8 ISSUES AND INSIGHTS

ne of the irritating

democracy is that,

about

things

every now and then, vot-

ers make stupid choices.

This is not surprising:

Nobody says that the

majority is always right,

merely that majority

approval is required for

legitimacy. Yet even in the

annals of stupid majority

decisions, Brexit shines.

Brexit would never

Two parties and many



MIHIR SHARMA

have happened, or caused the sort of extraordinary chaos it has, if the standard and time-tested institutions of parliamentary democracy had not been bypassed by then British Prime Minister David Cameron in order to have a referendum that he thought he would easily win. But he chose to have a vote with "Leave" and "Remain" on the ballot, and 52 per cent of British voters chose to leave. Actually facilitating this task was then delegated to their representatives. This is a reminder of why we don't have plebiscites, and instead choose representatives. Give the voters half a chance and they will demand the

tives who can figure out what is in fact possible. But there's one other thing that has emerged from the post-Brexit mess that British politics has descended into, particularly evident to any Indian observer: A fragmented politics, with multiple shifting coalitions, is far better, more efficient, and more democratic, than the "normal" twoparty system.

impossible; what's needed is for them to select representa-

What happened in Brexit? Why was it such a surprise to, say. David Cameron? It turns out that, while pro-European Union Conservatives had long understood that their party harboured a large number of committed Eurosceptics, they overlooked the fact that many voters who would never vote Conservative had similar views about Europe (or, more accurately, about foreigners generally). Late on Brexit referendum night, it was when the north-eastern town of Sunderland voted to Leave that people began to realise what was happening — Sunderland has had a Labour local government since the local council was first set up in the 1970s and is the closest thing to a one-party town you can imagine.

This is why post-Brexit politics has destroyed cohesion in not just the Conservative but also the Labour Party. If Theresa May constantly has to fight off her extremist wing, Jeremy Corbyn of Labour leads a restive set of immigrationhating Brexiteers, socialists who think the EU is a neoliberal plot, and metropolitan Europhiles. The moment he takes a real stand on Brexit, the uneasy concord within the Labour Party might fall apart — and he might lose ground in either the north-east, in places not so different from Sunderland, or in London and other cities where Remain won a comfortable majority.

It is often argued that the Brexit referendum was an expression of frustration — whenever a majority does something stupid, we are under orders to never say that it is stupid, we have to say instead that it is born of legitimate frustration. It's as if someone runs deliberately into the path of oncoming traffic and pundits say sadly "this is naturally an expression of frustration at the abysmal implementation of traffic laws and the preferences given to SUVs in a neoliberal set-up". But in fact, to the extent that any frustration was revealed, it was frustration at disenfranchisement. The Labour party, too, had its own xenophobes, but mainstream Labour had never gone far enough to appease them. Yet under a strict two-party system, they could not imagine defecting to the other tribe. Such a mass defection happens only rarely, and under specific circumstances — as when whites in the Southern United States turned en masse from the Democratic to the Republican Party in the three decades after the civil rights movements of the 1960s. Thus they could not express themselves in "normal" times — but, when given a chance in a referendum freed of party identification, they did so quite emphatically.

And this is why multi-party states, that require coalitions, are better. You always have an option; most people will find a way to express themselves, even through a minority party that might well wind up holding the scales of now er at some point. Coalition politics is far more democratic, in that it provides voice to more factions; it is far more efficient, in that more information is conveyed from the electorate (the opposite of how north-eastern Labour voters' views were not conveyed accurately); and it is thus "better". There is no reason to suppose that two-party states are the normal sort of democratic set-up. In fact, as Europe's vast variety of coalitions show us, Britain and the United States are the exception rather than the norm. Thus, as India prepares to vote in 2019, it is worth remembering several things. First, coalitions are not the enemy: They provide better representation. As the current government's awful record reminds us, one-party governments need not be better than coalition governments, and are often worse. And second, the argument "there is no alternative to Modi" is fatally flawed — in India, we are particularly fortunate, since there are dozens of alternatives.

What Ganga-jal oath means for India

Rewriting history will be the most important nationalised industry aimed at inventing an ancient post-modern miracle



ne phrase in a message Tulsi Gabbard

sent me four years ago I shall never

forget. "Our world is in dire need of

servant leaders," she wrote. I was reminded of

it again when a few days after Tulsi announced

her campaign to seek the Democratic nomi-

nation for US president in 2020, the papers

carried a picture of police personnel detailed

for duty at the Ardh Kumbh mela in Allahabad

(sorry, Prayagraj) with their left arms extended

in smart salutation but their right hands

cupped in a curiously unmilitary gesture.

Being in Adityanath's Uttar Pradesh, they were

taking the oath in Ganga-jal.

The connection is that Tulsi is the first Hindu member of the US Congress. It's a theoretical connection for no matter how piously UP's chief minister drapes himself in saffron, it will be a long time before his state will live down Justice AN Mulla's comment that "the police force in Uttar Pradesh is an organised gang of criminals". Someone or other — the National Human Rights Commission one day, Markandey Katju another — always recalls that indictment. No one expects a Ganga-ial oath to be any more binding than the oaths that are commonly sworn every day in thousands of law courts up and down the country.

My concern is what Ganga-jal portends for the national psyche. I am all for Narendra Modi's commitment to Hindus in Muslim countries. They were Indians once and have become foreigners only because of high-level statecraft in which they played no part. Moreover, they are at the mercy of unsympathetic populations and regimes. If India doesn't care for them, who will? But Hindutva through the backdoor is a different matter. Ganga-jal oath-taking might be dismissed as another Indian ritual like blowing a welcoming conch shell or lighting a lamp to inaugurate an exhi-

bition but if it continues, all the ceremonial of the state will become exclusively Hindu.

It wouldn't have been permitted in Tulsi's country where any attempt to impose Christianity is struck down as transgressing the First Amendment to the constitution which forbids Congress to "make" any "law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof ...". This was demonstrated in 1988 when the American Civil Liberties Union and the Jewish War Veterans objected to a 65-ft cross at Camp Smith near Pearl Harbour in Tulsi's Hawaii. The cross was dismantled after a federal court ruled it violated the constitutional separation of church and state, and replaced with an 80ft flagpole which still flies a huge American flag. History was repeated in 1997 when the Hawaii Citizens for the Separation of State and Church complained that the 37-ft white steel cross at Schofield Barracks, built with public funds was a "blatant and obvious violation" of the First Amendment. When the attorney for Hawaii Citizens heard that the federal court had ordered the cross to be dismantled, he declared, "If this is true, the action sends a strong message that the wall between state and church stands tall and forbids government from endorsing Christianity in particular over other religions."

The wall between state and temple is being blasted as surely as the Babri Masjid was demolished. If this continues, India will one day be overrun by old, diseased and dying cattle. Gangs of toughs will roam the country butchering anyone they don't like because they are alleged beef-eaters, while other thugs attack bars, discos and dance halls. The reinvented past will truly be another country. Rewriting history will be the most important nationalised industry aimed at inventing an ancient post-modern miracle whose seers and sants miraculously anticipated every single Western scientific discovery before it had even been discovered.

I much prefer Tulsi Gabbard's concept of 'servant leadership" where the leader "embodies the spirit of aloha (love, affection, peace, compassion and mercy in the Hawaiian language); one who actually loves and cares for others and our environment." It saddened me that there's little likelihood of her propagating that enlightened mission from the White House. Then I read her clarification, "Sometimes people think I'm just referring to 'political leaders,' but I'm not. By 'leaders', I mean everyone who is in a position to influence others — whether they be judges, business people, educators, doctors, bus drivers, parents, journalists, etc." As for herself, she asks, "Am I going to have the attitude of a loving servant and well-wisher or the attitude of a self-interested exploiter?" It's a question every Indian politician should have to address.

LUNCH WITH BS MANISH MEHROTRA CHEF INDIAN ACCENT

A master class on food

Mehrotra tells Rahul Jacob why he is excited about the rise of regional cuisines in India and explains how he manages restaurants in three different countries

Manish Mehrotra at his acclaimed restaurant Indian Accent a few years ago was inauspicious. The managing director for Asia of my former employer, the Financial Times, visiting from Hong Kong, had asked me to book a table. After repeated calls, I finally secured a table for the second dinner sitting. We duly arrived to find the restaurant a third empty because of a number of no-show customers. Dinner, however, was delicious, featuring Western-style plating and their style of distilling sauces melded with Indian regional cuisines. When Mehrotra came by for his customary post-dinner chat, the rest of the table complimented the food, but I grumbled that the restaurant should adopt the policy of high-end restaurants overseas and simply take credit card details when people booked and charge for no-shows.

Mehrotra laughed and Mehrotra explains why he cuisines in Delhi, people would **gastronomy, making the** soon be shouting down **practical point that its** who my father is?"

Indian Accent has **food because "we eat our** food." Mehrotra in food hot. It is fine as long opened outposts London and New York as it is assisting the dish, and made a move last not the hero of the dish. year to a more accessible **The surprise element** location at The Lodi in works only once. New Delhi. He remains a

first meeting with the tyranny of the tikka. He points to a recently opened Andhra restaurant in New Delhi and the popularity of The Potbelly, which features the cuisine of his native Bihar, as signs of progress. The dominance of what he describes as "very Delhi-centric restaurant food - certain kinds of tikkas and certain gravies revolving around what was called 'rogan josh' that was not even Kashmiri rogan josh but (merely) a mutton curry" may be ending. But, he also makes the point that Chinese cuisine was stuck in a similar rut overseas "whereas Beijing food is very different from Cantonese food."

I happily discover that one of my pet peeves — the monotony of so much restaurant food that contrasts with the diversity of food one eats in homes in India — is also Mehrotra's. "I'm so happy that not only in India, but internationally, regional

disarmingly replied that **steered clear of molecular** coming Places the phone: "Do you know trademark flourishes such doing typically as foams don't typically Rajasthani food

Since then, Mehrotra's work well with Indian

country. A big seller is a limeflavoured idli with chutney podi. Another is a seekh kebab drenched in melted butter courtesy a recipe from a small store in old Delhi, which I involuntarily let slip sounds "disgusting". "It's super yum," he insists. Another recipe from his college days combines a smoked chicken with a cashew paste and yogurt-based gravy, butter chicken modernised for the 21st century. The name Comorin is inspired by Cape Comorin, an acknowledgement also Mehrotra's love for south Indian food. He goes into raptures about "the acidity and pungency of Andhra gongura" and the potency of pepper — "one of India's best treasures".

of

Mehrotra fell in love with south Indian food because his wife is a Chettiar, a community known to be rabidly carnivorous food obsessives. The couple met years ago when he was working at the Thai Pavilion and she was at the Konkan Café, both at the Taj President Hotel in Mumbai. Angling for an anecdote of pickles exchanged and elaborate meals prepared as part of their courtship, I press him for more but he laughs off the ques tion. Instead, he speaks with fondness of learning from his motherin-law to crush rather than cut tomatoes while making rasam, a detail that surprises me. I never watch MasterChef TV shows, but Mehrotra's enthusiasm is so infectious, I feel as if I am in his kitchen getting a masterclass in cooking. We move on to the challenge of managing restaurants in three different countries. In addition to the original restaurant in New Delhi, Indian Accent in London completed its first year in December while his outpost in New York will turn three in February. His management secret is delegate, delegate, delegate - and retain star employees. "You have to train as

him to The Potbelly a couple of days later, but that is a busy day for a chef as it is Christmas Eve so he suggests meeting at Indian Accent at noon instead.

Four days later, we pick up where we left off. Mehrotra explains why he steered clear of molecular gastronomy, making the practical point that its trademark flourishes such as foams don't typically work well with Indian food because "we eat our food hot." But, the more he speaks about it, the less he sounds a fan: "Molecular gastronomy is fine as long as it is assisting the dish, not the hero of the dish. The surprise element works only once." I ask him if running a restaurant in London is much easier than in New York. It turns out it is the other way around; the UK has so many Indian restaurants that there is a local

industry making ghee, papad and other essentials but not as well as in India. In the US, he says, it is much easier to import these things directly from India. Brexit, meanwhile, has inevitably cast a shadow even over Mehrotra's sunny view of the world; his waiting staff in London include people from Italy, Latvia and the Czech Republic.

This time around, food is on its way: Delicious mini-parathas alternately stuffed with blue cheese and Canadian bacon, pork ribs with Gujarati sweet chutney and a daulat ki chaat so redolent of saffron that it makes the original from the alleys in Chandni Chowk seem a verv cousin. But, the head chef has called in sick at the recently opened Comorin so Mehrotra must leave before it is served. While he waits for an Ola cab to take him to Gurugram, I take the opportunity to introduce my nephew, who I am riding with to the airport that afternoon. Mehrotra and my nephew animatedly discuss Deadliest Catch, a gripping show on Discovery about the dangers of working on fishing fleets. As Mehrotra leaves, I say we must meet at The Potbelly next time. As his car pulls away, I can't help thinking that getting a busy chef to sit still long enough to have a leisurely lunch away from his restaurant might again prove an impossible challenge.

Email: m.s.sharma@gmail.com; Twitter: @mihirssharma

celebrated chef - with-

out the trappings of celebrity. He mostly replied to emails himself to schedule our interview, even while juggling cooking at the Ambani wedding. We meet at Indian Accent at 5 pm, a time when the restaurant seems like an empty theatre before a performance. Mehrotra, 44, comes out of a meeting wearing his chef's coat and plunges straight into the subject of whether Indian regional cuisines have at long last arrived after decades of being overshadowed by

"People ing. outside India and in India are getting more aware not only of regional food

says with feel

London

or

are

up.

in

are

Bengali

but that in Maharashtra, you would have Konkani food or Malvani food. in Kerala you have Syrian Christian food or Moplah food. More and more young chefs, instead of inventing new things, are exploring more deeply inside India."

This proves a natural preamble to discussing Mehrotra's latest venture, Comorin, which opened in December, a casual restaurant in Gurugram that combines comfort food (cheeni malai toast) with street food from different parts of the **ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINH**

many people as you can otherwise you are never going to grow," he says. "My restaurants are headed by chefs who have been working with me for 10 to 18 years."

We are 45 minutes into the interview and no food has arrived. When I raise the subject, worrying I will seem greedy, Mehrotra's embarrassment matches my own: I have inadvertently picked a time when his chefs are off-shift. I am secretly relieved because I had come to the interview from a mehndi lunch at a friend's home and unwisely raided her mother's kitchen as I left for nolen gurer sandesh that had just arrived from Kolkata. I ask Mehrotra if I can take

New found freedom



PEOPLE LIKE THEM **GEETANJALI KRISHNA**

met Pintu Devi last August but the shadows on her young, beautiful face made it hard for me to get her face out of my mind. She was barely 18, dressed in a simple *salwar kameez*. It looked like the weight of the world was on her shoulders. Her little brother had recently died and they were still in mourning. Her father Sohanlal was with her, and broke down often as she impassively told me her story. This is what she said.

In rural Rajasthan, the practice of *mauser* is apparently quite commonly followed when an elder dies. Within 13 days of the death, the unmarried members of the family are married in a com-

munal wedding. The auspiciousness of marriage is supposed to offset the ritual pollution that the death has brought. It was in accordance with this arcane custom that a six-year-old Pintu was married off to a 15-year-old bridegroom. "I didn't even know the boy's family," Sohanlal said, adding "I just went along with whatever the elders in the family decreed". Ten marriages took place that day, of which, four were of children. The youngest participant was barely two. "Even I was so young, I didn't know what was happening during the ceremony," she told me.

Life went back to normal after the marriage. Pintu continued to live with her parents till the summer of 2018. She was 18 then, and the boy's family began demanding that she be sent to her marital home. "By then we had learnt that my father-in-law was a criminal," she recounted. "I didn't want to go to their house," she said. Luckily, her father, who was a tractor operator, didn't have enough savings to pay for the wedding jewellery and feast. "When he tried to stall, the boy's family got so aggressive that we decided to annul the marriage," Pintu said.

Pintu and her family endured threats, aggression and barbs from the boy's family as well as the larger com-

munity after that. Even more traumatic were the many trips she had to take to the family court. She realised that although performing a child marriage is illegal in India, getting it annulled in court is not that easy. "If it hadn't been for Saarthi Trust, I would never have been able to do it ... " she said. Dr Kriti Bharti, founder of the Trust, gave her legal advise as well as psychological counseling to help her tide through this phase.

Finally, in December 2018, over 12 years after she had been so unfairly married off, Pintu won her freedom in court. "I wish I could make sure that no other girl had to go through what I did." she told me.

But sadly, child marriage continues to enjoy social sanction in Rajasthan. "The authorities publicise the child marriages prevented on akha teej, but conveniently fail to prevent marriages taking place the year round under mauser," says Bharti. Which is why a nameless chill ran down my spine when I saw a picture of Pintu, smiling victoriously outside court after her marriage had been finally annulled. I couldn't help wondering if the shadows I'd seen earlier on her face had not disappeared, but simply found another little girl to prey upon.



PEOPLE LIKE US KISHORE SINGH

n Wednesday, when I'd come home and changed into my party clothes, my wife gave me a bowl of soup and said, "We're not going out anywhere tonight, so this is dinner.' It felt strange to be home for a change, though it should have felt good to put one's feet up and relax. The whole of the previous week, we had been on a party carousel. Not just your callingsome-friends-over kind of get-togethers but wedding soirees that seemed to have all of Delhi society aflutter. This winter, everyone we know — or don't, since many invitations arrive from acquaintances we can barely recall seem to have children whose nuptials have overlapped, necessitating our having to cherry-pick between a cocktail

here, a brunch there, and, again, dinner with all the accoutrements of a Delhistyle wedding.

No more party hopping

With it came the problems "of the developed world kind", as a friend mocked us. Could one wear the same jacket to a wedding lunch as to a sundowner a fortnight later? Would guests or friends remember what you wore to one sangeet and repeated at another reception? "Yes," said my wife, when I posed what I thought was a rhetorical question hardly deserving of a response. Turns out, my wife maintains a roster of the clothes she has worn to various functions so all she needs to do is check through her phone album to ensure she isn't making a sartorial faux-pas. Apparently, repeating a dress or piece of jewellery is an offence worthy of scurrilous gossip at the least, or social media shaming at worst.

Meanwhile, I'd got used to my evening tipple and 'food on circulation'. From experience, I can tell you that thin crust pizzas seem to be the flavour of the season, and since I am partial to them, I began to look forward to my evening victuals. But my wife was more picky. "Let's have the Purani Dilli selection today," she instructed me. The previous evening, we'd been glued to the

oriental section because it was the caterer's specialty, and on the day before that my wife had forbidden me from having the pasta because everyone knew the caterer had the worst Mediterranean in town but his haleem was divine. "Tomorrow," she said because spouses seem to know who's doing the food (as well as the hair) -"vou must have the Japanese."

It got so that even the waiters began to recognise us, and would ply us with kebabs and alcohol in the hope of a little baksheesh - which some among our friends tend to find at all surprising. "So much nicer to sit in one place and be served," pointed out one, when I resisted being colonised in a corner with a limitless supply of spirits and nourishment. It ended up in a lot of wastage, but our friend seemed not to mind since it was the host, not he, who was paying.

Nor does there seem to be a break from shaadi fever any time soon. Till the foreseeable future. our evenings are chock-a-block with nuptial festivities and merrymaking - one of which, of course, will be hosted by us. Seeing how I'm a little bit tired of all the wedding hopping, can someone please invite us over for a home-cooked meal and regular conversation?

OPINION 9

Volume VI Number 25 MUMBAI | 19 JANUARY 2019

Weekend Business Standard

WEEKEND RUMINATIONS T N NINAN East-South divergence

lobally, we are living through the Great Convergence, when many of the poorer nations have been growing their incomes faster than the wealthier ones, thereby closing some of the gap between the two groups. What about convergence within the country, between the poorer and richer states? The hard truth is that there is none. Instead, there is only divergence.

Consider tax revenue. Madhya Pradesh has half the tax resources of Karnataka (not counting transfers from the Centre), with a population that is 20 per cent bigger. UP has two-and-a-half times the population of Tamil Nadu, but broadly similar tax resources. The bottom rung is occupied by (you guessed it) Bihar, which, with a substantially greater population than Andhra Pradesh and Telangana combined, has only 12 (yes, twelve) per cent of the Telugu-speaking states' tax resources. Odisha has half the tax resources of Kerala, but a 30 per cent greater population.

Central transfers can make up some, not all, of the inequality. MP gets twothirds more Central money than Karnataka, and Bihar 50 per cent more than the Telugu-speaking states. But per capita social sector spending by the poorer states remains lower than in the better-off ones. This is the opposite of what it should be, if the backward states are to catch up with the others. Bihar spends ₹76 per head in a year on the social sector, while Kerala spends ₹139. UP spends ₹69 while Maharashtra spends ₹120. West Bengal spends ₹95 while Karnataka spends ₹124. Some relatively backward states do better, like Chhattisgarh (₹150) and Odisha (₹115), but in general the pattern is skewed towards the south and west — ie the states that already have higher levels of attainment. These inequalities reflect even greater inequalities in private sector investment across states, the relative shares of airline flights, the availability of quality jobs, and so on. Migration provides only a partial corrective.

Inevitably, the skew in Central transfers to the poorer states of the east and north is financed from the tax resources contributed by the southern and western states. So far this has passed unnoticed. But voices of protest were heard last year when it became known that the Finance Commission (which decides on Central transfers to states) may have been asked to increase transfers to the poorer states, at the cost of the states from where the bulk of the revenues come. Indeed, the introduction of the goods and services tax (GST) in 2017 had been expected to shift state GST money to the "consuming" states from the "producing" ones. This was one of the reasons why Narendra Modi as Gujarat chief minister had blocked the introduction of the GST, because he feared loss of state revenue. To everyone's surprise, it does not seem to have worked out that way, but may well do so over time.

Meanwhile, the tinderbox issue is state-wise Lok Sabha seat allocation. This has remained frozen for nearly half a century, even as the population in the Bimaru states of the east and north has grown, relative to the south. The result today is that the average Lok Sabha constituency in Bihar has 2.6 million citizens, but only 1.65 million in Kerala; and 2.5 million in Madhya Pradesh compared to 1.84 million in Tamil Nadu. The next review of the state-wise seat allocation is due in 2026. Should a decision be taken then, that the citizen-per-seat ratio be equalised, you can expect strong protests from the south. And yet, keeping the present seat allocation frozen indefinitely would mean steadily more unequal representation across states, given that the southern states are no longer producing enough babies to sustain their population over time.

What should be clear is that the two issues - equalisation of state finances and of Lok Sabha representation - cannot be addressed simultaneously, lest a spark be lit and start a fire. Yet persisting with the inequalities, indeed seeing them get worse, is no one's prescription for national unity. Will fudging the issues be a solution? Only for a while, but it will buy time.



A Shiv*ji ki baraat* without a groom

India is mushrooming with Deve Gowda wannabes because being a former prime minister is better than being a former chief minister

the rich folklore of The Indian Express - where I worked for 25 years in two spells. One eminent friend asked the late Ramnath Goenka why he wasn't giving his editor an extension of contract. "He is such a saint, I can't believe you don't want him for longer," complained the eminent friend.

"Bhai, he is Saint George Verghese, I agree. But my Indian Express is Shiv ji ki baraat. It is too much for a saint to handle," said the patriarch.

Now, Shiv ji ki baraat is a millennia-old metaphor for a riotously mer- the Left, whom nobody ry mob of diverse living species, ghosts, spirits, apparitions and witches, high on the brew or concoction of their choice. Tell me if this isn't how today's anti-BJP opposition parties look across the country

The only reason Shiv ji ki baraat was still kept in reasonable order was the stature and the unchallenged leadership of the groom-to-be, Lord Shiva. In this modern version, every baraati is a groom-to-be. This is why Narendra Modi and his strategists are smiling, tossing away the blues after the state poll losses.

Let's start counting. There is the Congress, led by India's most prominent new Shiv-bhakt, with four allies of reasonable reliability: Sharad Pawar's NCP, M K Stalin's DMK, Lalu Prasad's RJD and HD Deve Gowda's JD(S). Let's call it the second front (NDA being the first). Then, the SP and the BSP are going their own way together in an Uttar Pradesh "gathbandhan". As things stand, in the election campaign, these two will attack the BJP, but also the Congress, and viceversa. Let's call them the third front, if only for convenience.

ere is a famous story from display with Mamata Banerjee's show little ideological glue between any of of strength. This includes the Congress, the SP, the BSP, and many of the reigning regional satraps, including the DMK, Chandrababu Naidu's TDP and Arvind Kejriwal's AAP. This is some kind of a fourth front.

Then there are Naveen Patnaik's BJD, the TRS of K Chandrashekara Rao (KCR) and Jagan Mohan Reddy's YSR-CP, who are out of all these groupings, and waiting for a break some place. These are our fifth, sixth, seventh fronts and so on.

And finally, we have wants. This is the state of the anti-BJP parties today, a Shiv ji ki baraat without a groom.

 $T^{\rm his\ can\ be\ sliced}_{\rm and\ diced\ further.}$ If you look at Mamata's stage, the Congress and SHEKHAR GUPTA the AAP are there, but still bitter rivals in Delhi

and Punjab. The TDP has not yet sealed an alliance with the Congress, given the uncertainty over the mutual transfer of votes after the debacle of Telangana. The SP and the BSP are set to fight the Congress to a repeat humiliation in Uttar Pradesh. Patnaik, as always, is keeping his options open. His is the least ideological of all regional parties. He can afford to be, because he has almost no dependence on the Muslim vote.

KCR is sure he is prime minister material. The Congress and the Left are bitter rivals in Kerala. The only thing that brings the leaders of these diverse parties together, even on a rally stage, is Yet another alliance of sorts is now on their opposition to the BJP. But there is

them. Barring the Congress, none of these parties can reach the number of 50. Their best hope: Keep the BJP below

170, the Congress at 100, and then build an alliance of the rest that forces the Congress to support it from outside. The last time we saw this movie, it was called Deve Gowda's United Front, In such an election, each one of these stalwarts would see a chance for tenancy at Lok Kalyan Marg, however short. Being a former prime minister for the rest of

your life is better than being a former chief minister. In 1996, the comrade late Harkishan Singh Surjeet had to conjure up a Deve Gowda from some place. Today, the opposition has a gaggle of "main-bhi-

Gowda" wannabes. NATIONAL INTEREST India isn't about to repeat in 2019 what it did in 1996 and felt stupid. That is why you find the confidence and the smiles back on the BJP faces. Mr Modi and his

strategists believe the contest this summer will bear no resemblance to the recent state elections or the many recent byelections they lost. The opposition's disunity, conflicting ambitions, personal antagonisms and the one-point agenda of "Modi

Hatao" have convinced them that India is headed for a 1971. Indira-versus-therest kind of elections. Where all pundits added the voter arithmetic and pronounced that she was going to lose, she won a landslide on the slogan of "Garibi Hatao" versus "Indira Hatao".

In a state election, as in Madhya Byspecial arrangement with ThePrint

What the disastrous Brexit caper tells us



It looks to be very unlikely but even in this relatively benign scenario, there would be large opportunity costs. There have been 18 months of uncertainty. Think of how the UK economy has slowed. Think of the business that just went elsewhere. Think of the investments not made. Think of the

importance as a financial centre. And, of course, there will be huge bureaucratic and legislative costs associated with unravelling 40-odd years of treaties and agreements.

In sum, the whole Brexit caper is a racism. John Donne may have believed that iaranteed disaster, only the dimensions might vary — from being substantial to absolutely monstrous. So it's worth asking how and why Britain landed itself in this particular mess?

would dim if there was an influx of European labour. They failed to realise that the pie itself would shrink, and perhaps, shrink quite drastically.

A third reason is genuine, knee-jerk no man is an island but it is true that

Give myth a chance

EYE CULTURE KUMAR ABISHEK

the years to glorify the so-called scien- are said to have originated from pots tific achievements preserved in the Vedas, Hindu mythology, and other ancient texts. Such attempts in the past few years have spilt over to the Indian Science Congress — most recently in its latest, 106th edition. Andhra University Vice-chancellor G Nageshwar Rao claimed ancient Indians had knowledge of stem cell research, test-tube fertilisation, aviation and guided missiles, citing tales from the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. More such seemingly bizarre statements were made during the science congress, evoking sharp criticism, and even protest from mainstream scientists.

nological achievement of the 20th century. But, there is a hymn in the Rigveda (VII.33.13) that tells us about a process similar to that of in-vitro fertilisation. There have been constant efforts over Also, in the Mahabharata, the Kauravas containing halls of flesh nourishe

Pradesh, Rajasthan or Chhattisgarh, you can go against the incumbent without a chief ministerial candidate. Your voters know the two or three contenders within your party and are not particularly polarised in terms of personal loyalties. In a national election, it is dangerous to say we will fight Mr Modi state by state, and also each other at the same time. He will turn it into a "so which among these will be your new Gowda" campaign. He can, and would, then cut you down piecemeal.

Thile the BJP compares 2019 to While the BJF compared _____ even better for them for two reasons. One, unlike in 1971, today a very large number of seats will go to regional parties. Several of them, from the Dravidian parties to Mayawati and even Mamata, have zero or negotiable ideological hang-ups, having partnered or opposed both the BJP and the Congress. So, they need to keep their options open. The optimum BJP plus Congress number in a general election is 350 out of 543. Anything below 300 starts opening up possibilities. And in case it is below 275 these parties will hunt in a fully bivalent manner. They continue to be likely allies for the BJP too.

Second, in 1971, it was still possible for major opposition parties, especially in the heartland, to be united only by sheer anti-Congressism. Today, there is strong anti-BJPism but the competing anti-Congress impulse endures. The prospect of a broken mandate is encouraging many of these below-50-seat stalwarts to fantasise about a non-BJP, non-Congress government. The most vocal proponent of this is Telangana's KCR. Now, arithmetic tells you the fol-

lowing: Even if the BJP and the Congress together count for less than 250, there is no way the rest could reach 272 without one of these big two supporting them from outside. That means a prime minister on daily wages, like V P Singh, Chandra Shekhar, HD Deve Gowda or I K Gujral.

Next, because no leader other than Mr Modi or Rahul Gandhi is even theoretically capable of crossing 50, a non-BJP/non-Congress leader who others would tolerate for more than a year, forget respecting him/her for five years, is an impossibility. Such a government, a riotous Shiv ji ki baraat without a leader or a groom, would fall apart soon. Remember, how even a saint like Jayaprakash Narayan failed to keep one such flock together in 1979?

Finally: If the Opposition insists on going leaderless, Mr Modi will only need to read out this script and the voters would most likely listen to him. Even if they don't, if a split election produces a 10-month-wonder again, it will subsequently give Amit Shah the opportunity to make his boast of 50 years of BJP rule.



VIEWPOINT **DEVANGSHU DATTA**

ver since the surprise result of the referendum on June 23, 2016, Brexit has been like a train wreck in slow motion. Stretching the metaphor further, the crash is now due on March 29, 2019. Nobody has a clue what will happen and there is no way to even start totting up costs.

The costs will be considerable, whatever occurs. Consider the two most extreme options. One is that the United Kingdom decides to remain within the EU - perhaps, after holding another referendum. This would be the least disruptive outcome and hence, the best in economic terms.

UK-based organisations, which have created alternate headquarters elsewhere.

At the other extreme, a "hard Brexit" and a disorderly exit would likely lead to a crash in the UK's growth as skilled labour and investment disappears, coupled with a spike in inflation as European Union goods became more expensive. It would also leave millions stranded on the wrong side of the English Channel, Some 3 million-odd EU citizens in the UK would see their right of residence, right to work, health care benefits, etc., being suspended. Similarly, millions of British citizens would be left in limbo on the continent.

A hard Brexit appears a higher probability outcome than "Remain". But it's more likely that some sort of compromise solution, somewhere between a soft to middling-hard Brexit, will be worked out. In that case, Britain will still lose out in terms of skilled labour and investment. It will still see businesses relocating. It will lose some

One answer is the stupidity of crowds. There was a large voter turnout of 72 per cent of the eligible electorate. About 52 per cent of them voted for Brexit. The voters were indeed fed a string of lies and misinformation. But most of those lies were preposterous and easily verifiable as lies. A large proportion of "Leavers" wilfully chose to believe the lies.

A second reason is venality. The Leave campaign was created, run and energised. by venal people who wanted Britain to leave the EU for their own selfish reasons. They were also stupid. Many Leavers believed that they would receive a larger slice of the economic pie if Britain quit the EU. This group included quite a few members of Britain's Asian community who thought their employment prospects

islanders tend to be more isolationist in their world view. Some Leavers would like the UK to become a place populated only by English-speaking whites. They don't really care, at this stage at least, if it also becomes a substantially less prosperous country.

It's hard to judge what the outcome of either a general election or another referendum would be. Opinion polls indicate that many erstwhile Leavers would now vote to Remain. But then, the opinion polls did not indicate the June 2016 result accurately. Also, if you believe the opinion polls, anti-immigrant sentiment remains high and that equates to the empowerment of enduring racism.

Brexit is an interesting case study. It shows how easy it is to influence large numbers of people to act against their own best interests. It highlights the flaws in democratic processes even in a rich, well-educated nation with a long democratic tradition.

A campaign to legitimise and establish these perceived hokums as technological achievements gathered steam since the Bharatiya Janata Party came to power at the Centre — from Prime Minister Narendra Modi to some of his ministers have supported such efforts, at least in words.

Taken at face value, such claims are outlandish and outright childish. But is it prudent to dismiss them as nothing but fertile thoughts of our ancestors, without conducting further research? After all, these claims have not been sourced from one single ancient text, but multiple — written over several centuries.

For example, *vimanas* — claimed to be aircraft and described in the Vedas, Puranic texts, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana (as the most popular of them all, *Pushpak*). There are references to flying devices in Kautilya's (Chanakya's) Arthashastra, and Bhoja's Samarangana Sutradhara and Yuktikalpataru.

There are several mentions of flying machines across the Vedic literature, including the following verse from the Yajurveda: "O royal skilled engineer, construct sea-boats, propelled on water by our experts, and aeroplanes, moving and flying upward, after the clouds that reside in the mid-region, that fly as the boats move on the sea, that fly high over and below the watery clouds. Be thou, thereby, prosperous in this world created by the Omnipresent God, and flier in both air and lightening (Yajurveda, 10.19)."

A tunnel testing of a 3D-printed vimana model, created on the basis of descriptions in these texts at the University of California, Irvine, showed it to be aerodynamic. But no evidence of a working prototype has been found thus far.

Now, test-tube babies are a bio-tech-

water and butter. Bizzare!

Based on Hindu scriptures, there are several other claims of technological advancements in ancient India, including targeted weaponry, plastic surgery, and even computer (albeit in a godly incarnation of Chitragupta).

At best, these claims are questionable. Yet, there is enough proof of science-driven research in the India of early centuries. The Susruta Samhita, with its description of 1,120 illnesses, 700 medicinal plants and discussions on surgical techniques, is not only one of the foundational texts of avurveda, but also surgery. Also, Panini's theory of morphological analysis was considered more advanced than any Western theory in linguistics before the 20th century (Frits Staal, Universals: Studies in Indian logic and linguistics). Or the works of Aryabhata and Brahmagupta.

Even the town planning and drainage system during the Indus Valley Civilisation would have been the envy of several major European cities of the 17th and the 18th centuries.

Also, discoveries across the globe suggest that people in the ancient world were not simple-minded. Göbekli Tepe in Turkey, considered the world's first temple and fine work of stone carvings was first erected possibly by huntergatherers in the 10th BCE and not by people living in agricultural society; Antikythera Mechanism, a bronze gear used at least 2,000 years ago to predict astronomical positions and eclipses for calendar and astrological purposes decades in advance, is considered a Greek analogue computer; and the 2000-year-old Baghdad Battery or Parthian Battery, a set of three artefacts a ceramic pot, a tube of copper, and a rod of iron - was possibly an old galvanic cell. Most likely, the statements made by

some Indian researchers and political leaders about scientific advancements in ancient India are nothing but rephrased excerpts from mythology. However, there is enough content in these claims for serious, well-funded and unbiased research into India's "lost' history, and not to be brushed aside by scientific minds in the country and abroad.

Every week, Eye Culture features writers with an entertaining critical take on art. music. dance, film and sport

Right line, wrong length



LINE AND LENGTH TCA SRINIVASA RAGHAVAN

n the past 30 years which election has been the most difficult to predict? My Lattempts to solve this question have led me to formulate a proposition with two parts.

Part 1 is this: The closer you are to one general election, the easier it is to predict the outcome of the next. In 2014, for example, it was easy to predict at least 275 Lok Sabha seats for the BJP in 2019.

Part 2 is that the closer you get to the next general election the harder it is to predict its outcome. Would anyone like to wager some money on the number of seats the BJP will win/lose in May this year?

In other words, peoples' political pref-

core of stable voters. But as the number of voters grows, so does the number of unstable voters, who make a huge difference at the margin.

What is astonishing is that this degree of instability would not be - and is not - tolerated in any other area. But in politics it is. If we take unstable political preferences

as a given - like air turbulence - what should be done to mitigate its effects? I have two suggestions below that arise from the two givens of the Constitution.

One, it does not limit the term of a prime minister to just one term. Two, however, it does limit the term of the Lok Sabha to five years except when an Emergency has been declared.

However, the five-year rule has no logic to it. It is entirely arbitrary. Many countries have less or more.

Also, many countries also limit the term of their heads of government. The USA used to have unlimited terms for the President till they changed it in the mid-1940s

Two problems

When taken together, the two constitutional provisions - no limit on the PM's terms and the limited term for the Lok Sabha constitute a problem for both politics and governance.

The political problem is mostly for parties that don't have dynasties. The BJP and CPI(M), the two major ideological parties, fall in this category. So do large regional parties like the AIADMK. BSP. JD(U) and TMC.

We have seen how difficult it has been for such parties to carry on responsibly when the founders or original leaders have passed on. There are no exceptions to this because the new leaders become extremists in order to hang on to their vote shares.

1,300 million

people, cannot be

governed by the

rules as England

century. Even with

65 million people

same arbitrary

was in the 17th

going hard

In contrast, in parties where leadership devolves by the dynastic rule, the problem is of India, with over poor governance because regardless of how poorly they govern there is no political challenge from within the partv.

The Congress at the national level and the SP, the DMK, and a host of other parties at it is finding the the state level are good examples of this. Thus, can anyone tell everyone else what will happen to the BJD after Naveen Patnaik?

What can be done

Taking everything about India into account. I believe that both these provisions need to be reviewed. They have not worked properly. Therefore, we need to limit the term of the prime minister (and the chief ministers) to just one term and we need to extend the

life of the Lok Sabha and the Vidhan Sabhas

to six or seven years. India, with over 1,300 million people, cannot be governed by the same arbitrary rules as England was in the 17th century. Even with 65 million people it is finding the going hard.

Longer terms will give the PMs/CMs enough time to achieve whatever they think is needed without having to constantly worry about re-election, which can be left to the party. In fact, a single sevenyear term will free them from party pressures entirely.

Both Manmohan Singh and

Narendra Modi can vouch for this because both have had to face intense pressure from their parties, which has forced them to make mistakes.

By the way, few people know it, but between 1947 and 1955 it was party pressure that led Jawaharlal Nehru to make some very bad mistakes, the worst being his economic policies that followed the Avadi

Congress of 1955. The current five-year rule for the legislatures also means that the fifth year is devoted to populist policies and inaction. In effect, therefore, the term is of four years only. One other benefit of limiting the terms for the PM and CMs will be that governments cannot be brought down by the legislators midway. The benefits of this cannot be overstated.