

INTERVIEW | KAMAL NATH

'The Congress has always been for cow protection and shelters'

The M.P. Chief Minister on undoing 'saffronisation' of institutions, and the Congress's position on cow protection and loan waivers

VARGHESE K. GEORGE

Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Kamal Nath is a key player in the Congress's comeback bid in the Lok Sabha elections. Having ended the BJP's 15-year rule in Bhopal, he says the priority of his government is to reverse the "saffronisation" of governance in the State. Excerpts from an interview:

After the Congress's break of 15 years from power in Madhya Pradesh, you have become the Chief Minister. Is your government in part a continuation of the 15 years of BJP rule in the State?

change its character?

■ We have to. Because it is a blatant misuse of State funds.

Are you looking at the school syllabus too?

■ Certainly. We have to correct all these things, so that what this country stands for, the ethos of this country, is maintained.

While you're striking a very strident pose on 'saffronisation', your government's decision to use the National Security Act (NSA) in cases of suspected cow slaughter was a continuation of the past, right?

■ It was not the government's policy. That was the policy of the past. It was done at the local level. I was surprised about it myself. This happened a few days after we took over. I strongly objected to it.

Have you given instructions that the NSA cannot be invoked in such cases?

■ Absolutely. In any case it cannot be. The objectives of the NSA are very clear. It was the previous government's policy to do this.

It was a misuse of that law?

■ Yes. It was misuse.

Cow protection has been a key component of BJP politics. Your government is also setting up cow shelters using public money. How does this square with your idea of change and good governance?

When you mention 'saffronisation', you are alluding to a turn towards Hindutva in governance? Have you identified areas or institutions where this has happened?

■ There are so many. Take our journalism university. Take the universities and the various bodies they formed. They were not doing that for the public good. They were using State funds for building a party organisation, which we are slowly dismantling.

The Jan Abhiyan Parishad (a government-funded network intended to improve governance) was used to propagate Hindutva?

■ Absolutely. The JAP has been used and misused to propagate their ideology, and for elections.

Are you determined to



A.M.FARUQUI

■ Of course it does. The Congress has always been for cow protection and shelters. The previous government did nothing. And they have been exposed on this. We are only continuing with what we have always believed in. We are promoting *gaushalas* (cow shelters). Cows are revered in Indian ethos, mythology and beliefs.

Cow protection is also linked to agrarian problems — stray cattle destroy crops, for instance. Don't you think that by bringing in this cultural component, the agrarian economy gets distorted?

■ I don't think so. If we build proper cow shelters, it does not disturb the agrarian economy at all. We respect the sentiments of the people. And at the same time, we protect their rural economy.

How long term do you think will be your relief to the agriculture sector through loan waivers?

■ A farmer is born into debt and dies in debt. Loan waiver is not the solution to the problem. Loan waiver is one of

There will be convergence between the BSP and the Congress at some point, because our objective is the same.

the ways to give him relief. We have to look at the agriculture sector in a completely different way. Seventy per cent of the people of M.P. are dependent on the agriculture sector, not all of them farmers. Twenty-three years ago, the problem of agriculture was the problem of shortage. Today, the problem is of excess. So, our policies will have to be attuned to this changed situation.

Do you have plans beyond loan waivers?

■ Yes, we are looking at a holistic plan on how to make the agriculture sector more remunerative so that farmers don't sink into debt again.

You decided to discontinue the pension scheme for MISA (Maintenance of Internal Security Act) detainees (people who were imprisoned during the Emergency). Why?

■ This was a political move made by the previous government. We dismantled it. Some of them were also fake. There was MISA in 1975. Many of them are not there any more. This is like saying, the BJP government was there for the last 15 years, and all those who felt victimised by them must get pension.

You have worked with all the members of the Nehru-Gandhi family barring Jawaharlal Nehru. How do you understand the family?

■ I have had the privilege of working with Sanjay Gandhi, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, Mrs. Sonia Gandhi and now Mr. Rahul Gandhi. They were all there in different periods. The world was different, the country was different, politics was different. So, each one has a different style of working. And in different circumstances and different periods, the challenges are also different, and so their styles are different.

How is Rahul Gandhi different from his family?

■ He is no different. As in, his heart is with the weakest al-

ways. He is very sharp. I admire his sense of understanding of so many diverse issues of this country.

Is there any point on which he is different from his mother and father?

■ I think he is far more impatient for results. He is impatient for achievements. That is good, he goads you on.

Is he impatient with people?

■ No, he is not impatient with people. He is impatient with the lack of progress.

While you have been vocal against Hindutva, some reports have suggested that you have made a tactical decision to not confront the RSS head on. Is that true? In the case of JAP, you seem to be giving a long rope.

■ Of course, I have to do the correct thing. I called a meeting with them and I told them that this is what you stand for. I have given them three months. Lot of people are involved, there are students in it. I have to ensure that those who are apolitical do not suffer in the process.

One long-term effect of Hindutva in politics is the progressive decline of Muslim representation in politics. Does your counter-politics to Hindutva account for this? And how?

■ Everything in society must be equitable. We cannot deny Muslims what are naturally their rights, their aspirations. Everyone, whether Hindu, Muslim, Christian or Sikh, is aspirational. When it comes to representation in a democracy, the question is, how will you win an election? Doing it symbolically can at times be hypocritical.

That is the sad part of our democracy, perhaps.

Fielding a Muslim candidate is not the best way to win an election. As a political tactician, do you face that dilemma?

■ When we are fielding someone, we have to see to it that he wins. Because we are putting him up to represent the people. But if he goes through the motions of an election without winning, he will not be able to represent anyone, including his community.

How stable is your government? The Congress does not have a majority.

■ The government is very stable. We demonstrated it in the elections for the Speaker and Deputy Speaker. We got 121 against the BJP's 109.

So, there is no question on the longevity of your government?

■ The BJP is continuously trying to lure MLAs with all kinds of things. But I have complete confidence in all the MLAs.

Do you think the Centre has been trying to unsettle your government?

■ The BJP as a whole is trying to unsettle this government.

Would you expect the Governor to be more impartial?

■ The Governor must stay within the confines of the Constitution. Stepping out of that will not be acceptable.

The BSP's support is critical for your government in M.P., but Mayawati has been hostile to the Congress recently. How do you see BSP-Congress relations going forward?

■ The objective of the BSP is to oust the BJP and there will

be convergence at some point, because our objective is the same. And everybody takes local situations into account. In U.P., they are dealing with the ground situation in the State. We have our own perceptions. That does not mean that our objectives are divergent.

After the NSA was used in cases of alleged cow slaughter in M.P., Ms. Mayawati said that the Congress and the BJP have the same character. Have you spoken to her after that?

■ I talk to her from time to time on various issues. They are our supporting party in M.P. They have two MLAs.

You challenged Digvijaya Singh to contest from a difficult seat if he wanted to contest. And he is now contesting from Bhopal. Is this a return of friction between the two of you?

■ I have no friction with anyone, whether it is Mr. Singh, Mr. [Jyotiraditya] Scindia, or Mr. [Suresh] Pachouri. We all worked together for victory in M.P.

Then why did you challenge Mr. Singh?

■ Because he has been State party president and Chief Minister. It was not a challenge, but a suggestion. I told him that it would befit his stature if he contested from a seat that the Congress has not won for a long time. He accepted my suggestion.

The Lok Sabha election in the State is on Narendra Modi or Kamal Nath?

■ Both. The people of M.P. are poor, they are simple, but they are not stupid. Mr. Modi will have to explain to the people of M.P. what happened to all the promises he made in the past.

SINGLE FILE

The return of the rural

A clutch of new filmmakers is attempting to restore the rural to Hindi cinema

KUNAL RAY



A friend recently expressed his desire to watch Abhishek Chaubey's *Sonchiriya*, set in the once-dacoit-dominated Chambal region of Madhya Pradesh. More than the plot or the misdeeds of the dacoits, he was interested to encounter such a place through a film. Though part of popular folklore, places like Chambal have only recently been reappearing in mainstream Hindi films.

My friend also mentioned how excited he is now to encounter small towns or rural areas in contemporary Hindi cinema. Earlier, the rural always existed in Hindi films. It was a regular narrative trope: characters from rural areas would always be arriving in the city. Those films created a split between the rural and the urban: the rural was seen as pure and the urban as impure, the rural as innocent and the urban as corrupt. They created a binary between the village and the city.

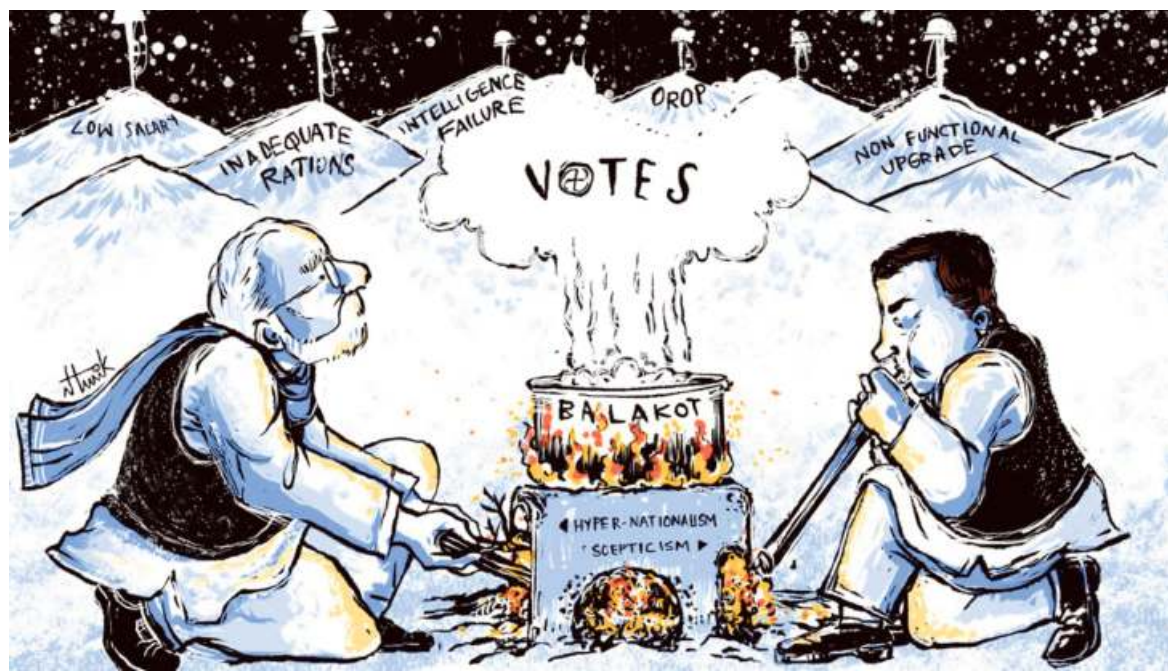
Manoj Kumar furthered this split through his nation-loving films, which cast the West invariably in a poor light, robbing people from the East of their principles. In the 1970s, the Hindi 'new wave' filmmakers also made films set in the rural. However, 1990 onwards, the rural gradually disappeared from Hindi films. The urban took centre stage and, slowly, so did the middle class and the rich.

A clutch of new films and filmmakers is attempting to restore the rural to Hindi cinema. And they are going beyond the idyllic hamlets of Punjab. But what does it mean to encounter a place through film? People make a place. We attribute an identity to a location vis-a-vis its people, who constitute its socio-cultural fabric.

Vishal Bhardwaj's *Omkaara*, set in the badlands of rural Uttar Pradesh, added a new dimension of caste-based politics to the film, thereby rendering it contextually true. *Gangs of Waseypur* was a trendsetter in this regard. It introduced a range of idiosyncratic characters to Hindi cinema. The rural does not appear as a caricature, as it did in Priyadarshan's *Malaamal Weekly*. *Anarkali of Aarah* took us to the by-lanes of the hinterlands of Bihar. *Newton* was a plunge into the Adivasi settlements in the forests of Chhattisgarh. *Barreilly Ki Barfi* showed us a free-spirited girl who refused to bow down to the pressures of marriage.

All these films have had myriad depictions of the rural — from the oppressed to the celebratory. Through them we recognise people as individuals with wants and desires and not case studies or objects of anthropological lust, as they were at one time.

The writer teaches literary and cultural studies at FLAME University, Pune



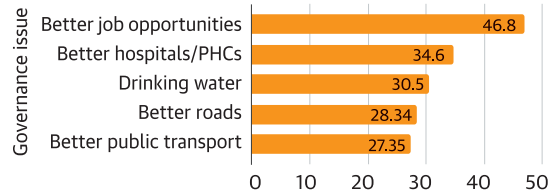
DATA POINT

Jobs on people's minds

A national survey of 2.73 lakh people across Lok Sabha constituencies found that getting better jobs was the top concern nationwide. Another recent, independent survey by Pew also came to the same conclusion. The other key concerns are access to better healthcare and drinking water. By Varun B. Krishnan

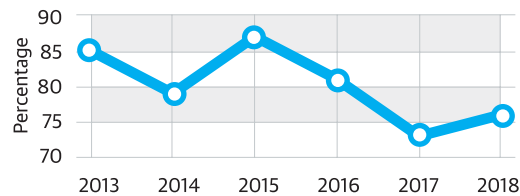
What do people worry about?

About 47% of respondents said getting better job opportunities was among their top five priorities. The graph shows the % of people who listed a particular issue as their top priority



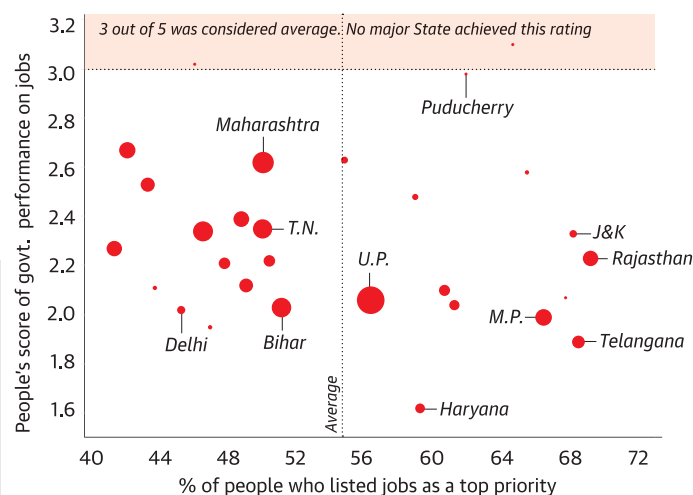
Corroborating survey

According to another independent survey by Pew, 76% of Indians surveyed said that the lack of employment opportunities was a "very big problem" in 2018



State-wise concerns

Getting better jobs was a big concern in the northern and central belt. People in these States also rated the current government as lowest on employment



A closer look
The size of each circle (●) represents the number of Lok Sabha seats in the State. The highest % of people who said jobs were a top priority were in Rajasthan, Telangana and J&K

Methodology
2.73 lakh voters were interviewed from 534 LS constituencies. 64.84% of the respondents were from rural areas. The survey was done between Oct. and Dec. 2018. Voters' priorities were recorded amongst 31 governance issues, and the performance of the govt. was rated by the respondents on those issues

Source: Association for Democratic Reforms

FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 27, 1969

Nijalingappa not for Telangana

The Congress President, Mr. S. Nijalingappa, has expressed himself emphatically against a separate Telengana State and the proposal for regional autonomy. He was, however, in favour of Telengana receiving "very high attention and preferential treatment" for its economic development. Mr. Nijalingappa, who was talking to Pressmen to-day [March 26] at Begumpet airport, on his way to Bangalore from New Delhi, appealed to the people to call off the agitation, now that the Centre and the State Government were taking up the matter of strict implementation of Telengana safeguards.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 27, 1919.

How Nations Sleep.

What seems indispensable to one nation for a good sleep, another considers the surest means of driving away repose. Europeans require, as a rule, a soft pillow, while the Jap stretches himself on his mat and puts a square wooden block under his head upon which he rests quite comfortably. To the Chinaman his bed is a very important affair. It is low and often adorned with precious carvings, but it never occurs to him that anything could be more comfortable than pleated mats. While the people of northern countries cannot sleep unless they have sufficient space to stretch themselves at full length, the natives of the tropics are often satisfied with a hammock. The inhabitant of Russia Minor loves to sleep on his hot stove, from which on awakening half roasted in the morning he will immediately plunge into cold water so as to re-establish his physical equilibrium. The Lapp sprawls into a sack made of reindeer skins, while the Hindu, who likewise uses a sack, though an airy and light one, does so for the purpose of protecting himself against the mosquitoes.

POLL CALL

Simultaneous elections

This refers to holding elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies simultaneously, once in five years. Simultaneous elections used to be held in India until 1967. The practice was disrupted when some State Assemblies were dissolved prematurely. Recently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi called for a widespread debate on holding simultaneous elections again. While supporters of the idea argue that such polls would reduce election expenditure and provide governments more time for development work, opponents say that there is no guarantee that it will reduce election expenditure, and that it may relegate local issues to the background. Such a framework also does not provision for legislatures in which no party or coalition commands the confidence of the House.

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