



The power of two

Assembly election campaigns could have a bearing on the parliamentary polls

Parliamentary elections in India have increasingly been influenced by State-level political variables beyond the performance of the ruling parties and the Opposition at the Centre. And this factor is likely to be even more salient in the four States facing simultaneous elections to the Assemblies and the Lok Sabha: Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. In Andhra Pradesh, the two main rivals are regional forces, the Chandrababu Naidu-led Telugu Desam Party and the Y.S. Jaganmohan Reddy-led YSR Congress Party. In 2014, the TDP had successfully fought elections in alliance with the BJP, and the Congress faced a backlash because of the bifurcation of the State during its tenure. This time, however, with the TDP having broken its alliance with the BJP, the regional parties are in a direct contest, and the national parties relegated to being minor players. Andhra Pradesh has faced acute fiscal concerns after bifurcation, and the TDP government would be keen to reassure voters over concerns about the State's economy. It fared the best in the country on economic growth parameters, with a significant increase in per capita income during the last five years and successful delivery of irrigation schemes. On the flip side, delays in the construction of the new capital city and the ballooning public debt suggest that Andhra still has structural issues to overcome. The TDP and the YSRCP have tried a game of one-upmanship on relations with the Centre and the denial of "special category status" for the State, which it is argued is crucial to overcome fiscal issues. Both parties have significant support bases among OBCs and other landowning communities, and the lack of any substantive differentiation between them could make this a closely contested election. The two parties are also likely to be important players in a post-election scenario at the national level.

In Odisha, the Biju Janata Dal led by Naveen Patnaik has been in power for 19 years, having bucked anti-incumbency largely due to welfare-driven governance. Unlike in Andhra Pradesh, the Congress and particularly the BJP have a stronger presence. The BJP, buoyed by its performance in the 2017 local body elections, is expected to put up a stronger fight in the State's Assembly and Lok Sabha polls. In fact, the BJP is keen to make up for expected losses in its strongholds in the north with gains in the east. India's longest-serving Chief Minister, Pawan Kumar Chhangling (in power since 1994), and his Sikkim Democratic Front are expected to face a more pronounced challenge from the Sikkim Krantikari Morcha and the new party launched by former footballer Bhaichand Bhutia, the Hamro Sikkim Party. In Arunachal Pradesh, the Permanent Resident Certificate issue will figure as a dominant narrative during the elections even as the ruling BJP seeks to link its campaign to the performance of the Central government.

Final showdown

The IS is facing defeat, but the search for a political solution in Syria should continue

The Islamic State, which at its peak controlled territories straddling the Iraq-Syria border of the size of Great Britain, is now fighting for half a square kilometre in eastern Syria. The Syrian Democratic Forces, the Kurdish-led rebel group assisted by the U.S., has effectively laid siege to Baghouz, the eastern Syrian village where about 500 IS jihadists along with 4,000 women and children are caught. When the IS lost bigger cities such as Raqqa and Deir Ezzor in eastern Syria, militants moved to Baghouz and the deserts in the south. After the SDF moved to Baghouz, several civilians fled the village. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimates that nearly 59,000 people have fled IS-held territory since December, and at least 4,000 jihadists have surrendered since February. Both President Donald Trump and the SDF commanders say victory against the IS is imminent. Victory in Baghouz will also mean the IS's territorial caliphate is shattered. Since the battle for Kobane in 2015, which marked the beginning of the end of the IS, Syrian Kurdish rebels have been in the forefront of the war. Naturally, the SDF would claim the final victory against the IS.

However, the liberation of Baghouz or the destruction of the territorial caliphate does not necessarily mean that the IS has been defeated. It is basically an insurgent-jihadist group. It has established cells, especially in Syria and Iraq, which have continued to carry out terror attacks even as IS territories kept shrinking. The group has a presence in Syria's vast deserts, a tactic its predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq, successfully used when it was in decline during 2006-2011 after its leader Abu Mubarak al-Zarqawi was killed by the U.S. When the Syrian civil war broke, the remnants of AQI found an opportunity for revival and rebranded themselves as the Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda's branch in Syria. The IS was born when al-Nusra split. The U.S., the Kurdish rebels, the Syrian government and other stakeholders in the region should be mindful of the geopolitical and sectarian minefields that groups such as the IS could exploit for their re-emergence. Mr. Trump has already announced the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria. The Turkish government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is wary of the rapid rise of the Syrian Kurds, who are organisationally and ideologically aligned with Kurdish rebels on the Turkish side. The Syrian regime, on its part, has vowed to re-establish its authority over the Kurdish autonomous region in the northeast. If Turkey and Syria attack Kurdish rebels, who were vital in the battle against the IS, that would throw northeastern Syria into chaos again, which would suit the jihadists. To avoid this, there must be an orderly U.S. withdrawal and a political solution to the Syrian civil war.

In the pursuit of four freedoms

The principles that inform a lived life of dignity must dictate choices in the great Indian election of 2019



NEERA CHANDHOKE

The schedule for the 2019 general election has been announced, and the political arena has once again been transformed into a gigantic market place. In this space political parties proceed to outbid and undercut each other, often in shocking ways, as they desperately buy a commodity called state power. Every political party pursues state power as frantically as the Knights of King Arthur searched for the Holy Grail in medieval England. This is their project and their rationale for existence. Power saturates every site of social interaction, from the household to the workplace, but state power is unique because it is a condensate of all power. The state decides whether our lives are led in good, bad or ugly ways. The holders of state power resolve what sort of opportunities are offered by society and the economy, and whether we can participate in multiple social transactions as equals.

All that's at stake

Understandably, politicians yearn to take over the state. Some of them might even agree to sell their souls, drive a Faustian bargain so that they can acquire, possess and relish power. We are a democracy, but citizens are unable to control the possession, exercise and implementation of power by their representatives.

A disturbing question haunts the corridors of our democracy. Are representatives responsive to their constituencies, to their wants, needs and aspirations? Or do they tend to subordinate the

well-being of citizens to their own lust for office? The latter is painfully evident.

Democratically elected governments can and have divided society, kept people in penury, imprisoned and tortured civil liberty activists, destroyed civil societies, and threatened war against neighbours. Overt and covert violence stalks our heels. Violence may have become the new normal in India, but there is little that is noble about violence. "Each new morn" says Macduff of war in Shakespeare's Macbeth, "new widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows Strike heaven in the face, that it resounds."

Today, new sorrows follow us around like Mary's little lamb because the government refuses to respect our need for a decent life, lived with dignity and in peace. Consider the way the Indian government has responded to serious economic distress in the country. Refusing to address the grim crisis in the agrarian sector which has destroyed livelihoods and driven farmers to suicide, the government decides to offer petty pocket money to the agriculturalist. Instead of transforming educational institutions, or taking on the onerous task of creating jobs with some determination, the Modi government offers pitiful reservations to graduates and postgraduates who have been forced to compete for positions below their

capabilities. Worse, our government refuses to count how many Indian citizens are unemployed. It just does not acknowledge that poverty created through job losses does not only breed distress, it produces and reproduces discontent and anger, resentment and violence. Our representatives have failed us.

For when we vote, we expect that our representative government will provide the basic preconditions of a good life. We do not expect it to tap petty passions and irrational emotions through incendiary rhetoric that targets communities, regions and other countries in the name of the nation. Cynics might wonder whether elections bring about change at all, or whether the outcome results in more of the same.

Freedom from fear

Nevertheless, elections are significant. The opportunity to vote offers us choices, we can vote for the same violence that has left us with bloodied hands and torn feet. Or we can vote for a party that offers us freedom. At stake in the 2019 election are four kinds of freedoms. The first is freedom from fear, from the haunting feeling that someone, somewhere is watching how we behave, and that someone is ready to penalise us through words and deeds if we dare question the mockery that democracy gives power to the religious major-

ity. Our own people who belong to the minority community need to be reassured that they are citizens of this country by right, and no one has the right to make them feel that they are here on sufferance. All of us have to be free from the nagging worry that our neighbourhoods will be overrun by lumpens on their monstrous motorcycles baying for blood at the drop of a hat, that citizens of India will be lynched and left to die painfully on the mud tracks of our cities and villages. Above all, we have the right to vent criticism of representatives without being assaulted by crude, sexist abuse on social media that relentlessly intrudes into our everyday lives.

The second sort of freedom we should reinstall is freedom from want. Our farmers live in precarious conditions, our working class ekes out a bare existence steeped in misery and deprivation, our children are offered insecure and low paid jobs, and our minorities live under the constant threat that their livelihoods will be snatched from them. Seventy-one years after Independence, the government should be concerned about the quality of employment it offers our people, about suitable remuneration, about lives lived with dignity, and about the self-worth that people develop when they love what they do for a living.

It is not enough that the working classes are handed out a mere pittance instead of a living wage. It is not sufficient that our people work for a mess of porridge, or that they should merely have enough to eat. It is the task of a democratic government to provide for basic preconditions - health, education, employment and a sustainable wage - that enable people to stand up and speak back to a history not of their making. This is what democracy means, not a handout here and a handout

there. For this, we need to ask why should people remain poor.

The third freedom that we have to re-capture is freedom from discrimination. Ironically, upper castes have mobilised against protections provided to one of the most vulnerable groups in human history, Dalits. It is paradoxical that reservations, which are meant to secure respect for those who are doubly disadvantaged by reasons of caste and class, are offered to the upper castes, which are already over-represented in the public sphere. Reservations have become a mockery, a charade, used as a deliberate ploy to delegitimise the project of social justice.

The fourth freedom is freedom from sexual violence, for women, for men, for transgenders, and for children. India must never witness with horror and pain another child mauled, raped and mutilated as in Kathua. We must never bear witness to the ignoble spectacle of lawyers demonstrating in favour of rapists. We must never again register the horrific phenomenon of women being beaten up merely because they wish to visit their god in a temple. If India cannot secure equality, which is the reason for democracy, let us at least opt for non-discrimination, a lesser form of equality.

A constitutional right

At stake in the elections that loom large on our collective imaginations is not delegation of power to representatives, so that they can live out their sick fantasies of controlling minds and bodies. We vote to recapture and protect the freedom that earlier generations fought for so strenuously. We vote because freedom is our constitutional right and we will reclaim it.

Neera Chandhoke is a former Professor of Political Science at Delhi University

To serve the governed

The Official Secrets Act has no place in a democracy, as the Goswami Commission had suggested in the late 1970s



FALI S. NARIMAN

The constitutional freedom to use and publicise information is directly affected by the provisions of the Official Secrets Act, 1923, which as with most of British India enactments followed the Official Secrets Act, 1920, passed by the British Parliament. It was strict enough then but after Independence in 'free India' we amended it and made it stricter in 1967, widening the scope of Section 5 ("Wrongful communication. etc., of information") and enlarging the scope of Section 8 ("Duty of giving information as to commission of offences").

Often misused

Whenever I think about the Official Secrets Act, 1923, I recall a scene from the son et lumière

(sound and light show) at the Red Fort enacted almost every evening where 100 years of Indian history is brilliantly encapsulated in a one-hour show: in it the Emperor Aurangzeb (who reigned for 60 years) asks his courtiers, "What is this noise, that is troubling us from outside?" And the courtiers reply: "Your Majesty, it is music." And Aurangzeb's majestic response is: "Then bury it deep into the bowels of the earth."

I always thought - un-majestically, but seriously - that this should have been the fate of the Official Secrets Act, 1923, which has been so frequently misused, that it ought to have been repealed when India got independence. In fact when the Janata government which came to power at the end of the Internal Emergency, and set up what was then known (and is now forgotten) as the Second Press Commission, it was chaired by a great and good judge, Justice Goswami of the Supreme Court of India, whose common sense approach to all subjects greatly attracted me to him.

L.K. Advani, then Minister for



Information and Broadcasting, requested me to be a member of the Commission, and I agreed. The Commission proceeded in great earnestness for months, and ultimately, when its report was ready in December 1979, a report that implored the government of the day to immediately repeal the Official Secrets Act, 1923, it never saw the light of day. Indira Gandhi, who came back to power in January 1980, wrote to the members a polite letter of thanks for our deliberations and promptly dissolved and disbanded the Justice Goswami Commission. It was replaced by the now officially known Second Press Commission presided over by Justice K.K. Mathew.

The Goswami Commission and all its deliberations had been obliterated by a stroke of the pen. If Mrs. Gandhi had returned to power a few months later and our report had been accepted by the previous government, concerns in the context of *The Hindu's* exposé on the Rafale deal would probably not have arisen over what the Attorney General of India ought to have said or done or ought not to have said or done. The Official Second Press Commission (the Mathew Commission) did not recommend the repeal of the Official Secrets Act of 1923.

The press as champion

Since I still regard the press (and no longer the electronic media) as the champion of Article 19(1)(a) freedoms, I would like to say that the press must serve the governed, not those who govern. In his famous Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln described good governance as "of the people, by the people and for the people". Centuries later we do understand the "of", and are willing to tolerate the "by" but unfortunately we keep

forgetting the "for". If government is indeed for the people, it has a solemn obligation to keep the people well informed.

Fortunately, the modern trend in today's world is towards less secrecy and more information. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations way back in 1966, specifically includes the right to freedom of expression, defined as "the freedom to seek, receive and impart the information and ideas of all kinds".

The Janata government signed and ratified this Covenant in 1979, but none of the later Governments has lived up to its ideals. We have enacted Article 19(1)(a) in our 1950 Constitution with extremely limited restrictions - in Article 19(2) - but again only paid lip service to freedom of speech and expression.

I am proud that *The Hindu* has not just preached but stuck its neck out in support of this cardinal freedom of ours. Bravo.

Fali S. Nariman is an eminent jurist

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Tale of three sisters

The situation of the three sisters is a situation many individuals on either side of India-Pakistan border face (OpEd page, "Too afraid to make a phone call", March 12). The article shows us the mirror - how humanity, love and relationships get sidelined by excessive nationalism, now at a crescendo in India. This has led to divisions in the hearts of ordinary people. Let us not give terrorists a motive to escalate hatred, tension and fear. Borders dividing nations should not divide families, relations and humanity.

ATUL JOSHI,
Kedarpur, Dehradun, Uttarakhand

■ The agony of the sisters cannot be fathomed. How unfair life is. The essay only shows the deep after-effects of Partition, made worse by terrorism and war.

B. PRABHA,
Varkala, Kerala

■ Such a moving article in its sensitive portrayal of the dilemma and agony an ordinary family faces. But as a resident of India, I will still

say that India is a peaceful country where people can live without fear and in full freedom.

V.T. SAMPATH KUMARAN,
Mysuru

■ The essay made very disturbing reading as it highlighted the agony that the three sisters all undergo simultaneously. It reflected the pain of the wound that has still to heal and which continues to haunt relations between India and Pakistan. That a sensible section of civil society on both sides of the border is against war and continues to push for a halt to hate politics is heartwarming. Let a healthy political atmosphere be given a chance to blossom.

S.V. VENUGOPALAN,
Chennai

■ It is agonising to come across such heart-wrenching stories. Even seven decades after Partition, the wound is still fresh. We are now in a state where expressing an opinion that contradicts the majority is labelled as being anti-national. As an individual, one should understand that nationalism

or patriotism is not just about being anti-Pakistan but also in empathising with and understanding the diversity of this great nation. The essay was enriching in making us understand better the sensitivities behind many situations that are created following adversity.

SRI HARSHA VAKKALANKA,
Visakhapatnam

■ It is unfortunate yet inevitable that conversations between siblings living on both sides of the border invite unnecessary attention when passions run high in a war-like situation. The writer has posed searching questions about the need to insulate the ordinary discourse of life from being poisoned by the suspicions and misunderstandings that surface when tensions escalate between India and Pakistan. However, it appears that he has chosen the wrong audience to address.

His pleas to restore the values of humanity are impassioned, but blaming the victim for the destructive agendas of an implacable adversary is disingenuous.

The writer should redirect his moral indignation to expose the root cause of the problem - Pakistan's treacherous and unstated doctrine of waging a covert war against India.

V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN,
Thiruvananthapuram

The forgotten soldier

The story of Sanju Ram, a former Indian Army soldier, was heart-rending ("Humiliating to be carried on palanquin: ex-armyman", March 12). The government has been spending crores on memorials and publicity material, but soldiers like Mr. Ram are forgotten. One hopes that with the report on his plight and his need for quality prosthetic implants, people will respond and help him lead a life with dignity.

J.P. REDDY,
Nalgonda, Telangana

■ It is a shame that precious little has been done for a soldier who has helped keep us safe. Perhaps the media should take up his case and ensure that he is able to lead a decent and dignified life.

K. JOSHI,
Bengaluru

No politics here

Social media has become so powerful that it is capable of making even the wisest look vulnerable (Page 1, "Pollachi sex scandal triggers outrage among politicians", March 12). The heinous crimes perpetrated on unsuspecting women in Tamil Nadu leave one to wonder whether we still live in a civilised society. The case should be fast-tracked and the culprits given the maximum punishment. The political games over the plight of the victims will divert attention from the need for a fair investigation.

V. SUBRAMANIAN,
Chennai

A hot house

Bengaluru is often called the 'Garden City' but its airport, Kempegowda International Airport, has very scant tree cover. While there are some flowering plants, the need is for trees. The parking area is devoid of trees. Even the shelters for passengers waiting for buses appear to have been designed unscientifically; they aid in the collection and capture of heat. When there are a

number of shade-giving tree species that can be used, one wonders why the officials have not bothered to do anything. In an age of global warming, it is certainly not an offence to plant trees.

S. YASHONATH,
Bengaluru

Complete trash

My wife and I were in India for 22 days in February. We arrived in Chennai and drove down the coast to Kanyakumari, then round the corner into Kerala. Day after day the route was found covered with litter. At the sides of roads, in fields, in town and village streets, in alleyways, at the edge of rivers, in tourist spots and beaches, Tamil Nadu looked as if it was awash with litter. We saw a tea stall with 100-plus paper cups trampled into the ground around it. The litter problem is shocking and someone has to address this. There is a beautiful and friendly country somewhere under the mess.

THE A. WALLACES,
Girvan, Scotland

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