

WHO

Leo Varadkar,
an agent
of change

In January 2015, a casually dressed Leo Varadkar, Ireland's then Minister for Health, sat in the studios of RTE Radio and announced he was gay. "It's not something that defines me. I'm not a half-Indian politician or a doctor politician or a gay politician for that matter...it is part of my character, I suppose," he told the station.

What does his win mean?

Defining or not, it was his personal and racial profile that grabbed global headlines in recent days as the 38-year-old doctor comfortably won the leadership contest of the Fine Gael Party, and prepares to take over as Taoiseach (Prime Minister) later this month after gaining the necessary support of the lower legislative chamber.

While international media extolled the societal changes that enabled an openly gay person with an immigrant background to lead a predominately Catholic country that had only stopped homosexuality being a criminal offence in 1993, many Irish people took to social media to express their frustration over

the scant attention paid to Mr. Varadkar's politics. "Nobody in Ireland cares that Leo Varadkar is gay or half-Indian. We care that he's a right-wing ideologue, who doesn't trust women's choices," tweeted one woman, of his public declarations of being pro-life, and against abortion on request or demand.

How did he get into politics?

The son of a Mumbai doctor who moved to England and then Ireland, and an Irish nurse, Mr. Varadkar grew up in Dublin, attending the prestigious and private King's Hospital school, and then Trinity College, Dublin, where he studied law before switching to medicine.

While his family was non-political, from his early days as a medical student he began to dabble in party politics. An RTE interview from 1999 provides a glimpse of his motivation, ambition and confidence: "If you want to change things, politics is the best way to do that," he said, speaking with the ease of a seasoned politician rather than a

rookie. "I've realised that doctors can only help change a certain number of patients but a Minister of Health can really change things," he said, citing Fine Gael's pro-European stance, and liberal economic policies for his own enthusiasm.

What is his politics?

While Mr. Varadkar's decision to come out as the country prepared for a referendum on same sex marriage was seen as a courageous step, other moves have sat less comfortably with public sentiment, such as an initiative championed by him,

**What are we likely to see from him?**

While Mr. Varadkar's charisma, confidence and youth have led to some com-

parisons with French President Emmanuel Macron and Canada's Justin Trudeau, his agenda is likely to be quite different. A fierce advocate of the European Union, he will have to contend with the impact of Brexit on relations between Ireland and Northern Ireland.

In 2008, he proposed that unemployed foreigners could be given a lump sum payment if they agreed to leave the country, which was widely condemned for pandering to anti-immigrant sentiment.

In 2007, his suggestion that prisoners could be asked to pay for the "cost of their time in prison" was derided as "loathsome," by the former ruling Fianna Fáil party, and disowned by his own party. More widely, he has sought to position himself as the politician of the aspirational and determined, pledging to represent those "who get up early in the morning."

His predecessor Enda Kenny had lobbied hard with the European Union to recognise Ireland's unique position as Brussels and London start Brexit talks.

He has pledged a referendum on Ireland's abortion laws and has signalled the need for some change, though his precise position is yet to become clear.

In deeply-Catholic Ireland, religion influences everything from birth to death. Abortion is illegal, unless a mother's life is in danger.

His medical past has clearly remained influential as measures aimed at cutting excessive alcohol consumption (and tackling its associated health impact) are expected by Irish media to be among his earliest legislative initiatives.

VIDYA RAM

WHAT

The lowdown
on the Bhim
Army**WHAT IS IT**

The Bhim Army Bharat Ekta Mission or the Bhim Army is a fledgling group of mostly Dalit volunteers who claim to champion the Dalit cause. Focussed on quick redress of caste-based atrocities and discrimination, promoting education and social awareness among Dalits and propagation of Ambedkarite values, the group considers itself a social counter-movement to Brahmanical ideology.

It lacks a formal structure and is an unregistered body, but claims to have over 20,000 members in and around Saharanpur in western Uttar Pradesh, where it is based.

The prime attraction of the group is its stress on direct action based on confrontation to preserve, protect or restore the dignity of Dalits. Its co-founder and most recognisable face is a charismatic lawyer named Chandrashekhar Azad 'Ravan', whose close team members sport ink blue scarves and ride on stylish bullet motorbikes.

"Through the Bhim Army, the Dalit youth become aware that they can struggle for their constitutional rights and they will no longer tolerate oppression. The Bhim Army is not to scare off anybody but for the security of Dalits," Mr. Azad said in a recent interview.

HOW DID IT COME ABOUT

The Bhim Army was formed around 2015 after a group of Dalit youths raised its voice over stray cases of discrimination and oppression

in Saharanpur. It came into the limelight when Mr. Azad put up a board in his native village extolling his caste identity: "The Great Chamar of Dhadkauli Welcome You."

This symbolic assertion by Dalits provoked the dominant Thakurs, who smeared the signboard with black ink. This led to bouts of caste tension, with the Bhim Army not shying away from taking on the dominant castes.

Mr. Azad became the local Dalit hero.

The outfit has been in the news over the last two months for its intervention in calming tension between Dalits and Muslims, when the BJP took out a 'Shobha Yatra' in Saharanpur without permission through communally sensitive areas, and the Dalit-Thakur clashes a few weeks later in the same district on the birth anniversary of Rajput king Maharana Pratap. The State government held the Bhim Army responsible for inciting violence, while the latter claims that the government was targeting it to malign the movement and shield upper caste offenders.

WHY DOES IT MATTER

The Bhim Army claims it is politically independent but bases its ideology on Ambedkarite principles, just like the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). The group is, however, still not clear whether its movement is for assertion of Dalit identity or a larger Ambedkarite movement.

Most Dalit thinkers agree that the Bhim Army arose out of the social vacuum created by mainstream political parties, particularly the BSP, and their failure to address issues like unemployment, land distribution, atrocities and real empowerment, despite seizing political power. At a time when the BSP has lost ground electorally and the BJP has begun mobilising Dalits, the Bhim Army is a symbol of resistance from within Dalit society. Noted Dalit scholar Anand Teltumbde writes that its emergence "may be likened to the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra in 1972, which in turn was the by-product of the bankrupt politics of the erstwhile Republican Party of India."

Not only does the Bhim Army highlight the flux, it also creates pressure on the BSP to innovate.

WHAT NEXT

The outfit is in disarray. Mr. Azad, who was absconding, has been arrested. Many other members have been booked and arrested on charges of instigating violence. Its identity is under threat with both the BSP and the BJP accusing it of being a political proxy.

It is difficult to gauge how the outfit will develop or sustain itself. Its first challenge is to weather the administrative action against it. Its focus on the symbolism around the Chamar caste is also limiting it, as identity politics within Dalit castes opens doors for the RSS-BJP and impedes attempts to forge a larger Dalit consciousness. Meanwhile, two questions linger: is the Bhim Army the start of a social movement from the ground or a mere expression of localised Dalit aggression?

OMAR RASHID

WHY

are farmers of
Maharashtra
on strike?**What happened?**

On June 1, farmers in Maharashtra went on strike for the first time ever. Their agitation saw violence, and angry farmers spilling milk and throwing vegetables on the road; at one point the strike expanded into a bandh call, where agitators threatened to stop supply to urban markets. This apparently leaderless agitation grabbed the attention of both the government and the urban population, quite ignorant of conditions in rural areas. A week into the protest, the farmers have made one gain: the Maharashtra government has committed itself to a deadline by which it will announce a loan waiver.

Why are farmers protesting?

The main demand: loan waivers. The other demands include higher support price for their produce and the implementation of the Swaminathan Committee recommendations. The BJP had made the implementation of the report, tabled a decade ago, a campaign promise during the 2014 Lok Sabha elections.

The demands are not new. Farmers have also asked for a cap on import of farm produce and an increase in import duty to safeguard the interests of the farm sector.

What brought on the agitation?

From 2013 to 2015, successive poor monsoons exacerbated farmer woes. Frustration grew when, after a satisfactory monsoon in 2016 and a good crop, demonetisation and the resultant currency crunch meant that the Rabi produce failed to earn profitable prices. Demonetisation also hit district central cooperative banks, the backbone of the State's crop loan system; DCCBs are now sitting on over ₹2,700 crore in demonetised currency, which the Centre is refusing to exchange for new notes. This has raised questions about their lending capacity, and they face the danger of being wiped out. In addition, heeding the Prime Minister's 2016 exhortation to grow more pulses, many farmers invested heavily in their cultivation.

This resulted in a glut in the market. Traders made a killing because they were able to buy at lower rates, and when the Minimum Support Price (MSP) kicked in, they sold at the MSP, leading to more farmer fury. Farmers say the government's failure to anticipate the larger crop isn't their fault, and a loan waiver would help them offset their losses because they heeded the Prime Minister's appeal but were then let down by the government. Farmers' organisations admit a waiver is not the ultimate solution, but say it will have at least a soothing effect and bring farmers back into the credit system. Farm loan waivers in the States ruled either by the BJP or the allies of the NDA have prompted them to ask, why not in Maharashtra?

How has the State responded?

The BJP-led State government has always maintained that it supports the loan waiver. But it has also said it will announce the decision at the 'right' time. This week, Chief Minister De-

vendra Fadnavis formed a panel to study the Uttar Pradesh loan waiver. The government has also said it will introduce a stringent law making buying agricultural produce at rates lower than MSP a punishable offence. For the rest of the demands, it has passed the buck onto the Centre. When the strike started, the State government called a meeting of selected leaders and announced it would declare a waiver package by October 31. The meeting, held without informing all organisations representing the agitating farmers, backfired: the leaders who attended the meeting were dubbed "backstabbers" by the farmers.

Is a loan waiver viable?

Maharashtra is in a financial crunch. For 2017-18, the estimated revenue deficit is likely to cross ₹4,000 crore. Excise revenue has dropped by ₹7,000 crore after the Supreme Court's decision to ban liquor outlets near highways. Implementing the Seventh Pay Commission report for State government employees will cost ₹21,000 crore.



Ambitious infrastructure projects – the Mumbai-Nagpur superhighway (₹40,000 crore), urban Metro projects (over ₹1 lakh crore) – and the Shivaji statue off Mumbai's coast (₹3,800 crore) add to the bill. Against these expenditures, bringing over 31 lakh farmers back into the credit system would require ₹30,000 crore. The government has hard choices ahead.

ALOK DESHPANDE

WHEN

7
June 2017

Twin terrors: Suicide bombers and gunmen struck at the heart of Tehran on Wednesday, attacking the two most important symbols of the 1979 Iranian Revolution – the Parliament and the tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini, founder of the Islamic Republic. The Islamic State, or IS, claimed responsibility for the daring breach that stunned Iran's famed and feared Revolutionary Guards. The strike left 12 people dead and at least 46 injured. For the IS, comprising Sunni extremists, Iran, which is primarily Shia, is the key enemy in the region. Iran is also involved in the anti-IS battles in neighbouring Iraq and Syria, where it is helping the regime of Bashar al-Assad take back territory held by IS militants. In a statement, the Revolutionary Guards blamed the twin attacks on Saudi Arabia and the U.S., coming as they did soon after President Donald Trump's visit to the Saudi Arabian capital Riyadh, where he openly reached out to Arab nations. ■ AFP, AP



Anne Hidalgo and Mayor of Pittsburgh William Peduto wrote in a joint op-ed in *The New York Times* this week.

Pittsburgh is today at the frontier of futuristic technology but its history is also a guide. It is the history of American capitalism.

The Pennsylvania city sits in the midst of vast reserves of coal. Andrew Carnegie, one of the builders of modern America, was born to Scottish parents here and grew up to pioneer mass steel production. Carnegie left a complex legacy of entrepreneurship, philanthropy, labour oppression and greed – all features that would define American capitalism in the 19th and early 20th century. And environmental degradation. As Pittsburgh steel mills fired by coal dug from mines all around ramped up production to meet the surge in demand during the Second World War, the city was enveloped by a smog. Streetlights stayed on round the clock in the 1940s.

Then came globalisation and Chinese steel. One after another, steel mills and mines around the city closed. The last



steel mills closed in 1999. Abandoned mines and shuttered plants fired Mr. Trump's politics.

How has it reinvented itself?

But the city of Pittsburgh overcame the shock of globalisation fast, though that cannot be said of the coal country that

surrounds it. Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) began developing autonomous driving vehicles three decades ago, and the city today hosts research facilities of all digital giants – Apple, Google and Facebook, among the more than 1,600 of them. This is the first city that Uber has chosen to trial-run its 'driverless cars.'

Around CMU and numerous other universities, a futuristic ecosystem is taking shape in the city. It hopes to shift to 100% renewable energy by 2035, and has 13,000 people employed in renewable technology research.

Why is it going against Trump?

Mr. Trump's statement brought international focus on Pittsburgh and Mayor Peduto became the face of resistance to the official U.S. policy of climate denial. "For decades, Pittsburgh has been rebuilding its economy based on hopes for our people and our future, not on outdated fantasies about our past. The City and its many partners will continue to do the same, despite the President's

imprudent announcement," he said the day after Mr. Trump's announcement. "As the Mayor of Pittsburgh, I can assure you that we will follow the guidelines of the Paris agreement for our people, our economy and future," he said, prompting a national mobilisation, endorsed by former President Barack Obama, of 250 U.S. cities and several States that have now made similar commitments.

Why is it polarised?

But the future that Pittsburgh holds out could also be deeply polarising. More than three quarters of Pittsburgh voters chose Hillary Clinton. Mr. Trump's opponent, in last year's election. But in the surrounding counties in rural Pennsylvania, untouched by the future and ravaged in the present, Mr. Trump triumphed, becoming the first Republican to win the State of Pennsylvania since 1988, which was a major factor in his national victory.

VARGHESE K GEORGE

WHERE

In Pittsburgh,
rejecting
Trump's Paris
pact exit

"I was elected to represent the citizens of Pittsburgh, not Paris," U.S. President Donald Trump said, announcing his decision to pull America out of the Paris climate agreement.

Mr. Trump sought to make Pittsburgh the metaphor of his 'America First' politics. As it turned out, it is not only his brand of nationalist politics that this statement spurred, Pittsburgh has also come to symbolise climate globalism in the last few days.

Since Mr. Trump's statement, Pittsburgh, a city of more than three lakh, 400 km northwest of Washington and 600 km west of New York City, has become the metaphor of a future beyond fossil fuels.

What is the plan?

"Last week, President Donald Trump tried to pit our two cities against each other when he announced the pull-out of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. As the Mayors of Pittsburgh and Paris, we're here to say that we're more united than ever," Mayor of Paris