



## #Makeover

Rahul Gandhi displays a new and humorous energy on social media

Congress vice president Rahul Gandhi set social media alight last weekend with a tweet stating his pet dog Pidi was the author of his suddenly effervescent posts. The sarcasm had his detractors scrambling to portray him, on the one hand, as frivolous, and doing so, on the other, without sounding humourless and stodgy. The hashtag #Pidi trended all Sunday, capping Mr. Gandhi's makeover since the summer. The numbers speak for themselves: his followers on Twitter have shot up from about 2.5 million in July to more than four million now. The change is clearly a result of the Congress's recently revamped social media team; more interestingly, also perhaps its strategy. The playfulness, the self-deprecatory humour, the regular-guy undertone in Mr. Gandhi's social media messaging are aimed at creating a new public persona, a plan that was evident since his tour of American campuses last month. What political dividend this will pay is not clear, but it's unsettling the official narrative. From being mocked as a princeling of Lutyens' Delhi, Mr. Gandhi is trying to recast himself as a humorous, almost subversive, insurgent taking on the formidable powers-that-be. Referring to the GST as the "Gabbar Singh Tax", he harnessed the film *Sholay*'s capacity to myth-make, and to project the indirect taxes overhaul as an extractive, arbitrary reign reminiscent of Hindi cinema's memorable villain.

Mr. Gandhi and his social media team are still a light presence in the Indian social media space – Mr. Modi has 36 million followers, and this machine's drive to take the battle to every post is the stuff of case studies in political campaign. But perhaps it is this mismatch that has given Mr. Gandhi's campaign the oxygen it seeks. During the second UPA government, as an anti-establishment mood swept the streets, Mr. Gandhi appeared equally keen to be seen as a dissenter – for instance, in 2013, when he angrily tore into the UPA's ordinance to invalidate a Supreme Court curb on convicted legislators. Then, his assertion of power over his party's Prime Minister smacked of dynastic entitlement. Now, he is the everyman blocked off from the corridors of power, highlighting the depths of his failure after the dismal summer of 2014 to give an assurance that he is on the learning curve, using disarming wit to isolate the trolls' violent imagery. The online space has been the staging ground for political projection before – most notably, Mr. Modi's saturation strategy for the 2014 general election and Barack Obama's 2008 "yes we can" challenge. And certainly, skilful use of social media allows a politician to control the message, as well as directly reach her audience unobstructed. But it is not just that an electoral battle is ultimately won at the hustings on the strength of party organisation and street campaigns. Unsettling the narrative is not enough; a campaigner must shape it with a social and economic agenda.

## Lessons from Kirkuk

Tensions between Baghdad and Kurds could undermine the fight against the Islamic State

The conflict that broke out in the oil-rich city of Kirkuk between Iraqi government troops aided by Shia militias and the Peshmerga, the military wing of Iraqi Kurdistan, this month is a reminder of the divisions that run deep in the country. Both government troops and the Peshmerga are part of the coalition that is fighting the Islamic State in Iraq. They are also American allies. The U.S. provides air cover in the war against the IS and offers military advice to Iraqi troops, besides supplying weapons. Likewise, the Peshmerga has received arms from the U.S., Germany, the U.K. and other western countries. The U.S. also has a consulate in Erbil, the capital of Kurdistan where hundreds of its diplomats and their families live. But neither the common American factor nor the shared interests in the war against terrorists has prevented the conflict in Kirkuk, that was captured by the Peshmerga from the IS in 2014. The alliance between the Kurds and Baghdad is tactical rather than strategic. In 2014, after the IS scored a series of military victories in Iraq, including in the cities of Fallujah, Ramadi, Kirkuk and Mosul, both Baghdad and Erbil were threatened by the prospect of IS advances. They set aside their historical differences and joined hands against a common enemy. But the IS is in retreat. Most of the cities it captured, including Mosul, Iraq's second largest, have been freed. This receding IS threat has exposed cracks in the alliance.

More immediately, the Kurdish political leadership's push for independence from Iraq has alarmed Baghdad. Masoud Barzani, President of Iraqi Kurdistan, wanted to mobilise the momentum created in the battle against the IS in favour of independence. Despite strong opposition from Baghdad and western capitals, Mr. Barzani went ahead with a referendum in late September, in which Kurds overwhelmingly voted for independence. Though the vote is not binding on the Kurdish regional government, it has undoubtedly strengthened Kurdish nationalist politics across borders. Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi rushed troops to retake Kirkuk. Mr. Barzani's move was politically counter-productive as he is not in a position to achieve independence for Kurdistan. Taking responsibility for the mess, he has announced he will step down as President in November. This actually aggravates the crisis. The new Kurdish leader may lack his charisma or authority but will have to deal with stronger nationalist aspirations. Baghdad has sent a tough message to Erbil by sending troops to Kirkuk: if the Kurds go ahead with plans to secede, it would invite a strong military response. The cracks in the coalition would be good news for the IS. The only country that could constructively intervene in the conflict is the U.S., which enjoys good ties with Baghdad and Erbil. It should mediate between the two sides on the Kurdish national question. Unless that is addressed, the chances for another civil war in Iraq remain high.

# Sardar Patel, a shared inheritance

The Congress's de-option of Patel was an error, Hindutva's co-option of Patel is an execration



GOPALKRISHNA GANDHI

Vallabhbhai Patel (1875-1950), whose birth anniversary it is today, is sorely missed. He has been, ever since he died at the none-too-great an age of 75, in 1950. He was the keel that the boat of the freedom struggle needed so as never to tip over, the ballast that the ship of state required to stay steady, move safe.

This is because he was, first and last, a patriot. A Congress patriot. And then, a man who knew India. The India which the Congress was seeking to define for itself, for India.

What was that India? Let us have Gandhi answer the question. In 1931, the year that Patel, for the first time, became Congress president, Gandhi went as the Congress's sole representative to the second Round Table Conference in London. He defined at that Conference, the nature of the party, and explained to that gathering how the Congress represented the entire country. He explained, in fact, their inextricable oneness.

### Under a big tent

In Gandhi's words: "In as much... as I represent the Indian National Congress, I must clearly set forth its position. In spite of appearances to the contrary, especially in England, the Congress claims to represent the whole nation and most decidedly the dumb millions among whom are included the numberless untouchables who are more suppressed than depressed, as also in a way the more unfortunate neglected classes known as backward races..."

And again, at the Conference's Minorities Committee: "...if you were to examine the register of the Congress, if you were to examine the records of the prisons of India, you would find that the Congress



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represented and represents on its register a very large number of Mohammedans. Several thousand Mohammedans went to jail last year under the banner of the Congress... The Congress has Indian Christians also on its register. I do not know that there is a single community which is not represented on the Congress on its register...even landlords and even mill-owners and millionaires are represented there..."

Serving the nation through that party representing 'the whole nation' and its various communities, strengthening that party at its plural grassroots, shaping the resolutions and decisions of its Working Committee and helping it form ministries in eight of the 11 provinces in the elections of 1936-37, Patel then guided it as it took over the reins of the Government of India in 1947. Working for and through the Congress was the Alpha and Omega of Patel's political career.

That made him what he was, the 'indomitable' iron man of India. That also made the Congress, in very great part, what it was – an all-India organisation.

### Congress was Patel's life

No Patel, no national Congress. No Congress, no Sardar Patel. Congress patriotism was his patriotism; Congress politics was his politics.

No one, howsoever anxious to wrench his legacy off from that of

the Congress, can dispute and much less deny that basic and incontrovertible fact. No one, howsoever desperate to annex his legacy to that of another body, cultural or political, like the Hindu Mahasabha or the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh or the Bharatiya Janata Party, can succeed in staging so ridiculous a trapeze show.

Sardar Patel was the Congress's spine. The Congress was Sardar Patel's life.

Does that mean that the Sardar's membership, leadership and stewardship of the Congress was free of tensions? Of course not, because he was human and his party was led and peopled by other humans, each with tempers and temperaments that were distinct. Despite Gandhi's pre-eminent position in it and in the hearts of the people of India, the Congress was not a hegemonic party and its most charismatic leader, Jawaharlal Nehru, was, by instinct, self-training and practice, its most natural democrat. Nehru's was a lunar luminosity in Gandhi's Congress. Nehru's glow could brighten and lessen, and on a moonless light plunge the party in inky gloom. Patel, with his seven great skills – resoluteness, clarity, direction, focus, loyalty, groundedness and guts – was the party's saptarshi, its Ursa Major.

The Congress not only accommodated personality and political variations, it regarded itself as their natural home. It was a place to

which people belonged, not a place in which people assembled for a drill. Its sifit, to use a Persian word that stands for essence or ethos, was its diversity. And its Working Committee embodied that sifit. It had, Gandhi apart, Nehru the socialist and agnostic, Patel the conservative, C. Rajagopalachari the liberal, Rajendra Prasad the traditionalist, Abul Kalam Azad the scholar, J.B. Kripalani the scoffer. At different times it had Subhas Chandra Bose the nationalist, Sarojini Naidu the poet. Each Congressman and Congresswoman was himself or herself first, and then a soldier of the party. Each person was 'rare'. Which is why, describing Acharya Narendra Deva in his obituary speech in Parliament, Nehru spoke of him being "...a man of rare distinction – distinction in many fields – rare in spirit, rare in mind and intellect, rare in integrity of mind and otherwise." The Congress's ranking leaders, as indeed its countless 'file', differed, debated, wrangled and even warred, but stayed true to the party's sifit, because the party gave them that 'play', not as a policy but as an inherent personality trait, India's trait.

The mutual differences between Nehru and Patel are no secret. The Congress did not believe in secrecy. Their mutual trust was no secret. The Congress believed in trust.

Their differences are not to be exaggerated. They are not to be minimised. They are to be contextualised. In the democratic spirit of that plural party.

Sardar Patel led a party as its Ursa Major that was anything but a homogenising factory. It was as plural as it was because it saw itself in the words Gandhi used to describe its eclectic rolls in London in 1931.

### 'India first'

Gandhi, who knew the meaning and action of political variegation, encouraged and succeeded in getting Nehru and Patel to work with coordination and cooperation if not coalescence. And for this, the

realism of both leaders has to be thanked. Their realism, and their sense of 'India first'.

India first was part of their idea of India. And 'India first' was integral to their sense of patriotism, their Congress patriotism.

Four days after Gandhi's assassination, in a letter to his senior in politics, in the party and in age, Nehru wrote: "With Babu's death everything is changed... I have been greatly distressed by the persistence of whispers and rumours about you and me, magnifying out of all proportion any difference we may have."

Patel replied on May 5, 1948: "I am deeply touched... We both have been lifelong comrades in a common cause. The paramount interests of our country and our mutual love and regard, transcending such differences of outlook and temperament as existed, have held us together."

The very previous day, addressing the Congress Party in the Constituent Assembly, Patel described Nehru as "my leader" and said: "I am one with the Prime Minister on all national issues. For over a quarter of a century, both of us sat at the feet of our master and struggled together for the freedom of India. It is unthinkable today, when the Mahatma is no more, that we should quarrel."

The Congress's rank and file should ponder these observations of Nehru and Patel and rectify years of neglect, post-Nehru, of the Sardar's legacy at the false altar of political cronyism. That neglect has lubricated the crassly opportunistic co-option of Patel by the Hindu Right which has no right, logical, political or moral, to that legacy. What the Congress squandered, Hindutva is shovelling in.

The Congress's unwitting de-option of Patel was an error, Hindutva's calculated co-option of Patel is an execration.

'India first' believers should be aware of both.

Gopalkrishna Gandhi is a former administrator, diplomat and Governor

# Of bureaucracy and emotions

If the bureaucracy is not empathetic towards those who are slow to respond, it will be very damaging



YUGANK GOYAL

Eleven-year-old Santoshi Kumari died of starvation in Jharkhand's Simdega district this month. Her ration card was not Aadhaar card-linked, preventing her from receiving any food ration from the Public Distribution System (PDS) for several weeks. Many of us cringed on reading the news. The resulting politicisation of the debate and the cacophony of who is at fault reminds us again of the hopelessness in public discourse.

A fresh, young mind has been left baffled by this. Why did the PDS dealer not give some food to a dying girl? How difficult can it be? An 'old' mind understands. If the paperwork isn't right, what can the dealer do?

### Thinking like a catalogue

Our society runs on paperwork. Bureaucracy came into being after the birth of scripts in ancient civilisation. When a large amount of administrative data was created, a system was needed to retrieve the stored knowledge, which gave rise to archiving, cataloguing and clas-

sifying. More than writing, it was this method of retrieval that led to efficiency. Archaeologists discover new scripts every decade, but what sets the Sumerians, Chinese and Egyptians apart were their investments in building ways of cataloguing, says historian Yuval Noah Harari in his book *Sapiens*.

In our brains, data are organised freely. In libraries, banks and offices, we need librarians, clerks and accountants to organise data. In time, this leads people to be re-programmed to start thinking like machines, reading and retrieving data, rather than thinking like humans. Modern debates of objectivity make our obsession with paperwork even more brutal. Discretion and free thought are peripheral while forms and filing cabinets become central.

### 'Cabinetisation' of the world

All this took a strong hold rather late in history. With economies growing, this transformation was inevitable. In his book *Cubed*, Nikil Saval gives us a fascinating account of how all-purpose clerks, who ran most organisations in the U.S. until the late 19th century, were transformed under the spell of a specialisation drive, largely influenced by the ideas of Frederick Taylor. In his book, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*, David Graeber writes of how the bureaucracy en-



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courages cultivating helpless stupidity in both state and people. Ken Loach's recent film, *I, Daniel Blake*, tells a horrific tale of a helpless plumber trying in vain to work through the bureaucracy to get welfare benefits. The Taipei Biennial 2016 expressed how bureaucracies have informed the imagination.

As opaque pieces of paper with signatures and seals take hold of our world, pain becomes linear and voiceless. Yet, this has worked out rather efficiently in the West. Societies run by clocks, computer commands and as queues waiting for their numbers to be displayed on the board. Regardless of the horrors, the trading of emotions for the order and regularity of bureaucratic life has paid off in the rich countries. The question is this: why hasn't it worked in poor societies? And how can it?

Bureaucracy is new in developing countries. And we must realise that institutionally, people are not "bureaucracy-receptive". In his monograph, *Danes Are Like That*, anthropologist G. Prakash Reddy writes of his experience of living in a tiny Danish village called Hvilsager in the early 1990s. There, he was struck by the individuality and insularity of people's lives. He writes: "Coming as I do from India, and born and brought up in a village, I am used to seeing people... The doors of all the houses were closed and created a doubt in me, as to whether this village had any people at all."

The Indian villager accesses the state through a local leader. Everyone knows everyone else and independent bureaucracy cannot be executed in the web of interdependent informal relationships among the stakeholders. When the state creates a new bureaucratic framework that trumps local networks (on which informal societies such as India are built), citizens become confused and find themselves at a loss to negotiate their space. Here is an example. Many of our grandparents prefer to go to the bank rather than call customer care. Any new conduit of relationships makes them recede.

### The traditional link

Societies carry a historical burden of norms and customs. Mostly in-

formal in nature, these institutions cannot be changed overnight. New laws and regulations introduced in any society must recognise the informal social norms society is predicated upon. In societies such as India, citizen-state interaction is historically built on patronage and personal relations; bureaucratic forms of engagement are recent. The 'modern' forms of citizen-state engagement through the bureaucracy do not go well with 'traditional' citizens. Western societies that are individualised, are prepared to function bureaucratically, and can successfully build independent regulatory bodies. But collectivist societies like India cannot, and may be should not, try this. Therefore, shouldn't we build a framework for emotional bureaucracies to emerge?

In diverse societies, bureaucracies have to be contextual, and therefore emotional. They must be designed for everyone, and not just for the urban elites. Regulations force people to change their behaviour and dynamics instantly. If the bureaucracy is not empathetic to those who are slow in responding, it will be hugely damaging to society as a whole. It will leave so many of us distressed, some of us dead, and even worse, most of us devoid of compassion.

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## 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.

### Rich with possibility

The Indian government's successful attempt to ship wheat to Afghanistan was made possible after talks with the U.S. Secretary of State. This step will give a huge impetus to India-Afghanistan relations, and in turn India-U.S. relations. The point to be noted is that the shipment is through Iran's Chabahar port and that the U.S. has supported India's use of the Iran route to reach Afghanistan, despite deteriorating U.S.-Iran relations. The route can also be utilised to enhance economic activity later. Significantly, this could be a solution to India's desire for connectivity to energy-rich West Asia without being affected by Pakistan ("India ships wheat to Afghanistan via Chabahar", October 30).

MAYUKH DEVAJAS,  
Thiruvur, Kerala

### Eroding jurisdiction

What is the value of a high court judgment if one of the two parties, unsatisfied with its judgment, moves to the Supreme Court, thereby consuming more time and increasing the pendency of other cases? A way has to be evolved to appoint a separate bench of judges to deal with those cases that come from the high courts. When the law is the same for all courts, the difference lies in the perception of the case and the conclusive evidence presented. The quality of judgments by the various high courts should be improved to avoid conflicts later. Moreover, the large pendency of cases in all courts should be disposed of expeditiously ("Devaluing high courts", October 30).

T.S.N. RAO,  
Bheemavaram, Andhra Pradesh

It is unfortunate to read that our single integrated judicial system is fast losing its character by devaluing the highest court of appeal in the State. In *Chandra Kumar* (1997), the Supreme Court laid down that appeals against the orders of the Central Administrative Tribunal shall lie before the division bench of the high court concerned. This power should be extended to other tribunals also, ensuring the relevance of high courts.

MUHAMMED FAIZAL T.,  
Kollam, Kerala

### Bank recapitalisation

The infusion of fresh capital into public sector banks will be without purpose unless long-standing governance issues such as political interference in lending and remote control of decision-making processes using pliable appointees are

addressed (OpEd Cartoon, October 30). The cartoon was succinct. Powerful corporates will continue to flex their financial and political muscles in the appointment of CEOs of their choice. The Banks Board Bureau is turning out to be a damp squib. The decision on the infusion was a knee-jerk reaction which stemmed from the government's need to be seen as doing something to stop the economy from sagging. Unless steps are taken to plug accretion of fresh NPAs, recapitalisation will only amount to throwing good money after bad and provide an escape route to wilful defaulters.

MANOHAR ALEMBATH,  
Kannur, Kerala

### Second chance

For a country that had excelled in football in the

1950s and 1960s, bringing laurels to the nation in the international arena and boasting of players such as the legendary P.K. Banerjee, it is now a sad reality that the zeal for the game and talent has remained confined by and large to local and State levels. However, the Under-17 football World Cup has provided much needed relief for a cricket frenzied nation such as ours, where cricket has taken centrestage and almost all sport have been relegated to

the background. Notwithstanding the defeats, India's spirited performance should push governments and the Sports Authority of India to revive the past glory of Indian football. Football academies should be opened. Due attention needs to be accorded to the game right from school. (Editorial - "Splendid goal", October 30).

B. SURESH KUMAR,  
Coimbatore

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### CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In a Science and Technology page article titled "Did Asians cause the Haitian cholera outbreak?" (Oct. 29, 2017), a sentence in the sixth paragraph read: "India is a cholera-endemic zone and many Indians are immune to the virus." It should have been *bacteria* – not virus.

It is the policy of The Hindu to correct significant errors as soon as possible. Please specify the edition (place of publication), date and page. The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300 (11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday); Fax: +91-44-28552963; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in; Mail: Readers' Editor, The Hindu, Kasturi Buildings, 859 & 860 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002, India. All communication must carry the full postal address and telephone number. No personal visits. The Terms of Reference for the Readers' Editor are on www.thehindu.com