pandian to extend support to the NDA in future, even if they want to. ■



BJD supporters at a Lok Sabha election campaign rally in Odisha, May 2024

Modi's vitriolic campaign is apparently spurred by the hope of a major revival of the BJP in Odisha. The BJP's vote share in the state had jumped from 21.9% in 2014 to 38.9% in 2019

HERALD VIEW

A time to hope, a time to fear

Voters now in their thirties will probably remember the electoral storm that blew over India in 2014. Those older will have a deeper context. Every national election is arguably different, but the 2024 editions marked some important departures from the past. For one, they rang down the curtain on an era of coalition politics in India.

In 2014, Narendra Modi mounted his bid to power in Delhi on the back of his reputation as a doer. During his long stint as Gujarat chief minister between 2001 and 2014. For fence-sitters at the time, enamoured of his go-getting reputation, the Gujarat riots of 2002 and its 'management' by Modi's state government, were discomfiting but they were still willing to "give Modi a chance". His doer reputation—also largely a media creation—was in some ways the springboard for his ambition to recast the parliamentary election into a presidential-style gladiatorial contest, projecting himself as the strongman with a laser focus on getting things done.

The Sangh *parivar* saw both promise and purchase in the strategy. The capture of institutions over time, including most importantly the capture of the mainstream media narrative, cemented this strategy. The monstrous, overpowering influence of social media has coincided with Modi's reign and the BJP has been quick to learn how to maximise its reach and influence among the people. For that reason alone, Amit Malviya, the national convenor of the BJP's IT cell, is an important cog in the party's propaganda wheel.

Going into these elections, the collective wisdom of the BJP/ Sangh propagandists was that the time had come to go to the people to elect a monarch. In case anyone missed it, the ruling party is contesting the 2024 Lok Sabha polls not as the BJP's bid to return to power but a vote for 'Modi's Guarantee' that 'better things are in store'. That guarantee is supposedly worth its weight in gold in the popular imagination. The promise of a wet dream for swathes of the country that want the dawn of a Hindu—itsra, and it's a nightmare for others, who desperately want to shake off that very real prospect if the BJP returns to power, legitimately or otherwise.

To track back briefly, 2014 was a watershed election that gave the BJP a major win on its own—the first time for any party in 30 years since 1984. In that epochal election, though, the BJP, with 282 seats, went only slightly past the simple majority mark of 272. The general election in 2019 was again an unusual one with the BJP and prime minister Modi converting the Pulwama terror attack—a huge blot on the government and a glaring security failure—into a show casing the Modi government's muscular response to foreign/ Pakistani aggression, through the expedient of a token air strike inside Pakistan. When, in fact, even the strike (in Balakot) was botched, resulting in the tragic loss of a pilot and a fighter plane inside Pakistan and a helicopter and six personnel, shot down by mistake inside Indian territory. Nevertheless, the 'ghar me ghus ke maara' rhetoric generated a patriotic frenzy that secured the BJP a record 303 seats and the NDA 353 seats in the Lok Sabha, giving the government a free pass in the lower House to do what it desired.

How different is the ongoing election? The BJP should have found itself in a sweet spot, having hurriedly and somewhat clumsily gone through with the consecration of the Ram Mandir. And with central agencies going on a rampage against the Opposition. Putting opposition leaders in jail, freezing the bank accounts of the principal opposition party, intimidating opposition leaders to defect or else, welcoming defectors from everywhere and fielding the probable winners among them as BJP candidates should have put it in an unassailable position. With more men, muscle and money than all the opposition put together—and by doing its damndest to strangle any resistance—the BJP should have found it easy to win this time too. Barely weeks ago, '400-paar' was made to look like a cinch, but with voting done and dusted for 381 (of 543) seats at the time of writing, there are indications (see *Straws in the electoral wind*, Page 1) that a different outcome is possible.

It is apparently visible on the ground, in the North as much as the South, in the East as well as the West. The arrogance of the BJP, its inability to convincingly address everyday issues of unemployment and inflation, the yawning gulf between people's lived experience and 'Modi's' guarantees, the veiled threats to rewrite the Constitution and a motley assortment of local issues are apparently rewriting a perceptible draught against the BJP. A traditional breed of independent analysts—seen mostly on YouTube, for reasons well known but best set aside for now—are predicting that the BJP, even the NDA, will fall short. Yet there are hushed whispers even among those who see a different outcome on the horizon that if 4 June does see a mandate for change, the current regime will resist a peaceful transfer of power. Be afraid!

Letters to the Editor

Modi's flip-flop on Muslims

Prime Minister Narendra Modi began his election campaign by claiming that if the Congress came to power at the Centre, it would snatch properties from Hindus and distribute them "among those who have more children". In the previous sentence he was talking about Muslims and thus nobody was in doubt about who he meant by those "who have more children". His remarks drew widespread flak and hundreds of people complained to the Election Commission that the prime minister was making communally divisive remarks. The ECI, as expected, took no action on these complaints. For two phases, Modi stuck to this line of attack on the Congress. But it did not seem to work. Then suddenly, during an interview with his 'tonic' pal Rubika Liaquat, Modi made a somersault and said that he never targeted Muslims and that the day he does it, he will have no right to remain in public life! Really? **Dr Mehmoor Ali, Delhi**

nationalisation under Indira Gandhi'. The author observes, "...the Congress has rejected Manmohan Singh and all that he brought to the table, whether it says so explicitly or not." The Congress manifesto is so strong that the ruling BJP and its supreme leader, instead of telling people about their achievements (are there any?), are endlessly talking about the Congress manifesto. **Satyaprakash Sharma, Bhopal**

No end to Human Greed?

A propos 'Why Uttarakhand is in flames' (NH, 12 May), it is worrisome that there are over 150 fires raging in the Garhwal region of Uttarakhand and nearly 500 fires burning in the forests of the Kumaon range, as is evident from satellite images. The question is how did these fires start at such massive scale? As per the report, the state administration claims that 90 per cent of the fires that have spread across Pauri Garhwal, Chamoli, Almora and around the Mussoorie hills are manmade. Although villagers do traditionally burn forest floors to stimulate the growth of fresh grass, environmentalist Reenu Paul sounds more realistic as she claims that the majority of fires are the handiwork of the real estate lobby which uses this (burnt) forest land to develop colonies—of course, in connivance with the local bureaucracy. **Shikha Penuli, Dehradun**

The Kejriwal case: 'democracy' really?

Facts peel away the fiction of 'free and fair' elections

Arvind Kejriwal has been released for a few days to campaign, after which he has to return to jail. He has not been convicted, of course, and is in jail merely because the BJP opposes his bail.

What the judges observed about Kejriwal is telling. He is 'the chief minister of Delhi and a leader of one of the national parties. No doubt, his serious accusations have been made, but he has not been convicted. He does not have any criminal antecedents. He is not a threat to society'.

The court also noted that the case was registered in 2022, but Kejriwal was arrested on 21 March this year, days before voting began on 19 April. Kejriwal missed more than a month of the initial campaign and was thereafter kept in jail while three phases of the election were carried out.

It was his wife who was campaigning on his behalf around the country. Will such an election be considered 'free and fair' when results are out on 4 June? Locking up your opponents while you are free to campaign is the sort of 'election' that happens in nations that are called autocracies.

Hemant Soren, the former chief minister of Jharkhand, Manish Sisodia, the deputy chief minister of Delhi, and Kalvakuntla Kavitha of the Bharat Rashtra Samithi, which ran the previous government in Telangana, are all in jail. Not a single one of these jailed politicians is a convict. They are merely accused, that too accused by the BJP, of having done something wrong.

The BJP's argument in court is that politicians should not be treated differently from others accused, so should not be granted bail simply to campaign. What it is *not* saying is that it considers democracy irrelevant and elections incidental to its desire to keep its opponents locked up.

Surely what the court noted in the Kejriwal case also applies to the rest? They have no antecedents of criminal activity. They are not an immediate threat to society. Their only crime seems to be that they are all leaders of political parties that are campaigning for these general elections.

Kejriwal got a rousing reception on his release; the BJP was not pleased. One of its national executive members tweeted that 'by picking a side right in the middle of elections, the lordships that be have made themselves a part of the campaign. When the billion ballots speak, they may not like it'.

The problem, of course, is that the courts



Aakar Patel

Today, the BJP jails its opponents during an election and still believes—or at least wants us to believe—that all it is doing is following the rules of democracy

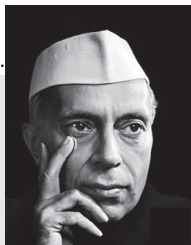
are being forced into this. The real question is whether one should take the BJP at its word when it says that it is not attacking democracy with its actions. India is quite divided on this, with the prime minister's supporters egging him on.

For opposition's sake, let us assume that the Argument and its supporters are in fact totally biased, and therefore their opinions can be ignored. What does the outside world, which presumably has less of a stake or no stake at all in the results of the Lok Sabha elections, feel about the route India has taken?

We need only go back to what has been said several times, over several years, including in this column. The outside world says that India is not only sliding into authoritarianism, it is no longer even a democracy.

Views are personal

NEHRU'S WORD



The dangers of communal hatred

The ongoing Lok Sabha election campaign has been marked by blatant communal dog-whistling by the topmost leaders of the party in power, though reportedly with rapidly diminishing returns. But 73 years ago, the then prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru converted the first election campaign into a virtual referendum on the demand for a Hindu Rashtra, and delivered a rousing speech to its proponents with the firsts winning only 10 seats and six per cent of the vote! We bring to you this week extracts from a speech he gave in Amritsar on 22 December 1951 which demonstrates this.

For thousands of years now, there have been different religions in India and yet we are all Indians. The majority of us are Hindus, and Muslims are in great numbers, as also are Sikhs, Christians, Jains, Buddhists, Parsis and many others. This has been going on for thousands of years. All these religions have made India their home. India does not belong to any one of them alone. There has never been a question of one religion trying to suppress the others. If anyone tries to do it now, he will be very foolish and will cause great damage to the country.

India can progress in only one way and that is when all Indians, irrespective of their professions, province or religion, live in harmony with one another and march together. They may hold different views and opinions, but they must not live in compartments politically or otherwise.

You have gathered here in great numbers and perhaps most of you live in Amritsar. Almost all of you must be Punjabis. But you are not merely the citizens of Amritsar or of the Punjab—you are first and foremost the citizens of India. And as the citizens of India, you have certain rights, and at the same time some responsibilities too because there can be no rights without responsibilities...

The first step towards fulfilling our responsibilities is to learn the lesson of unity...Why is it that in spite of all our bitter experience of the past, these communal organisations raise their heads in our country and create problems and tension? What is the matter? It is something for us to consider. I can understand difference of opinion amongst us, on political or economic matters. I understand and accept the difference in ideologies of the various parties like the communist or socialist parties. There can be different ways of looking at the problems of a country. But I simply cannot understand communalism in politics and it simply shows that we are forgetting all our past experiences in India and in the Punjab.

Communalism has done incalculable harm in the past. The Muslim League, an intensely communal party, spread a bitter poison throughout the country and did great damage. But somehow it was removed

from here and it is no longer powerful at least rid of this terrible disease. But it is our misfortune that the disease is spreading once again in a different form, among the new communal organisations of the Hindus and the Sikhs. It is strange that we have not been able to learn a lesson even now.

Can any intelligent man in Punjab think that there can be progress made here if there is constant tension between the Hindus and the Sikhs? You must think about this. Both will bring ruin upon themselves. And I cannot understand what there is to quarrel about? All their problems

Everyone in India, whether he is a Muslim or a Hindu or Sikh or Christian, has the right to follow his own religion and traditions peacefully. All religions are worthy of respect and there should be no obstacles in the way of anyone. But if you try to bring religion into politics and try to create barriers, then you are following an extremely dangerous path. Religion is a sacred subject and if you try to drag it into the mire, you will be degrading both religion and politics...

Let us work together to create a new India and a new Punjab. Remember that when individuals or nations are engaged in big tasks, they too grow in stature. I am by no means a big man. I am an ordinary Indian, with an ordinary education and some intelligence. What sacrifice have I made which has not been made over and over again by innumerable people in the Punjab and all over the country? Then how did I or the others grow?

We grew because of two or three factors. Firstly, we came under the shadow of a great man like Mahatma Gandhi and some of his greatness got rubbed on us. Secondly, we were engaged in a mighty task and that also added to our stature. Those who hold their heads high and gaze at the stars naturally grow taller. This is the case with nations too. You will find that periods of greatness in the history of any country always coincide with their being engaged in some mighty effort and not when they were busy in petty squabbles.

So we grew, and now once again we have an opportunity to grow. To try to make the condition of 35 crore people better is a mighty task. We can do it if all of us work together and each one of us stands on his own feet and does his duty. It will take time and means hard work, great toil and sweat and tears. But it is not impossible. So, I put all these thoughts of mine and make an effort to see that everyone marches in step. Ultimately, the best of governments cannot do anything unless the people are willing to cooperate. ■

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If you try to bring religion into politics and try to create barriers, then you are following an extremely dangerous path

can be very easily solved. But the fundamental thing is that the Punjab can progress only if all the citizens of the Punjab whether they are Hindus, Sikhs or Christians learn to live together in harmony and do not isolate themselves into separate compartments.

This is a broad fact and it applies to the whole of India. India cannot achieve progress if there is no unity among her people...So we have to change our mental attitudes somewhat and get rid of these communal notions. It has ruined us in the past and lowered us in the eyes of the world. What is the sense in getting into the same old rut once again at a time when we have just won freedom and got an opportunity to progress? What is this foolishness?

So, I am laying stress on this repeatedly because we have to put an end to it.

Selected and edited by MRIDULA MUKHERJEE, former professor of history at JNU and former director of Nehru Memorial Museum & Library

CHAR DHAM YATRA

Say hello to blind faith

Reckless 'development' and heedless religious tourism are taking a heavy toll on the fragile Garhwal Himalayas, writes **Rashme Sehgal**

The rain gods have been kind. Heavy rainfall across Uttarakhand on 10 May helped put out over a thousand fires that had already burnt down vast tracts of its precious deodar and chir forests. Before it could recover from that calamity, this fragile state finds itself in the midst of another disaster.

The Char Dham Yatra to Gangotri, Yamunotri and Kedarnath started on 10 May. The doors to the Badrinath temple were opened on 12 May. Over one lakh pilgrims made a headlong rush to the shrine—and the arrangements to manage this sudden uncontrolled traffic were just not adequate.

Two pilgrims died in the melee making their way up to Yamunotri while several were injured. Traffic jams to Yamunotri extended for more than five kilometres with *yatris* complaining of being stuck in their vehicles for hours on end. *Yatris* trekking up to Kedarnath were ill prepared for the snow and heavy rain that awaited them at those heights. Hotels were charging astronomical amounts that they could ill afford, and no other provision had been made.

The story in Badrinath was no different. Pilgrims swaddled in blankets to keep out the cold began to form long queues outside the Badrinath temple from 2 a.m. in order to get a glimpse of the lord as soon as the temple doors opened after the long winter break. But with the *pandas* giving priority to VIP *darshans*, the common people, who had waited for 8 to 10 hours, broke into angry protests and sloganeering.

Why should there be so much mismanagement for such a prestigious event which fetches the state hundreds of crores in revenue and provides employment to thousands? The chief secretary of the state Radha Raturi has sent out a letter emphasising that since they were expecting 10 lakh *yatris* in the first ten days, she had requested 'dignitaries and state officials to avoid visiting the Dham from 10-25 May'. Raturi fails to specify how the situation is likely to improve after 25 May. Chances are it will only get worse given the unpredictable weather conditions and the fact that landslides have increased with soil further loosening because of the forest fires.

What brings millions of devotees to the Char Dham given that in 2023, more than 300 *yatris* died not only in landslides but also due to cardiac problems exacerbated by high



Visitors through the Kedarnath shrine in Uttarakhand, 10 May 2024

Residents demand that the flow to each dham be regulated. "Not more than 5,000 people should be allowed to visit each dham in a day. There is no space to accommodate more," said Amol Rawat, a businessman

altitudes? What is the psychology of the average *yatri* that makes them rush to these shrines without keeping in mind basic health and safety issues? The opening of the Char Dham yatra is preceded by a mesmerising advertising campaign on social media and television. The music and the words are so seductive that for the *yatris*, it is akin to setting foot in paradise. The bait is hard to resist.

Some changes have been introduced. For one, all pilgrims are now required to register online. Without this mandatory registration, they are not allowed entry into the temple precincts. This does not seem to have curbed the enthusiasm of the devotees.

The barrage of criticism that the administration faced in mishandling the first three days has forced them to initiate further changes. With vehicles being stuck for five to six hours on the road leading up to Yamunotri, district magistrate M.S. Bisht has stated that a minimum number of vehicles will now be allowed to ply on the roads leading up to both Gangotri and Yamunotri. Gates have been set up at 13

points along the route to divert all excess vehicles thereby enabling a smoother flow.

The locals living in these areas have taken to social media to register their complaints at this large influx of pilgrims. One hotel owner in Chamoli tweeted, 'We welcome the *yatris* but there must be some regulation. The government has failed to create proper infrastructure. The result is that we have to make arrangements in case of some emergency but we have limited means at our disposal'.

Residents demand that the flow to each dham be regulated. "At an average, not more than 5,000 people should be allowed to visit each dham in a day. There is no space to accommodate more," said Amol Rawat, a businessman from Badrinath.

Atul Sati, who heads the Joshimath Bachao Sangharsh Samiti, regrets the lack of health facilities along the length of the Char Dham yatra. "There are no cardiologists, no oxygen cylinders, no basic health facilities," he said, adding, "The public must be given time to acclimatise before reaching these heights".

Another major point made by local residents is that *yatris* must be warned not to throw garbage all over the place. By the time the yatra ends, there are huge mountains of garbage strewn across the hillsides which make their way into the rivers, polluting them even further. A social activist from Gangotri pointed out, "Many of the people who come on the first couple of days are social influencers and bloggers who are being paid to visit these places. This is a new trend".

Environmentalist Reenu Paul regrets that the government is putting so much strain on the ecosystem. "We had just finished with the forest fires and now we have hordes of people rushing up these mountains. Our Garhwal Himalayas are being given no time to regenerate."

Experts also raise questions about how this revenue-driven model is riding roughshod over such an ecologically sensitive environment, with no lessons learnt from the major subsidence that continues in Joshimath and several other towns in the state.

Hemant Dhyani, environmental expert and former member of the Supreme Court's high-powered committee on the Char Dham project, had warned that the state government was exploiting these fragile Himalayas much beyond their carrying capacity.

This commercial exploitation can be gauged from the fact that this year, massive posters of Paytm QR codes have been placed outside both the Kedarnath and Badrinath temples so that people can give *dakshina* by making online payments.

Unpredictable rainfall patterns, massive construction and hill cutting of arterial roads have seen an increase in landslides. However, the government seems unconcerned over the fallout of having such a large population descend suddenly on these slopes.

Chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhami is promoting the idea of building more dhams in the state obviously to attract more tourists. UP chief minister Yogi Adityanath, on his recent visit to the shrine of Neem Karoli Baba in Kainchi, insisted this too must be developed into a dham which would attract more than five lakh *yatris* a day.

What havoc these unsustainable practises will have on the environment does not worry our politicians. Such demonic exploitation of our sacred *devbhoomi* (abode of the gods) can only serve to destroy it. ■

STATES 360°



BIHAR

BJP workers all at sea over Modi's 'guarantees'

Soroor Ahmed on the prime minister's broken promises and the UPA's forgotten achievements

Lalu Prasad Yadav recently reminded prime minister Narendra Modi of a promise he had made in 2014. Not only had he pledged to ensure the reopening of the state's sugar mills—closed for four decades—he had also promised to come down for a cup of tea made with the sugar produced there. When prayed, he asked, would Modi have that sweetened tea, given that the mills were still closed?

An aggressive Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) has been relentless in reminding the prime minister of his past guarantees. What happened to the special economic package he had announced for Bihar, asked Lalu Prasad Yadav's daughter Misa Bharati. What about the special category status to the state? What have you done after winning the last two elections in 2014 and 2019?

Such questions are making it difficult for BJP and RSS workers to defend 'Modi's Guarantees' in the state. The very mention of those magic words leads to derisive laughter and lewd jokes. On his roadshow last Sunday (12 May), the PM made a bad situation even worse. In an interview to *NDTV's* Marya Shakil, he declared that while the NDA had won 39 of the 40 Lok Sabha seats in Bihar last time, this time they'd win all 40: "*Shayad iss baar hum ek bhi nahin harengay* (Perhaps this time we won't lose even a single seat)". With most observers convinced that the NDA could lose as many as 15-20 seats in the state, it's the 'perhaps' that pricks the PM's bombastic bubble.

This was Narendra Modi's first roadshow in Patna (indeed the first for any national leader). The litmus test has always been to address rallies at the historic Gandhi Maidan, as the INDIA bloc leaders did in March. More funereal than celebratory, the PM's roadshow also caused massive public disruptions with the closure not only of air-space but also Patna Junction. No trains were permitted to stop at Patna Junction that evening, and passengers had no choice but to board from Danapur station, 12 kilometres away. Missed flights and traffic jams marked the day.

The PM's expression was glum and his body language listless and mechanical. Standing by his side was the even more downcast chief minister Nitish Kumar,

holding the lotus in his hand. Old-timers recalled the predicament of his mentor George Fernandes, when he had insisted on contesting the 2009 Lok Sabha election as an Independent. Once a redoubtable leader from Muzaffarpur and one of the architects of the National Democratic Alliance, Fernandes had ended up fifth. Together, Nitish and he had helped mainstream the BJP.

The NDA cannot afford to lose too many seats in Bihar, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh in the remaining three rounds of polling till 1 June.

While Uttar Pradesh was clearly favoured by the PM, Bihar received a relative cold shoulder. For 13 of the 19 years since 2005, Nitish Kumar has been the BJP's oldest 'secular ally', though he did break away twice (in 2013 and 2022). Work on the ambitious Ganga Expressway was inaugurated by Nitish Kumar on 11 October 2013, four months after snapping ties with the BJP and when UPA-II was still in power in Delhi. The blueprint of the Patna Metro was also prepared before 2014.

Bihar fared better during the UPA years under Dr Manmohan Singh as prime minister. Neither NDA-I under Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1998-2004) nor the UPA (2004-2014) were discriminatory towards a state governed by a different alliance. This was partly because both the RJD and JD(U) were no pushovers and did not have to plead for grants and aid from the centre. Since 2014, however, Nitish Kumar has not been able to remind Narendra Modi that he had publicly promised a special package of Rs 1.25 lakh crore for the state while campaigning during the assembly election in 2015. Union ministers from the state have been reduced to being the PM's cheerleaders.

RJD and JLP (Lok Janshakti Party) leaders who were ministers in the UPA government did not oppose or stall grants for Bihar. On the contrary, Bihar received generous grants from the Backward Region Grant Fund (BRGF), created by the Manmohan Singh government in 2006. The state government received Rs 8,753 crore during the 11th Five Year Plan (2007-12) and Rs 12,000 crore during the 12th Five Year Plan (2012-17). Be it



Prime Minister Narendra Modi's roadshow in Patna, 12 May 2024

Photo: Getty Images

Bihar fared better during the UPA years. Neither NDA-I under Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1998-2004) nor the UPA (2004-2014) under Manmohan Singh were discriminatory towards a state governed by an opposing party

the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana, the East-West Corridor, the Golden Quadrilateral (work on which actually started during the Vajpayee era) or other National Highway projects and centrally-sponsored schemes, Bihar received its due share.

As railway minister, Lalu Prasad Yadav brought projects worth several thousand crores to Bihar including the Rail Wheel Plant in Saran and the electric locomotive factory in Madhepura. The then union rural development minister late Raghuvansh Prasad Singh was equally generous in granting funds for rural roads in Bihar. MNREGA was also introduced by the UPA.

Nitish claimed credit for construction-driven projects during that period, but New Delhi did not seem to mind and Union ministers from Bihar were not hostile.

Despite the development of road and rail infrastructure and the near total electrification of Bihar by 2014, industrialisation failed to take off. The only exception were the brew-

eries following the new excise policy which aggressively promoted liquor vends in large numbers. (In April 2016, Nitish Kumar took a U-turn and implemented total prohibition.)

Even during the Vajpayee years, Bihar witnessed considerable development, despite the carving out of the mineral-rich region into the separate state of Jharkhand in November 2000.

Despite legendary tussles between the Rabri Devi government in the state and the NDA government at the Centre, 11 Union ministers from Bihar were instrumental in ensuring several significant projects such as the NTPC plant in Barh, a rail project in Harnaut, doubling and gauge conversion of various rail routes, the Koderma-Hazaribagh connection, rail bridges over the Ganga between Patna-Sonepur and Munger-Khagaria.

The UPA years also saw the central university of South Bihar come up in Gaya and a central university of North Bihar in Motihari, besides the off-campus branch of Aligarh Muslim University in Kishanganj. Initially, the project to revive Nalanda University as an international university also received the union government's attention, with Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen as chairman of the mentor group.

Nitish Kumar took a keen interest in opening the Chandragupta Institute of Management in Patna and the Chanakya National Law University. The Aryabhata Knowledge University was formed to administer all the technical institutes in the state and an Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) was established in Patna. All this before 2014. The Indian Institute of Management (IIM) in Bodh Gaya began functioning from 2015.

Come 2024, with very few exceptions, they are all languishing. Amartya Sen was chucked out unceremoniously, presumably because he was critical of Modi as chief minister of Gujarat. "Today nobody knows what is happening in Nalanda University and in the off-campus branch of Aligarh Muslim University," commented Basant Kumar Mishra, who retired from Patna University and writes regularly on education, adding that not much can be said about the rest either. ■

THE GAZA WAR / CAMPUS PROTESTS

What student outrage is really up against

Debabrata Biswas in Boston

The student movement against the brutal Israeli invasion of Gaza started with the first Gaza Solidarity Encampment at Columbia University, which saw more than a hundred demonstrators arrested on 18 April 2024. On 23 April, Columbia students staged a walkout at the university campus in Washington DC and posted a call on social media for students of other universities: 'We will seize our universities and force the administration to divest from any Israeli connections, for the people of Gaza! Join the popular university, take back our institutions.'

On 25 April, students at UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) set up a Gaza Solidarity Encampment inside their university campus. On 28 April, clashes occurred between pro-Palestinian students chanting "second Nakba" (a reference to the expulsion of Palestinians from their homes by Israeli forces in 1948) and pro-Israeli students staging StandWithUs rallies. On 26 April, police dismantled the encampment, arresting 132 protesters and shooting at them with rubber bullets. On the same day, students from Georgetown University and George Washington University established a joint encampment in response to the International Court of Justice's ruling that Israel has violated the Genocide Convention set by the UN.

They were later joined by students from Howard University, George Mason University, University of Maryland and Baltimore. It wasn't long before students from many other colleges/ universities including Ivy League universities—Harvard, MIT, Yale, Tufts, Boston, Emory, UNC-Capitol Hill, Brown, NYU, UPenn—joined the movement. April saw student protests escalating on more than 60 university campuses across the US, spreading to educational institutions in Europe (Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Ireland, Finland, Spain, UK), Australia, Canada, Egypt, Japan, Mexico, Kuwait, Lebanon, Yemen, marking global outrage against the genocide. Demands include severing financial ties with Israel and its affiliated entities, transparency over financial ties and amnesty for protesters, as well as an end to US military support for Israel as part of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanction (BDS) movement.

While 14 universities in the UK saw students setting up encampments, Edinburgh University students went on hunger strike, like their counterparts in Princeton. As in the US, the methods adopted were civil disobedience, the methods adopted were civil disobedience, and in Amsterdam, as in the US, the riot police were called out. French police, too, applied



Pro-Palestinian protests across the United States, Canada, Australia and UK

force to disperse student demonstrators at Sorbonne University.

As of 8 May, over 2,400 protesters have been arrested in the US, including faculty members and professors, with more than 30 protesters injured and hospitalized so far.

The Republican Party as a whole has vehemently criticised the movement as anti-Semitic, as has President Biden, former president Donald Trump, many US governors and, of course, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

While many Democratic leaders are not sympathetic to the students' movement, over 200 groups have expressed support for the protesters. Senator Bernie Sanders, leading Democrats and progressive members of Congress such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib and Irvine mayor Farrah Khan have rallied behind the students.

Sanders told CNN, "I worry very much that President Biden is putting himself in a position where he has alienated not just young people but a lot of the Democratic base in terms of views on Israel and this

It is hard to imagine university authorities agreeing to divest from companies that have direct business relations with Israel—Microsoft, Google, Amazon, Cisco, Lockheed Martin, Caterpillar, General Electric...

war". Sanders drew comparisons with Vietnam, noting former president Lyndon Johnson's decision not to run in 1968 amid growing anger over the war in Vietnam.

Just like the protesters of the 1960s and the 1980s (anti-apartheid in South Africa), today's students are being arrested, suspended and expelled for showing solidarity with Palestinians. The 54th anniversary of the 'Kent State Massacre' is also drawing unfortunate parallels. On 4 May 1970, the Ohio National Guard opened fire during anti-Vietnam demonstrations on the Kent State University campus, killing four students and unleashing a surge of protest across the country.

And while in terms of scale and motivation the campus protests over the past three weeks may seem much smaller, they could have a political fallout given the tight rematch between Biden and Trump.

America waged war directly with North Vietnam for five years, with nearly 1.9 million Americans drafted and more than 50,000 killed or missing in action. While no US troops are fighting in Israel's war on

Gaza, without its unconditional military and financial aid such an assault would not be possible.

The indiscriminate killing of civilians and the carpet-bombing of schools, hospitals, homes and infrastructure by Israel has rightly been termed genocide by the International Court of Law. Over 253 persons have been taken hostage, more than 80,000 injured and over 35,000 Palestinians killed—75 per cent of them women and children. All these atrocities have swayed public opinion against Israel—support for Israel's military assault dropped from 50 per cent in a November Gallup poll to 36 per cent in late March.

Senator Sanders commented that the US is actually waging a proxy war in Gaza and cannot avoid moral responsibility for the inhuma suffering inflicted on the civilians of Gaza by Israel. President Biden, who last month signed a bill to provide \$14 billion additional aid to Israel, has faced growing criticism over his handling of the crisis, with hundreds of thousands of voters casting 'uncommitted ballots' in Democratic primaries in recent months to express their frustration and anger.

"In 1968, one of the great failures of the party establishment was that they ignored anti-war youth and alienated the horrific war in Vietnam and continued the young voters, and I feel like they're at risk of doing the same thing," said political strategist Abbas Alawieh.

It is hard to imagine university authorities agreeing to divest from companies that have direct business relations with Israel: Microsoft, Google, Amazon, Cisco, Lockheed Martin, Caterpillar, General Electric... As for political parties, the Israeli lobby in America is very strong. The AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee), which advocates pro-Israel policies, is one of the biggest donors to the Democratic Party, and Joe Biden is very attached to them.

Yet one cannot overlook the role of public opinion in shifting policies and exerting political pressure. For example, Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington reached a deal with students to work towards divesting from 'companies that profit from gross Human Rights violation and/ or the occupation of Palestinian Territories'.

While demonstrations have spread to more than 154 campuses in 49 states, it's still too soon tell what impact might be achieved before classes let out for summer. But one thing is clear: with Presidential elections less than six months away, Biden is rattled by the magnitude of the protests. If they've had some role in his freezing the shipment of arms and ammunition to Israel on the eve of Israel's full-scale invasion of Rafah, it is no small victory. ■



Party-hopping in UK

If it's the season of 'Aaya Ram-Gaya Ram' in Indian politics with almost daily political defections, election-bound Britain is not doing too badly either on this front. In recent weeks, two MPs belonging to Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's ruling Tory party have defected to the Labour party as the latter appears set to win the coming general elections.

The latest to cross the floor is Natalie Elphicke, saying that the Tories "have become a byword for incompetence and division".

She accused Sunak of "broken promises" and abandoning key pledges, especially on immigration. His government was "failing to keep our borders safe and secure", with illegal migration touching "record levels".

Yet not so long ago, she was accusing Labour of having "no plan of their own to tackle illegal immigration" while hailing Sunak's controversial plan to deport illegal immigrants as "world-leading".

Perhaps this is what political opportunism looks like. Elphicke's defection came barely weeks after another MP and a former minister Dan Poulter left the party to join Labour. He said he was leaving the party against the government's "lack of focus" on public services, especially the National Health Service.

Labour leader Keir Starmer is facing criticism for betraying the party's values by admitting "unprincipled" right-wing Tories.

I beg your pardon? Politics and principles?

Gaza's shadow over London

The streets of London have become Palestine battlegrounds for pro-Palestinian supporters and Jewish groups with many of the capital's 160,000 Jews claiming they no longer feel safe.

They have accused pro-Palestinian protesters of intimidating them by raising anti-Semitic slogans. Police are having a field day trying to maintain peace between rival groups amid accusations that they are being "soft" on alleged Palestinian "provocateurs".

The Tory party has launched a campaign against Scotland Yard, which is controlled by Labour mayor Sadiq Khan's administration.

Police Commissioner Mark Rowley was forced to apologise after an incident in which Gideon Falter, the boss of the Campaign Against Anti-Semitism (CAA), was stopped by the police from approaching a noisy pro-Palestinian protest. He was advised to leave the scene as he was "openly Jewish" and his presence could be "provocative".

However, Rowley rejected calls for his resignation and defended his force's "professional" handling of the incident.

"A couple of turns of phrase were clumsy and offensive... and we've



apologised for that. The wider actions and intent of the officer were professional and in the best tradition of British police trying to prevent disorder," he said.

Meanwhile, the Gaza conflict looms large over the coming general elections with the Labour party's "pro-Israel" stance eliciting mounting anger from Muslim voters in London and cities in northern England.

The issue has already cost the party dozens of seats in recent regional polls. A grassroots Muslim vote campaign has given Labour leader Keir Starmer 18 demands to be met if he wants to win back the community's support. These include an apology from Starmer for his stance and a promise to sever military ties with Israel.

The campaign said it would support only like-minded candidates in the general election. About 3.9 million people in Britain identify as Muslim.

Look out, Mr Starmer.



Monty Panesar's botched-up political debut

Like many of his British peers, former English cricketer Monty Panesar has been on a political journey.

In 2016, he backed the Tory party's Zac Goldsmith—brother of the Jamaica Goldsmith and former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan's brother-in-law—for mayor of London. Goldsmith lost.

Eight years later, Panesar himself came close to joining frontline politics. He was to stand as a parliamentary candidate for the far-left demagogue George Galloway's Workers Party whose staunch pro-Palestinian stance has made him popular in the predominantly Muslim areas of northern England.

The House of Commons just missed out on having another Indian-origin member on its benches, as after a number of gaffes,

he is reported to have opted out of the race. However, he is apparently in no hurry to quit politics altogether and will live to fight another day.

Panesar is the latest in a long line of English cricketers—C.B. Fry, Robin Marlar and Ted Dexter—who joined politics with the aim of making it to Parliament, but failed.

Women's woes

Unhappy Indian women can take some comfort from the fact that British women are not wallowing in happiness either.

Research has found that they are 'sadder and more stressed' than their European counterparts. An annual study of almost 80,000 women from 143 countries concluded that 'negative emotions' (worry, stress and anger) have risen among the women of UK



since 2020, while falling across Europe.

And while women say they are not surprised by the statistics, feminist writer Claire Cohen wrote, 'What does surprise me is that it's not worse. Every woman I know feels this way to some extent—it's why the wellbeing industry, geared towards self-care, has exploded'.

How about a similar study about Indian women?

And, finally, a woman was recently told by a government hospital staffer that, according to their records, she had been dead for four months, to which she replied, "I'm not, I'm still talking to you".



The last handloom weaver of Gobindapur

Roopchand Debnath is not willing to part ways with his loom even as other weavers in this Tripura village have moved away amid dropping incomes and government apathy

Rajdeep Bhowmik and Deep Roy

There is no shortage of weavers here on paper but it's all over (practically) once I die," sighs Roopchand Debnath as he takes a break from weaving on the handloom in his bamboo hut. Apart from the loom, which takes up most of the space, are piles of junk—broken furniture, metal spare parts and pieces of bamboo, among other things. There is barely any room for more than one person.

Roopchand, 73, lives in Gobindapur on the outskirts of Dharmanagar city, on the border of India and Bangladesh, in the state of Tripura. A narrow pitch road leads into the village, once home to 200 weaver families and over 600 artisans, according to the locals. The office of the Gobindapur Handloom Weavers' Association stands among the few houses in narrow lanes, its corroded walls a reminder of mostly forgotten glory.

"There was not a single house here that did not have a loom," recounts Roopchand, who belongs to the Nath community (listed as Other Backward Classes in the state). The sun is bright and he wipes the sweat off his face before continuing. "Society used to respect us. Now, no one cares. Tell me who would respect a profession that doesn't have any money?" he asks, voice cracking with emotion.

The veteran weaver recalls making the handwoven nakshi sarees which had elaborate floral motifs. But in the 1980s, "When Purbasha (the handicraft emporium of the government of Tripura) opened an outlet in Dharmanagar, they told us to discontinue making nakshi sarees and start making plain sarees," says Roopchand. These were low on detailing and overall quality, and hence cheaper.

Slowly, he says, nakshi sarees faded out in the region, and today, he adds, "there are neither any artisans left nor supply of spare parts for the looms". His words are echoed by Rabindra Debnath, acting

president of the Weavers' Association for the last four years who says, "There was no market for the clothes we used to make." At 63, he cannot keep up with the physical demands of weaving any more.

By 2005, Roopchand had stopped weaving nakshi sarees altogether and switched to the gamcha. "We never used to make gamchas. All of us wove only sarees. But we had no choice," recounts one of the last masters of the loom in Gobindapur.

"Since yesterday, I have woven just two gamchas. I will make barely Rs 200 selling these," says Roopchand and adds, "This is not my earning alone. My wife helps me with winding the yarn. So it is the earning of an entire family. How does one survive with this income?"

Roopchand gets down to weaving after breakfast, around 9 a.m. and continues till a little after noon. He pauses for a bath and lunch before resuming work. He usually does not work in the evenings now, as it causes his joints to ache. But when he was younger, Roopchand says, he worked "till late in the night".

At the loom, most of Roopchand's working day is spent weaving gamchas.

"Earlier, we used to dye these yarns ourselves. For the past 10 years or so, we have been purchasing dyed yarns from the Weavers' Association," he tells us and adds that he too uses his own gamchas.

But when did things change in the handloom industry? Roopchand says, "It was primarily with the introduction of power looms and a decline in the quality of yarns. Weavers like us can't compete with power looms."

Power looms are expensive, making it difficult for most weavers to make the switch. Additionally, in villages such as Gobindapur, there are no shops that sell spare parts for the loom, and repair work is challenging, which is a deterrent for many of the weavers. Now, Roopchand says, he is too old to use the machines.

"I recently bought yarns (22 kg) worth Rs 12,000 which used to cost me around Rs 9,000 till last year; with my current state of health it will take me around 3 months to make



Photos: Deep Roy & Rajdeep Bhowmik



Roopchand at his loom; wife Basana (left) divides her time between household chores and helping Roopchand

around 150 gamchas which I will sell (to the Weaver's Association) for just around Rs 16,000," Roopchand says helplessly.

Roopchand was born in Sylhet, Bangladesh around 1950 and immigrated to India in 1956. "My father continued weaving here in India. I studied till Class 9 before dropping out of school," he says. The young Roopchand then took a job in the local electricity department. "The work was too demanding and the pay too low. So, I quit after four years."

He then decided to learn how to weave from his father, a generational weaver. "The handloom (industry) paid well at that time. I have even sold sarees for Rs 15 a piece. I couldn't have paid my medical expenses or married off my (three) sisters had I not been in this craft," he says.

Basana Debnath, his wife, remembers that she started helping him to weave right after they got married. "We used to have four looms at that time and he was still learning from my father-in-law," she says over the sound of her husband operating the loom in the other room.

Basana's day runs longer than Roopchand's. She wakes up early, performs the household chores and prepares lunch before helping her husband with winding yarns. Only in the evening is she able to get some rest. "All the work of winding the yarn and making skeinings is done by her," Roopchand acknowledges.

Roopchand and Basana have four

children. Two daughters are married, and a jeweller's son (not a mechanic and other a jeweller) live not too far away from their residence. When asked if people are losing touch with traditional art and craft, the maestro introspects, "Even I have failed. Why else could I not inspire my own children [to take up the craft]?"

Across India, the household income of 93.3 per cent of handloom workers is below Rs 10,000 while in Tripura, 86.4 per cent of the household income of handloom workers is below Rs 5,000 (Fourth All India Handloom Census, 2019-2020). "The craft has been dying slowly here," says Arun Bhowmik, Roopchand's neighbour. "We are not doing enough to preserve it."

His thoughts are echoed by Nanigopal Bhowmik, another senior resident of the village, "People want to work less and earn more," he sighs and says. "Weavers have (always) lived in huts and mud houses. Who wants to live like that?" Roopchand adds.

Apart from a lack of income, persistent health issues plague the weavers. "My wife and I spend Rs 50,000-60,000 on medical bills every year," says Roopchand. The couple suffers from shortness of breath and cardiac complications, a fallout of the profession.

There have been some efforts by the government to preserve the craft. But Roopchand and others in the village think it is not making a difference. "I have trained over 300 weavers through the Deen

Dayal Hathkargha Protsahan Yojana (a central government initiative launched in 2000)," Roopchand says. "It is hard to get trainees," he continues, "people mostly show up for the stipend. It is not possible to produce skilled weavers like this." The state of affairs is made worse by "the mismanagement of handloom storage, wood mites infestation and destruction of yarn by rats," Roopchand adds.

Handloom exports have decreased by almost 50 per cent between 2012 and 2022, from around Rs 3,000 crore to around Rs 1,500 crore annually (Handloom Export Promotion Council) and the funds from the ministry have also dried up.

The future of the handloom in the state looks bleak. Roopchand says, "I feel this is beyond repair." But he pauses for a moment and is able to offer a solution. "More involvement from women would help," he says, "I have seen a tremendous workforce, almost entirely run by women, in Sidhai Mohanpur (a commercial handloom production site in West Tripura)." One way of remedying the situation, he says, would be to offer a fixed daily wage to the existing artisans.

When asked if he has ever thought of quitting, Roopchand smiles. "Never," he says with resolve, "I have never put greed ahead of my craft." There are tears in his eyes as he rests his hand on the loom. "She may leave me, but I never will." ■

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

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< 240 sq. cm @ Rs 175 per sq. cm

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NOTE: Cheque / DD should be drawn in favor of "Associated Journals Limited" and sent to Herald House, 5-A Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, New Delhi -110002.

General Terms and Conditions

w.e.f. 1 January 2024

National Herald on Sunday (Delhi & Mumbai) and Sunday Navjivan

- All advertisements are published in Edition(s) of the paper and charges are payable strictly in advance of publication by Bank Draft or Bank Transfer (RTGS) and/or cheques only except in the case of advertising agencies accredited to INS.
- Advertisements are accepted for publication on top of advertisements positions on an additional charge of 25%. No advertisement is however published on top of news-matter. Top of column position cannot be guaranteed even on payment of additional charge of 25%.
- Extra charges for top of column position are calculated on the total amount payable inclusive of amount payable for specified pages.
- Every reasonable effort is made to publish an advertisement on the date(s) specified by an advertiser. The Management however reserves the right to vary the date or the scheduled date(s) of publication, with or without notice to the advertiser, owing to the exigencies of availability of spaces.
- The management reserves the right to refuse, suspend or stop, in its discretion, publication of any advertisement without assigning any reasons.
- While every endeavour will be made by the Management to avoid publication of competitive advertisements in close proximity to one another, no guarantee can be given in this respect nor will the claims be entertained for free insertions in the event of announcements of rival product appearing on the same page.
- The placing of an order by an Advertiser/Advertising Agency constitutes a warranty by the Advertiser/Advertising Agency to the Associate Journals Limited Management that the Advertiser/ Advertising Agency has secured the necessary authority and permission in respect of the use in the advertisement or advertisements of pictorial representation of (or purporting to be of) living persons and all references to words attributing to living persons.
- The advertisements will be charged at the rate applicable on the day of publication of the advertisement irrespective of the date of booking, date of release order and whether the advertisement is part of any package/scheme.
- Standing instructions are accepted over Whatsapp or email. However verbal instructions must be clear and specific. Quoting reference of the previous release order and/or new scheduled dates of insertions in respect of which the instructions are given. These instructions should be given afresh either through Whatsapp/email and/or Landline phone.
- Booking of space for premium positions in all The Associated Journals Limited publications will be confirmed only upon receipt of original release order. Fax/Scanned copies, Emails will be entertained for the same.
- "Reader" advertisements are accepted but will be distinguished from "news matter" by a rule around the advertisement matter and expression 'advt' will be added at bottom.
- Solus/Semi Solus positions cannot be guaranteed on the front page.
- Cancellation charges @20% of the total cost of the front/Full page advertisement shall be levied if a cancellation of booking is made two days before the scheduled date of publication. Cancellation charges @35% of the total cost of the full front-page advertisement shall be levied if the cancellation of a booking of front/full page advertisement is made one day before the scheduled date of the publication.
- In the event of printing mistake, omission or non-publication of advertisement, the advertising agencies shall have to furnish the instructions on behalf of their client for republication. In the event of a dispute the liability of Management shall be restricted to the amount received against sale of spaces for the advertisement received. All disputes /claims regarding advertisement /complaints must be made within a period of one month of publication date after which no claim will be entertained.
- The Management shall not be responsible for any loss or damage caused by an error or inaccuracy in the printing of/ or omission in inserting advertisements.
- In case of dispute, the agency shall not be entitled to invoke any condition suggestive of existence of an arbitration agreement unless specifically agreed to by the Management.
- No deduction is allowed from bills raised against publication of advertisement(s) on account of any defective insertion(s). Any claims in these respects, if admitted, will be met by publishing a corrigendum/ free insertion or the like, depending upon the merits of the claim vis-a-vis the error in publishing the advertisement(s) or other materials. Claims for refund or for compensation, if admitted, shall be restricted to the charges for advertisement received by Management. The decision of the management shall be final in this regard.
- The advertisements released by Government/Semi Government/ Undertakings/Autonomous body are published in classified display column only at commercial rates irrespective of the number of words.
- The advertising agencies releasing an advertisement on behalf of its client shall be deemed to have undertaken to keep the management indemnified in respect of costs, damages or other charges incurred by the Management as a result of any legal action or threatened legal action arising from and in relation to publication of any advertisement published in accordance with the release order and the copy of instructions supplied by the agency.
- The agency shall bring to the notice of its clients these General Terms and it shall not be open to any of its clients to plead/claim or aver ignorance of these General Terms which apply to every transaction of sale of space in particular issue(s) of any of publications of The Associated Journals Limited.
- No agency commission is payable on the on the classified advertisements chargeable at DAVP rates.
- Fraction of centimetre in excess of the scheduled size shall be charged as full centimetre if the advertisement exceeds the scheduled size. If the material supplied is shorter than the scheduled size, the advertisement will be charged for the size scheduled and not for the actual space occupied or consumed by the advertisement on the basis of the short size material so supplied.
- The Management shall not be bound by notice of stoporders, cancellations, prepayments/postponements or alterations/deletions/ additions in the material(s) of advertisement(s) booked for publication in special or specified position if received less than one week prior to dates of insertion. For ordinary advertisement, the stoppage or not of publication must reach at least four days before the scheduled date of publication of advertisement.
- The Management reserves the rights to revise the rates and terms and conditions without any notice.
- Every Advertiser/Advertising Agency acknowledges having read and accepted these Terms and Conditions.
- Courts only in New Delhi, shall have the jurisdiction to entertain and decide all disputes and claims, arising out of publication of any advertisement in the Associate Journals limited publications.
- The Management shall be at liberty to refuse to carry advertisements/ adjust amounts paid for subsequent ads against pre-existing liabilities, even without carrying such subsequent advertisement.
- Advertising party hereby agrees to indemnify, defend and hold harmless AJL, its directors, officers, shareholders and agents against any and all third party claims arising out of or in connection with the content or placement of the advertisement, and to the fullest extent.
- In no event shall AJL be liable hereunder for any indirect, incidental, special, consequential, punitive or exemplary damages or losses in connection with these terms even if advised in advance of the possibility of arising of such liability, damages or losses.
- In no event shall AJL's aggregate liability exceed Rs. 10,000 to any advertising party.

EAT. WANDER. REPEAT

Pickled, spiced and salted

Denise D'Silva on the enduring romance of preserving and bottling our seasonal bounty for the year ahead

One aspect of Indian cuisine that has always fascinated me is the art of preserving the best of our bountiful seasons for the leaner months. While most of India doesn't really have lean months—we are an agrarian economy after all—there is something lovely about our way of capturing the essence of a season.

Come summer and we see the peak of what can only be called the great Indian bounty. Mangoes, the most precious of them all, are fruiting. Fish are aplenty in markets. The humble jackfruit ripens and perfumes the air. Berries like the foraged *karvanda* and jamun make their appearance by staining the streets with purple hues. Pushcarts heave with ice apples or *tadgolas*. Cashew apples leave their trace on the tropical air. Watermelons are displayed as walls of dark green with pink stripes inside on highway pit-stops.

Summer is also the time for pickling. The freshest, ripest, sourest fruits that make an appearance in the heat, are lovingly collected and put into ancient receptacles and treated with much care till they are brined and spiced for the year.

As a child, growing up in cosmopolitan Bombay, summer was always the season of discovery. Not only was it the holidays, which meant more time at home, it was also time spent around neighbours. Oh, the smells! You could tell which neighbour was preserving



what, simply by sniffing. It helped that the things being dried, preserved or pickled were sharp to begin with.

I remember a particular Goan neighbour whose kitchen could be smelt from a mile away. You see, she would make *choriz* (Goan sausages) and hang their red beads around the walls of the kitchen and string them through the balconies.

What felt like a too-pungent aroma then, is now something that makes my mouth water, as I hunt through Goa for the finest homemade *choriz* beads.

Meanwhile, my Maharashtrian neighbour's home was a sight to behold. Deep red chillies and perfectly round papads spread over chatais and charpais lined the small compound outside their ground-floor house. The sun was used to its fullest potential to dehydrate goodies well before the coming rains.

Even now, not far from where I live, there are fields of drying fish. The Kolis (fishing community) of Mumbai stop all fishing activity during the monsoon and use the harsh summer sun to preserve their catch. How, you might wonder does fish last a year?

In square patches of shore adjacent to their villages—and often right next to swanky high-rises—the Kolis painstakingly spread the day's catch after sorting it on sand banks that have been used for this purpose for generations. Depending on which way the wind is blowing, streets far away are filled with the smell of salty fish. And while that might seem offensive to some, to me it is the smell of Bombay. A reminder that we are people of the sea.

The Kolis tell me that the dried fish market is quite lucrative and they actually make more money from this trade than from regular fishing. Judging by the heaps that are put on weighing scales and displayed by the road, it certainly looks like it.

The East Indian community of Mumbai goes a step further in the process of drying fish. They apply spices to the ubiquitous *sukkha bombil* or dried Bombay Duck, which is then packed and sealed,

Photos: Denise D'Silva



Each of the spices used in pickling is cleaned by hand and dried in the scorching sun; (below left) the dried fish market is quite lucrative and the Kolis actually make more money from this trade than from regular fishing

and bought by homesick families who secretly hide their stock in checked-in suitcases on their flights back to the west.

Pickling is one of the main summer routines in a traditional home. The best produce from the garden or the market is sourced, spiced and laden with oil to be savoured through the year. Each home has its own recipe and all of them are delicious. Pickling isn't just a matter of following a recipe from the books. It is a ritual. One that involves the entire family. There's usually someone to wipe the vegetables and someone to prepare the *barnis* (ceramic jars) and always someone to eat the bulk of it before it reaches the salting stage.

In Mumbai's wadis and chawls, it was always a community affair. Women from different houses would clear up their schedules and spend afternoons together at one chosen lady's house, making pickle while sharing gossip.

Summer in Mumbai is also the time for Masala or spice mixes. Many communities like the Maharashtrians and East Indians make their own masalas for the entire year. Places like Lalbaug and Masjid Bandar see a steady stream of customers picking and choosing the best spices. Each lady comes equipped with a humongous bag and a tattered piece of paper that has the

As a child, growing up in cosmopolitan Bombay, summer was always the season of discovery. Oh, the smells! You could tell which neighbour was preserving what, simply by sniffing

owners. They're usually on a first-name basis, and pleasantries and details of respective family members are swapped as the spices are handed over for pounding.

The East Indians have a fascinating tradition of hand-pounding spices that is done by a troupe of women from Gorai. Families book them in January for the summer season of April and May. Sadly, not many of these ladies are left to continue this profession.

I love to watch how the women of the houses all around me place all manner of spices on brightly coloured old saris under the sun. Each of the spices is cleaned by hand and turned till crisp in the scorching heat. Souring agents like the pretty kokum fruit and tamarind are also sun-dried and preserved in tall *barnis* that go to the back of dark storerooms.

Mango, in all its stages of ripeness, is used in *murabbas*, aam papads, marmalades, jams, aamchur, squashes and aam ras to stock up for the rest of the year.

The monsoon and its melancholy will be here soon but summer is truly a time to tune into the nostalgia and romance of little jars brimming with seasonal goodness and the sweet lull of gossip in dappled corridors. ■

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



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