NATIONAL HERALD ON SUNDAY

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

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NATION

'IT'S MODI VERSUS THE PEOPLE'

In conversation with Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge

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THE *HAWA* HAS TURNED, BUT...

There's more to reading elections than the overrated discipline of psephology, writes Kumar Ketkar

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STATES 360°

In focus this week: Uttar Pradesh, Odisha and Punjab

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What to expect on Judgement Day and after

Narendra Modi will move heaven and earth to continue in power, says Avay Shukla



Photo courtesy: *Scroll.in*

Residents of Mubarakpur in UP's Sambhal who were allegedly assaulted by police personnel during voting at a polling station on 7 May 2024

I sincerely hope the hon'ble lordships who dismissed the petitions for mandatory counting of VVPAT slips (with wholly unwarranted aspersions on the petitioner, the Association for Democratic Reforms) are able to sleep soundly these days. I also hope they have realised by now just how misplaced their faith in the current election commissioners was.

Every round of polling brings fresh disturbing news of malfunctioning EVMs, of only the BJP symbol being displayed no matter which key one presses, of EVMs being 'captured' by ruling-party goons with the connivance of the police, Muslim voters not being allowed to vote, a BJP candidate (who has no business being inside a polling booth except to cast her vote) forcibly lifting the burkhas of Muslim women to verify their IDs, CCTV cameras in strongrooms being rendered ineffective by electricity 'failure', en masse deletion of names of voters of a particular community—all accompanied by the sepulchral silence of the Election Commission.

In one of the laziest judgements delivered in recent times, the hon'ble judges premised their order on complete faith in the Election Commission and its impartiality. How wrong they were is being proved on a daily basis.

The present Election Commission is the most deplorable, partisan and incompetent one we have had since 1947. It is as transparent as a block of granite, as communicative as a Trappist monk who has taken a vow of silence and as straight as a corkscrew.

It takes no action on hate speeches and allows a communal video to be shown for four days before taking it down just hours before polling. It is petrified of even taking the prime minister's name, let alone calling him out for persistent anti-Muslim baiting. Its 'notices' are targeted mainly at the Opposition parties. It changes, without any explanation, the practice of revealing polling numbers instead of just percentages. It takes days to reveal even this information in the age of 'Digital India'! And, in order to leave no doubt as to which corner of the ring it is in, it castigates the president of the country's largest opposition party for raising this issue in a letter.

The credibility of this Commission has hit rock bottom, yet it continues to dig deeper every day. All of us knew this, but apparently the hon'ble judges did not. I fear the nation may pay a huge price for this indefensible misjudgement of the Commission's character and intentions. For the real mischief will happen on counting day.

The credibility of this Election Commission has hit rock bottom, yet it continues to dig deeper every day. All of us knew this, but apparently the hon'ble judges did not

It appears that some of Mr Modi's divinity has rubbed off on me too. These days, perched in my mountain home at 7,000 feet, I feel like Moses on Mount Sinai, surveying the frenetic goings-on far below with cynical disapproval.

Neither have things changed much since the days of Moses. While he beheld the worship of the golden calf, what I see now is hysteria about the saffron cow (speaking metaphorically, of course). To provide a non-Abrahamic analogy, I feel a bit like Jamlu Devta of Malana village, on the heights of Chandrakhani Pass, observing the other inferior *devta*s of Kullu conducting their road shows (it *is* election time, after all!), each trying to impress the voter—sorry, devotee—in order to be declared numero uno. (Incidentally, Jamlu Devta is not to be confused with Jumla Devta, the reigning deity of Delhi.)

What I also see is that—notwithstanding the indulgence (or worse) of the Election Commission, the misuse of official apparatus and the thousands of crores of bribes as electoral bonds—the BJP is going to fall short of a simple majority by at least 30–40 seats.

The ragtag NDA allies may garner another 30 or so seats, but it is unlikely that they will bail the BJP out. As Parakala Prabhakar explained to Karan Thapar in a recent interview, these parties are "contextual" rather than "ideological" allies of the BJP. When the context changes, they will jump ship like proverbial rats. And that is when the fun begins, or the shit hits the ceiling. It is something we should all be discussing, because this moment will put to the test every single institution, convention and law we have so painstakingly created over the years.

Mr Modi has been in power continuously for the last 22 years, and has made no secret of the fact that he loves it so much he is not likely to hand it over to anyone else, election or no election. He has, after all, been ordained to rule by God himself.

Moreover, if he must relinquish power he has much to lose and fear. His atrocities and excesses have made him many enemies: he can expect no quarter from them. His imperious decisions will be called into question and investigated—Rafale, demonetisation, the PM CARES fund, electoral bonds, Pegasus, the Panama and Pandora papers, the Hindenberg expose on Adani, the award of contracts, ports, airports, mines and railways to cronies...

Cadavers from the past will be exhumed to point their gory fingers at him—the Gujarat riots of 2002, the North-East Delhi riots of 2021, Judge Loya, the Sohrabuddin and Kausarbi encounters, the killings in Manipur, the imprisonment of Sanjiv Bhat and human rights activists... Many more may emerge once the repressive lid is lifted off a citizenry and media muzzled for the last ten years.

Continued on page 5

How to murder a 'free and fair' process

The current Election Commissioners have taken a weak, inadequate system and destroyed it with their brazen bias

Palanivel Thiagarajan

What does it mean, in practical terms, to run a free and fair election? Here are some essential prerequisites, in my view:

Accuracy. The conduct of elections must be 100 per cent accurate in enfranchising those who are constitutionally eligible and in preventing those who are not eligible.

Awareness. All citizens should have full information about each step of the voting process. They should be able to exercise their vote without any confusion.

Non-partisan environment. The election process and the media ecosystem should be neutral such that neither is content suppressed nor is anybody able to get away with untruths, let alone Nazi-level propaganda.

Reliability. The process should be transparent enough that multiple people can validate that it took place according to the rules and nothing untoward or illegal took place.

Equality of access. The system should not discriminate between candidates based on the size of their party or whether they run as an Independent. There should be no bar for any average citizen to fight an election.

The most desirable outcome would involve absolute integrity of polling, uncompromised security of devices, reliability of the counting and polling processes, and devices that deliver a result consistent with the intent expressed by voters.

Such an outcome would inspire confidence that everyone has had a fair and equal opportunity to be a voter, that the party holding executive power has not had undue influence on or gains from the process, and that the system has delivered a result that truly reflects the will of the voters.

[...]

With roughly 960 million eligible voters and over 1.2 million polling booths, running a general election requires a few million booth officers, booth agents, observers and security personnel, nearly all of whom are pressed into temporary service, in roles completely unrelated to their regular roles.

The Election Commission today remains an understaffed paper tiger. Although the electoral exercise requires millions of people, the Election Commission of India (ECI) runs on a skeleton staff of fewer than 500 full-time employees. This small group is supposed to project authority, manage the system, and ensure compliance with all the rules.

A granular analysis of the current election model shows that the system is structurally unsound. Over 99 per cent of the people who work in an election are conscripted from government or quasi-government jobs and national PSUs, including nationalised banks. These workers are not ideally suited for this additional duty. The level of training and functional support provided to them is grossly inadequate by any professional standard. As an extreme example, reports have come in from Madhya Pradesh (*Dainik Bhaskar*) alleging that 20 government employees, including gardeners and drivers, were designated as Polling Officers. With no disrespect to the workers themselves, slipshod distribution of tasks and perfunctory training and support shows a callous disregard for the process.

How accurate are electoral rolls (voter lists)?

[...]

Based on the five elections I worked on, the voter lists are 'off' by up to 10 per cent in rural areas and by up to 15 per cent or more in urban areas. There has been no from-scratch census-equivalent voter registration drive in decades. The fact that there is an annual collapsing and consequent renumbering means that people's serial numbers in their booth list change constantly.



Although the electoral exercise requires millions of people, the ECI runs on a skeleton staff of fewer than 500 full-time employees

The National Electoral Roll Purification and Authentication Programme (NERPAP), launched by the ECI in 2015 with the objective of 'bringing a totally error-free and authenticated electoral roll', has been plagued by several problems. Critics of the scheme suggested that the ECI was pressured into doing this not as an "end in itself, but as a preparatory step to pave the way for other ambitions of the government of the day such as simultaneous elections or one nation, one election". The decision to link the EPIC (Electors Photo Identification Card) number with Aadhaar was stayed by the Supreme Court in August 2015. Fears that such a linkage would be used to disenfranchise voters from marginalised communities cannot be dismissed. A radical purification of the electoral rolls cannot happen merely through an Aadhaar-based linkage, especially in a nation where there are tens of thousands of fake Aadhaar entries, including an Aadhaar card issued for Lord Hanuman.

[...]

Polling day and secure storage of EVMs

[...]

Under the current system, every candidate is permitted one main and one substitute agent at every booth to ensure that due process is followed, and the booth is not 'captured' by anyone. These agents ensure that there is only one match on the list with the person voting, and that no voter is either denied a vote or coerced to vote for a particular candidate/ party (as happened in Manipur this election compelling even the selectively blind ECI to call for repolling).

A minimum of 3,000 booth agents are needed to effectively manage polling day, and candidates without a party structure to back them may not be able to identify so many volunteers, let alone train them. So, it is not a level playing field and the odds of an Independent candidate winning a Lok Sabha seat remain dismal. (Data suggest that 99 per cent of independents lost their deposits in the last election). I bring up this point to show that pre-polling processes like testing and validating EVMs, ensuring that nomination papers are in order, cross-referencing the various forms (Form 10, Form 17, Form 20) are all relatively new procedures for both the ECI's temporary workers and party volunteers.

Process familiarity that can be reasonably expected from well-trained, long-term officers is visibly absent at every booth. The most important form is Form 17 because it contains comprehensive information of what happened on polling day (total registered voters, total votes recorded in the EVM, whether this tallies, and so on). As a crucial data point, Form 17 gives polling-station-wise breakdown of the number of votes. Form 17 can later be tallied against Form 20 (counted votes), and discrepancies alert us to undeniable rigging.

Today, we are watching a farce unfold: five weeks after the first phase of polling, the ECI has not officially released the final polling figures. Its website and app do not show data on the number of voters in each constituency.

[...]

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PALANIVEL THIAGARAJAN *is minister of information technology and digital services, Tamil Nadu. A longer version of this essay first appeared in* Frontline *magazine*

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It's the People vs Modi this election

The Congress president believes Narendra Modi's days as prime minister are numbered

Congress president and leader of the INDIA bloc **Mallikarjun Kharge** *took time off after the fifth phase of polling to share his assessment of the situation on the ground, the likely result and the role of the Election Commission. The 81-year-old politician, who campaigned across the country, exuded confidence that the INDIA bloc will have the numbers to form the government. Edited excerpts from an interview with* **Ashlin Mathew** *in New Delhi.*



Photo: **Vipin**

Polling for 429 Lok Sabha seats is over. How confident are you about the INDIA bloc's prospects?

The INDIA bloc is going to win. The election is being fought by the people. It is the people versus the BJP, the people versus [Narendra] Modi.

Secularism is the core of the Congress ideology and that of its alliance partners. People are tired of divisive politics and Modi's policies. They want peace and do not approve of BJP leaders dividing people on communal or religious lines. People are clearly fed up.

Modi's lies are catching up with him. He is talking of Pakistan, accusing the Opposition of planning to end reservation for Dalit and SC/ST citizens and giving all (seats) to Muslims. We never said that. It is the BJP leaders who have spoken of the urgency to secure 400 seats so that they can change the Constitution and end reservation. Our fight is to save the Constitution and democracy.

The prime minister is destroying all Constitutional agencies and democratic institutions like the Enforcement Directorate, CBI and income tax and vigilance departments. He is blatantly misusing his office and authority. No previous prime minister has usurped and concentrated so much power in one person. If he continues, he will destroy the country's economy and imprison everyone who believes in democracy and the Constitution.

The Congress is said to have performed well in the southern states; what about the north?

We will do well in Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Telangana. We are improving in the north, and will gain seats in Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, with at least five to six seats in Madhya Pradesh. We will certainly do well in Haryana and keep our eight seats intact in Punjab. In Delhi too we will gain. So, where is the question of Modi winning?

With the election still going on, it is premature to talk of numbers, but judging by reports and seeing the response on the ground, I can say with confidence that the INDIA bloc will stop the BJP from returning to power.

Are people really persuaded of the threat to the Constitution?

People have understood the threat and the message has percolated down to the villages. Several senior BJP leaders have said on record that if they get the numbers, they would change the Constitution. How can the prime minister deny it?

What has been the Congress' role in the INDIA bloc?

All important decisions were taken in consultation with other parties. We had meetings in Patna, Mumbai, Chennai and UP. In Maharashtra, there are three parties in the Alliance. In UP, Rahul Gandhi and Akhilesh [Yadav, of the Samajwadi Party] have been doing joint rallies. Wherever INC had to adjust, we did—even if that meant fewer seats. We were clear that all parties in the Alliance needed to be given space. If differences remain, our five-member team will sort them out to everyone's satisfaction.

The Election Commission and judiciary have failed to rein in the prime minister's speeches. Has he successfully polarised the electorate?

Narendra Modi has *always* been a polarising figure. He did it in 2014 and 2019 and he is doing it again.

He has gone to the extent of saying that if Congress comes to power, the party will snatch everyone's property and distribute it among those who have 'more children' and are 'infiltrators' (*ghuspethia*), insinuating Muslims. In Gujarat he said, if you have two buffaloes, one would be given to Muslims.

It is astonishing that the prime minister of the country is saying such things. He is clearly not a statesman or even a responsible political leader. He is behaving like an RSS *pracharak*. I believe this is no longer having the desired impact among people, who are seeing through his bluster and hate speech.

How did the Congress steer clear of the hate speech trap?

The Congress has focused on its manifesto and what it will do for the people, Panch Nyay (five promises) among others.

The prime minister has said the Congress will be wiped out in Uttar Pradesh. Thoughts?

What's new? He always says the Congress will be wiped out. Despite his ugly speeches, the Congress came to power in Karnataka, Himachal Pradesh and Telangana. We won in Madhya Pradesh too, but he destroyed that.

Wherever people supported the Congress and we came to power, he tried to break not just the party but the state and its people—like in Maharashtra. In Modi's scheme, everything is fair; he does not stop at anything. Is this what should happen in a democracy?

"In Modi's scheme, everything is fair; he does not stop at anything. Is this what should happen in a democracy? Recently, the PM threatened the media. Earlier he used to praise them"

Several instances of electoral malpractices (voter intimidation, vote suppression, underage voting) have surfaced. Comments?

Conducting a free and fair election is the duty of the Election Commission, which has the mandate to monitor, supervise and take necessary steps. We do not want to comment or interfere in what the Returning Officers are required to do.

The BJP and RSS have, however, mastered the art of putting bogus names on voter lists and trying to rig elections in interior locations. Because they have the power, money and machinery, because they have officers working in their favour, they often get away with it.

Recently, the PM threatened the media. Earlier he used to praise them. Now, he has started saying that the media, print media in particular, is opposed to him.

Several political parties and you yourself have raised the matter of the Election Commission not releasing the total number of voters in each constituency…

Our views were heard by the Commission and dismissed. The Supreme Court has now sought a response from the ECI by 24 May. Without absolute numbers, the Commission cannot arrive at percentages. Since they are releasing the polling percentage, what prevents them from releasing the full data?

They have to compile the data from 543 constituencies. With just 49 constituencies in the fifth phase of polling, why are they still not able to do it?

Several independent candidates have also complained to the Supreme Court that they were not given Form 17C (data on voters and polled votes) in every booth. Did all Congress candidates receive Form 17C?

These are not matters that I look after. The organisational general secretary will monitor it. The general secretaries in charge of states and the election observers will look into it. We have educated them about the requirements. We certainly want transparency and all data to be put out in the public domain.

Will Congress go to court in this matter?

I raised the question of voter numbers. Our Alliance partners have also asked the Election Commission what difficulty there was in releasing this data. They have raised suspicions. Therefore, I don't want to say anything now. There are two more phases. The Election Commission is not doing what they are required to do.

What do you think will happen if the BJP does not get the required majority? Do you foresee any trouble?

I don't know what the prime minister will do, but naturally, the elected parties will take a call. One man can't decide the fate of Indian democracy. ■

Everyone knows the *hawa* has turned, but…

Kumar Ketkar uses political intuition to read between the lines of psephological predictions

Can you even imagine a humiliating setback for Modi–Shah's BJP in this election? How could anyone, in the face of a propaganda blitzkrieg of such scale and range? Even their detractors and diehard sceptics struggle to envisage an outcome where they are out of power.

There are, however, enough indications that Modi's carefully crafted image has developed cracks. The latest burst of interviews—including one in which he claims divine origin—is one such indication. But even if Modi and his minions manage to rig these elections and subvert the popular mandate, his messianic reputation will suffer.

M.G. Devasahayam, a former bureaucrat with three decades of experience in senior positions including in the Election Commission, does not see Modi's BJP getting more than 170 seats. Having witnessed the recent shenanigans of the Election Commission of India (ECI), he has begun a movement to stop the 'illegal and unconstitutional' conduct of the ECI, often abetted, in his view, by the indifference (or complicity) of the judiciary.

Devasahayam has lodged cases against the 'nefarious' actions of the ECI and mobilised over a hundred former senior IAS officers to fight against the 'fraud being [perpetrated] to topple democracy and marginalise the Constitution'. He is convinced the national mood is anti-Modi—and that both the prime minister and his alter ego, home minister Amit Shah, know it.

The most significant signals are coming from the BJP's own ranks. Leaders say in hush-hush tones that the PM and the PMO have reduced them to errand boys. Retired ministers confide that ministerial meetings are short: A4 sheets are handed out to be read in Parliament or to the media. There is neither appreciation for work done, nor any room to act independently, even in their respective constituencies. They are convinced the party will suffer in this election.

Most opinion polls and exit polls do not reflect this sentiment, maybe because their samples are too small or because the surveys are dictated or doctored. How, then, does one identify a declining trend? By unconventional means like conversations with common folk, through observations that do not take the shape of statistical data on Excel sheets, by using political instinct honed over years of watching elections.



Photo: **Getty Images**

Subaltern waves rarely manifest on the surface. The so-called Indira wave in 1971, the Janata–JP wave in 1977, the sympathy wave after Mrs Gandhi's assassination in 1984 were exceptions.

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Let us also not forget that splurging crores on opinion polls does not lead to failsafe predictions. Even the so-called 'correct predictions' are largely accidental. What you glean from unhurried conversations with local journalists, ground-level activists, anganwadi workers, third- and fourth-grade government and semi-government employees, factory workers, the not-so-well-off peasantry, armed services personnel, the police beat constable and suchlike are far more revealing.

A sizeable number of junior and senior government employees are fed up. Their 'inside stories' rarely make it to print or television. The taxi drivers, *autowala*s and corner shop *paanwala*s most journalists project as the voice of the people are not the only 'common people'.

Politically sensitive noses are able to pick up a '*hawa*', straws in the wind that indicate which way it is blowing. There is no certified scientific method for this; it is what one gleans from incidental details. From observing the crowds at election rallies, big and small; making mental notes of how they reached the venue—were they bussed in, did they come on their own; how they responded to the various speakers; how many left mid-way; what kind of discussions did they have after, as they walked home, caught local trains, jumped into metros, hotly arguing with each other—all this and more. It is this intangible *hawa* that the Intelligence Bureau, the media and the political parties try to decipher.

Even if Modi and his minions manage to rig these elections and subvert the popular mandate, his messianic reputation will suffer

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How big a role does money play in swinging our elections? In a recent article in the *Times of India*, author and investment analyst Ruchir Sharma writes: '[…] candidates are spending $15 million (or Rs 125 crore) in each constituency, which implies a total spending of more than $1 billion (approx. Rs 8,300 crore) to win seats in the more prosperous southern states.'

I have seen families of five being handed Rs 25,000 in the last two days before voting. (Usually, 36 hours after the campaign is over.) I have seen envelopes with Rs 2,000 notes being distributed in slum areas, along with a sandwich. In middle-class housing societies, with 1- and 2-BHK tenants, candidates and political parties have been spending several lakhs with the consent of RWAs (resident welfare associations), painting buildings or providing cable TV connections.

The whole business of bribing voters, distributing money or favours is not even clandestine. It is talked about openly by loudmouth party *karyakarta*s, volunteers and 'grateful' residents.

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In elections before 1984–85, the *karyakarta* tended to be a party loyalist or a supporter of a particular candidate; they were neighbourhood social workers or ideology-driven individuals. Not only communists and socialists, but also the then Jana Sangh, Shiv Sena and RSS volunteers worked tirelessly in election campaigns. Today, there are *karyakarta* teams available on hire—at a hefty price.

There was a time when 'allurements' to party activists took the modest shape of a free lunch or dinner, a vehicle pickup and drop.

In the 1967, 1971 and 1977 election campaigns, even these 'facilities' were missing. I've seen dedicated communist, Congress and RSS volunteers spend their own money, take leave from their factories and offices and work for their chosen candidates. Can we imagine that kind of campaign today?

I don't want to paint an apocalyptic picture. There are still enough earnest volunteers and sincere voters and leaders. It is this kind, the ones who can't be bought, that worry the BJP. And hence its reliance on money and muscle. Aware that a victory in these elections is not theirs for the asking, BJP strategists have ensured the party has no dearth of resources to do whatever necessary to retain its hold on power.

While parties like the YSR Congress and Telugu Desam in Andhra, DMK and AIADMK in Tamil Nadu, Trinamool Congress in Bengal and the BRS in Telangana have also learnt the rules of the game, the BJP has bested them all—not simply by growing its own coffers by all means possible (electoral bonds and more such) but also by doing its best to choke the Opposition. Take for instance the freezing of the bank accounts of the Congress, its principal opposition party, on the eve of elections.

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To return to the various poll predictions for a moment, anyone who still thinks that the BJP in on its way to win 370 seats on its own, taking the NDA '400 *paar*', is either smoking potent weed or is in a position to rig these elections at scale.

The latter scenario is scary but improbable, and the key players in that denouement would be the Election Commission of India and their new masters. Among psephologists and political observers of note, Prashant Kishor has given the BJP more than 300 seats while Yogendra Yadav, last heard, said the party will end up with around 230 seats.

Psephology is tricky business. Prashant Kishor seems to know (wonder how?) that the people are disappointed with Modi but not angry. Is this election perhaps a referendum on Modi? Hold your horses till Judgement Day. ■

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STATES 360° UTTAR PRADESH

BJP on a sticky wicket, Congress–SP confident of gains

A.J. Prabal

Polling in 53 of the 80 Lok Sabha seats in Uttar Pradesh is over. The last two phases on 25 May and 1 June will cover as many as 27 constituencies. With closer contests than in 2019, the BJP leaders' confidence in prime minister Narendra Modi's 'election management', popular appeal and the Ram temple effect remains unimpaired.

The Opposition is equally confident that the Samajwadi Party–Congress alliance is working much better than in 2017 (when they allied for the assembly election). In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the SP–BSP alliance had bagged 15 seats and the Congress just one. This time both parties are hoping for a very different outcome.

Their hopes are not entirely misplaced. There is simmering anger among people over unemployment, inflation and sitting MPs recontesting, some for the third time. The BJP's spin on *labharthi*s (beneficiaries of government welfare schemes) has been neutralised by the PM's failure to sort out the menace of *chhutta pashu* (stray cattle). Marauding hordes of cattle have been destroying standing crops and seriously injuring farmers who guard their fields even at night.

Modi had announced during the assembly election in 2022 that he had the perfect solution to the problem but was unable to announce or implement it because the Model Code of Conduct was in force! Apparently, it would be implemented immediately after the election and farmers would find it so attractive that they would vie with each other to keep and feed the stray cattle at home.

While free rations are working in the BJP's favour, the issue of reservations for OBCs, Dalits and tribals is working against it. Several BJP leaders, including the party's sitting MP from Ayodhya, Lallu Singh, have publicly spoken about changing the Constitution and putting an end to reservations. Accusations and denials are rife. The Dalit vote in Purvanchal is decisive and can tilt the outcome, agree observers.

The BJP had banked upon the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). Instead, anecdotal evidence from several constituencies suggests that Dalits have opted to vote for the INDIA bloc. If the trend continues in the remaining rounds of polling, the BJP has reason to worry. Akhilesh Yadav's call to rally the PDA (Pichhda–Dalits–Aadhi Abaadi) has had less traction in the media but results will show if it has worked.

At the start of the elections in mid-April, the most optimistic assessment was that the Opposition would do well to restrict the BJP to its previous tally of 62 seats won in 2019. By the end of the fifth phase, the consensus is that the Opposition appeared poised to improve its tally from six last time (10 were won by the BSP, five by the SP and one by the Congress) to anywhere between 15 to 25, excluding seats secured by the BSP.

Women voters remain the X factor. While most observers seem to believe that being devout, they would vote for the BJP on the Ram temple issue, naysayers argue that women who have been bearing the brunt of inflation and lack of sustainable jobs for their children in villages are more likely to vote on bread-and-butter issues.

Promises made by UP chief minister Yogi Adityanath and visiting campaigners like Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma of wresting Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and building another temple in Mathura are cutting little ice, claim SP–Congress alliance leaders. Ajay Rai, the Congress candidate from Varanasi, also appears to be pinning his hopes on the direct contests this time as opposed to the triangular contests of 2019.

Has RSS withdrawn its support?

The RSS has reportedly been inactive on the ground. While both RSS and BJP leaders have explained the absence of RSS volunteers by claiming that they were needed elsewhere as UP is already 'secure', BJP president J.P. Nadda's statement in an interview to the *Indian Express* suggests otherwise: "*Shuru mein hum aksham honge, thora kum honge, RSS ki zaroorat padti thi… Aaj hum badh gaye hain, saksham hain… toh BJP apne aap ko chalati hai* (In the beginning, we were less capable and needed the RSS. Today, we have grown, we are capable… so the BJP runs itself)."

Writing in the *Print*, Nagpur-based journalist Vivek Deshpande pointed out that Nadda could not have made such a statement without approval from the prime minister and the home minister. It was, he wrote, the BJP's declaration of independence from the Sangh. Irked at being sidelined, the Sangh had decided to leave the BJP to its own devices in this election and were thus conspicuous by their absence.

Rumours about the rift between the RSS and the BJP have been circulating for several months and are now in the open. RSS watcher Rakesh Pathak from Gwalior pointed out that Narendra Modi had not visited the RSS headquarters even once after becoming prime minister in 2014.

The strains in the relationship were evident when Modi downgraded the importance of the party's organising secretary, traditionally lent by the RSS to coordinate between the Sangh and the government. Earlier, the organising secretary interacted directly with prime minister Vajpayee but Modi insisted that he report directly to the Union home minister Amit Shah instead.


Photo: Getty Images

Congress leaders Rahul Gandhi, Priyanka Gandhi and Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav at a public meeting in Raebareli on 17 May 2024

There is also anti-incumbency against several sitting MPs, while several BJP candidates have gone on record to complain about internal sabotage

Pathak had also emphasised RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat's statement earlier this year that the RSS would not celebrate its centenary in 2025. He also claimed that since 2015, when PM Modi and his cabinet ministers called on Bhagwat at Haryana Bhavan in Delhi, the two had never met except in public functions like the consecration of the Ram temple.

The confidence, or rather over-confidence of the BJP, rests on last time's massive margins. However, it discounts core voters' relative indifference at its own peril. There is also anti-incumbency against several sitting MPs, while several BJP candidates have gone on record to complain about internal sabotage. Wild speculation abounds regarding the role of the Election Commission and the Returning Officers. The rejection of as many as 33 nomination papers in Varanasi on somewhat flimsy grounds has drawn criticism.

This election promises to be historic in more ways than one. The results will be crucial for the political future of Yogi Adityanath as well as Mayawati and the BSP.

While Ajay Rai's claim that the SP–Congress alliance is all set to spring a surprise by winning over 50 seats and Akhilesh Yadav's statement that the alliance could win all but one of the 80 seats (that of the Pradhan Sevak's in Varanasi) are obviously being dismissed as hyperbolic, the PM's post after the fifth phase that the NDA is now certain of a landslide victory, especially in Uttar Pradesh, may have been necessary simply to boost the workers' morale and steady the shaky stock market. ■

With inputs from K. Santosh



STATES 360° ODISHA

An unravelling NDA alliance and a jittery post-poll scenario

Ashutosh Mishra

The stepped-up attack by Narendra Modi and Amit Shah on Odisha chief minister Naveen Patnaik and his Man Friday, bureaucrat-turned-politician V.K. Pandian, is fuelling speculation of a political witch-hunt likely to be launched against Biju Janata Dal (BJD) leaders in case the BJP-led NDA manages to secure a third term at the Centre. Political analyst Sabita Mohanty says, "Given the kind of vitriolic campaign the two parties have engaged in, the chances of a patch-up between them after the results appear remote, irrespective of who wins. The politics of vendetta may take centre-stage."

On one hand, the BJP has made it virtually impossible for the BJD to remain in the NDA. On the other hand, the threat of a witch-hunt may be used to arm-twist the BJD to stay on. If the BJP fails to secure a majority on its own in the Lok Sabha, it can no longer take the BJD's support for granted.

In the 2019 general election, the BJD had bagged 12 of the 21 Lok Sabha seats, the BJP eight and the Congress one. In 2014, the BJP won just one seat while the Naveen Patnaik-led BJD secured all the rest.

In 2024, the BJP is making a concerted bid to increase its tally in Odisha to compensate for losses elsewhere, which explains its down-and-dirty campaign in the state.

The buzz among the people is that a government led by Modi and Shah could rake up the multi-crore mining scam and the Ponzi scandal that hit the state between 2012 and 2014—the latter resulting in the arrest of senior BJD leaders including two MLAs who were denied tickets in 2019. In an interview to a local news channel during one of his recent visits to the state, Amit Shah stated that the BJP's manifesto clearly mentioned that people duped by the Ponzi companies will get their money back within one-and-a-half years, and "those involved in the chit fund scam will go to jail".

Chit fund firms allegedly collected around Rs 4,600 crore from people across Odisha. In May 2014, the Supreme Court ordered a CBI probe into the Saradha group and 44 other chit fund firms for purportedly taking investors for a ride. The CBI arrested Banki MLA Prabhat Tripathy, Mayurbhanj MP Ramachandra Hansda and former MLA Subarna Naik for their suspected involvement. The BJD suspended all of them. In 2017, another sitting BJD MLA, Pravat Biswal, was taken into custody by the CBI. Three years later, the CBI raided the house of senior party leader and former minister Debi Prasad Mishra in connection with the scam.

With chief minister Naveen Patnaik developing friendly relations with PM Modi and the BJD supporting the BJP-led NDA on several crucial issues in Parliament, the situation eased up. Today, however, chances of the CBI renewing its probe in the post-poll scenario are not being ruled out. BJP leaders and foot soldiers are equally keen to see the regional party 'thoroughly exposed'.

"It is ironical that a party whose senior leaders are steeped in corruption is seeking votes by promising to end corruption in the state. Once our party government comes to power, all scam-tainted BJD leaders would face the music," averred Panchanan Patra, a young BJP convert who was among those gathered outside party headquarters in Bhubaneswar to welcome Modi as he commenced his road show on 10 May.

The mining scam that broke in 2009 and ran into several thousand crores could also be leveraged against the Patnaik-led BJD if the BJP manages to form a government at the Centre again. Scathing criticism of state officials by the Justice M.B. Shah commission of inquiry set up to probe the 'loot' of Odisha's mineral wealth forced the government to act.

Show cause notices were issued to over 100 miners involved in illegal mining and a penalty of around Rs 68,000 crore was imposed. The Opposition called this eyewash and kept demanding a CBI inquiry to which the Supreme Court did not agree.


Naveen Patnaik and bureaucrat-turned-politician V.K. Pandian

On one hand, the BJP has made it virtually impossible for the BJD to remain in the NDA. On the other hand, the threat of a witch-hunt may be used to arm-twist the BJD to stay on

Addressing rallies in Angul and Cuttack on 20 May, the prime minister rubbished the BJD's claim of development in the state saying that the party had given Odisha "nothing except land mafia, sand mafia, coal mafia and mining mafia".

Taking a dig at Pandian, who hails from Tamil Nadu, Modi said, "People are saying that the key (to the treasury room in Jagannath Temple) has gone to Tamil Nadu. Who has taken it? The people will not forgive this. I assure you the mystery will be resolved. Those involved in cheating and fraud will not be spared. This is Modi's guarantee."

Shah, too, has been targeting Pandian. "This assembly election is an election to uphold Odisha's pride. Can a Tamil babu rule Odisha?" he asked during a rally in Keonjhar, before going on to assure people that the BJP would give Odisha a young chief minister who spoke Odia fluently.

Pandian retorted by describing BJP's star campaigners in Odisha as "political tourists" who can't even identify the state capital, an oblique reference to the PM's jibe about Pandian not being able to name Odisha's districts and capitals.

A 'slip of the tongue' from the BJP's national spokesperson and its Puri Lok Sabha candidate Sambit Patra has given the BJD further fodder. Addressing media persons on the occasion of the PM's roadshow in Puri on 20 May, Patra described Lord Jagannath as Modi's "*bhakt*" (devotee) instead of the other way round.

Later, he expressed his regret for the faux pas and said he would do penance by fasting for three days. Pandian had a better suggestion: that he take care of himself and eat properly! "Three days before the election (due on 25 May), he should not faint. He is a doctor, he should know what to do," said Pandian.

Chief minister Naveen Patnaik, posted his critique on X: 'Mahaprabhu Shree Jagannatha is the Lord of the Universe. Calling Mahaprabhu a bhakt of another human being is an insult to the Lord... it is totally condemnable. This has hurt the sentiments and demeaned the faith of crores of Jagannatha bhaktas and Odias across the world.'

As the campaign reaches a crescendo in the state, things are likely to heat up further. The relationship between one-time allies can only go from bad to worse, indicating dramatic changes in the post-poll political equation. ■

NATIONAL HERALD ON SUNDAY
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26 MAY 2024

HERALD VIEW

Hello ECI, do explain the 1.07 crore extra votes

The Supreme Court of India is in recess for its annual summer vacation. It is expected, though, to hear a petition filed by the Association of Democratic Reforms (ADR) challenging the Election Commission of India's (ECI) refusal to share poll data, more specifically the number of total voters and actual votes polled in each booth and constituency. There are reasons to believe that all is not kosher with this data. Not even simply because the ECI has gone against the established practice to declare it without any delay. The ECI did belatedly share polling percentages, but has stubbornly refused to share the data of total voters, which was routine till the previous Lok Sabha election in 2019. As anyone with even a nodding acquaintance with math knows, voter turnout percentages cannot be calculated without absolute numbers of voters. So, the ECI either has booth- and constituency-wise absolute numbers of voters, and won't share them for reasons we haven't yet heard, or it has cooked up the percentages. Smell a rat?

In reply to RTI applications seeking the data, the ECI has said people may approach the chief electoral officers in each state and collect the data. On another RTI application, the CEO of the Union territory of Puducherry responded by stating that the data would be uploaded after the elections were over. When a persistent journalist from New Delhi called up the CEO's office in the UT, s/he was told that the CEO did not have the data.

At the end of polling, the presiding officer of every booth is required to record the data of the number of voters and the votes polled, in Form 17C. They are supposed to sign these forms and obtain the signatures of the polling agents of each party and candidate. This is done to ensure that parties and their candidates know and confirm that on counting day, there'll be no mismatch between the votes polled and the votes counted.

While defending its position in court, the ECI argued that since all polling agents already had their respective Form 17Cs, the candidates and parties knew the figures, in any case. The better organised political parties do indeed collect data from their polling agents and have a fair idea of the votes polled, but that does not free the ECI and its polling officers of *their* statutory obligations. There are reports that several presiding officers have been refusing to fill up these forms or share it with polling agents while some have allegedly obtained the signatures of polling agents on blank forms.

Even more important, when the ECI makes suspicious revisions in polling data, the legal remedies parties and their candidates may seek are limited while the elections are still on. As the ECI affidavit in court (of 22 May) rather alarmingly points out, in one of seven objections to the ADR/ Common Cause plea: 'Under Article 329(b) of the Constitution, judicial interference in the electoral process from the date of notification [of elections] till declaration of results is barred.' In other words, the Election Commission of India is asking the Supreme Court of India to lay off. At the time of writing, we were still waiting to see how the court may respond when it takes up the ADR/ Common Cause plea on Friday, 24 May, in light of the ECI affidavit.

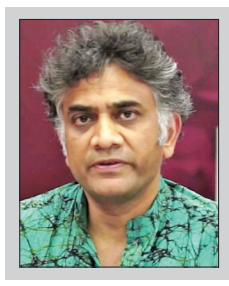
The current ECI seems to have decided that it serves the ruling party rather than the people of India. We have known this for a while, and it's more or less written into the way Election Commissioners are now chosen—on partisan lines. The current ECI's bias has been all too obvious in the way that it has selectively applied the Model Code of Conduct, grabbing every half-chance to censure or serve notice on opposition leaders while winking at flagrant violations of the code by leaders of the ruling party, including the prime minister himself.

Given this suspicious trajectory, it's nothing short of alarming that it should have taken the ECI 11 days to share the data of 'votes polled' for Phase 1 (held on 19 April), and then not even bother to explain the huge discrepancies between the figures for 'votes polled' on polling day and the final figures, shared after this inexplicable gap of 11 days. Former chief election commissioner S.Y. Quraishi, who should know a thing or two about how elections are conducted, has said on record that polling data, in this digital age, is available to the ECI in a matter of minutes.

Exhibit B: at the end of Phase 4 (held on 13 May), when voting had concluded for 380 constituencies, the ECI's polling data showed an increase of 1.07 crore votes in the final figures—an average increase per constituency of >28,000 votes . Effectively, that is 1.07 crore unaccounted-for votes! We should worry, even while we cling to the hope that the weakened guard rails of our democracy will somehow withstand this onslaught.

NHRC failing the 'mother of democracy'

What India needs is a strong and independent watchdog responding to rights violations even by the State



Aakar Patel

On 13 May this year, the *Hindu* carried an article headlined: 'UN-linked body defers NHRC India accreditation for second year in a row'. Beneath this was the line: 'The decision could now affect India's ability to vote at the Human Rights Council and some UNGA bodies.'

The NHRC is the National Human Rights Commission, and this column is about why its accreditation was deferred.

Last year, on 9 March 2023, a group of non-governmental organisations (including Amnesty International India, whose board I chair) wrote to the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI), the UN-linked body in question. We asked it to review India's accreditation status because the NHRC's lack of independence, pluralism, diversity and accountability were contrary to the United Nations principles for national institutions (popularly known as the 'Paris Principles').

Taking cognisance of our letter and other civil society submissions, the global body deferred the NHRC's re-accreditation by 12 months, considering its failure to effectively discharge its mandate, namely, to respond to escalating human rights violations in India. The NHRC was also told to improve its processes and functions; a year later this had not happened. This is what led to the second deferral of accreditation.

So, which aspects of the NHRC's functioning are contrary to the Paris Principles? First, its lack of independence—both in the appointing of its functionaries and its functioning.

The chairperson and other members of the NHRC are appointed by the President of India, based on the recommendations of a committee consisting of the prime minister, the speaker of the Lok Sabha, the minister of home affairs, the leaders of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha and the deputy chairperson of the Rajya Sabha. However, since 2019, the post of the leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha has been lying vacant, leaving only a single Opposition voice in the selection committee.

After his retirement from the Supreme Court, Arun Mishra was made the NHRC chair on 31 May 2021—despite strong disagreement from that lone Opposition voice.

The second problem is that the NHRC has police officers investigating all human rights violations by the State—including those by the police themselves! This is clearly a conflict of interest, and the opposite of independence from government interference. Despite this being pointed out in the 2023 review, the Modi government did not begin a legislative process to correct this or invite a consultation to begin the amelioration process.

In November 2023, seven former IPS officers were appointed by the NHRC as special monitors. One of them, accused of corruption in 2018 while working as special director of the CBI, India's federal investigation agency, was given the responsibility of overseeing the domains of terrorism, counterinsurgency, communal riots and violence. A former director of the national Intelligence Bureau was also made a member of the commission.

Third, India has been repeatedly reminded of concerns about the lack of diversity in the NHRC. It has been asked to ensure a 'pluralistic balance in its composition and staff' by ensuring the representation of a diverse Indian society, including (but not limited to) religious and ethnic minorities. This, of course, has not been done either.

After all, this is a country where the prime minister constantly rants against minorities (especially Muslims), including in his electioneering speeches.

Yet another issue is the NHRC's lack of effective engagement with civil society and human rights defenders in India. To this end, the NHRC was asked to interpret its mandate in a 'broad and purposive manner to promote a progressive definition of human rights' and told to address all human rights violations and ensure consistent follow-ups with state authorities.

Those who have bought this government's framing of the matter, where all who oppose its violence are 'anti-nationals', may be surprised to hear this. However, that is not how the world views it, for proper democracies must engage with civil society.

In India, human rights defenders languish in detention for years without trial under various draconian laws, including the UAPA, with not a peep from the NHRC. This includes those detained in connection with the Bhima Koregaon–Elgar Parishad case for more than five years; Kashmiri human rights defender Khurram Parvez, who has been in detention since November 2021; and student activist Umar Khalid.

The NHRC has not taken any concrete steps to respond to these situations nor intervene in a timely manner—despite various UN special rapporteurs calling on Indian authorities to release these individuals.

The NHRC has been next to useless on issues of conflict and human rights abuses in Manipur, Jammu and Kashmir, communal violence in Haryana and Uttarakhand, and other headline-making incidents. It has certainly not covered itself in glory, and the predicament that the NHRC and the government find themselves in is of their own making.

India currently holds an 'A' rating. The deferral of the NHRC's re-accreditation means this rating is under threat. That in turn means that the NHRC stands to lose its voting position in the United Nations Human Rights Council and other bodies. This can only be corrected by doing the right thing, which nobody is stopping the government from doing.

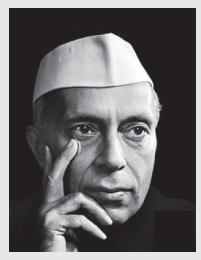
All of us, including the signatories to that letter to GANHRI, want to see India accredited at the highest level by the global body.

However, such an accreditation should be achieved by honest effort. It must reflect the presence of a strong and independent human rights body in India, committed in particular to responding to violations by the State.

It cannot be an automatic right given to the self-appointed mother of democracy. ■

Views are personal

NEHRU'S WORD



Communal parties can only harm India, not help it progress

As India enters the final phases of polling to elect a new Lok Sabha, the rhetoric from our current prime minister and his band is getting even more communally charged. Instead of highlighting achievements vis-à-vis employment, poverty alleviation, and so on, all we hear is hate-speech against Muslims. That's because there has been no real development worth talking about. During our first general elections in 1951-52, then prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru had cautioned the people that communal parties cannot put India on the path to progress and prosperity. If anything, they can only harm the country. Extracts from his speech at Allahabad on 12 December 1951:

I entirely agree that the most important question before us is the economic problem and to remove poverty from the country, from whichever angle we may look at it… Therefore, when I refer to communalism, it is because it creates obstacles in the way of solving the basic problem of poverty...

The individual who is communal-minded is a small man with a narrow mind who cannot undertake anything big; and nations based on petty principles also become small. We had become great intellectually because Mahatma Gandhi came and raised the stature of our country and widened our horizon.

But there are others who come and talk of communalism whether the word 'communal' is used or not. The result is that we immediately shrink in size and our country also shrinks. How can you hope to solve any problem when the communal-minded cannot understand the problem itself? Everyone is prepared to give an answer without knowing what the question is. Therefore, I lay stress on this.

I am amazed when I see in certain newspapers statements and speeches, especially from our communalist organisations like the Hindu Mahasabha, Ram Rajya Parishad, Jana Sangh and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. They hotly deny that they are communal organisations. Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee denies very forcibly that the RSS and the Jana Sangh are communal.

What can I say in reply, for it has not been put down on paper nor will anyone be foolish enough to shout from the roof tops that he is communal. But people are recognised by their activities and traditions. If there is a communal organisation in India today, it is the Jana Sangh, which is not only communal but utterly reactionary in every way. I am saying this from my personal knowledge.

It is no secret that the most reactionary people in India today are the princes and jagirdars and others, who, I think, should be labelled 'backward classes' and all of them are behind the Jana Sangh. They throw money lavishly. You may wonder why I am mentioning money. The Congress is a very big organisation but, as far as I could make out, other parties are spending ten times as much as we are in these elections. They are spending enormous sums because the coffers of the capitalists are open to them.

So, communalism opens up an old wound and keeps it festering and therefore it is very dangerous. We must remedy that by changing our social fabric so that this malaise may be removed as also the factors which increase it and put India in a terrible situation. This is not a Hindu-Muslim question, or it is only partly so.

Pakistan was created because of the communalism of the Muslim League, and as a result there were terrible riots in August-September 1947. Please remember that the moment you open the doors to it, it spreads very fast as it has among the Sikhs and the Hindus in the Punjab…

> *The Congress is a big organisation but other parties are spending ten times as much as we are in these elections because the capitalists' coffers are open to them*

It is a strange situation and you must realise how dangerous it is. If we do not suppress it and fight against it, if we give it any scope whatsoever, it will pull India from her roots. I am convinced of that. We must understand where its roots are and strike at them. Political communalism is a superficial thing .... The communal organisations are doing a great deal of damage by constantly spreading ill-feeling. This is not open to argument.

If my argument is right, then they are causing harm not only to the entire national cause but also to their own narrow cause because the Hindus cannot hope to make progress through the Jana Sangh or the Hindu Mahasabha, and want the others in India to be left behind. It is a childish thought because not only the others but the Hindus will also be left behind.

Similarly, the Sikhs are a brave people and have shown great courage wherever they have gone, and are very capable and hardworking. But I am amazed at the way some of their leaders work almost as if they are prepared to take on the rest of India as their enemy. What is all this? If I lay stress on the dangers of communalism, what is wrong in that? It is a fundamental question. If we follow a narrow, petty path in every matter how can India progress? The moment you become a little lax, the disease would spread everywhere… Until we bring this under control, how can we become a nation?

But apart from this, the way communalism is growing, especially the demand of its votaries that Pakistan should be attacked and their accusations that I try to appease Pakistan and I show weakness and that there should be a confrontation on the Kashmir issue, etc., is extremely dangerous. What can I say in my defence?

The word 'appease' has become a sort of abuse in India and elsewhere too, and perhaps people feel I am prepared at all times to appease. I am neither ashamed nor scared of this word. I say it openly and I shall say it ten times. I agree that if something which is against the honour and national interest of India is done, it is absolutely wrong. But keeping in mind India's honour and her national interest, we must at all times try to appease every country in the world. I say it quite openly. And do they mean it when they wish us to hurl these childish threats of military attacks, etc.?

As a matter of fact, it has become a habit with these people to start abusing when they make speeches and they think they are showing their strength... I had said, and I shall repeat this, that the conspiracy to kill Mahatma Gandhi had been hatched in Gwalior and that the Hindu Mahasabha had a big hand in it.

Since then, the Hindu Mahasabha has repeatedly mentioned Godse's name and praised him and passed resolutions congratulating him. How can the Hindu Mahasabha think that under such circumstances I can respect their party even a little? I can tell you quite honestly that I consider them as traitors. ■

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

Letters to the Editor

Kejriwal getting a taste of his own medicine?

The Swati Maliwal case could be shocking for many but not for someone who has watched the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) since its birth. I have never been a fan of Kejriwal and his style of politics. The allegations levelled by AAP Rajya Sabha MP Swati Maliwal against her boss, Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal's personal assistant chime with the AAP's modus operandi—shoot and scoot. This is what Mr Kejriwal has always done. Maliwal, considered close to Kejriwal till recently, has claimed that Kejriwal's PA Bibhav Kumar assaulted her with slaps and kicks inside the CM's drawing room! The truth will only come out after an independent probe, but for now Mr Kejriwal is certainly getting a taste of his own medicine.

Pankaj Khanna, Delhi

Why is the Modi govt terrified of data?

Ever since Narendra Modi took over as prime minister in 2014, his government has repeatedly either tried to supress official data—especially when it contradicts claims made by the PM and his minions on the economy and unemployment—or its own 'experts' have tried to misinterpret it. The State Bank of India was not ready to part with data on the electoral bonds at any cost. Now, the latest is the Election Commission refusing to provide voter turnout data even in the Supreme Court! Why? This doesn't fall under the Officials Secrets Act—it is regular data that the Election Commission has always willingly shared with the public immediately after polling ended in *all* previous elections. This time there is an unusual spike in the polling percentage after 5 p.m., and the ECI is brazenly saying that it will *not* come clean on it. The present Commission has reduced this Lok Sabha election to a farce.

Sanjay Srivastava, Prayagraj

People are waiting for a new dawn

When Narendra Modi started his campaign as the BJP's prime ministerial candidate in 2013–14, he could make crowds sway to his tunes. And before his teleprompter was spotted, people went so far as to claim that he was the best orator the BJP had ever produced, even better than Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Today, the same person is the butt of jokes and the subject of funny memes. His so-called oratorial skills no longer keep crowds spellbound. In fact, videos have surfaced where people can be seen leaving his rallies midway, the way people walk out of a boring movie even before the interval. On the other hand, people are turning up in hundreds of thousands even in this scorching heat for the INDIA bloc rallies, particularly in Uttar Pradesh. They want to catch a glimpse of Rahul Gandi and Akhilesh Yadav. This has rattled the BJP and its supreme leader. People are eagerly waiting for a new dawn on 4 June.

Prakash M, Bengaluru

Presiding over a travesty of Indian democracy

How the current Election Commission of India has effectively run Indian democracy aground

Palanivel Thiagarajan

The proper conduct of elections is an existential feature of a functioning democracy. In the Constituent Assembly debates, there was even a proposal to consider the purity and independence of elections as a Fundamental Right. In previous avatars, Election Commissions enjoyed a level of respect in people's minds, and arguably a level of compliance and adherence by state and Union governments. There was an aura of impartiality, which allowed people to sustain their faith in the system.

[Today], the integrity and process around EVMs… is still suspect, compounded by the ECI's reluctance to reveal who manufactures the EVM components, what is the source code, and so on. Investigating EVMs is like opening a can of worms: the issue of tampering, their storage in strongrooms being compromised, instances of EVMs being lost/ replaced, faulty EVMs that record two votes for the ruling party where only one vote has been polled, and the refusal to tally VVPAT (Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail) receipts with EVMs are some of the issues.

What secures the election for a political party is ensuring that its counting agents are well prepared and adequately trained. Counting follows a different logic from polling, and only trained counting agents can perform their roles effectively. For agents to function adequately, they must have the exact information in Form 17 related to each booth and its corresponding EVMs—including the identification number of the EVM, the total votes cast, etc.

It is the candidate's task to provide its counting agents with all this data to ensure manipulation-free and error-free counting. The votes (EVM and postal) secured by each candidate, which are reported by the Returning Officer on counting day, are aggregated and declared in Form 20, which is the official result of the election process.

The ECI's decision to stop publishing Form 17 data (votes polled) is a despicable, unconscionable and unforgivable assault on the very notion of fair elections.

Without universal agreement on the polled numbers in each EVM (identified by its unique serial number), there is no way to ensure that votes counted match votes cast. It is now up to each candidate to have their own teams collect Form 17 from each booth (copy known as 17C) and tally and redistribute by the 14-count ascendancy.

Only then can the counting agent ensure that the right EVM (matching serial number) has resulted in a total of counted votes that equals the total votes actually cast in that booth, that EVM on the day of polling.

Smaller parties and independent candidates are again at a disadvantage, given the scale and complexity [of the exercise] to check for accuracy and then protest in the case of any discrepancy. Again, the potential for the party holding executive power to manipulate the counting process is very high. In addition to these, there is one more avenue for smaller-scale manipulation.

Postal votes/ manipulation. In closely fought contests, where the margin of victory is slim, results are often manipulated through the counting of postal votes (as the nation saw in the recent Chandigarh mayoral election). In one of the most egregious instances, the current BJP Union minister Bhupendrasinh Chudasama won the Dholka MLA seat against Ashwin Rathod of the Congress by a slender margin of 327 votes after 429 postal votes were invalidated by Returning Officer Dhaval Jani, who had previously worked as an officer under Chudasama when he was revenue minister.

The ECI has mandated that the postal ballot papers be counted first, and that the EVM counting begin half an hour after the counting of postal votes begins. However, this is not followed in many cases.

There is another structural lacuna. Once the Returning Officer at the counting centre issues the Certificate of Election (Form 22) to the successful candidate, the election can only be challenged in court, which can take years, and hence become infructuous.

Instances of seats being captured by issuing the certificate to a ruling party candidate, despite losing during the counting of votes, show how results can be manipulated even at the last second.

Election petitions. What happens to election petitions filed in court? Section 86(6) and 86(7) of The Representation of the People Act implores the high court to conduct the trial of an election petition every day until its conclusion (wherever practically possible), and mandates that the trial be concluded in six months. However, given the judiciary's lack of will and resources, several petitions end up becoming infructuous.

Fixing the electoral apparatus. The ECI in its present form is incompetent, inefficient and partisan. An already weak electoral process has been further degraded by the partisan frenzy of the current Election Commissioners. Staggering incompetence has resulted in an election over two-and-a-half months in the middle of an unprecedented heatwave.

The ECI is tasked with the regime's idea of One Nation, One Election. How much more time, money and effort must go into making this process quasi-functional and robust enough to inspire confidence?

Some problems can be easily fixed were the ECI to invest in better technology, commit itself to accuracy, switch to 100 per cent real-time data reporting instead of random sampling, expand its skeletal workforce and train them adequately, and start the process of data correlation from scratch.

[…]

Eighty years ago, while envisioning what the staff apparatus of the Election Commission should be, Dr Ambedkar said:

'The question was whether the Electoral Commission should have the authority to have an independent staff of its own to carry on the work which has been entrusted to it. It was felt that to allow the Election Commission to have an independent machinery to carry on all the work of the preparation of the electoral roll, the revision of the roll, the conduct of the elections and so on would be really duplicating the machinery and creating unnecessary administrative expense which could be easily avoided for the simple reason, as I have stated, that the work of the Electoral Commission may be at times heavy [while] at other times it may have no work. Therefore, we have provided in clause (5) that it should be open for the Commission to borrow from the provincial Governments such clerical and ministerial agency as may be necessary for the purposes of carrying out the functions with which the Commission has been entrusted. When the work is over, that ministerial staff will return to the provincial Government. During the time that it is working under the Electoral Commission, no doubt administratively it would be responsible to the Commission and not to the Executive Government.'

Dr Ambedkar's concerns about additional expenditure and the duplication of administrative machinery were in tune with the limitations of a new nation. In the first general election, the average number of voters in a parliamentary constituency was around four lakh; now it is upwards of 1.5 million. More than one million booths cater to 969 million voters. Also, elections now happen on a three-tier level (Parliament, state Assemblies, local bodies) around the year.

Complaints mechanism and a partisan ECI. Parties often complain of ECI bias at every stage—monitoring political advertisements and spending, acting against complaints, allotting symbols, etc. (I faced this first hand when running statewide advertising campaigns when the DMK was in the opposition.)

Recently, the ECI banned AAP's official campaign song on the pretext that it showed the 'ruling party and its agencies in poor light'. On the other hand, the ECI turned a blind eye when the BJP ran explicit dog-whistling campaigns targeting the Muslim community or when it spread canards about the Congress manifesto.

When complaints were made to the ECI about Prime Minister Narendra Modi's campaign speech in Rajasthan that created the false impression that people's hard-earned money and women's *mangalsutra*s would be taken away in the name of wealth redistribution and given to 'infiltrators' and 'those who have more children', the ECI chose to send a notice not to Modi but to the BJP chief J.P. Nadda.

Prime Minister Modi visited the Ram temple on the eve of the third phase—revealing both his desperation and his disregard for the Model Code of Conduct. It is worth recalling that the Liberhan Ayodhya Commission of Inquiry recommended to the ECI that 'attempts to misuse religious sentiments, or to appeal to voters through the mode of their piety, whether by holding thinly disguised electoral rallies in places of worship, or posing as political supplications to God must result in swift action and possible disqualifications'.

Today we have the exact inverse—a ruling party running for its third term on the plank of the Ram temple, regular hate speech and communal rabble-rousing by the Prime Minister and an Election Commission that is a silent spectator.

We have not invested enough attention, importance, money or time in the electoral process that forms the bedrock of a functional democracy. The notion of 'One Nation, One Election' is not only a constitutional travesty, given the current asynchronous terms of various state and Union governments, and local bodies, it is also a quixotic fantasy, given the gross inadequacies in the current election model as detailed above.

The three current election commissioners have taken a weak, inadequate system and murdered it with their shameless bias. They have brazenly allowed the explicit targeting of Muslims (Ajmer, 6 April; Nawada, 7 April; Pilibhit, 9 April; Banswara , 29 April), turned a blind eye to the sops announced by the Centre after the Model Code of Conduct came into force, and remained unperturbed by the hijacking of democratic processes in Surat, Indore and Gandhinagar.

The final voting percentages, released 11 days after polling, show an inflation of approximately 5.5 per cent for the first phase and 5.7 per cent for the second phase—these are deeply suspicious figures. That is why I say that the functioning of this ECI marks the absolute nadir of India's hard-won democracy. ■

Continued from page 1

PALANIVEL THIAGARAJAN *is minister of information technology and digital services, Tamil Nadu. A longer version of this essay first appeared in* Frontline *magazine*

Photo: **Getty Images**



Voters queue up at a polling station in West Bengal's Howrah district during the fifth phase of voting on 20 May 2024

The ECI's decision to stop publishing Form 17 data (votes polled) is a despicable, unconscionable and unforgivable assault on the very notion of fair elections

What to expect on Judgement Day...



In Sambhal, there were reports of UP Police beating up and threatening Muslims to prevent them from voting

Continued from page 1

He will not, however, be without powerful allies who have been his accomplices in his megalomaniac excesses—bureaucrats, the police and defence forces, institutions like the Election Commission, the Reserve Bank of India and other banks, SEBI and other regulatory bodies, even the judiciary.

Just about every organ of government has, in the last 10 years, been infiltrated by right-wing sympathisers, if not outright *bhakt*s. For all of them, this will be a moment that will endanger their own survival. They will try to prevent any change of regime and, since they will continue to occupy positions of power in the system, they will constitute a potent challenge.

With the kind of resources he will still have at his disposal and strong backing from within the governmental structure, Mr Modi can be expected to move heaven and earth to continue in power. It will not be a repeat of 1977, when Mrs Gandhi handed over power peacefully.

Here's why: our institutions and systems of checks and balances have been thoroughly eroded over the last decade, an independent media no longer exists, the character of our politicians has plumbed unimagined depths, and the very fabric of society has been torn and shredded.

The engineering of large-scale violence on the pattern of the 6 January Capitol riots in Washington DC cannot be ruled out either. That will give the present regime the perfect excuse to declare an Emergency, suspend all rights and call out the uniformed forces, who have shown that they are not at all averse to a touch of high-handedness and have their own take on how best to preserve the 'sovereignty of the nation'.

The fate of the nation will then depend on the President and the Supreme Court. Somehow, I cannot muster up much confidence in either. If, in spite of the election results (or because of manipulated results), Mr Modi and the BJP/ NDA manage to retain power for the next five years, India will cease to exist as a genuine democracy.

But then, as Satan said, for some it is better to rule in hell than to serve in heaven. ■

AVAY SHUKLA *is a retired IAS officer. He blogs at avayshukla.blogspot.com*

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Nitish's slow walk to political oblivion

Under this astute opportunist, the JD(U) always punched above its weight in Bihar, but those days are numbered

Soroor Ahmed

Independent observers agree that in trying to prolong his hold on power, Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar has effectively written his political obituary. The death of his long-time friend and close associate Sushil Kumar Modi, former deputy chief minister and a BJP leader, on 13 May comes as an additional blow. They had jointly helmed the JD(U)–BJP coalition governments in the state for more than 11 years (with a break between 16 June 2013 and 26 July 2017).

When L.K. Advani was sidelined and Arun Jaitley passed away, the duo was regarded with suspicion by the BJP central leadership.

On Sunday, 12 May, the day before Sushil Modi passed away, Nitish Kumar cut a sorry figure in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's roadshow in Patna. Both looked grim and uneasy as they stood next to each other in an open jeep (Modi on a stool that made him look taller). Nitish Kumar was caught on camera wincing as he waved a lotus thrust into his hands.



Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar is now a shadow of his former self *Photo: **Getty Images***

In his heyday, Nitish Kumar might have advised against conducting a roadshow in the congested part of old Patna. Harassed locals recalled how he had withdrawn a dinner invitation to Modi when the latter was the Gujarat chief minister and returned a cheque for Rs 5 crore sent by Modi for flood relief, seeing that 'benevolence' for what it was—front-page newspaper advertising.

Modi's second roadshow in Patna on Monday, 20 May, was ostensibly to pay his condolences to the grieving family. Nitish Kumar, who was reported to have fallen ill the day after his friend's death, did not appear at Sushil Modi's funeral. Neither was he able to travel to his ancestral village to attend the death anniversary function of his deceased wife, nor join the long list of NDA bigwigs and chief ministers as the prime minister filed his nomination papers in Varanasi on 14 May.

The future of the Janata Dal (U) is uncertain, even as there is unanimity among public and politicos alike that Nitish Kumar's five-decade-long political career is nearing a sad and inglorious end. His only son was either kept away from politics or showed no inclination for a political career. Unlike several regional parties including the RJD in Bihar, Nitish Kumar has no designated political successor from the family or otherwise.

He did promote at least five close aides as his virtual or actual 'number two' in the party, describing them as capable leaders in whose hands the party would be safe. Among them were IAS officer-turned-politician, R.C.P. Singh, election strategist Prashant Kishor, former Union minister Upendra Kushwaha, the sitting Munger MP Lallan Singh and, for a brief period, even Tejashwi Prasad Yadav. Each one of them was unceremoniously dumped.

An author of a book on contemporary Bihar politics says, on condition of anonymity, "Nitish Kumar does seem to suffer from insecurity; he has not allowed anyone to rise from the ranks. Because of his deteriorating health and possibly memory lapses, he appears to have become even more insecure and erratic." Frequent mood changes, uncharacteristically crass language, sudden outbursts and laboured explanations of his shifting political stance have not escaped notice and, as a result, his authority is at an all-time low.

Nitish Kumar nominated Harivansh Narayan Singh, then editor-in-chief of the Hindi daily *Prabhat Khabar*, to the Rajya Sabha and did not object when the BJP made Harivansh the deputy chairman of the Rajya Sabha. The former editor, however, has kept a low profile and remained scrupulously away from politics in the state.

Nitish also promoted Sanjay Jha, who had once worked closely with Arun Jaitley, his pointsman in Patna for several years. Jha was suspected by several party leaders of being a BJP mole reporting to New Delhi until he too was 'rewarded' with a seat in the Rajya Sabha.

R.C.P. Singh, a fellow Kurmi from his own home district of Nalanda, was perceived as Nitish Kumar's political successor for several years. A former IAS officer from the UP cadre, Singh operated from the chief minister's office and was seen as a de facto chief minister. He was anointed as the party's national president in December 2020 and nominated to the Rajya Sabha. However, within three weeks of his induction into the Union cabinet in July 2021, he was removed from the party post by Nitish Kumar and denied renomination to the Rajya Sabha in June 2022. This led to his abrupt resignation as Union minister.

Singh was thereafter expelled from the party after block-level JD(U) workers accused him of corruption in the purchase of land by him and his two daughters between 2013 and 2022. Curiously, this was the period when he was closest to Nitish Kumar. A party leader recalled that the CM had trusted Singh ever since he became a Union minister in the 1990s. The latter joined the BJP in May 2023 but his utility to the BJP was apparently over.

In 2018, Prashant Kishor was appointed national vice president of the JD(U) with a cabinet rank and allotted the bungalow next to the chief minister's. Nitish Kumar publicly declared that the future prospect of the party was secure in Kishor's hands. That warmth proved short-lived, and in January 2020 Kishor and the party's general secretary, former diplomat Pawan Verma, were both expelled from the JD(U). Kishor turned into a bitter critic of Nitish Kumar but nobody knows why the two fell apart.

A few months after the 2020 Assembly election, Upendra Kushwaha merged his Rashtriya Lok Samata Party with the JD(U) and was made the chairman of the party's parliamentary board. He too was projected as a successor to Nitish Kumar. On 9 August 2022, when Nitish Kumar once again quit the NDA to regroup with the RJD, Kushwaha went his own way. By then, Nitish had started publicly declaring Tejashwi as the future hope of the Mahagathbandhan.

Nitish Kumar would have been a powerful voice in the Opposition alliance. By burning bridges mid-stream, he stands to lose much more than his political ambition

In December 2023, Kumar took over as party president following the resignation of Lallan Singh, who is now contesting the Lok Sabha election from Munger. And in January 2024, the king of flip-flops returned to the NDA after abandoning the INDIA bloc, despite having hosted its first meeting in Patna barely months ago.

D.M. Diwakar, a former director of Patna-based A N Sinha Institute of Social Studies, rules out a JD(U)–BJP merger. Virtually a one-man party, JD(U) is not a cadre-based organisation. (On polling days in earlier elections, it has traditionally relied upon BJP's committed workers.) Some observers feel it will be easy for the BJP to gobble up the JD(U) before the next Assembly election in 2025. RJD chief Lalu Prasad Yadav also says that the JD(U) is on a ventilator and will not last long. The JD(U) splitting and one faction going with the BJP and another with the RJD is another possibility.

The fall of the once powerful and prominent regional satrap has been dramatic. With the Ram Mandir threatening to overshadow all other electoral considerations, the JD(U) leader was apparently advised to hitch his horse to the BJP bandwagon for survival. Some of the members of the coterie, ministers among them, feared investigation by central agencies for corruption while others were convinced that it would be easier to arrange funds for the election with the BJP's backing.

It was, suggest these insiders, a bad judgement call. Nitish Kumar would have been a powerful voice in the Opposition alliance, a potential prime minister even. By burning bridges mid-stream, he stands to lose much more than his political ambition.

If the JD(U) and the NDA suffer serious reverses in the state, it may well be the death knell of his own political future. A lot will depend on the results of the Lok Sabha election on 4 June. Meanwhile, JD(U) leaders and office-bearers are braving it out, though one of them did exclaim, in private, "*Sab kuch gadbad ho gaya*. Prospect *thik nahin hai* (Everything has turned upside down. The prospects are bleak)." ■

STATES 360° PUNJAB

Favourites in a four-cornered contest

The Congress and AAP, adversaries here but allies nationally, will likely best the other two players

Harjeshwar Pal Singh

Two years ago, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) changed the traditional bi- and tripartite contest in Punjab with its landslide victory in the Assembly election. This year, Punjab has four serious players—the Indian National Congress (INC), Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and AAP. In some constituencies like Sangrur, Bathinda and Khadoor Sahib, there will be five-horse races with radical Sikh contestants Simranjit Singh Mann, Lakha Sidhana and Amritpal Singh putting up a serious challenge.

Punjab politicians have often been likened to *titli*s (butterflies) flitting from one flower to another. All parties have benefited this time with an unprecedented surge of turncoats. The ruling AAP has secured the services of Gurpreet Singh GP and Raj Kumar Chabbewal from the Congress as well as Pawan Kumar Tinnu. The Congress attracted former AAP leaders like Yamini Gomar while the beleaguered SAD has been able to recruit former congressman Mahinder Singh KP. However, it is the BJP which has fielded the highest number of political defectors—Sushil Kumar Rinku (Jalandhar), Ravneet Bittu (Ludhiana), Preneet Kaur (Patiala), Parampal Kaur (Bathinda), and Mandeep Manna (Khadoor Sahib) who have been poached from AAP, Congress and SAD.

Backlash against the BJP in the rural areas led by kisan unions has been both pronounced and frequent. The repressive actions of Haryana's BJP government against protesting Punjab farmers over MSP (minimum support price) and debt relief has led to the collective ire of the farming community. BJP candidates have not only faced vocal protests, they have not been allowed to campaign in rural areas by kisan activists.

The steady advance of the radical Sikhs is yet another feature of these elections. The surprise victory of Simranjit Singh Mann during the Sangrur by-elections in 2022 was a major breakthrough after two decades. The decline of the moderate SAD (Badal), the emergence of the charismatic duo of Deep Sidhu and Amritpal Singh, the restlessness of the youth and the polarising effect of social media combined to galvanise radicals. They are expected to do well in at least three seats—Sangrur (Simranjit Singh Mann), Bathinda (Lakha Sidhana) and Khadoor Sahib (Amritpal Singh). There is also the real possibility of a sympathy wave in favour of Amritpal, who was dramatically arrested for espousing Khalistan and incarcerated in Assam.

In the 2022 state assembly election, AAP had polled 42 per cent votes, INC 23 per cent, SAD around 20 per cent and BJP eight per cent. In subsequent by-elections, the BJP vote share improved in the state, the SAD's declined, the Congress appeared stagnant while AAP went on a rollercoaster ride. The radical Sikh party, SAD (Mann), was also seen to be gaining in popularity.

In 2022, there was also resentment against the BJP for unleashing the farm laws, against the SAD for supporting them and against the Congress for its lacklustre governance. Moreover, the credibility of AAP's leadership—Kejriwal in Delhi and Bhagwant Mann in the state—was higher. With its promise of the 'Delhi model' of cheap electricity, education and health, AAP was lapped up by Punjab. Its untested and fresh faces were perceived to be more credible than the 'corrupt' old guard, and people went all out to give *ik mauka Bhagwant Mann nun* (a chance to Bhagwat Mann).

Despite no perceptible wave in favour of any party, the situation in 2024 is different. AAP has been boasting of making a clean sweep, winning all 13 seats in the state. It is banking on the popularity of Bhagwant Mann and its campaigning model. It also hopes that division in opposition votes would help it in multi-cornered contests. Its campaign hinges on the slogans "*Sansad vich vi Bhagwant Mann* (Bhagwant Mann in Parliament too)" and "*Zulm da jawaab vote naal* (Vote against oppression)" to protest the imprisonment of Arvind Kejriwal.

The arrest and decimation of almost its entire Delhi leadership has, however, arrested AAP's momentum. The non-performance of its MLAs and its over-reliance on poached candidates exposes the shortage of credible leaders. Multiple failures in dealing with drug trafficking, law and order and sand-mining issues have also been glaring. Sections of farmers, women and employees are unhappy about unfulfilled poll promises.



An Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) roadshow in Amritsar on 16 May 2024 *Photo: **Getty Images***

The use of public funds on helicopter rides, hiring private jets and releasing media advertisements outside Punjab has also dented the Aam Aadmi Party's image

The use of public funds on helicopter rides, hiring private jets and releasing advertisements outside Punjab has also dented the Aam Aadmi Party's image, while the Delhi liquor policy 'scam' has taken a toll on its claims of being *kattar imandar* (absolutely honest). Yet, AAP remains a force to reckon with in almost all the seats and looks particularly strong in Faridkot, Fatehgarh Sahib, Anandpur Sahib and Hoshiarpur.

The INC is also exuding confidence, hopeful of repeating its 2019 performance when it won 8 of the 13 Lok Sabha seats. Buoyed by Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra, its campaign on the threats to democracy and the Constitution and its promises of Paanch Nyay (benefits for the poor, women, minorities, backward classes and youth), the Punjab Congress believes that a combination of an attractive manifesto and credible candidates will help it sail through.

Fielding Dr Dharamvir Gandhi and Sukhpal Khaira from Patiala and Sangrur respectively has bolstered the party while putting up equally strong leaders like Charanjit Channi (Jalandhar), Raja Warring (Ludhiana) and Sukhjinder Randhawa (Gurdaspur) has boosted its hopes.

On the flip side, still riven by factional fights, the Punjab Congress has put up less than ideal candidates from seats like Khadoor Sahib, Bathinda, Anandpur Sahib and Hoshiarpur, thus weakening its chances.

Several Congress leaders are facing vigilance probes and the memory of Captain Amarinder Singh's lacklustre governance has added to its image problem despite the 'New Congress' rhetoric of Rahul Gandhi. Nevertheless, the Congress is likely to do well in Punjab and emerge as the largest party in the state.

Punjab's 100-year-old party, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), has been struggling under Sukhbir Badal. He has tried to rejuvenate the party with a Punjab Bachao Yatra and by mending fences with Taksali Akalis like Sukhdev Singh Dhindsa and Bibi Jagir Kaur. He also attempted a course correction by refusing to join hands with BJP, thus burnishing the SAD's *panthic* credentials. SAD is projecting itself as the only authentic Punjabi party.

However, desertions by local satraps like Pawan Kumar Tinnu, the Maluka family, Talbir Gill, along with the radical revival in core SAD areas, pose an existential threat. With its shrinking social base and erosion of identity as the Punjabi, Sikh and peasants' party, SAD has fielded some strong candidates like Harsimrat Badal (Bathinda), Prem Singh Chandumajra (Anandpur Sahib), Anil Joshi (Amritsar) and Virsa Valtoha (Khadoor Sahib), but it appears to have a realistic chance only in its last bastion, Bathinda.

The BJP, ever since its divorce with SAD in the wake of the farm laws in 2020, has decided to go solo in the state. It made some gains in the two by-elections at Sangrur and Jalandhar and also tried to give a regional touch to the party through the wholesale induction of Jatt leaders like Captain Amarinder Singh and Sunil Jakhar.

The BJP made religious appeals to Sikhs by commemorating the sacrifice of Guru Tegh Bahadur and celebrating Veer Bal Diwas. Apart from hoping to consolidate its upper-caste Hindu base through the religious fervour around the Ram Mandir, it is banking on the popularity of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and various central government schemes including free rations, gas cylinders and pucca houses. However, the determined opposition of farmers has been a roadblock. It is struggling even in its traditional strongholds of Gurdaspur and Hoshiarpur. With its reliance on 'imported defectors' like Ravneet Bittu, Sushil Rinku, Perneet Kaur and Rana Gurmit Sodhi, the BJP will be lucky to open its account in the absence of its traditional ally, SAD.

There is little enthusiasm among people for any party and the main contest seems to be between Congress and AAP with SAD and ascendent radical Sikhs also in the fray. ■

RAW's expanding footprint ruffles feathers

The vigilantism of India's spy agency has intensified in Modi's time

Girish Linganna

India's spy agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) is facing increased scrutiny due to growing claims of its international operations, including alleged assassinations and meddling in foreign affairs during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's second term in office. Experts believe that, during Modi's decade in office, India's capability of gathering intelligence overseas has greatly improved. This follows a significant boost in resources and operational freedom of RAW.

Over the past 10 years, the partnership of Narendra Modi and National Security Adviser Ajit Doval has expanded funding and operational capabilities for RAW, enhancing the agency's role, compared to the previous United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. Dheeraj Paramesha Chaya, a professor of criminology at the University of Hull, in Britain, and an expert on Indian intelligence, spoke about these developments with *South China Morning Post* (*SCMP*).

Paramesha noted that RAW's recent international activities were not entirely new, as previous Indian administrations had also focused on enhancing the nation's intelligence capabilities. He mentioned that, under former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in the 1980s, the scale of intelligence operations was comparable, indicating that the current mandate had not changed drastically. However, as India's foreign policy ambitions have grown, so have the objectives of its intelligence efforts. Recent controversial claims about RAW's operations abroad have focused increased attention on the agency.

On 29 April 2024, the *Washington Post* revealed that an Indian intelligence officer was implicated in a thwarted attempt to kill Sikh separatist leader Gurpatwant Singh Pannun in the US in 2023. This plan was allegedly sanctioned by then RAW chief Samant Goel, who reported directly to the prime minister.

The Indian government staunchly denied the allegations, labelling them as "unwarranted and unsubstantiated". On 4 April, the *Guardian* reported that the Indian government had adopted a policy of targeting individuals it deemed adversaries.

The report discussed new allegations connecting India to nearly 20 assassinations since 2020, executed by unidentified gunmen in Pakistan. These were the first instances where Indian intelligence officials openly spoke about supposed operations in Pakistan, with documents that surfaced directly implicating RAW in these killings.

The report also highlighted that Sikh separatists involved in the Khalistani movement were targets within these operations—both in Pakistan and in Western countries. The Pakistani authorities believe these killings were coordinated by Indian intelligence sleeper cells that were primarily based in the United Arab Emirates.

In 2023, there was a notable increase in such incidents, attributed to these cells' heightened activities. Allegedly, these cells engaged local criminals, or economically disadvantaged Pakistanis, offering substantial sums to execute these assassi-nations. Moreover, Indian agents were accused of enlisting jihadists to perform these hits by misleading them into thinking they were eliminating 'infidels'.

Australian news sources have stated that Canberra deported two individuals from India accused of trying to access confidential details regarding defence initiatives, airport security and trade ties. These reports also mentioned surveillance of the Indian community in Australia and interactions with active and former politicians.

Although the Australian authorities have not verified the nationalities of those deported or provided further information, they have recognised that such an event occurred. The Indian government has denied these claims as "baseless".

RAW influence across Asia and beyond

RAW is viewed with suspicion in South Asia, with its influence causing concern among neighbouring nations. Observers note that since Modi's tenure began, the accusations against RAW's activities have intensified. In 2018, the then Sri Lankan president Maithripala Sirisena claimed RAW was behind a plot to assassinate him, which strained relations between Sri Lanka and India. Nepal pointed fingers at RAW in 2020, accusing it of interfering in its political matters. Meanwhile, Pakistan, India's longtime adversary, consistently accuses Indian agents of working to "undermine its stability".

Paramesha noted that the effectiveness of RAW's operations hinges significantly on the determination and power of India's political leaders. In his book *India's Intelligence Culture and Strategic Surprises: Spying for South Block*, he indicates how Indian foreign intelligence has organically evolved without a formal charter, shaping its functions in reaction to perceived threats.

Established in 1968 after the Sino-Indian war of 1962, RAW was created to address threats from China and Pakistan. Over time, its role has expanded, with intelligence data increasingly influencing India's foreign policy decisions.

Much like the CIA in the US and Mossad in Israel, top RAW officials report directly to the nation's highest leaders. According to former RAW chiefs and independent experts, the agency has been crucial in pivotal moments of India's history, including the formation of Bangladesh in 1971 under the prime ministership of Indira Gandhi and the development of India's indigenous nuclear programme. Paramesha pointed out that Indian leaders—such as Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Narendra Modi—had actively engaged with RAW, while others had been less involved.

There have been allegations that Indian operatives conducted targeted assassinations over the years in countries such as the UK, Pakistan and Afghanistan

A former RAW officer preferring anonymity, mentioned that the past decade had seen a deliberate effort by the government to enhance RAW's role, aiming to position India as a major global player.

Despite the Modi government's ambitious approach to external intelligence, the agency faces challenges, such as being understaffed and lacking essential resources. However, there is a clear intent to improve or, at least, the appearance of a significant upgrade, according to the officer. So far, India's intelligence capabilities have been deemed sufficient for the nation's needs.

However, as India's international stature grows, there will be a need to enhance these capabilities to meet both present and future challenges.

Details about RAW, including its staff numbers and budget, remain highly confidential. In recent years, Indian intelligence has focused on targeting radicals that support Kashmiri independence and Khalistani separatism, both of which are particularly delicate matters for New Delhi.

There have been allegations that Indian operatives conducted targeted assassinations over the years in countries such as the UK, Pakistan and Afghanistan. A recent incident in Canada, involving the killing of separatist leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Vancouver, escalated tensions between Ottawa and New Delhi. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau claimed in Parliament that Indian agents were responsible, a charge that New Delhi has consistently denied.

Harsh V. Pant, vice president of studies and foreign policy at the Observer Research Foundation in Delhi, told *SCMP* that it was a natural progression for India's spy network and intelligence activities to expand as the nation's global stature grows. India's expanding role on the global stage naturally leads to increased intelligence and espionage activities, which should be expected, given its rising prominence, remarked Pant.

He also noted that the differing perceptions between India and Western countries were likely to persist in media portrayals due to India's growing engagement in international matters. This conflict reflects a wider debate on how India seeks to safeguard its interests and demonstrate its capability to do so. ■

The author is a defence and aerospace analyst.
Courtesy: IPA Service



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with his spymaster Ajit Doval

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

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NATIONAL HERALD ON SUNDAY
www.nationalheraldindia.com
26 MAY 2024

When life is a long-distance race



Photos: *Arshdeep Arshi*

Arshdeep Arshi

Eh kise hor nu jita rahe ne, sade agge koi hor kudi nahi si (They are making someone else win, there was no other girl ahead of us)." Athletes Jaspal, Ramandeep and friends are complaining to their coach in one voice. The dozen young runners from Amritsar district travelled 200 kilometres to participate in a marathon in Chandigarh, and they are visibly agitated.

All this is happening even as Jaspal Kaur's name is being announced from the stage as winner of the second prize in the 5-km race. They know Jaspal is the winner, not runner-up, as she was leading all the way to the finishing line. But the cash prize of Rs 5,000 for the winner is being announced in someone else's name.

Jaspal refuses to go to the stage and accept the second prize. Instead, she and her coach go from one person to another on and off the stage, questioning the decision of the organisers, narrating their story and seeking help to address the injustice. In the end, at the request of her coach, Jaspal accepts the second prize, a giant foam board cheque with Rs 3,100 written on it.

A month later, in April 2023, to her surprise, Jaspal finds Rs 5,000 has been deposited in her account. Nothing is explained to Jaspal and nothing has been reported in any local newspaper. On the website of Runizen timing systems, her name appears as the winner on the leaderboard for the 5-km race with a guntime (race time) of 23.07 minutes. She is not there in the prize distribution photographs for the year. But the giant cheque is still in her possession along with her many medals.

In 2024, while accompanying the girls to the next marathon, this reporter found out from the organisers that they had disqualified Jaspal's competitor in the race later that year after examining the video footage. They realised the protesting girls had been right. There was some cheating that had taken place with the race bib. That explained the mystery of the cash prize money that came to Jaspal.

Cash prizes are important for Jaspal. If she can save enough money she can go to college again. Two years ago, Jaspal joined an online B.A. programme at a private university. "But I have not been able to study beyond the first semester," she says. "I have to pay about Rs 15,000 every semester to sit in the exam. In the first semester, I used the money from cash awards (given by village representatives and the school for winning nationals) to pay the fees. But after that, I ran out of money."

Jaspal, 22, is a first-generation college-goer in her family and among the very few women from the Mazhabi Sikh community in her village, classified as the most disadvantaged Scheduled Caste community in Punjab. Jaspal's mother Baljinder Kaur, 47, studied till Class 5 and her father Balkar Singh, 50, has never been to school. Her elder brother Amritpal Singh, 24, dropped out after Class 12 to help his father in construction labour around their village Kohali; her younger brother Akashdeep Singh, 17, has completed Class 12.

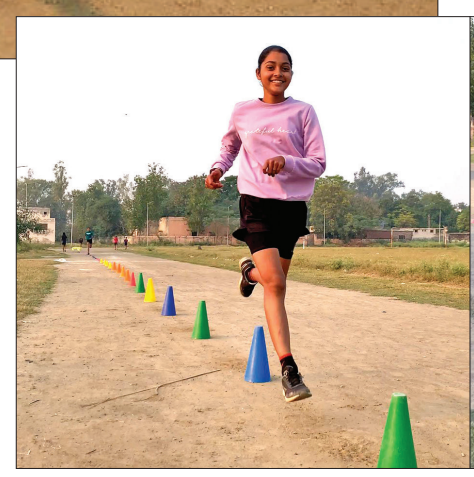
The family's income depends on the frequency of work that the two men find. They make around Rs 9,000–10,000 a month.

The prize money that Jaspal gets often takes care of some of her expenses like entry fees and travel for competitions, and her own education. "We get t-shirts when we register for races but for shorts, tracksuit pants and shoes, I have to ask my parents for money," she says as she dons her sports gear for practice.

Around us we see young athletes, some doing warm-ups, others taking a slow round of the ground while a few are gathered around their coach Rajinder Singh Chhina for daily training. All of them come from different villages. Jaspal has been participating in 400 and 800 metres, and 5-km events, and has won many prizes and medals in the past seven years. In her own village, Jaspal has become an inspiration for many. Her medals, certificates and cash prizes have encouraged poor families to put their kids into training.

But for Jaspal, nothing she has won till now has been enough to help the family. Since February 2024, she has started commuting to keep accounts for a gaushala near Amritsar for Rs 8,000 a month. "I took up this job to contribute to my family's income. But now I don't even get time to study," she says.

In March 2024, she participated in a 10-km race in Chandigarh. This time she ended up as second runner-up and won a cash prize of Rs.11,000.





Ramandeep's work does not end with training for her runs. The 21-year-old also has to help at home, taking care of a cow and a buffalo that the family owns

Jaspal is certainly a 'star' in the group of about 70 athletes that Rajinder Singh Chhina (60) trains for free in Harse Chhina village. An international athlete himself in the 1,500-metre event, he has been training young girls and boys from marginalised communities for more than a decade now.

A taunt from a senior officer in Chandigarh about widespread drug abuse among youngsters in rural Punjab pushed this athlete to start training youngsters in 2003. "I brought the kids to this ground first," he says, referring to the playground of Comrade Acchar Singh Chhina Government Senior Secondary Smart School in Harse Chinna village in Amritsar.

"The children who were not going to school—those from marginalised sections and poor families—I got them admitted in the school and started training them."

"In government schools, there are many kids from the marginalised sections now. They are hardworking. I started forming teams thinking that they should at least reach the state level... I have at least 70 athletes whom I coach. Some of my athletes have done quite well and secured good jobs. Some are in Pro Kabaddi League," Chhina proudly says.

"We do not get any help from anyone. People visit, honour the kids, promise to help but nothing comes out of it. We do whatever we can on our own," he says.

He holds a BAMS (Bachelor of Ayurvedic Medicine and Surgery) degree and runs his own clinic in Ram Tirath near Amritsar. He says the income from that is enough to cover the expenses of his home and the ground. "I spend around Rs 7,000–8,000 a month on equipment—hurdles, weights, lime to mark the ground etc." His children, three of them, all grown up and working, also contribute from time to time.

"I don't want the youth to do drugs. I want them to come to the ground so that they become something."

Coming to the ground, however, is quite an effort for young Jaspal, whose village Kohali is about 10 kilometres away. "I struggle with the distance. The village is far away from the ground," Jaspal says sitting in front of her two-room brick house on the outskirts of her village. "It takes me about 45 minutes to walk to the ground each way," Jaspal says. "I get up at 3:30 in the morning every day. I reach the ground at 4:30. My parents tell me to be careful, but I never feel unsafe. There is an *akhara* nearby where boys do wrestling. Because of them, the road is never deserted. We practise for two hours, and I walk back home around 7.30 a.m.," she says.

Two years ago, she learnt to ride her father's second-hand bike. Since then, she occasionally gets to take the motorbike to the training ground, which is then only a matter of 10 minutes. But many times, on those lucky days, Jaspal has to leave training halfway and return home urgently, because the men at home need the bike. She has missed a few training sessions like that.

"There are still some villages where there is no government or private bus service," the coach says. "The young athletes struggle to reach the ground and many of them struggle with their education as well because of this." The absence of a college nearby is also a reason why many girls in these villages drop out after Class 12.

Ramandeep Kaur, another young athlete from the same village, also walks 10 kms, twice a day, to attend the training sessions. "Sometimes, I walk five kilometres and then go to the ground on a scooty with another girl, Komalpreet from Chainpur village. After training, I walk back another five kilometres," she explains.

"*Darr tan lagda ikalle ande jande, par kise kol time nahi naal jan aan layi* (I fear walking alone, but no one in the family has the time to go with me every day)," says Ramandeep. The training and then the extra 20-km walks take a toll on her. "I am tired all the time," she says. Also, her work does not end with training for her runs. The 21-year-old also has to help at home, taking care of a cow and a buffalo that the family owns. Right in front of the house beyond a 3–4 feet wide brick road is a small space where they keep their cattle.

Ramandeep is also from the Mazhabi Sikh community. Her family of 10 survives on the income of two brothers, who work as labourers. "They largely do carpentry or any other work that comes their way. When they do find work, each can earn anything around Rs 350 a day," she says.

She gave up studies after completing Class 12 in 2022, when her father died. "We could not afford it," she says regretfully, sitting in her two-room house with cracked walls at the far end of the village. "My mother buys me sports gear out of her widow's pension of Rs 1,500," she adds.

"*Cash prize jitt ke shoes laye si 3,100 de, hun tutt gaye, fer koi race jittungi te shoes laungi* (I bought these shoes when I won a cash prize of Rs 3,100 at a race. These are torn now. I will buy a new pair when I win a race again)," she says pointing at her ragged shoes. Shoes, or no shoes, she runs to get to a better place from where she is right now.

"I run to secure a job in the police," Ramandeep says. And so do Komalpreet Kaur (15) from Chainpur, Gurkirpal Singh (15) from village Kohali, Manpreet Kaur (20) from village Ranewali and Mamta (20) from village Sainsra Kalan. All of them come to get trained under coach Chhina. For each of these young athletes, apart from better social status, a government job means financial security for the entire family. But entrance exams for these jobs are yet another hurdle race. ■





Jaspal keeps her prized possessions safe in this metal almirah; (right) **Ramandeep Kaur** (black t-shirt) **with her mother and sisters at home**

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



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NATIONAL ENGLISH WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

NATION

'IT'S MODI VERSUS THE PEOPLE'

In conversation with Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge

▸P2



NATION

THE *HAWA* HAS TURNED, BUT...

There's more to reading elections than the overrated discipline of psephology, writes Kumar Ketkar

▸P2



NATION

STATES 360°

In focus this week: Uttar Pradesh, Odisha and Punjab

▸P3,6



What to expect on Judgement Day and after

Narendra Modi will move heaven and earth to continue in power, says Avay Shukla

I sincerely hope the hon'ble lordships who dismissed the petitions for mandatory counting of VVPAT slips (with wholly unwarranted aspersions on the petitioner, the Association for Democratic Reforms) are able to sleep soundly these days. I also hope they have realised by now just how misplaced their faith in the current election commissioners was.

Every round of polling brings fresh disturbing news of malfunctioning EVMs, of only the BJP symbol being displayed no matter which key one presses, of EVMs being 'captured' by ruling-party goons with the connivance of the police, Muslim voters not being allowed to vote, a BJP candidate (who has no business being inside a polling booth except to cast her vote) forcibly lifting the burkhas of Muslim women to verify their IDs, CCTV cameras in strongrooms being rendered ineffective by electricity 'failure', en masse deletion of names of voters of a particular community—all accompanied by the sepulchral silence of the Election Commission.

In one of the laziest judgements delivered in recent times, the hon'ble judges premised their order on complete faith in the Election Commission and its impartiality. How wrong they were is being proved on a daily basis.

The present Election Commission is the most deplorable, partisan and incompetent one we have had since 1947. It is as transparent as a block of granite, as communicative as a Trappist monk who has taken a vow of silence and as straight as a corkscrew.

It takes no action on hate speeches and allows a communal video to be shown for four days before taking it down just hours before polling. It is petrified of even taking the prime minister's name, let alone calling him out for persistent anti-Muslim baiting. Its 'notices' are targeted mainly at the Opposition parties. It changes, without any explanation, the practice of revealing polling numbers instead of just percentages. It takes days to reveal even this information in the age of 'Digital India'! And, in order to leave no doubt as to which corner of the ring it is in, it castigates the president of the country's largest opposition party for raising this issue in a letter.

The credibility of this Commission has hit rock bottom, yet it continues to dig deeper every day. All of us knew this, but apparently the hon'ble judges did not. I fear the nation may pay a huge price for this indefensible misjudgement of the Commission's character and intentions. For the real mischief will happen on counting day.

It appears that some of Mr Modi's divinity has rubbed off on me too. These days, perched in my mountain home at 7,000 feet, I feel like Moses on Mount Sinai, surveying the frenetic goings-on far below with cynical disapproval.

The credibility of this Election Commission has hit rock bottom, yet it continues to dig deeper every day. All of us knew this, but apparently the hon'ble judges did not

Neither have things changed much since the days of Moses. While he beheld the worship of the golden calf, what I see now is hysteria about the saffron cow (speaking metaphorically, of course). To provide a non-Abrahamic analogy, I feel a bit like Jamlu Devta of Malana village, on the heights of Chandrakhani Pass, observing the other inferior *devta*s of Kullu conducting their road shows (it *is* election time, after all!), each trying to impress the voter—sorry, devotee—in order to be declared numero uno. (Incidentally, Jamlu Devta is not to be confused with Jumla Devta, the reigning deity of Delhi.)

What I also see is that—notwithstanding the indulgence (or worse) of the Election Commission, the misuse of official apparatus and the thousands of crores of bribes as electoral bonds—the BJP is going to fall short of a simple majority by at least 30–40 seats.

The ragtag NDA allies may garner another 30 or so seats, but it is unlikely that they will bail the BJP out. As Parakala Prabhakar explained to Karan Thapar in a recent interview, these parties are "contextual" rather than "ideological" allies of the BJP. When the context changes, they will jump ship like proverbial rats. And that is when the fun begins, or the shit hits the ceiling. It is something we should all be discussing, because this moment will put to the test every single institution, convention and law we have so painstakingly created over the years.

Mr Modi has been in power continuously for the last 22 years, and has made no secret of the fact that he loves it so much he is not likely to hand it over to anyone else, election or no election. He has, after all, been ordained to rule by God himself.

Moreover, if he must relinquish power he has much to lose and fear. His atrocities and excesses have made him many enemies: he can expect no quarter from them. His imperious decisions will be called into question and investigated—Rafale, demonetisation, the PM CARES fund, electoral bonds, Pegasus, the Panama and Pandora papers, the Hindenberg expose on Adani, the award of contracts, ports, airports, mines and railways to cronies...

Cadavers from the past will be exhumed to point their gory fingers at him—the Gujarat riots of 2002, the North-East Delhi riots of 2021, Judge Loya, the Sohrabuddin and Kausarbi encounters, the killings in Manipur, the imprisonment of Sanjiv Bhat and human rights activists... Many more may emerge once the repressive lid is lifted off a citizenry and media muzzled for the last ten years.

Continued on page 5



Photo courtesy: *Scroll.in*

Residents of Mubarakpur in UP's Sambhal who were allegedly assaulted by police personnel during voting at a polling station on 7 May 2024

How to murder a 'free and fair' process

The current Election Commissioners have taken a weak, inadequate system and destroyed it with their brazen bias

Palanivel Thiagarajan

What does it mean, in practical terms, to run a free and fair election? Here are some essential prerequisites, in my view:

Accuracy. The conduct of elections must be 100 per cent accurate in enfranchising those who are constitutionally eligible and in preventing those who are not eligible.

Awareness. All citizens should have full information about each step of the voting process. They should be able to exercise their vote without any confusion.

Non-partisan environment. The election process and the media ecosystem should be neutral such that neither is content suppressed nor is anybody able to get away with untruths, let alone Nazi-level propaganda.

Reliability. The process should be transparent enough that multiple people can validate that it took place according to the rules and nothing untoward or illegal took place.

Equality of access. The system should not discriminate between candidates based on the size of their party or whether they run as an Independent. There should be no bar for any average citizen to fight an election.

The most desirable outcome would involve absolute integrity of polling, uncompromised security of devices, reliability of the counting and polling processes, and devices that deliver a result consistent with the intent expressed by voters.

Such an outcome would inspire confidence that everyone has had a fair and equal opportunity to be a voter, that the party holding executive power has not had undue influence on or gains from the process, and that the system has delivered a result that truly reflects the will of the voters.

[...]

With roughly 960 million eligible voters and over 1.2 million polling booths, running a general election requires a few million booth officers, booth agents, observers and security personnel, nearly all of whom are pressed into temporary service, in roles completely unrelated to their regular roles.

The Election Commission today remains an understaffed paper tiger. Although the electoral exercise requires millions of people, the Election Commission of India (ECI) runs on a skeleton staff of fewer than 500 full-time employees. This small group is supposed to project authority, manage the system, and ensure compliance with all the rules.

A granular analysis of the current election model shows that the system is structurally unsound. Over 99 per cent of the people who work in an election are conscripted from government or quasi-government jobs and national PSUs, including nationalised banks. These workers are not ideally suited for this additional duty. The level of training and functional support provided to them is grossly inadequate by any professional standard. As an extreme example, reports have come in from Madhya Pradesh (*Dainik Bhaskar*) alleging that 20 government employees, including gardeners and drivers, were designated as Polling Officers. With no disrespect to the workers themselves, slipshod distribution of tasks and perfunctory training and support shows a callous disregard for the process.

How accurate are electoral rolls (voter lists)?

[...]

Based on the five elections I worked on, the voter lists are 'off' by up to 10 per cent in rural areas and by up to 15 per cent or more in urban areas. There has been no from-scratch census-equivalent voter registration drive in decades. The fact that there is an annual collapsing and consequent renumbering means that people's serial numbers in their booth list change constantly.



Although the electoral exercise requires millions of people, the ECI runs on a skeleton staff of fewer than 500 full-time employees

The National Electoral Roll Purification and Authentication Programme (NERPAP), launched by the ECI in 2015 with the objective of 'bringing a totally error-free and authenticated electoral roll', has been plagued by several problems. Critics of the scheme suggested that the ECI was pressured into doing this not as an "end in itself, but as a preparatory step to pave the way for other ambitions of the government of the day such as simultaneous elections or one nation, one election". The decision to link the EPIC (Electors Photo Identification Card) number with Aadhaar was stayed by the Supreme Court in August 2015. Fears that such a linkage would be used to disenfranchise voters from marginalised communities cannot be dismissed. A radical purification of the electoral rolls cannot happen merely through an Aadhaar-based linkage, especially in a nation where there are tens of thousands of fake Aadhaar entries, including an Aadhaar card issued for Lord Hanuman.

[...]

Polling day and secure storage of EVMs

[...]

Under the current system, every candidate is permitted one main and one substitute agent at every booth to ensure that due process is followed, and the booth is not 'captured' by anyone. These agents ensure that there is only one match on the list with the person voting, and that no voter is either denied a vote or coerced to vote for a particular candidate/ party (as happened in Manipur this election compelling even the selectively blind ECI to call for repolling).

A minimum of 3,000 booth agents are needed to effectively manage polling day, and candidates without a party structure to back them may not be able to identify so many volunteers, let alone train them. So, it is not a level playing field and the odds of an Independent candidate winning a Lok Sabha seat remain dismal. (Data suggest that 99 per cent of independents lost their deposits in the last election). I bring up this point to show that pre-polling processes like testing and validating EVMs, ensuring that nomination papers are in order, cross-referencing the various forms (Form 10, Form 17, Form 20) are all relatively new procedures for both the ECI's temporary workers and party volunteers.

Process familiarity that can be reasonably expected from well-trained, long-term officers is visibly absent at every booth. The most important form is Form 17 because it contains comprehensive information of what happened on polling day (total registered voters, total votes recorded in the EVM, whether this tallies, and so on). As a crucial data point, Form 17 gives polling-station-wise breakdown of the number of votes. Form 17 can later be tallied against Form 20 (counted votes), and discrepancies alert us to undeniable rigging.

Today, we are watching a farce unfold: five weeks after the first phase of polling, the ECI has not officially released the final polling figures. Its website and app do not show data on the number of voters in each constituency.

[...]

Continued on page 5

PALANIVEL THIAGARAJAN *is minister of information technology and digital services, Tamil Nadu. A longer version of this essay first appeared in* Frontline *magazine*

NATIONAL HERALD ON SUNDAY
www.nationalheraldindia.com
26 MAY 2024

It's the People vs Modi this election

The Congress president believes Narendra Modi's days as prime minister are numbered

Congress president and leader of the INDIA bloc **Mallikarjun Kharge** *took time off after the fifth phase of polling to share his assessment of the situation on the ground, the likely result and the role of the Election Commission. The 81-year-old politician, who campaigned across the country, exuded confidence that the INDIA bloc will have the numbers to form the government. Edited excerpts from an interview with* **Ashlin Mathew** *in New Delhi.*



Photo: **Vipin**

Polling for 429 Lok Sabha seats is over. How confident are you about the INDIA bloc's prospects?

The INDIA bloc is going to win. The election is being fought by the people. It is the people versus the BJP, the people versus [Narendra] Modi.

Secularism is the core of the Congress ideology and that of its alliance partners. People are tired of divisive politics and Modi's policies. They want peace and do not approve of BJP leaders dividing people on communal or religious lines. People are clearly fed up.

Modi's lies are catching up with him. He is talking of Pakistan, accusing the Opposition of planning to end reservation for Dalit and SC/ST citizens and giving all (seats) to Muslims. We never said that. It is the BJP leaders who have spoken of the urgency to secure 400 seats so that they can change the Constitution and end reservation. Our fight is to save the Constitution and democracy.

The prime minister is destroying all Constitutional agencies and democratic institutions like the Enforcement Directorate, CBI and income tax and vigilance departments. He is blatantly misusing his office and authority. No previous prime minister has usurped and concentrated so much power in one person. If he continues, he will destroy the country's economy and imprison everyone who believes in democracy and the Constitution.

The Congress is said to have performed well in the southern states; what about the north?

We will do well in Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Telangana. We are improving in the north, and will gain seats in Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, with at least five to six seats in Madhya Pradesh. We will certainly do well in Haryana and keep our eight seats intact in Punjab. In Delhi too we will gain. So, where is the question of Modi winning?

With the election still going on, it is premature to talk of numbers, but judging by reports and seeing the response on the ground, I can say with confidence that the INDIA bloc will stop the BJP from returning to power.

Are people really persuaded of the threat to the Constitution?

People have understood the threat and the message has percolated down to the villages. Several senior BJP leaders have said on record that if they get the numbers, they would change the Constitution. How can the prime minister deny it?

What has been the Congress' role in the INDIA bloc?

All important decisions were taken in consultation with other parties. We had meetings in Patna, Mumbai, Chennai and UP. In Maharashtra, there are three parties in the Alliance. In UP, Rahul Gandhi and Akhilesh [Yadav, of the Samajwadi Party] have been doing joint rallies. Wherever INC had to adjust, we did—even if that meant fewer seats. We were clear that all parties in the Alliance needed to be given space. If differences remain, our five-member team will sort them out to everyone's satisfaction.

The Election Commission and judiciary have failed to rein in the prime minister's speeches. Has he successfully polarised the electorate?

Narendra Modi has *always* been a polarising figure. He did it in 2014 and 2019 and he is doing it again.

He has gone to the extent of saying that if Congress comes to power, the party will snatch everyone's property and distribute it among those who have 'more children' and are 'infiltrators' (*ghuspethia*), insinuating Muslims. In Gujarat he said, if you have two buffaloes, one would be given to Muslims.

It is astonishing that the prime minister of the country is saying such things. He is clearly not a statesman or even a responsible political leader. He is behaving like an RSS *pracharak*. I believe this is no longer having the desired impact among people, who are seeing through his bluster and hate speech.

How did the Congress steer clear of the hate speech trap?

The Congress has focused on its manifesto and what it will do for the people, Panch Nyay (five promises) among others.

The prime minister has said the Congress will be wiped out in Uttar Pradesh. Thoughts?

What's new? He always says the Congress will be wiped out. Despite his ugly speeches, the Congress came to power in Karnataka, Himachal Pradesh and Telangana. We won in Madhya Pradesh too, but he destroyed that.

Wherever people supported the Congress and we came to power, he tried to break not just the party but the state and its people—like in Maharashtra. In Modi's scheme, everything is fair; he does not stop at anything. Is this what should happen in a democracy?

Several instances of electoral malpractices (voter intimidation, vote suppression, underage voting) have surfaced. Comments?

Conducting a free and fair election is the duty of the Election Commission, which has the mandate to monitor, supervise and take necessary steps. We do not want to comment or interfere in what the Returning Officers are required to do.

The BJP and RSS have, however, mastered the art of putting bogus names on voter lists and trying to rig elections in interior locations. Because they have the power, money and machinery, because they have officers working in their favour, they often get away with it.

"In Modi's scheme, everything is fair; he does not stop at anything. Is this what should happen in a democracy? Recently, the PM threatened the media. Earlier he used to praise them"

Recently, the PM threatened the media. Earlier he used to praise them. Now, he has started saying that the media, print media in particular, is opposed to him.

Several political parties and you yourself have raised the matter of the Election Commission not releasing the total number of voters in each constituency…

Our views were heard by the Commission and dismissed. The Supreme Court has now sought a response from the ECI by 24 May. Without absolute numbers, the Commission cannot arrive at percentages. Since they are releasing the polling percentage, what prevents them from releasing the full data?

They have to compile the data from 543 constituencies. With just 49 constituencies in the fifth phase of polling, why are they still not able to do it?

Several independent candidates have also complained to the Supreme Court that they were not given Form 17C (data on voters and polled votes) in every booth. Did all Congress candidates receive Form 17C?

These are not matters that I look after. The organisational general secretary will monitor it. The general secretaries in charge of states and the election observers will look into it. We have educated them about the requirements. We certainly want transparency and all data to be put out in the public domain.

Will Congress go to court in this matter?

I raised the question of voter numbers. Our Alliance partners have also asked the Election Commission what difficulty there was in releasing this data. They have raised suspicions. Therefore, I don't want to say anything now. There are two more phases. The Election Commission is not doing what they are required to do.

What do you think will happen if the BJP does not get the required majority? Do you foresee any trouble?

I don't know what the prime minister will do, but naturally, the elected parties will take a call. One man can't decide the fate of Indian democracy. ■

Everyone knows the *hawa* has turned, but…

Kumar Ketkar uses political intuition to read between the lines of psephological predictions

Can you even imagine a humiliating setback for Modi–Shah's BJP in this election? How could anyone, in the face of a propaganda blitzkrieg of such scale and range? Even their detractors and diehard sceptics struggle to envisage an outcome where they are out of power.

There are, however, enough indications that Modi's carefully crafted image has developed cracks. The latest burst of interviews—including one in which he claims divine origin—is one such indication. But even if Modi and his minions manage to rig these elections and subvert the popular mandate, his messianic reputation will suffer.

M.G. Devasahayam, a former bureaucrat with three decades of experience in senior positions including in the Election Commission, does not see Modi's BJP getting more than 170 seats. Having witnessed the recent shenanigans of the Election Commission of India (ECI), he has begun a movement to stop the 'illegal and unconstitutional' conduct of the ECI, often abetted, in his view, by the indifference (or complicity) of the judiciary.

Devasahayam has lodged cases against the 'nefarious' actions of the ECI and mobilised over a hundred former senior IAS officers to fight against the 'fraud being [perpetrated] to topple democracy and marginalise the Constitution'. He is convinced the national mood is anti-Modi—and that both the prime minister and his alter ego, home minister Amit Shah, know it.

The most significant signals are coming from the BJP's own ranks. Leaders say in hush-hush tones that the PM and the PMO have reduced them to errand boys. Retired ministers confide that ministerial meetings are short: A4 sheets are handed out to be read in Parliament or to the media. There is neither appreciation for work done, nor any room to act independently, even in their respective constituencies. They are convinced the party will suffer in this election.

Most opinion polls and exit polls do not reflect this sentiment, maybe because their samples are too small or because the surveys are dictated or doctored. How, then, does one identify a declining trend? By unconventional means like conversations with common folk, through observations that do not take the shape of statistical data on Excel sheets, by using political instinct honed over years of watching elections.



Photo: **Getty Images**

Subaltern waves rarely manifest on the surface. The so-called Indira wave in 1971, the Janata–JP wave in 1977, the sympathy wave after Mrs Gandhi's assassination in 1984 were exceptions.

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Let us also not forget that splurging crores on opinion polls does not lead to failsafe predictions. Even the so-called 'correct predictions' are largely accidental. What you glean from unhurried conversations with local journalists, ground-level activists, anganwadi workers, third- and fourth-grade government and semi-government employees, factory workers, the not-so-well-off peasantry, armed services personnel, the police beat constable and suchlike are far more revealing.

A sizeable number of junior and senior government employees are fed up. Their 'inside stories' rarely make it to print or television. The taxi drivers, *autowala*s and corner shop *paanwala*s most journalists project as the voice of the people are not the only 'common people'.

Politically sensitive noses are able to pick up a '*hawa*', straws in the wind that indicate which way it is blowing. There is no certified scientific method for this; it is what one gleans from incidental details. From observing the crowds at election rallies, big and small; making mental notes of how they reached the venue—were they bussed in, did they come on their own; how they responded to the various speakers; how many left mid-way; what kind of discussions did they have after, as they walked home, caught local trains, jumped into metros, hotly arguing with each other—all this and more. It is this intangible *hawa* that the Intelligence Bureau, the media and the political parties try to decipher.

Even if Modi and his minions manage to rig these elections and subvert the popular mandate, his messianic reputation will suffer

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How big a role does money play in swinging our elections? In a recent article in the *Times of India*, author and investment analyst Ruchir Sharma writes: '[…] candidates are spending $15 million (or Rs 125 crore) in each constituency, which implies a total spending of more than $1 billion (approx. Rs 8,300 crore) to win seats in the more prosperous southern states.'

I have seen families of five being handed Rs 25,000 in the last two days before voting. (Usually, 36 hours after the campaign is over.) I have seen envelopes with Rs 2,000 notes being distributed in slum areas, along with a sandwich. In middle-class housing societies, with 1- and 2-BHK tenants, candidates and political parties have been spending several lakhs with the consent of RWAs (resident welfare associations), painting buildings or providing cable TV connections.

The whole business of bribing voters, distributing money or favours is not even clandestine. It is talked about openly by loudmouth party *karyakarta*s, volunteers and 'grateful' residents.

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In elections before 1984–85, the *karyakarta* tended to be a party loyalist or a supporter of a particular candidate; they were neighbourhood social workers or ideology-driven individuals. Not only communists and socialists, but also the then Jana Sangh, Shiv Sena and RSS volunteers worked tirelessly in election campaigns. Today, there are *karyakarta* teams available on hire—at a hefty price.

There was a time when 'allurements' to party activists took the modest shape of a free lunch or dinner, a vehicle pickup and drop.

In the 1967, 1971 and 1977 election campaigns, even these 'facilities' were missing. I've seen dedicated communist, Congress and RSS volunteers spend their own money, take leave from their factories and offices and work for their chosen candidates. Can we imagine that kind of campaign today?

I don't want to paint an apocalyptic picture. There are still enough earnest volunteers and sincere voters and leaders. It is this kind, the ones who can't be bought, that worry the BJP. And hence its reliance on money and muscle. Aware that a victory in these elections is not theirs for the asking, BJP strategists have ensured the party has no dearth of resources to do whatever necessary to retain its hold on power.

While parties like the YSR Congress and Telugu Desam in Andhra, DMK and AIADMK in Tamil Nadu, Trinamool Congress in Bengal and the BRS in Telangana have also learnt the rules of the game, the BJP has bested them all—not simply by growing its own coffers by all means possible (electoral bonds and more such) but also by doing its best to choke the Opposition. Take for instance the freezing of the bank accounts of the Congress, its principal opposition party, on the eve of elections.

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To return to the various poll predictions for a moment, anyone who still thinks that the BJP in on its way to win 370 seats on its own, taking the NDA '400 *paar*', is either smoking potent weed or is in a position to rig these elections at scale.

The latter scenario is scary but improbable, and the key players in that denouement would be the Election Commission of India and their new masters. Among psephologists and political observers of note, Prashant Kishor has given the BJP more than 300 seats while Yogendra Yadav, last heard, said the party will end up with around 230 seats.

Psephology is tricky business. Prashant Kishor seems to know (wonder how?) that the people are disappointed with Modi but not angry. Is this election perhaps a referendum on Modi? Hold your horses till Judgement Day. ■

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STATES 360° UTTAR PRADESH

BJP on a sticky wicket, Congress–SP confident of gains

A.J. Prabal

Polling in 53 of the 80 Lok Sabha seats in Uttar Pradesh is over. The last two phases on 25 May and 1 June will cover as many as 27 constituencies. With closer contests than in 2019, the BJP leaders' confidence in prime minister Narendra Modi's 'election management', popular appeal and the Ram temple effect remains unimpaired.

The Opposition is equally confident that the Samajwadi Party–Congress alliance is working much better than in 2017 (when they allied for the assembly election). In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the SP–BSP alliance had bagged 15 seats and the Congress just one. This time both parties are hoping for a very different outcome.

Their hopes are not entirely misplaced. There is simmering anger among people over unemployment, inflation and sitting MPs recontesting, some for the third time. The BJP's spin on *labharthi*s (beneficiaries of government welfare schemes) has been neutralised by the PM's failure to sort out the menace of *chhutta pashu* (stray cattle). Marauding hordes of cattle have been destroying standing crops and seriously injuring farmers who guard their fields even at night.

Modi had announced during the assembly election in 2022 that he had the perfect solution to the problem but was unable to announce or implement it because the Model Code of Conduct was in force! Apparently, it would be implemented immediately after the election and farmers would find it so attractive that they would vie with each other to keep and feed the stray cattle at home.

While free rations are working in the BJP's favour, the issue of reservations for OBCs, Dalits and tribals is working against it. Several BJP leaders, including the party's sitting MP from Ayodhya, Lallu Singh, have publicly spoken about changing the Constitution and putting an end to reservations. Accusations and denials are rife. The Dalit vote in Purvanchal is decisive and can tilt the outcome, agree observers.

The BJP had banked upon the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). Instead, anecdotal evidence from several constituencies suggests that Dalits have opted to vote for the INDIA bloc. If the trend continues in the remaining rounds of polling, the BJP has reason to worry. Akhilesh Yadav's call to rally the PDA (Pichhda–Dalits–Aadhi Abaadi) has had less traction in the media but results will show if it has worked.

At the start of the elections in mid-April, the most optimistic assessment was that the Opposition would do well to restrict the BJP to its previous tally of 62 seats won in 2019. By the end of the fifth phase, the consensus is that the Opposition appeared poised to improve its tally from six last time (10 were won by the BSP, five by the SP and one by the Congress) to anywhere between 15 to 25, excluding seats secured by the BSP.

Women voters remain the X factor. While most observers seem to believe that being devout, they would vote for the BJP on the Ram temple issue, naysayers argue that women who have been bearing the brunt of inflation and lack of sustainable jobs for their children in villages are more likely to vote on bread-and-butter issues.

Promises made by UP chief minister Yogi Adityanath and visiting campaigners like Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma of wresting Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and building another temple in Mathura are cutting little ice, claim SP–Congress alliance leaders. Ajay Rai, the Congress candidate from Varanasi, also appears to be pinning his hopes on the direct contests this time as opposed to the triangular contests of 2019.

Has RSS withdrawn its support?

The RSS has reportedly been inactive on the ground. While both RSS and BJP leaders have explained the absence of RSS volunteers by claiming that they were needed elsewhere as UP is already 'secure', BJP president J.P. Nadda's statement in an interview to the *Indian Express* suggests otherwise: "*Shuru mein hum aksham honge, thora kum honge, RSS ki zaroorat padti thi… Aaj hum badh gaye hain, saksham hain… toh BJP apne aap ko chalati hai* (In the beginning, we were less capable and needed the RSS. Today, we have grown, we are capable… so the BJP runs itself)."

Writing in the *Print*, Nagpur-based journalist Vivek Deshpande pointed out that Nadda could not have made such a statement without approval from the prime minister and the home minister. It was, he wrote, the BJP's declaration of independence from the Sangh. Irked at being sidelined, the Sangh had decided to leave the BJP to its own devices in this election and were thus conspicuous by their absence.

Rumours about the rift between the RSS and the BJP have been circulating for several months and are now in the open. RSS watcher Rakesh Pathak from Gwalior pointed out that Narendra Modi had not visited the RSS headquarters even once after becoming prime minister in 2014.

The strains in the relationship were evident when Modi downgraded the importance of the party's organising secretary, traditionally lent by the RSS to coordinate between the Sangh and the government. Earlier, the organising secretary interacted directly with prime minister Vajpayee but Modi insisted that he report directly to the Union home minister Amit Shah instead.


Photo: Getty Images

Congress leaders Rahul Gandhi, Priyanka Gandhi and Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav at a public meeting in Raebareli on 17 May 2024

There is also anti-incumbency against several sitting MPs, while several BJP candidates have gone on record to complain about internal sabotage

Pathak had also emphasised RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat's statement earlier this year that the RSS would not celebrate its centenary in 2025. He also claimed that since 2015, when PM Modi and his cabinet ministers called on Bhagwat at Haryana Bhavan in Delhi, the two had never met except in public functions like the consecration of the Ram temple.

The confidence, or rather over-confidence of the BJP, rests on last time's massive margins. However, it discounts core voters' relative indifference at its own peril. There is also anti-incumbency against several sitting MPs, while several BJP candidates have gone on record to complain about internal sabotage. Wild speculation abounds regarding the role of the Election Commission and the Returning Officers. The rejection of as many as 33 nomination papers in Varanasi on somewhat flimsy grounds has drawn criticism.

This election promises to be historic in more ways than one. The results will be crucial for the political future of Yogi Adityanath as well as Mayawati and the BSP.

While Ajay Rai's claim that the SP–Congress alliance is all set to spring a surprise by winning over 50 seats and Akhilesh Yadav's statement that the alliance could win all but one of the 80 seats (that of the Pradhan Sevak's in Varanasi) are obviously being dismissed as hyperbolic, the PM's post after the fifth phase that the NDA is now certain of a landslide victory, especially in Uttar Pradesh, may have been necessary simply to boost the workers' morale and steady the shaky stock market. ■

With inputs from K. Santosh



STATES 360° ODISHA

An unravelling NDA alliance and a jittery post-poll scenario

Ashutosh Mishra

The stepped-up attack by Narendra Modi and Amit Shah on Odisha chief minister Naveen Patnaik and his Man Friday, bureaucrat-turned-politician V.K. Pandian, is fuelling speculation of a political witch-hunt likely to be launched against Biju Janata Dal (BJD) leaders in case the BJP-led NDA manages to secure a third term at the Centre. Political analyst Sabita Mohanty says, "Given the kind of vitriolic campaign the two parties have engaged in, the chances of a patch-up between them after the results appear remote, irrespective of who wins. The politics of vendetta may take centre-stage."

On one hand, the BJP has made it virtually impossible for the BJD to remain in the NDA. On the other hand, the threat of a witch-hunt may be used to arm-twist the BJD to stay on. If the BJP fails to secure a majority on its own in the Lok Sabha, it can no longer take the BJD's support for granted.

In the 2019 general election, the BJD had bagged 12 of the 21 Lok Sabha seats, the BJP eight and the Congress one. In 2014, the BJP won just one seat while the Naveen Patnaik-led BJD secured all the rest.

In 2024, the BJP is making a concerted bid to increase its tally in Odisha to compensate for losses elsewhere, which explains its down-and-dirty campaign in the state.

The buzz among the people is that a government led by Modi and Shah could rake up the multi-crore mining scam and the Ponzi scandal that hit the state between 2012 and 2014—the latter resulting in the arrest of senior BJD leaders including two MLAs who were denied tickets in 2019. In an interview to a local news channel during one of his recent visits to the state, Amit Shah stated that the BJP's manifesto clearly mentioned that people duped by the Ponzi companies will get their money back within one-and-a-half years, and "those involved in the chit fund scam will go to jail".

Chit fund firms allegedly collected around Rs 4,600 crore from people across Odisha. In May 2014, the Supreme Court ordered a CBI probe into the Saradha group and 44 other chit fund firms for purportedly taking investors for a ride. The CBI arrested Banki MLA Prabhat Tripathy, Mayurbhanj MP Ramachandra Hansda and former MLA Subarna Naik for their suspected involvement. The BJD suspended all of them. In 2017, another sitting BJD MLA, Pravat Biswal, was taken into custody by the CBI. Three years later, the CBI raided the house of senior party leader and former minister Debi Prasad Mishra in connection with the scam.

With chief minister Naveen Patnaik developing friendly relations with PM Modi and the BJD supporting the BJP-led NDA on several crucial issues in Parliament, the situation eased up. Today, however, chances of the CBI renewing its probe in the post-poll scenario are not being ruled out. BJP leaders and foot soldiers are equally keen to see the regional party 'thoroughly exposed'.

"It is ironical that a party whose senior leaders are steeped in corruption is seeking votes by promising to end corruption in the state. Once our party government comes to power, all scam-tainted BJD leaders would face the music," averred Panchanan Patra, a young BJP convert who was among those gathered outside party headquarters in Bhubaneswar to welcome Modi as he commenced his road show on 10 May.

The mining scam that broke in 2009 and ran into several thousand crores could also be leveraged against the Patnaik-led BJD if the BJP manages to form a government at the Centre again. Scathing criticism of state officials by the Justice M.B. Shah commission of inquiry set up to probe the 'loot' of Odisha's mineral wealth forced the government to act.

Show cause notices were issued to over 100 miners involved in illegal mining and a penalty of around Rs 68,000 crore was imposed. The Opposition called this eyewash and kept demanding a CBI inquiry to which the Supreme Court did not agree.


Naveen Patnaik and bureaucrat-turned-politician V.K. Pandian

On one hand, the BJP has made it virtually impossible for the BJD to remain in the NDA. On the other hand, the threat of a witch-hunt may be used to arm-twist the BJD to stay on

Addressing rallies in Angul and Cuttack on 20 May, the prime minister rubbished the BJD's claim of development in the state saying that the party had given Odisha "nothing except land mafia, sand mafia, coal mafia and mining mafia".

Taking a dig at Pandian, who hails from Tamil Nadu, Modi said, "People are saying that the key (to the treasury room in Jagannath Temple) has gone to Tamil Nadu. Who has taken it? The people will not forgive this. I assure you the mystery will be resolved. Those involved in cheating and fraud will not be spared. This is Modi's guarantee."

Shah, too, has been targeting Pandian. "This assembly election is an election to uphold Odisha's pride. Can a Tamil babu rule Odisha?" he asked during a rally in Keonjhar, before going on to assure people that the BJP would give Odisha a young chief minister who spoke Odia fluently.

Pandian retorted by describing BJP's star campaigners in Odisha as "political tourists" who can't even identify the state capital, an oblique reference to the PM's jibe about Pandian not being able to name Odisha's districts and capitals.

A 'slip of the tongue' from the BJP's national spokesperson and its Puri Lok Sabha candidate Sambit Patra has given the BJD further fodder. Addressing media persons on the occasion of the PM's roadshow in Puri on 20 May, Patra described Lord Jagannath as Modi's "*bhakt*" (devotee) instead of the other way round.

Later, he expressed his regret for the faux pas and said he would do penance by fasting for three days. Pandian had a better suggestion: that he take care of himself and eat properly! "Three days before the election (due on 25 May), he should not faint. He is a doctor, he should know what to do," said Pandian.

Chief minister Naveen Patnaik, posted his critique on X: 'Mahaprabhu Shree Jagannatha is the Lord of the Universe. Calling Mahaprabhu a bhakt of another human being is an insult to the Lord... it is totally condemnable. This has hurt the sentiments and demeaned the faith of crores of Jagannatha bhaktas and Odias across the world.'

As the campaign reaches a crescendo in the state, things are likely to heat up further. The relationship between one-time allies can only go from bad to worse, indicating dramatic changes in the post-poll political equation. ■

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HERALD VIEW

Hello ECI, do explain the 1.07 crore extra votes

The Supreme Court of India is in recess for its annual summer vacation. It is expected, though, to hear a petition filed by the Association of Democratic Reforms (ADR) challenging the Election Commission of India's (ECI) refusal to share poll data, more specifically the number of total voters and actual votes polled in each booth and constituency. There are reasons to believe that all is not kosher with this data. Not even simply because the ECI has gone against the established practice to declare it without any delay. The ECI did belatedly share polling percentages, but has stubbornly refused to share the data of total voters, which was routine till the previous Lok Sabha election in 2019. As anyone with even a nodding acquaintance with math knows, voter turnout percentages cannot be calculated without absolute numbers of voters. So, the ECI either has booth- and constituency-wise absolute numbers of voters, and won't share them for reasons we haven't yet heard, or it has cooked up the percentages. Smell a rat?

In reply to RTI applications seeking the data, the ECI has said people may approach the chief electoral officers in each state and collect the data. On another RTI application, the CEO of the Union territory of Puducherry responded by stating that the data would be uploaded after the elections were over. When a persistent journalist from New Delhi called up the CEO's office in the UT, s/he was told that the CEO did not have the data.

At the end of polling, the presiding officer of every booth is required to record the data of the number of voters and the votes polled, in Form 17C. They are supposed to sign these forms and obtain the signatures of the polling agents of each party and candidate. This is done to ensure that parties and their candidates know and confirm that on counting day, there'll be no mismatch between the votes polled and the votes counted.

While defending its position in court, the ECI argued that since all polling agents already had their respective Form 17Cs, the candidates and parties knew the figures, in any case. The better organised political parties do indeed collect data from their polling agents and have a fair idea of the votes polled, but that does not free the ECI and its polling officers of *their* statutory obligations. There are reports that several presiding officers have been refusing to fill up these forms or share it with polling agents while some have allegedly obtained the signatures of polling agents on blank forms.

Even more important, when the ECI makes suspicious revisions in polling data, the legal remedies parties and their candidates may seek are limited while the elections are still on. As the ECI affidavit in court (of 22 May) rather alarmingly points out, in one of seven objections to the ADR/ Common Cause plea: 'Under Article 329(b) of the Constitution, judicial interference in the electoral process from the date of notification [of elections] till declaration of results is barred.' In other words, the Election Commission of India is asking the Supreme Court of India to lay off. At the time of writing, we were still waiting to see how the court may respond when it takes up the ADR/ Common Cause plea on Friday, 24 May, in light of the ECI affidavit.

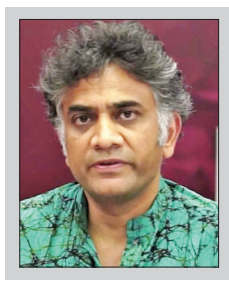
The current ECI seems to have decided that it serves the ruling party rather than the people of India. We have known this for a while, and it's more or less written into the way Election Commissioners are now chosen—on partisan lines. The current ECI's bias has been all too obvious in the way that it has selectively applied the Model Code of Conduct, grabbing every half-chance to censure or serve notice on opposition leaders while winking at flagrant violations of the code by leaders of the ruling party, including the prime minister himself.

Given this suspicious trajectory, it's nothing short of alarming that it should have taken the ECI 11 days to share the data of 'votes polled' for Phase 1 (held on 19 April), and then not even bother to explain the huge discrepancies between the figures for 'votes polled' on polling day and the final figures, shared after this inexplicable gap of 11 days. Former chief election commissioner S.Y. Quraishi, who should know a thing or two about how elections are conducted, has said on record that polling data, in this digital age, is available to the ECI in a matter of minutes.

Exhibit B: at the end of Phase 4 (held on 13 May), when voting had concluded for 380 constituencies, the ECI's polling data showed an increase of 1.07 crore votes in the final figures—an average increase per constituency of >28,000 votes . Effectively, that is 1.07 crore unaccounted-for votes! We should worry, even while we cling to the hope that the weakened guard rails of our democracy will somehow withstand this onslaught.

NHRC failing the 'mother of democracy'

What India needs is a strong and independent watchdog responding to rights violations even by the State



Aakar Patel

On 13 May this year, the *Hindu* carried an article headlined: 'UN-linked body defers NHRC India accreditation for second year in a row'. Beneath this was the line: 'The decision could now affect India's ability to vote at the Human Rights Council and some UNGA bodies.'

The NHRC is the National Human Rights Commission, and this column is about why its accreditation was deferred.

Last year, on 9 March 2023, a group of non-governmental organisations (including Amnesty International India, whose board I chair) wrote to the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI), the UN-linked body in question. We asked it to review India's accreditation status because the NHRC's lack of independence, pluralism, diversity and accountability were contrary to the United Nations principles for national institutions (popularly known as the 'Paris Principles').

Taking cognisance of our letter and other civil society submissions, the global body deferred the NHRC's re-accreditation by 12 months, considering its failure to effectively discharge its mandate, namely, to respond to escalating human rights violations in India. The NHRC was also told to improve its processes and functions; a year later this had not happened. This is what led to the second deferral of accreditation.

So, which aspects of the NHRC's functioning are contrary to the Paris Principles? First, its lack of independence—both in the appointing of its functionaries and its functioning.

The chairperson and other members of the NHRC are appointed by the President of India, based on the recommendations of a committee consisting of the prime minister, the speaker of the Lok Sabha, the minister of home affairs, the leaders of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha and the deputy chairperson of the Rajya Sabha. However, since 2019, the post of the leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha has been lying vacant, leaving only a single Opposition voice in the selection committee.

After his retirement from the Supreme Court, Arun Mishra was made the NHRC chair on 31 May 2021—despite strong disagreement from that lone Opposition voice.

The second problem is that the NHRC has police officers investigating all human rights violations by the State—including those by the police themselves! This is clearly a conflict of interest, and the opposite of independence from government interference. Despite this being pointed out in the 2023 review, the Modi government did not begin a legislative process to correct this or invite a consultation to begin the amelioration process.

In November 2023, seven former IPS officers were appointed by the NHRC as special monitors. One of them, accused of corruption in 2018 while working as special director of the CBI, India's federal investigation agency, was given the responsibility of overseeing the domains of terrorism, counterinsurgency, communal riots and violence. A former director of the national Intelligence Bureau was also made a member of the commission.

Third, India has been repeatedly reminded of concerns about the lack of diversity in the NHRC. It has been asked to ensure a 'pluralistic balance in its composition and staff' by ensuring the representation of a diverse Indian society, including (but not limited to) religious and ethnic minorities. This, of course, has not been done either.

After all, this is a country where the prime minister constantly rants against minorities (especially Muslims), including in his electioneering speeches.

Yet another issue is the NHRC's lack of effective engagement with civil society and human rights defenders in India. To this end, the NHRC was asked to interpret its mandate in a 'broad and purposive manner to promote a progressive definition of human rights' and told to address all human rights violations and ensure consistent follow-ups with state authorities.

Those who have bought this government's framing of the matter, where all who oppose its violence are 'anti-nationals', may be surprised to hear this. However, that is not how the world views it, for proper democracies must engage with civil society.

In India, human rights defenders languish in detention for years without trial under various draconian laws, including the UAPA, with not a peep from the NHRC. This includes those detained in connection with the Bhima Koregaon–Elgar Parishad case for more than five years; Kashmiri human rights defender Khurram Parvez, who has been in detention since November 2021; and student activist Umar Khalid.

The NHRC has not taken any concrete steps to respond to these situations nor intervene in a timely manner—despite various UN special rapporteurs calling on Indian authorities to release these individuals.

The NHRC has been next to useless on issues of conflict and human rights abuses in Manipur, Jammu and Kashmir, communal violence in Haryana and Uttarakhand, and other headline-making incidents. It has certainly not covered itself in glory, and the predicament that the NHRC and the government find themselves in is of their own making.

India currently holds an 'A' rating. The deferral of the NHRC's re-accreditation means this rating is under threat. That in turn means that the NHRC stands to lose its voting position in the United Nations Human Rights Council and other bodies. This can only be corrected by doing the right thing, which nobody is stopping the government from doing.

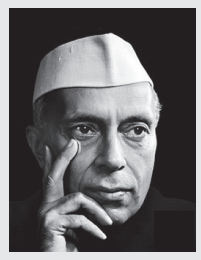
All of us, including the signatories to that letter to GANHRI, want to see India accredited at the highest level by the global body.

However, such an accreditation should be achieved by honest effort. It must reflect the presence of a strong and independent human rights body in India, committed in particular to responding to violations by the State.

It cannot be an automatic right given to the self-appointed mother of democracy. ■

Views are personal

NEHRU'S WORD



Communal parties can only harm India, not help it progress

As India enters the final phases of polling to elect a new Lok Sabha, the rhetoric from our current prime minister and his band is getting even more communally charged. Instead of highlighting achievements vis-à-vis employment, poverty alleviation, and so on, all we hear is hate-speech against Muslims. That's because there has been no real development worth talking about. During our first general elections in 1951-52, then prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru had cautioned the people that communal parties cannot put India on the path to progress and prosperity. If anything, they can only harm the country. Extracts from his speech at Allahabad on 12 December 1951:

I entirely agree that the most important question before us is the economic problem and to remove poverty from the country, from whichever angle we may look at it… Therefore, when I refer to communalism, it is because it creates obstacles in the way of solving the basic problem of poverty...

The individual who is communal-minded is a small man with a narrow mind who cannot undertake anything big; and nations based on petty principles also become small. We had become great intellectually because Mahatma Gandhi came and raised the stature of our country and widened our horizon.

But there are others who come and talk of communalism whether the word 'communal' is used or not. The result is that we immediately shrink in size and our country also shrinks. How can you hope to solve any problem when the communal-minded cannot understand the problem itself? Everyone is prepared to give an answer without knowing what the question is. Therefore, I lay stress on this.

I am amazed when I see in certain newspapers statements and speeches, especially from our communalist organisations like the Hindu Mahasabha, Ram Rajya Parishad, Jana Sangh and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. They hotly deny that they are communal organisations. Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee denies very forcibly that the RSS and the Jana Sangh are communal.

What can I say in reply, for it has not been put down on paper nor will anyone be foolish enough to shout from the roof tops that he is communal. But people are recognised by their activities and traditions. If there is a communal organisation in India today, it is the Jana Sangh, which is not only communal but utterly reactionary in every way. I am saying this from my personal knowledge.

It is no secret that the most reactionary people in India today are the princes and jagirdars and others, who, I think, should be labelled 'backward classes' and all of them are behind the Jana Sangh. They throw money lavishly. You may wonder why I am mentioning money. The Congress is a very big organisation but, as far as I could make out, other parties are spending ten times as much as we are in these elections. They are spending enormous sums because the coffers of the capitalists are open to them.

So, communalism opens up an old wound and keeps it festering and therefore it is very dangerous. We must remedy that by changing our social fabric so that this malaise may be removed as also the factors which increase it and put India in a terrible situation. This is not a Hindu-Muslim question, or it is only partly so.

Pakistan was created because of the communalism of the Muslim League, and as a result there were terrible riots in August-September 1947. Please remember that the moment you open the doors to it, it spreads very fast as it has among the Sikhs and the Hindus in the Punjab…

> *The Congress is a big organisation but other parties are spending ten times as much as we are in these elections because the capitalists' coffers are open to them*

It is a strange situation and you must realise how dangerous it is. If we do not suppress it and fight against it, if we give it any scope whatsoever, it will pull India from her roots. I am convinced of that. We must understand where its roots are and strike at them. Political communalism is a superficial thing .... The communal organisations are doing a great deal of damage by constantly spreading ill-feeling. This is not open to argument.

If my argument is right, then they are causing harm not only to the entire national cause but also to their own narrow cause because the Hindus cannot hope to make progress through the Jana Sangh or the Hindu Mahasabha, and want the others in India to be left behind. It is a childish thought because not only the others but the Hindus will also be left behind.

Similarly, the Sikhs are a brave people and have shown great courage wherever they have gone, and are very capable and hardworking. But I am amazed at the way some of their leaders work almost as if they are prepared to take on the rest of India as their enemy. What is all this? If I lay stress on the dangers of communalism, what is wrong in that? It is a fundamental question. If we follow a narrow, petty path in every matter how can India progress? The moment you become a little lax, the disease would spread everywhere… Until we bring this under control, how can we become a nation?

But apart from this, the way communalism is growing, especially the demand of its votaries that Pakistan should be attacked and their accusations that I try to appease Pakistan and I show weakness and that there should be a confrontation on the Kashmir issue, etc., is extremely dangerous. What can I say in my defence?

The word 'appease' has become a sort of abuse in India and elsewhere too, and perhaps people feel I am prepared at all times to appease. I am neither ashamed nor scared of this word. I say it openly and I shall say it ten times. I agree that if something which is against the honour and national interest of India is done, it is absolutely wrong. But keeping in mind India's honour and her national interest, we must at all times try to appease every country in the world. I say it quite openly. And do they mean it when they wish us to hurl these childish threats of military attacks, etc.?

As a matter of fact, it has become a habit with these people to start abusing when they make speeches and they think they are showing their strength... I had said, and I shall repeat this, that the conspiracy to kill Mahatma Gandhi had been hatched in Gwalior and that the Hindu Mahasabha had a big hand in it.

Since then, the Hindu Mahasabha has repeatedly mentioned Godse's name and praised him and passed resolutions congratulating him. How can the Hindu Mahasabha think that under such circumstances I can respect their party even a little? I can tell you quite honestly that I consider them as traitors. ■

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

Letters to the Editor

Kejriwal getting a taste of his own medicine?

The Swati Maliwal case could be shocking for many but not for someone who has watched the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) since its birth. I have never been a fan of Kejriwal and his style of politics. The allegations levelled by AAP Rajya Sabha MP Swati Maliwal against her boss, Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal's personal assistant chime with the AAP's modus operandi—shoot and scoot. This is what Mr Kejriwal has always done. Maliwal, considered close to Kejriwal till recently, has claimed that Kejriwal's PA Bibhav Kumar assaulted her with slaps and kicks inside the CM's drawing room! The truth will only come out after an independent probe, but for now Mr Kejriwal is certainly getting a taste of his own medicine.

Pankaj Khanna, Delhi

Why is the Modi govt terrified of data?

Ever since Narendra Modi took over as prime minister in 2014, his government has repeatedly either tried to supress official data—especially when it contradicts claims made by the PM and his minions on the economy and unemployment—or its own 'experts' have tried to misinterpret it. The State Bank of India was not ready to part with data on the electoral bonds at any cost. Now, the latest is the Election Commission refusing to provide voter turnout data even in the Supreme Court! Why? This doesn't fall under the Officials Secrets Act—it is regular data that the Election Commission has always willingly shared with the public immediately after polling ended in *all* previous elections. This time there is an unusual spike in the polling percentage after 5 p.m., and the ECI is brazenly saying that it will *not* come clean on it. The present Commission has reduced this Lok Sabha election to a farce.

Sanjay Srivastava, Prayagraj

People are waiting for a new dawn

When Narendra Modi started his campaign as the BJP's prime ministerial candidate in 2013–14, he could make crowds sway to his tunes. And before his teleprompter was spotted, people went so far as to claim that he was the best orator the BJP had ever produced, even better than Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Today, the same person is the butt of jokes and the subject of funny memes. His so-called oratorial skills no longer keep crowds spellbound. In fact, videos have surfaced where people can be seen leaving his rallies midway, the way people walk out of a boring movie even before the interval. On the other hand, people are turning up in hundreds of thousands even in this scorching heat for the INDIA bloc rallies, particularly in Uttar Pradesh. They want to catch a glimpse of Rahul Gandi and Akhilesh Yadav. This has rattled the BJP and its supreme leader. People are eagerly waiting for a new dawn on 4 June.

Prakash M, Bengaluru

Presiding over a travesty of Indian democracy

How the current Election Commission of India has effectively run Indian democracy aground

Palanivel Thiagarajan

The proper conduct of elections is an existential feature of a functioning democracy. In the Constituent Assembly debates, there was even a proposal to consider the purity and independence of elections as a Fundamental Right. In previous avatars, Election Commissions enjoyed a level of respect in people's minds, and arguably a level of compliance and adherence by state and Union governments. There was an aura of impartiality, which allowed people to sustain their faith in the system.

[Today], the integrity and process around EVMs… is still suspect, compounded by the ECI's reluctance to reveal who manufactures the EVM components, what is the source code, and so on. Investigating EVMs is like opening a can of worms: the issue of tampering, their storage in strongrooms being compromised, instances of EVMs being lost/ replaced, faulty EVMs that record two votes for the ruling party where only one vote has been polled, and the refusal to tally VVPAT (Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail) receipts with EVMs are some of the issues.

What secures the election for a political party is ensuring that its counting agents are well prepared and adequately trained. Counting follows a different logic from polling, and only trained counting agents can perform their roles effectively. For agents to function adequately, they must have the exact information in Form 17 related to each booth and its corresponding EVMs—including the identification number of the EVM, the total votes cast, etc.

It is the candidate's task to provide its counting agents with all this data to ensure manipulation-free and error-free counting. The votes (EVM and postal) secured by each candidate, which are reported by the Returning Officer on counting day, are aggregated and declared in Form 20, which is the official result of the election process.

The ECI's decision to stop publishing Form 17 data (votes polled) is a despicable, unconscionable and unforgivable assault on the very notion of fair elections.

Without universal agreement on the polled numbers in each EVM (identified by its unique serial number), there is no way to ensure that votes counted match votes cast. It is now up to each candidate to have their own teams collect Form 17 from each booth (copy known as 17C) and tally and redistribute by the 14-count ascendancy.

Only then can the counting agent ensure that the right EVM (matching serial number) has resulted in a total of counted votes that equals the total votes actually cast in that booth, that EVM on the day of polling.

Smaller parties and independent candidates are again at a disadvantage, given the scale and complexity [of the exercise] to check for accuracy and then protest in the case of any discrepancy. Again, the potential for the party holding executive power to manipulate the counting process is very high. In addition to these, there is one more avenue for smaller-scale manipulation.

Postal votes/ manipulation. In closely fought contests, where the margin of victory is slim, results are often manipulated through the counting of postal votes (as the nation saw in the recent Chandigarh mayoral election). In one of the most egregious instances, the current BJP Union minister Bhupendrasinh Chudasama won the Dholka MLA seat against Ashwin Rathod of the Congress by a slender margin of 327 votes after 429 postal votes were invalidated by Returning Officer Dhaval Jani, who had previously worked as an officer under Chudasama when he was revenue minister.

The ECI has mandated that the postal ballot papers be counted first, and that the EVM counting begin half an hour after the counting of postal votes begins. However, this is not followed in many cases.

There is another structural lacuna. Once the Returning Officer at the counting centre issues the Certificate of Election (Form 22) to the successful candidate, the election can only be challenged in court, which can take years, and hence become infructuous.

Instances of seats being captured by issuing the certificate to a ruling party candidate, despite losing during the counting of votes, show how results can be manipulated even at the last second.

Election petitions. What happens to election petitions filed in court? Section 86(6) and 86(7) of The Representation of the People Act implores the high court to conduct the trial of an election petition every day until its conclusion (wherever practically possible), and mandates that the trial be concluded in six months. However, given the judiciary's lack of will and resources, several petitions end up becoming infructuous.

Fixing the electoral apparatus. The ECI in its present form is incompetent, inefficient and partisan. An already weak electoral process has been further degraded by the partisan frenzy of the current Election Commissioners. Staggering incompetence has resulted in an election over two-and-a-half months in the middle of an unprecedented heatwave.

The ECI is tasked with the regime's idea of One Nation, One Election. How much more time, money and effort must go into making this process quasi-functional and robust enough to inspire confidence?

Some problems can be easily fixed were the ECI to invest in better technology, commit itself to accuracy, switch to 100 per cent real-time data reporting instead of random sampling, expand its skeletal workforce and train them adequately, and start the process of data correlation from scratch.

[…]

Eighty years ago, while envisioning what the staff apparatus of the Election Commission should be, Dr Ambedkar said:

'The question was whether the Electoral Commission should have the authority to have an independent staff of its own to carry on the work which has been entrusted to it. It was felt that to allow the Election Commission to have an independent machinery to carry on all the work of the preparation of the electoral roll, the revision of the roll, the conduct of the elections and so on would be really duplicating the machinery and creating unnecessary administrative expense which could be easily avoided for the simple reason, as I have stated, that the work of the Electoral Commission may be at times heavy [while] at other times it may have no work. Therefore, we have provided in clause (5) that it should be open for the Commission to borrow from the provincial Governments such clerical and ministerial agency as may be necessary for the purposes of carrying out the functions with which the Commission has been entrusted. When the work is over, that ministerial staff will return to the provincial Government. During the time that it is working under the Electoral Commission, no doubt administratively it would be responsible to the Commission and not to the Executive Government.'

Dr Ambedkar's concerns about additional expenditure and the duplication of administrative machinery were in tune with the limitations of a new nation. In the first general election, the average number of voters in a parliamentary constituency was around four lakh; now it is upwards of 1.5 million. More than one million booths cater to 969 million voters. Also, elections now happen on a three-tier level (Parliament, state Assemblies, local bodies) around the year.

Complaints mechanism and a partisan ECI. Parties often complain of ECI bias at every stage—monitoring political advertisements and spending, acting against complaints, allotting symbols, etc. (I faced this first hand when running statewide advertising campaigns when the DMK was in the opposition.)

Recently, the ECI banned AAP's official campaign song on the pretext that it showed the 'ruling party and its agencies in poor light'. On the other hand, the ECI turned a blind eye when the BJP ran explicit dog-whistling campaigns targeting the Muslim community or when it spread canards about the Congress manifesto.

When complaints were made to the ECI about Prime Minister Narendra Modi's campaign speech in Rajasthan that created the false impression that people's hard-earned money and women's *mangalsutra*s would be taken away in the name of wealth redistribution and given to 'infiltrators' and 'those who have more children', the ECI chose to send a notice not to Modi but to the BJP chief J.P. Nadda.

Prime Minister Modi visited the Ram temple on the eve of the third phase—revealing both his desperation and his disregard for the Model Code of Conduct. It is worth recalling that the Liberhan Ayodhya Commission of Inquiry recommended to the ECI that 'attempts to misuse religious sentiments, or to appeal to voters through the mode of their piety, whether by holding thinly disguised electoral rallies in places of worship, or posing as political supplications to God must result in swift action and possible disqualifications'.

Today we have the exact inverse—a ruling party running for its third term on the plank of the Ram temple, regular hate speech and communal rabble-rousing by the Prime Minister and an Election Commission that is a silent spectator.

We have not invested enough attention, importance, money or time in the electoral process that forms the bedrock of a functional democracy. The notion of 'One Nation, One Election' is not only a constitutional travesty, given the current asynchronous terms of various state and Union governments, and local bodies, it is also a quixotic fantasy, given the gross inadequacies in the current election model as detailed above.

The three current election commissioners have taken a weak, inadequate system and murdered it with their shameless bias. They have brazenly allowed the explicit targeting of Muslims (Ajmer, 6 April; Nawada, 7 April; Pilibhit, 9 April; Banswara , 29 April), turned a blind eye to the sops announced by the Centre after the Model Code of Conduct came into force, and remained unperturbed by the hijacking of democratic processes in Surat, Indore and Gandhinagar.

The final voting percentages, released 11 days after polling, show an inflation of approximately 5.5 per cent for the first phase and 5.7 per cent for the second phase—these are deeply suspicious figures. That is why I say that the functioning of this ECI marks the absolute nadir of India's hard-won democracy. ■

Continued from page 1

PALANIVEL THIAGARAJAN *is minister of information technology and digital services, Tamil Nadu. A longer version of this essay first appeared in* Frontline *magazine*

Photo: **Getty Images**



Voters queue up at a polling station in West Bengal's Howrah district during the fifth phase of voting on 20 May 2024

The ECI's decision to stop publishing Form 17 data (votes polled) is a despicable, unconscionable and unforgivable assault on the very notion of fair elections

What to expect on Judgement Day...



In Sambhal, there were reports of UP Police beating up and threatening Muslims to prevent them from voting

Continued from page 1

He will not, however, be without powerful allies who have been his accomplices in his megalomaniac excesses—bureaucrats, the police and defence forces, institutions like the Election Commission, the Reserve Bank of India and other banks, SEBI and other regulatory bodies, even the judiciary.

Just about every organ of government has, in the last 10 years, been infiltrated by right-wing sympathisers, if not outright *bhakt*s. For all of them, this will be a moment that will endanger their own survival. They will try to prevent any change of regime and, since they will continue to occupy positions of power in the system, they will constitute a potent challenge.

With the kind of resources he will still have at his disposal and strong backing from within the governmental structure, Mr Modi can be expected to move heaven and earth to continue in power. It will not be a repeat of 1977, when Mrs Gandhi handed over power peacefully.

Here's why: our institutions and systems of checks and balances have been thoroughly eroded over the last decade, an independent media no longer exists, the character of our politicians has plumbed unimagined depths, and the very fabric of society has been torn and shredded.

The engineering of large-scale violence on the pattern of the 6 January Capitol riots in Washington DC cannot be ruled out either. That will give the present regime the perfect excuse to declare an Emergency, suspend all rights and call out the uniformed forces, who have shown that they are not at all averse to a touch of high-handedness and have their own take on how best to preserve the 'sovereignty of the nation'.

The fate of the nation will then depend on the President and the Supreme Court. Somehow, I cannot muster up much confidence in either. If, in spite of the election results (or because of manipulated results), Mr Modi and the BJP/ NDA manage to retain power for the next five years, India will cease to exist as a genuine democracy.

But then, as Satan said, for some it is better to rule in hell than to serve in heaven. ■

AVAY SHUKLA *is a retired IAS officer. He blogs at avayshukla.blogspot.com*

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Nitish's slow walk to political oblivion

Under this astute opportunist, the JD(U) always punched above its weight in Bihar, but those days are numbered

Soroor Ahmed

Independent observers agree that in trying to prolong his hold on power, Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar has effectively written his political obituary. The death of his long-time friend and close associate Sushil Kumar Modi, former deputy chief minister and a BJP leader, on 13 May comes as an additional blow. They had jointly helmed the JD(U)–BJP coalition governments in the state for more than 11 years (with a break between 16 June 2013 and 26 July 2017).

When L.K. Advani was sidelined and Arun Jaitley passed away, the duo was regarded with suspicion by the BJP central leadership.

On Sunday, 12 May, the day before Sushil Modi passed away, Nitish Kumar cut a sorry figure in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's roadshow in Patna. Both looked grim and uneasy as they stood next to each other in an open jeep (Modi on a stool that made him look taller). Nitish Kumar was caught on camera wincing as he waved a lotus thrust into his hands.



Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar is now a shadow of his former self *Photo: **Getty Images***

In his heyday, Nitish Kumar might have advised against conducting a roadshow in the congested part of old Patna. Harassed locals recalled how he had withdrawn a dinner invitation to Modi when the latter was the Gujarat chief minister and returned a cheque for Rs 5 crore sent by Modi for flood relief, seeing that 'benevolence' for what it was—front-page newspaper advertising.

Modi's second roadshow in Patna on Monday, 20 May, was ostensibly to pay his condolences to the grieving family. Nitish Kumar, who was reported to have fallen ill the day after his friend's death, did not appear at Sushil Modi's funeral. Neither was he able to travel to his ancestral village to attend the death anniversary function of his deceased wife, nor join the long list of NDA bigwigs and chief ministers as the prime minister filed his nomination papers in Varanasi on 14 May.

The future of the Janata Dal (U) is uncertain, even as there is unanimity among public and politicos alike that Nitish Kumar's five-decade-long political career is nearing a sad and inglorious end. His only son was either kept away from politics or showed no inclination for a political career. Unlike several regional parties including the RJD in Bihar, Nitish Kumar has no designated political successor from the family or otherwise.

He did promote at least five close aides as his virtual or actual 'number two' in the party, describing them as capable leaders in whose hands the party would be safe. Among them were IAS officer-turned-politician, R.C.P. Singh, election strategist Prashant Kishor, former Union minister Upendra Kushwaha, the sitting Munger MP Lallan Singh and, for a brief period, even Tejashwi Prasad Yadav. Each one of them was unceremoniously dumped.

An author of a book on contemporary Bihar politics says, on condition of anonymity, "Nitish Kumar does seem to suffer from insecurity; he has not allowed anyone to rise from the ranks. Because of his deteriorating health and possibly memory lapses, he appears to have become even more insecure and erratic." Frequent mood changes, uncharacteristically crass language, sudden outbursts and laboured explanations of his shifting political stance have not escaped notice and, as a result, his authority is at an all-time low.

Nitish Kumar nominated Harivansh Narayan Singh, then editor-in-chief of the Hindi daily *Prabhat Khabar*, to the Rajya Sabha and did not object when the BJP made Harivansh the deputy chairman of the Rajya Sabha. The former editor, however, has kept a low profile and remained scrupulously away from politics in the state.

Nitish also promoted Sanjay Jha, who had once worked closely with Arun Jaitley, his pointsman in Patna for several years. Jha was suspected by several party leaders of being a BJP mole reporting to New Delhi until he too was 'rewarded' with a seat in the Rajya Sabha.

R.C.P. Singh, a fellow Kurmi from his own home district of Nalanda, was perceived as Nitish Kumar's political successor for several years. A former IAS officer from the UP cadre, Singh operated from the chief minister's office and was seen as a de facto chief minister. He was anointed as the party's national president in December 2020 and nominated to the Rajya Sabha. However, within three weeks of his induction into the Union cabinet in July 2021, he was removed from the party post by Nitish Kumar and denied renomination to the Rajya Sabha in June 2022. This led to his abrupt resignation as Union minister.

Singh was thereafter expelled from the party after block-level JD(U) workers accused him of corruption in the purchase of land by him and his two daughters between 2013 and 2022. Curiously, this was the period when he was closest to Nitish Kumar. A party leader recalled that the CM had trusted Singh ever since he became a Union minister in the 1990s. The latter joined the BJP in May 2023 but his utility to the BJP was apparently over.

In 2018, Prashant Kishor was appointed national vice president of the JD(U) with a cabinet rank and allotted the bungalow next to the chief minister's. Nitish Kumar publicly declared that the future prospect of the party was secure in Kishor's hands. That warmth proved short-lived, and in January 2020 Kishor and the party's general secretary, former diplomat Pawan Verma, were both expelled from the JD(U). Kishor turned into a bitter critic of Nitish Kumar but nobody knows why the two fell apart.

A few months after the 2020 Assembly election, Upendra Kushwaha merged his Rashtriya Lok Samata Party with the JD(U) and was made the chairman of the party's parliamentary board. He too was projected as a successor to Nitish Kumar. On 9 August 2022, when Nitish Kumar once again quit the NDA to regroup with the RJD, Kushwaha went his own way. By then, Nitish had started publicly declaring Tejashwi as the future hope of the Mahagathbandhan.

Nitish Kumar would have been a powerful voice in the Opposition alliance. By burning bridges mid-stream, he stands to lose much more than his political ambition

In December 2023, Kumar took over as party president following the resignation of Lallan Singh, who is now contesting the Lok Sabha election from Munger. And in January 2024, the king of flip-flops returned to the NDA after abandoning the INDIA bloc, despite having hosted its first meeting in Patna barely months ago.

D.M. Diwakar, a former director of Patna-based A N Sinha Institute of Social Studies, rules out a JD(U)–BJP merger. Virtually a one-man party, JD(U) is not a cadre-based organisation. (On polling days in earlier elections, it has traditionally relied upon BJP's committed workers.) Some observers feel it will be easy for the BJP to gobble up the JD(U) before the next Assembly election in 2025. RJD chief Lalu Prasad Yadav also says that the JD(U) is on a ventilator and will not last long. The JD(U) splitting and one faction going with the BJP and another with the RJD is another possibility.

The fall of the once powerful and prominent regional satrap has been dramatic. With the Ram Mandir threatening to overshadow all other electoral considerations, the JD(U) leader was apparently advised to hitch his horse to the BJP bandwagon for survival. Some of the members of the coterie, ministers among them, feared investigation by central agencies for corruption while others were convinced that it would be easier to arrange funds for the election with the BJP's backing.

It was, suggest these insiders, a bad judgement call. Nitish Kumar would have been a powerful voice in the Opposition alliance, a potential prime minister even. By burning bridges mid-stream, he stands to lose much more than his political ambition.

If the JD(U) and the NDA suffer serious reverses in the state, it may well be the death knell of his own political future. A lot will depend on the results of the Lok Sabha election on 4 June. Meanwhile, JD(U) leaders and office-bearers are braving it out, though one of them did exclaim, in private, "*Sab kuch gadbad ho gaya*. Prospect *thik nahin hai* (Everything has turned upside down. The prospects are bleak)." ■

STATES 360° PUNJAB

Favourites in a four-cornered contest

The Congress and AAP, adversaries here but allies nationally, will likely best the other two players

Harjeshwar Pal Singh

Two years ago, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) changed the traditional bi- and tripartite contest in Punjab with its landslide victory in the Assembly election. This year, Punjab has four serious players—the Indian National Congress (INC), Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and AAP. In some constituencies like Sangrur, Bathinda and Khadoor Sahib, there will be five-horse races with radical Sikh contestants Simranjit Singh Mann, Lakha Sidhana and Amritpal Singh putting up a serious challenge.

Punjab politicians have often been likened to *titli*s (butterflies) flitting from one flower to another. All parties have benefited this time with an unprecedented surge of turncoats. The ruling AAP has secured the services of Gurpreet Singh GP and Raj Kumar Chabbewal from the Congress as well as Pawan Kumar Tinnu. The Congress attracted former AAP leaders like Yamini Gomar while the beleaguered SAD has been able to recruit former congressman Mahinder Singh KP. However, it is the BJP which has fielded the highest number of political defectors—Sushil Kumar Rinku (Jalandhar), Ravneet Bittu (Ludhiana), Preneet Kaur (Patiala), Parampal Kaur (Bathinda), and Mandeep Manna (Khadoor Sahib) who have been poached from AAP, Congress and SAD.

Backlash against the BJP in the rural areas led by kisan unions has been both pronounced and frequent. The repressive actions of Haryana's BJP government against protesting Punjab farmers over MSP (minimum support price) and debt relief has led to the collective ire of the farming community. BJP candidates have not only faced vocal protests, they have not been allowed to campaign in rural areas by kisan activists.

The steady advance of the radical Sikhs is yet another feature of these elections. The surprise victory of Simranjit Singh Mann during the Sangrur by-elections in 2022 was a major breakthrough after two decades. The decline of the moderate SAD (Badal), the emergence of the charismatic duo of Deep Sidhu and Amritpal Singh, the restlessness of the youth and the polarising effect of social media combined to galvanise radicals. They are expected to do well in at least three seats—Sangrur (Simranjit Singh Mann), Bathinda (Lakha Sidhana) and Khadoor Sahib (Amritpal Singh). There is also the real possibility of a sympathy wave in favour of Amritpal, who was dramatically arrested for espousing Khalistan and incarcerated in Assam.

In the 2022 state assembly election, AAP had polled 42 per cent votes, INC 23 per cent, SAD around 20 per cent and BJP eight per cent. In subsequent by-elections, the BJP vote share improved in the state, the SAD's declined, the Congress appeared stagnant while AAP went on a rollercoaster ride. The radical Sikh party, SAD (Mann), was also seen to be gaining in popularity.

In 2022, there was also resentment against the BJP for unleashing the farm laws, against the SAD for supporting them and against the Congress for its lacklustre governance. Moreover, the credibility of AAP's leadership—Kejriwal in Delhi and Bhagwant Mann in the state—was higher. With its promise of the 'Delhi model' of cheap electricity, education and health, AAP was lapped up by Punjab. Its untested and fresh faces were perceived to be more credible than the 'corrupt' old guard, and people went all out to give *ik mauka Bhagwant Mann nun* (a chance to Bhagwat Mann).

Despite no perceptible wave in favour of any party, the situation in 2024 is different. AAP has been boasting of making a clean sweep, winning all 13 seats in the state. It is banking on the popularity of Bhagwant Mann and its campaigning model. It also hopes that division in opposition votes would help it in multi-cornered contests. Its campaign hinges on the slogans "*Sansad vich vi Bhagwant Mann* (Bhagwant Mann in Parliament too)" and "*Zulm da jawaab vote naal* (Vote against oppression)" to protest the imprisonment of Arvind Kejriwal.

The arrest and decimation of almost its entire Delhi leadership has, however, arrested AAP's momentum. The non-performance of its MLAs and its over-reliance on poached candidates exposes the shortage of credible leaders. Multiple failures in dealing with drug trafficking, law and order and sand-mining issues have also been glaring. Sections of farmers, women and employees are unhappy about unfulfilled poll promises.



An Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) roadshow in Amritsar on 16 May 2024 *Photo: **Getty Images***

The use of public funds on helicopter rides, hiring private jets and releasing media advertisements outside Punjab has also dented the Aam Aadmi Party's image

The use of public funds on helicopter rides, hiring private jets and releasing advertisements outside Punjab has also dented the Aam Aadmi Party's image, while the Delhi liquor policy 'scam' has taken a toll on its claims of being *kattar imandar* (absolutely honest). Yet, AAP remains a force to reckon with in almost all the seats and looks particularly strong in Faridkot, Fatehgarh Sahib, Anandpur Sahib and Hoshiarpur.

The INC is also exuding confidence, hopeful of repeating its 2019 performance when it won 8 of the 13 Lok Sabha seats. Buoyed by Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra, its campaign on the threats to democracy and the Constitution and its promises of Paanch Nyay (benefits for the poor, women, minorities, backward classes and youth), the Punjab Congress believes that a combination of an attractive manifesto and credible candidates will help it sail through.

Fielding Dr Dharamvir Gandhi and Sukhpal Khaira from Patiala and Sangrur respectively has bolstered the party while putting up equally strong leaders like Charanjit Channi (Jalandhar), Raja Warring (Ludhiana) and Sukhjinder Randhawa (Gurdaspur) has boosted its hopes.

On the flip side, still riven by factional fights, the Punjab Congress has put up less than ideal candidates from seats like Khadoor Sahib, Bathinda, Anandpur Sahib and Hoshiarpur, thus weakening its chances.

Several Congress leaders are facing vigilance probes and the memory of Captain Amarinder Singh's lacklustre governance has added to its image problem despite the 'New Congress' rhetoric of Rahul Gandhi. Nevertheless, the Congress is likely to do well in Punjab and emerge as the largest party in the state.

Punjab's 100-year-old party, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), has been struggling under Sukhbir Badal. He has tried to rejuvenate the party with a Punjab Bachao Yatra and by mending fences with Taksali Akalis like Sukhdev Singh Dhindsa and Bibi Jagir Kaur. He also attempted a course correction by refusing to join hands with BJP, thus burnishing the SAD's *panthic* credentials. SAD is projecting itself as the only authentic Punjabi party.

However, desertions by local satraps like Pawan Kumar Tinnu, the Maluka family, Talbir Gill, along with the radical revival in core SAD areas, pose an existential threat. With its shrinking social base and erosion of identity as the Punjabi, Sikh and peasants' party, SAD has fielded some strong candidates like Harsimrat Badal (Bathinda), Prem Singh Chandumajra (Anandpur Sahib), Anil Joshi (Amritsar) and Virsa Valtoha (Khadoor Sahib), but it appears to have a realistic chance only in its last bastion, Bathinda.

The BJP, ever since its divorce with SAD in the wake of the farm laws in 2020, has decided to go solo in the state. It made some gains in the two by-elections at Sangrur and Jalandhar and also tried to give a regional touch to the party through the wholesale induction of Jatt leaders like Captain Amarinder Singh and Sunil Jakhar.

The BJP made religious appeals to Sikhs by commemorating the sacrifice of Guru Tegh Bahadur and celebrating Veer Bal Diwas. Apart from hoping to consolidate its upper-caste Hindu base through the religious fervour around the Ram Mandir, it is banking on the popularity of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and various central government schemes including free rations, gas cylinders and pucca houses. However, the determined opposition of farmers has been a roadblock. It is struggling even in its traditional strongholds of Gurdaspur and Hoshiarpur. With its reliance on 'imported defectors' like Ravneet Bittu, Sushil Rinku, Perneet Kaur and Rana Gurmit Sodhi, the BJP will be lucky to open its account in the absence of its traditional ally, SAD.

There is little enthusiasm among people for any party and the main contest seems to be between Congress and AAP with SAD and ascendent radical Sikhs also in the fray. ■

RAW's expanding footprint ruffles feathers

The vigilantism of India's spy agency has intensified in Modi's time

Girish Linganna

India's spy agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) is facing increased scrutiny due to growing claims of its international operations, including alleged assassinations and meddling in foreign affairs during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's second term in office. Experts believe that, during Modi's decade in office, India's capability of gathering intelligence overseas has greatly improved. This follows a significant boost in resources and operational freedom of RAW.

Over the past 10 years, the partnership of Narendra Modi and National Security Adviser Ajit Doval has expanded funding and operational capabilities for RAW, enhancing the agency's role, compared to the previous United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. Dheeraj Paramesha Chaya, a professor of criminology at the University of Hull, in Britain, and an expert on Indian intelligence, spoke about these developments with *South China Morning Post* (*SCMP*).

Paramesha noted that RAW's recent international activities were not entirely new, as previous Indian administrations had also focused on enhancing the nation's intelligence capabilities. He mentioned that, under former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in the 1980s, the scale of intelligence operations was comparable, indicating that the current mandate had not changed drastically. However, as India's foreign policy ambitions have grown, so have the objectives of its intelligence efforts. Recent controversial claims about RAW's operations abroad have focused increased attention on the agency.

On 29 April 2024, the *Washington Post* revealed that an Indian intelligence officer was implicated in a thwarted attempt to kill Sikh separatist leader Gurpatwant Singh Pannun in the US in 2023. This plan was allegedly sanctioned by then RAW chief Samant Goel, who reported directly to the prime minister.

The Indian government staunchly denied the allegations, labelling them as "unwarranted and unsubstantiated". On 4 April, the *Guardian* reported that the Indian government had adopted a policy of targeting individuals it deemed adversaries.

The report discussed new allegations connecting India to nearly 20 assassinations since 2020, executed by unidentified gunmen in Pakistan. These were the first instances where Indian intelligence officials openly spoke about supposed operations in Pakistan, with documents that surfaced directly implicating RAW in these killings.

The report also highlighted that Sikh separatists involved in the Khalistani movement were targets within these operations—both in Pakistan and in Western countries. The Pakistani authorities believe these killings were coordinated by Indian intelligence sleeper cells that were primarily based in the United Arab Emirates.

In 2023, there was a notable increase in such incidents, attributed to these cells' heightened activities. Allegedly, these cells engaged local criminals, or economically disadvantaged Pakistanis, offering substantial sums to execute these assassi-nations. Moreover, Indian agents were accused of enlisting jihadists to perform these hits by misleading them into thinking they were eliminating 'infidels'.

Australian news sources have stated that Canberra deported two individuals from India accused of trying to access confidential details regarding defence initiatives, airport security and trade ties. These reports also mentioned surveillance of the Indian community in Australia and interactions with active and former politicians.

Although the Australian authorities have not verified the nationalities of those deported or provided further information, they have recognised that such an event occurred. The Indian government has denied these claims as "baseless".

RAW influence across Asia and beyond

RAW is viewed with suspicion in South Asia, with its influence causing concern among neighbouring nations. Observers note that since Modi's tenure began, the accusations against RAW's activities have intensified. In 2018, the then Sri Lankan president Maithripala Sirisena claimed RAW was behind a plot to assassinate him, which strained relations between Sri Lanka and India. Nepal pointed fingers at RAW in 2020, accusing it of interfering in its political matters. Meanwhile, Pakistan, India's longtime adversary, consistently accuses Indian agents of working to "undermine its stability".

Paramesha noted that the effectiveness of RAW's operations hinges significantly on the determination and power of India's political leaders. In his book *India's Intelligence Culture and Strategic Surprises: Spying for South Block*, he indicates how Indian foreign intelligence has organically evolved without a formal charter, shaping its functions in reaction to perceived threats.

Established in 1968 after the Sino-Indian war of 1962, RAW was created to address threats from China and Pakistan. Over time, its role has expanded, with intelligence data increasingly influencing India's foreign policy decisions.

Much like the CIA in the US and Mossad in Israel, top RAW officials report directly to the nation's highest leaders. According to former RAW chiefs and independent experts, the agency has been crucial in pivotal moments of India's history, including the formation of Bangladesh in 1971 under the prime ministership of Indira Gandhi and the development of India's indigenous nuclear programme. Paramesha pointed out that Indian leaders—such as Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Narendra Modi—had actively engaged with RAW, while others had been less involved.

There have been allegations that Indian operatives conducted targeted assassinations over the years in countries such as the UK, Pakistan and Afghanistan

A former RAW officer preferring anonymity, mentioned that the past decade had seen a deliberate effort by the government to enhance RAW's role, aiming to position India as a major global player.

Despite the Modi government's ambitious approach to external intelligence, the agency faces challenges, such as being understaffed and lacking essential resources. However, there is a clear intent to improve or, at least, the appearance of a significant upgrade, according to the officer. So far, India's intelligence capabilities have been deemed sufficient for the nation's needs.

However, as India's international stature grows, there will be a need to enhance these capabilities to meet both present and future challenges.

Details about RAW, including its staff numbers and budget, remain highly confidential. In recent years, Indian intelligence has focused on targeting radicals that support Kashmiri independence and Khalistani separatism, both of which are particularly delicate matters for New Delhi.

There have been allegations that Indian operatives conducted targeted assassinations over the years in countries such as the UK, Pakistan and Afghanistan. A recent incident in Canada, involving the killing of separatist leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Vancouver, escalated tensions between Ottawa and New Delhi. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau claimed in Parliament that Indian agents were responsible, a charge that New Delhi has consistently denied.

Harsh V. Pant, vice president of studies and foreign policy at the Observer Research Foundation in Delhi, told *SCMP* that it was a natural progression for India's spy network and intelligence activities to expand as the nation's global stature grows. India's expanding role on the global stage naturally leads to increased intelligence and espionage activities, which should be expected, given its rising prominence, remarked Pant.

He also noted that the differing perceptions between India and Western countries were likely to persist in media portrayals due to India's growing engagement in international matters. This conflict reflects a wider debate on how India seeks to safeguard its interests and demonstrate its capability to do so. ■

The author is a defence and aerospace analyst.
Courtesy: IPA Service



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with his spymaster Ajit Doval

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When life is a long-distance race



Photos: *Arshdeep Arshi*

Arshdeep Arshi

Eh kise hor nu jita rahe ne, sade agge koi hor kudi nahi si (They are making someone else win, there was no other girl ahead of us)." Athletes Jaspal, Ramandeep and friends are complaining to their coach in one voice. The dozen young runners from Amritsar district travelled 200 kilometres to participate in a marathon in Chandigarh, and they are visibly agitated.

All this is happening even as Jaspal Kaur's name is being announced from the stage as winner of the second prize in the 5-km race. They know Jaspal is the winner, not runner-up, as she was leading all the way to the finishing line. But the cash prize of Rs 5,000 for the winner is being announced in someone else's name.

Jaspal refuses to go to the stage and accept the second prize. Instead, she and her coach go from one person to another on and off the stage, questioning the decision of the organisers, narrating their story and seeking help to address the injustice. In the end, at the request of her coach, Jaspal accepts the second prize, a giant foam board cheque with Rs 3,100 written on it.

A month later, in April 2023, to her surprise, Jaspal finds Rs 5,000 has been deposited in her account. Nothing is explained to Jaspal and nothing has been reported in any local newspaper. On the website of Runizen timing systems, her name appears as the winner on the leaderboard for the 5-km race with a guntime (race time) of 23.07 minutes. She is not there in the prize distribution photographs for the year. But the giant cheque is still in her possession along with her many medals.

In 2024, while accompanying the girls to the next marathon, this reporter found out from the organisers that they had disqualified Jaspal's competitor in the race later that year after examining the video footage. They realised the protesting girls had been right. There was some cheating that had taken place with the race bib. That explained the mystery of the cash prize money that came to Jaspal.

Cash prizes are important for Jaspal. If she can save enough money she can go to college again. Two years ago, Jaspal joined an online B.A. programme at a private university. "But I have not been able to study beyond the first semester," she says. "I have to pay about Rs 15,000 every semester to sit in the exam. In the first semester, I used the money from cash awards (given by village representatives and the school for winning nationals) to pay the fees. But after that, I ran out of money."

Jaspal, 22, is a first-generation college-goer in her family and among the very few women from the Mazhabi Sikh community in her village, classified as the most disadvantaged Scheduled Caste community in Punjab. Jaspal's mother Baljinder Kaur, 47, studied till Class 5 and her father Balkar Singh, 50, has never been to school. Her elder brother Amritpal Singh, 24, dropped out after Class 12 to help his father in construction labour around their village Kohali; her younger brother Akashdeep Singh, 17, has completed Class 12.

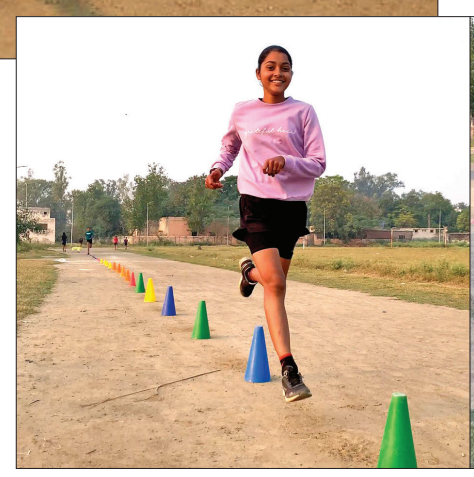
The family's income depends on the frequency of work that the two men find. They make around Rs 9,000–10,000 a month.

The prize money that Jaspal gets often takes care of some of her expenses like entry fees and travel for competitions, and her own education. "We get t-shirts when we register for races but for shorts, tracksuit pants and shoes, I have to ask my parents for money," she says as she dons her sports gear for practice.

Around us we see young athletes, some doing warm-ups, others taking a slow round of the ground while a few are gathered around their coach Rajinder Singh Chhina for daily training. All of them come from different villages. Jaspal has been participating in 400 and 800 metres, and 5-km events, and has won many prizes and medals in the past seven years. In her own village, Jaspal has become an inspiration for many. Her medals, certificates and cash prizes have encouraged poor families to put their kids into training.

But for Jaspal, nothing she has won till now has been enough to help the family. Since February 2024, she has started commuting to keep accounts for a gaushala near Amritsar for Rs 8,000 a month. "I took up this job to contribute to my family's income. But now I don't even get time to study," she says.

In March 2024, she participated in a 10-km race in Chandigarh. This time she ended up as second runner-up and won a cash prize of Rs.11,000.





Ramandeep's work does not end with training for her runs. The 21-year-old also has to help at home, taking care of a cow and a buffalo that the family owns

Jaspal is certainly a 'star' in the group of about 70 athletes that Rajinder Singh Chhina (60) trains for free in Harse Chhina village. An international athlete himself in the 1,500-metre event, he has been training young girls and boys from marginalised communities for more than a decade now.

A taunt from a senior officer in Chandigarh about widespread drug abuse among youngsters in rural Punjab pushed this athlete to start training youngsters in 2003. "I brought the kids to this ground first," he says, referring to the playground of Comrade Acchar Singh Chhina Government Senior Secondary Smart School in Harse Chinna village in Amritsar.

"The children who were not going to school—those from marginalised sections and poor families—I got them admitted in the school and started training them."

"In government schools, there are many kids from the marginalised sections now. They are hardworking. I started forming teams thinking that they should at least reach the state level... I have at least 70 athletes whom I coach. Some of my athletes have done quite well and secured good jobs. Some are in Pro Kabaddi League," Chhina proudly says.

"We do not get any help from anyone. People visit, honour the kids, promise to help but nothing comes out of it. We do whatever we can on our own," he says.

He holds a BAMS (Bachelor of Ayurvedic Medicine and Surgery) degree and runs his own clinic in Ram Tirath near Amritsar. He says the income from that is enough to cover the expenses of his home and the ground. "I spend around Rs 7,000–8,000 a month on equipment—hurdles, weights, lime to mark the ground etc." His children, three of them, all grown up and working, also contribute from time to time.

"I don't want the youth to do drugs. I want them to come to the ground so that they become something."

Coming to the ground, however, is quite an effort for young Jaspal, whose village Kohali is about 10 kilometres away. "I struggle with the distance. The village is far away from the ground," Jaspal says sitting in front of her two-room brick house on the outskirts of her village. "It takes me about 45 minutes to walk to the ground each way," Jaspal says. "I get up at 3:30 in the morning every day. I reach the ground at 4:30. My parents tell me to be careful, but I never feel unsafe. There is an *akhara* nearby where boys do wrestling. Because of them, the road is never deserted. We practise for two hours, and I walk back home around 7.30 a.m.," she says.

Two years ago, she learnt to ride her father's second-hand bike. Since then, she occasionally gets to take the motorbike to the training ground, which is then only a matter of 10 minutes. But many times, on those lucky days, Jaspal has to leave training halfway and return home urgently, because the men at home need the bike. She has missed a few training sessions like that.

"There are still some villages where there is no government or private bus service," the coach says. "The young athletes struggle to reach the ground and many of them struggle with their education as well because of this." The absence of a college nearby is also a reason why many girls in these villages drop out after Class 12.

Ramandeep Kaur, another young athlete from the same village, also walks 10 kms, twice a day, to attend the training sessions. "Sometimes, I walk five kilometres and then go to the ground on a scooty with another girl, Komalpreet from Chainpur village. After training, I walk back another five kilometres," she explains.

"*Darr tan lagda ikalle ande jande, par kise kol time nahi naal jan aan layi* (I fear walking alone, but no one in the family has the time to go with me every day)," says Ramandeep. The training and then the extra 20-km walks take a toll on her. "I am tired all the time," she says. Also, her work does not end with training for her runs. The 21-year-old also has to help at home, taking care of a cow and a buffalo that the family owns. Right in front of the house beyond a 3–4 feet wide brick road is a small space where they keep their cattle.

Ramandeep is also from the Mazhabi Sikh community. Her family of 10 survives on the income of two brothers, who work as labourers. "They largely do carpentry or any other work that comes their way. When they do find work, each can earn anything around Rs 350 a day," she says.

She gave up studies after completing Class 12 in 2022, when her father died. "We could not afford it," she says regretfully, sitting in her two-room house with cracked walls at the far end of the village. "My mother buys me sports gear out of her widow's pension of Rs 1,500," she adds.

"*Cash prize jitt ke shoes laye si 3,100 de, hun tutt gaye, fer koi race jittungi te shoes laungi* (I bought these shoes when I won a cash prize of Rs 3,100 at a race. These are torn now. I will buy a new pair when I win a race again)," she says pointing at her ragged shoes. Shoes, or no shoes, she runs to get to a better place from where she is right now.

"I run to secure a job in the police," Ramandeep says. And so do Komalpreet Kaur (15) from Chainpur, Gurkirpal Singh (15) from village Kohali, Manpreet Kaur (20) from village Ranewali and Mamta (20) from village Sainsra Kalan. All of them come to get trained under coach Chhina. For each of these young athletes, apart from better social status, a government job means financial security for the entire family. But entrance exams for these jobs are yet another hurdle race. ■





Jaspal keeps her prized possessions safe in this metal almirah; (right) **Ramandeep Kaur** (black t-shirt) **with her mother and sisters at home**

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