

Salvoes over open defecation



COUNTRY CODE

RAHUL JACOB

Under the radar, a great debate broke out this month about what is arguably India's most pressing problem. That the controversy has been sparked by a research paper is bizarre, but the oddities do not end there. *Changes in open defecation in rural north India: 2014-2018* is published by the research groups Research Institute for Compassionate Economics (RICE) and Accountability Initiative. The authors acknowledge that millions more Indians in villages in India own a latrine since 2014, but assert that 44 per cent of the rural populations in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh still defecate in the open. As ending the practice of open defecation in rural India has long been an issue of convincing people not to go into the fields to defecate even when there is a toilet, the study's finding that 23 per cent of those who own a latrine still defecate in the open is worrying. The survey, conducted between September and December 2018, is based on interviews of almost 10,000 people across these four states.

These findings clash with the numbers on the Swachh Bharat website that are updated before your eyes as if they were those giant information boards at a busy railway station. When I last looked, more than 547,000 villages had been declared open defecation free and 91 million toilets had been built since October 2, 2014. If, in reality, some 98 per cent of India now can be classified as achieving this basic level of sanitation, the country should see a massive drop in water-borne diseases and child malnutrition. Children not continually fighting diarrhea and dysentery in villages has implications for potentially raising the educational achievements of an entire generation of young Indians if our schools can be improved as well.

Given this extraordinary turnaround in the number of toilets built under the Modi government, a research paper by a small group of academics and researchers contradicting these claims ought to have been swatted away easily enough. Instead, the government, in a response to IndiaSpend, accuses the researchers "of grossly misleading the reader". Several paragraphs later, the government even thunders against articles on the RICE report. "Given the glaring gaps in the aforementioned survey, the ministry would like to highlight that reports based on such erroneous, inconsistent and biased studies serve to mislead readers," the ministry's response to IndiaSpend concludes.

What is distressing about the shrillness of the ministry response is that both sides have so much to admire about them. Under Parameswaran Iyer, secretary, drinking water and sanitation, the Swachh Bharat mission has built toilets at a speed that resembles a military operation. Iyer has led from the front. On occasion, he has lifted soil out of a 'fallow' pit latrine to make the point that the soil was completely harmless and odourless compost. Prime Minister Narendra Modi singled him out for praise at a public event in Bihar last year.

On the other side of the debate is the dedicated team at RICE. The institute is led by two young American academics, Dean Spears and Diane Coffey, whose book *Where India Goes: Abandoned Toilets, Stunted Growth and the Costs of Caste* featured a foreword by Angus Deaton, the Nobel laureate in economics, who praised the thoroughness of their research. It was the best book I read in 2017.

The authors of the paper are dispassionate and find good news as well in this government's efforts. "We find important reductions in open defecation. In the region (the four states) as a whole, open defecation declined from approximately 70 per cent of people over two years old in 2014, to approximately 44 per cent of people over two years old in 2018. This 26 percentage point reduction in individual open defecation over a four year period (more than six percentage points per year) was rapid compared to the likely rate of decline in prior years."

The problem in part is the Modi government repeats the previous government's emphasis on toilets built, rather than championing behavioural change as vociferously as they do so much else. Indeed, surveying whether people are not just building toilets but building the right kind of toilets and also using them is an almost insurmountable task, even by the impossible challenges that trying to govern India represents.

Past experience and past surveys have shown that even toilets constructed in villages are sometimes used as granaries. Caste concerns has over the years prompted people to build open pit latrines that are too big to be inexpensive or to crave the kind of septic tank toilets that are not practical in the absence of abundant supplies of water and modern sewage systems. As Spears put it to me and a colleague four years ago, "Simply building latrines is not enough. We have to encourage people to use these. We have a culture of (belief in) purity and pollution that teaches people that it is bad to accumulate faeces near their home." Many millions of toilets have been built in the past four years, but it still seems implausible that India has, in effect, become a completely different country overnight.

Will it be a package deal?

What Priyanka's entry into active politics means for the Congress and why Robert Vadra might be calling attention to himself



PLAIN POLITICS

ADITI PHADNIS

In Uttar Pradesh, especially eastern Uttar Pradesh, everyone is called *bhaiya* — whether you're the baby of the family or the eldest. But *bhaiyas* are always men. So it is a matter of mystery why Priyanka Gandhi is called *bhaiyaji* by constituents of Amethi and Rae Bareilly.

Here's why. When Rahul and Priyanka were children and used to visit the constituency with their grandmother Indira or father Rajiv, both had very short hair. So much so that most constituents thought for a long time that Priyanka was a boy. Hence the sobriquet *bhaiyaji*, that

has stuck till today when she is the mother of two children.

She looks like her grandmother. But is she like her? Indira Gandhi always took care of those who had stood by her whether they had won elections or lost them (see Pranab Mukherjee's account of his relations with Indira Gandhi) and never forgot a slight. Priyanka doesn't think she is either ruthless or vindictive. She is known to have told friends, "you think I'm like my grandmother? Wait till you've had dealings with Rahul". This much is true. Priyanka values forgiveness. That was the motive behind her visit to the prison in Tamil Nadu where the person convicted of killing her father, Nalini, is incarcerated. She said she wanted to understand why her father had to be killed. In the 1999 election, when the man thought to be behind the Bofors scandal, Arun Nehru, who abandoned Rajiv Gandhi to defect to the VP Singh-led Janata Dal and later the Bharatiya Janata Party, contested from Rae Bareilly she asked voters only one memorable question: "The man who stabbed my father in the back — how did you let such a man even enter Rae Bareilly?"

And yet, the same Priyanka Gandhi made up with the family when Nehru was on his deathbed. Priyanka took charge of the crema-

tion when he died in 2013. It was the Nehru-Gandhi grandson Raihan who lit Arun Nehru's pyre. The extended family means a lot to her: When she went to New York (to be by her daughter Miraya's side as she recovered from a knee procedure) she stayed with cousin Radhika, Arun Nehru's daughter.

She was educated at the Welhams Girls' School and that's where she was when Indira Gandhi was assassinated. Since then she has yearned for stability and a 'normal' life for her family and her children. Rahul Gandhi said there was never any question about her joining active politics but she didn't want to jump into the fray until her children were 'settled'. Now both are at university and are considered to be settled.

But this is not to say she wasn't active in politics. Former cricketer Navjot Singh Sidhu says quite openly that it was Priyanka who brought him in politics. This is endorsed by Punjab Chief Minister Amrinder Singh, who has no reason to be happy to have had Sidhu foisted on him (hockey legend Pargat Singh was also brought to the Congress by Priyanka, Amrinder says). She was the one who pushed and pushed Rahul Gandhi and Akhilesh and Dimple Yadav to enter into a partnership ahead

TEA WITH BS ▶ YASHWANT SINHA | FORMER FINANCE MINISTER

Rebel with a cause?

Sinha tells Archis Mohan all that is wrong with GST, demonetisation and the current crop of BJP leaders

On a cold winter day, Sinha sits snug near an oil heater behind a wooden desk in the small but well-furnished study of his tastefully maintained house in Noida. A shelf full of books covering the entire length and breadth of a wall stands behind him, and his swivel chair helps reach any book he might consider thumbing through. Not that Sinha, at 81, needs any reference notes. He recalls conversations and events from years past, and spews granular economic data to bolster a point he is making.

The publisher and promoter of Sinha's new book, *India Unmade: How the Modi Government Broke the Economy*, would have him focus the interview on its contents, but the former Union finance minister, despite years in the bureaucracy, does not take orders easily. So we sit down for a freewheeling chat.

I was quite embarrassed when he had got up to welcome me in, and tell him as much and about how I had met him with my parents, who were acquainted with him, on a couple of occasions in the early-1980s. I was barely seven or eight-years-old then. He was heading the Delhi Transport Corporation, and was on the brink of quitting the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) after uproar over the death of an employee in police firing subsequent to a workers' strike. I tell him that I remember the meeting for the sole reason that it was probably my first taste of a carbonated beverage that he had offered us, despite my mother's protests.

A year later and having quit the IAS, Sinha was the new star in the Janata Party as Chandra Shekhar, the party chief, laid the foundation stone for an *ashram* in Bhandsi, then a dusty village outside the Gurugram city. However, I remember little of Sinha, other than that he appeared the tallest and most smartly turned out in a sea of old men clad in white khadi *kurta-pyjama*. As a member of his household staff serves green tea with cashews and biscuits, I tell Sinha how I was much surprised to discover my favourite author in the

gathering there, and was pleased no end that she was willing to have a chat with me over lunch. It struck me years later that Nilima Sinha, the author of several children's books, was Sinha's wife.

Sinha, who had chuckled all along remembering his times with the "angry old socialists" of the erstwhile Janata Party, gives out a hearty laugh as I end my anecdote. Sinha, in turn, recounts how he once physically stopped one of the "angry socialists" from marching out of a party meeting in protest. The leader was upset that a party resolution sought to insult the socialist creed, while Sinha wanted to prevent the leader from walking right into the arms of the press corps waiting outside the venue and the episode sparking a controversy.

Sinha was one of the earliest to back Narendra Modi as the prime ministerial candidate of the Bharatiya Janata Party, and now he is one of the PM's most vocal critics. During our conversation, as we sip the lightly brewed green tea, Sinha is unsparring in his criticism of the PM and Finance Minister Arun Jaitley. Despite his advancing years, Sinha has been on the road for the last 14 months since the run up to the Gujarat Assembly polls in December 2017, addressing public meetings and press conferences across the country to highlight the "mismanagement" he believes Modi and Jaitley have wrought on India.

Sinha says the Shramik Patrakar Sangh, founded in 1941, invited him in early December to deliver their annual lecture, but pleaded they did not have money to pay for his business-class airfare, or a five-star hotel stay. Alluding to the fact that he is not only tall but also old and needs leg space, Sinha says he sat in the cramped economy class seat. In the run up to the Gujarat polls, Sinha covered the length and breadth of the state, travelling by road to address meetings in Rajkot, Surat and Ahmedabad.

Sinha, who served as finance minister in the Chandra Shekhar and Atal Bihari Vajpayee governments, says

his disillusionment with Modi began with the government's demonetisation decision, which he calls a "silly thing to do" and "advertising that silly approach" by replacing ₹1,000 currency notes with ₹2,000. "I was seeing the terrific mandate of 2014 being wasted day by day," Sinha says.

The former minister says "whoever whispered in his ears that go for demonetisation, misled him completely" and that the PM lacked the sagacity to know that it would not work, especially after he had created the infrastructure for converting black money into white through the Jan Dhan Yojana. "Then all the money came back so he must have felt cheated," Sinha says. I ask him about the PM's working style, and Sinha says how people close to Modi have told him that he does not read, only wants power point presentations, which he will grasp but give him 10-pages of some note he will not read.

On the goods and services tax (GST), Sinha says he felt "particularly distressed" because he, as the finance minister in the Vajpayee government, had carried out many reforms in indirect tax, and settled on three rates — merit rate, demerit rate and a mean rate. Sinha says his desire was to move to a single rate, and he was told that over 90 per cent of all indirect tax revenue collected came those days was from mean rate. He bemoans how the finance minister did not provide leadership to the state finance ministers who cannot have the national vision, and the reform was hurriedly implemented.

Sinha says he would pore over the minutest of details when he prepared the annual Budget as finance minister. "Do you get the feeling when you see the finance minister reading his Budget speech? I mean one would have read that speech 30-40 times before actually getting up in the Lok Sabha and reading it. You will not fumble because you know what follows... every word... almost," he says, pointing at 400 changes in GST rates as evidence the FM did not "apply his mind".

However, even before his criticism



ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

of the Modi government's economic policies, Sinha and some other senior leaders had flagged problems ailing the BJP. That was right after the BJP's defeat in the Bihar Assembly poll in November 2015, and the signatories to the press statement included Murli Manohar Joshi, Shanta Kumar and L K Advani. Sinha says none in the party had the courage to speak those words now.

of the UP Assembly elections. Many in the Rahul Gandhi camp feel this was tantamount to snatching defeat from the jaws of victory: Rahul and the Congress were just beginning to assert themselves in UP when they were trapped into an alliance. Anyway, things bounced back soon after and it was Priyanka who made seating, logistics and other arrangements for the big day when Rahul took over as Congress President.

In the last one month, the Congress system has seen many upheavals. Those who were hoping younger people would be promoted and the old guard pensioned off have been disappointed. It is Kamal Nath and Ashok Gehlot who have bounced back and many insecurities have been laid to rest. And now there's another disruption in the form of Priyanka. This could even extend to Robert Vadra who has never hidden his political ambitions and was quick to claim proprietorial rights over Priyanka via congratulations delivered over Twitter (ask yourself if you would take to Twitter to congratulate your wife on her promotion — unless your objective was to call attention to yourself). While the average Congressman is loyal to Priyanka — and maybe just a little smitten by her — many would be reluctant at having to defend a package deal. Most have noted speculation that it is from Moradabad, Vadra's home town and Priyanka's *sasural* that Rahul Gandhi will start his election campaign — and maybe Priyanka will share the stage with him. The coming weeks and months should be interesting for the new equations they reveal.

The former BJP leader says he told that group how during Advani's tenure as party president the standard operating procedure was for the leaders to meet at 11 am in the party office to discuss the news of the day, and decide the party line. "It used to be a convivial gathering. There was no tension. Suddenly everything changed, and I am not talking of the period after we formed the government. It started changing with Nitin Gadkari who brought in a corporate style," he says.

Sinha says that earlier any state or district leader could come with the hope to meet Advani, even if he did not have an appointment. "I told Advani and Joshi all of this. I said this was not the party which I had joined. You people were so liberal; it was so different, what has happened? We then flagged the issue, but then they managed, I must say they managed Advani, Joshi and Shanta Kumar and that is why whatever we had started died a natural death." Sinha says he then realised that he could not count on the support of even the seniors in the party to raise issues, and wrote his famous article in the *Indian Express*.

The former finance minister says it was "cheap" of the party to accuse him of looking for a sinecure. He says the party wanted him to contest the 2014 Lok Sabha polls, but he did not and that is when they picked his son Jayant Sinha as the party's candidate from that seat. He says he quit the IAS, with no hope of where his next salary might come from, with 12 years of service left, and turned down VP Singh's offer when he wanted to make him a minister because he thought Singh was not being fair. "I have invited uncertainties in my life with my unfortunate attitude. I have presented five Budgets and two interim Budgets. I did not want crumbs like finance commission chief or NITI Aayog or BRICS Bank chairmanship," he says.

Sinha says the BJP leadership then tried to make it personal, and made his son pen a counter article. They wanted to convert it into a family battle between the father and the son. Sinha concedes, when I ask him, that he was indeed queering the pitch for his son by doing what he is doing.

As it was time for me to leave, I ask him what would be his fatherly advice to his son. "My fatherly advice is that I would not give you any advice. You decide for yourself," he signs off.

Too rich for dole, too poor to thrive Joy of seeing the tricolour fly



PEOPLE LIKE THEM

GEETANJALI KRISHNA

The Budget season is upon us, and it's time for some reckoning. Much has been said about rising income levels in India this year. Yet, Oxfam Inequality Report 2019 estimates it would take 941 years for a minimum wage worker in rural India to earn what the top paid executive at a leading Indian garment company earns in a year. The inequality is troubling, no doubt. But there's something I find even more troubling. The definition of income for the purposes of social security schemes doesn't take into account one critical variable — economic vulnerability. Today, many in the country's vast unorganised sector earn just a little

over ₹1 lakh per annum, which is the income cutoff for most government schemes. But the very nature of the unorganised sector leaves them vulnerable to economic shocks of all sorts — job loss, ill health, market downturns and more.

In the last week, I've met two people who've been chafing at a modest rise in their incomes. The first of them is Amita, an illiterate domestic worker. Her husband has been jobless for years following an accident. Till last year, she earned ₹8,000 per month, or ₹96,000 per annum. A couple of months ago she received a salary hike of ₹2,000 a month. Soon after, neighbours told her that applications for new ration cards were being accepted. "We've lived in Delhi for the last 10 years and have been unable to get our ration card made during this time," she said. However, to her dismay, when she tried to submit her application, she was told that the card was issued only to households with incomes below ₹1 lakh. "Today I earn ₹10,000 a month and save nothing. Tomorrow, I could lose my job or be forced to take a salary cut," she said adding, "What will happen to my family then?"

Rakesh Singh, a driver, earns a slightly higher salary than Amita and lives in

ing as a watchman in Noida, earning about ₹8,000 a month," he told me. His wife stayed home with their infant son. "My employer was a kind hearted gentleman who saw how hard it was for me to manage," he said. "So he paid for my driving lessons." Now, Singh earns ₹12,000 plus overtime every month. "This year, when my daughter was born, I wanted to enroll her under the Ladli Scheme," he said. "There's a daily risk of accident and injury in my line of work and I thought the scheme would ensure some financial security for her," Singh said. But this scheme is also applicable only for households with less than ₹1 lakh annual income.

Amita and Singh are both the sole wage earners in their households. Both, till quite recently, fell in the ₹1 lakh income bracket. Both remain vulnerable to job loss and decrease in income. It is imperative to identify people like them who are too rich for dole and too poor to thrive; people who have neither economic security nor social security — not just in Delhi-NCR but across the country. The government must somehow regulate the informal sector which has declined since demonetisation and the imposition of the goods and service tax. Meanwhile, it cannot ignore the needs of lakhs of Amitas and Singhs in the country.



PEOPLE LIKE US

KISHORE SINGH

You'll spot our house for the tricolour fluttering from the balcony, the only one on our street, and possibly in the colony. Around Republic Day or Independence Day, someone will be dispatched to the basement to select from the growing collection of flags we've been accumulating over the years. A suitable one will be found, ironed, fitted into a rod, and strung up (hoisting would be the wrong term) from the railing. There it will stay for a few days, perhaps a week, sometimes a little more.

We aren't any more patriotic than the neighbours. Indeed, some of our views might not fit the current nationalistic narrative, and our choice of foods, or lifestyle, might have grave con-

sequences were we to declare them openly. Should the national anthem be sung in movie theatres? Should jingoism be enforced through coercion and the fear of law? Our answers might prove provocative in the current climate, yet the hanging of the flag is something we regard with the same enthusiasm as putting up a Christmas tree, or lighting *diyas* at Diwali, or buying packets of colour on Holi, without any association with the ritualistic aspect of these festivals. Eating peanuts on Lohri around a bonfire is fun as long as one is not obsessive about significance and meaning.

Our collection of flags comes off the streets, bought from urchins who festoon themselves with the tricolour in the hope of making an extra buck around this time. My driver is partial to bargaining for them at traffic junctions, insisting he won't pay beyond a certain (usually pithy) amount, but he is equally insistent on buying a flag to take home to his family. Since we are often surrounded by flag-selling vendors, I find myself funding several such purchases, which are then distributed among colleagues, much to their amusement. Some have wondered if I am a card-carrying member of some right-wing party. I tell them I have no trouble aligning

myself with the flag even though I don't care much for political parties, their manifestos or agendas.

I have noticed that not too many occupants of cars bother themselves with the petty commerce related to buying these flags. Many on scooters and motorcycles do, as do those who ride in auto-rickshaws. This week, I had reason to take Ubers to work on a couple of occasions. Each time, the drivers would stop to buy tiny flags to place on their dashboards. I thought it a lovely gesture. A number of part-timers who help to keep our home running smoothly are thrilled to take home flags that I am happy to share with them. It is in their lower-income colonies and slums where you will see more flags fluttering jauntily from rickety windows or roofs than you will see in all the tonier colonies put together.

I am not making a case for class and patriotism, merely stating a fact. I know some among our friends who would be embarrassed to have a flag anywhere near their homes. Why this is so is not something I am clear about. Perhaps it has to do with our polarised politics. Whatever the reason, it has fortunately not stopped us from enjoying a simple act — finding joy in the way the tricolour flaps in the wind.

Mr Jaitley's Budgets

Next week, the Modi government will present its final statement of accounts on revenue and expenditure. They will almost certainly show that government finances have improved over the five years of Arun Jaitley's stewardship, the reference point being the previous government's final year of 2013-14. Tax revenue is budgeted to increase by 81 per cent, in a period when GDP (at current prices, ie including inflation) would have grown 67 per cent. Even factoring in some shortfall against the Budget estimates for the current year, the government would have done well to raise tax revenue faster than GDP growth, though that can't be said about non-tax revenue. Total revenue is slated to go up by 57 per cent over the five years, of which borrowings go up by only 24 per cent. This is certainly a creditable performance.

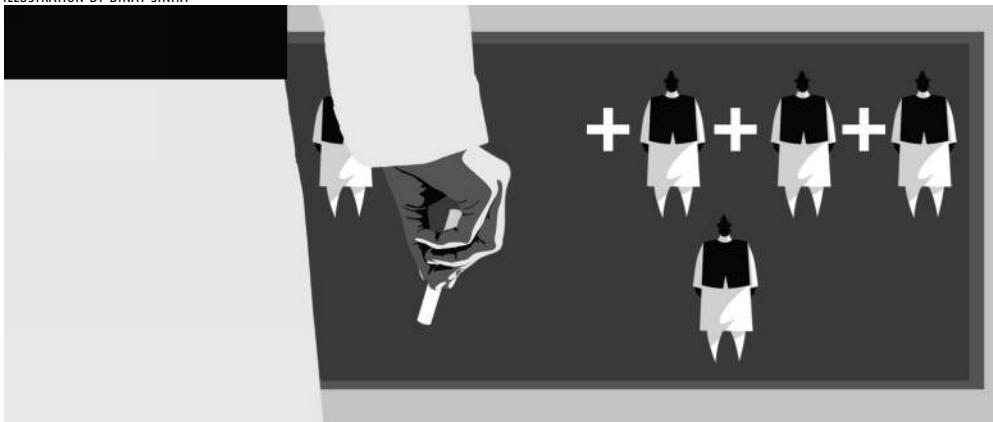
On the expenditure side, the sharpest increases have been in the allocations for road and rail; the former by an unprecedented 150 per cent over the base year, while investment in the railways has trebled. The change of scale in the railways can be judged by the figures for 2013-14 and the current year: Doubling and trebling of track going from 750 km to 18,000 km, and gauge conversion from 450 km to 5,000 km. Railway revenue has gone up at a slower pace, presumably because key projects like the dedicated freight corridors are yet to be commissioned; the cumulative revenue increase is 43 per cent.

Balancing these sharp increases, the overall subsidy bill has been kept under tight control, going up by less than 4 per cent over five years. However, there is a massive increase in the food subsidy bill, which goes up by about 90 per cent while the fertiliser subsidy is virtually unchanged and the petroleum subsidy has come down. The rural employment guarantee programme has got significantly more funds, with the outlay going up from ₹33,000 crore to a budgeted ₹55,000 crore, while news reports speak of additional allocations having to be made. Much of the increase may be on account of higher wage rates, so it is not clear whether the number of mandays of work created has increased.

Many comparisons are not easy to make because of intervening changes in Centre-state financial arrangements. Still, what is notable is stagnant expenditure on school education while higher education has got a 40 per cent mark-up in outlay — continuing a long-term national bias. Defence has been squeezed, especially capital expenditure, which has moved up by just 19 per cent. In comparison, defence revenue expenditure (much of it salaries) has increased by 48 per cent while the pension bill has soared and is now significantly larger than capital expenditure. This is a sad story of the teeth-to-tail ratio going the wrong way, while the country's defences look increasingly vulnerable. There is a larger story of the overall pension bill for all government employees threatening to run out of control — and points to the long-term dangers of committing to guaranteed incomes of one kind or other.

Big budget increases have gone over these five years to the ministries of agriculture, atomic energy, telecom, drinking water, health, urban development and housing, rural development and water resources — reflecting some of the programme priorities of the government under names such as Bharatneta, Gram Sadak Yojana (rural roads), Awas Yojana (housing for the poor), Smart Cities, Swachh Bharat, Krishi Sinchai Yojana (crop insurance) and Namami Gange. Inevitably, some areas get squeezed, like civil aviation, whose budget has shrunk. Considering the focus on building the physical infrastructure, one would have expected that the overall expenditure balance would have swung towards capital expenditure, but that is only marginally the case; despite the subsidy bill being controlled, revenue (ie current) expenditure has gone up nearly as fast as capital spending. Given the pressure to provide financial relief to farmers and the growing talk of some kind of basic income provision, it is possible that the future may see a reversal of trend, with more money being spent under revenue heads.

ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA



Modi's fate: Between magic, math & Maya

Surveys say BJP will fall far short of a majority. We lay out six factors that will determine who will be our next PM and who won't

It is an accepted truism that when journalists predict an election, they are usually wrong. And when all journalists call it the same way, exactly the opposite result is guaranteed.

Opinion polls too are dodgy, but better than us journalists. So, what happens when all of them agree on the same broad outcome?

This has been a week of several opinion polls. One thing they fully agree on is that if elections were held today, we are guaranteed a hung parliament, with the BJP as the largest party, the Congress as the next but with just half its size, and a genuine coalition government once again.

There are still three months to the elections and nothing in politics remains static. We can, however, track some significant trends and safely draw the following broad conclusions from these polls. Which one is good or bad I leave to you to judge, based on your own voting preferences.

1) The most striking indicator is that while the BJP will fall far short of its 2014 majority, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's personal popularity is by and large intact. The *India Today* poll shows the BJP vote share falling just 1 per cent from 31 in 2014.

This is remarkable. I believe that while there is significant disillusionment among his original voters, it is compensated for by the unquestioning devotion of first-time Lok Sabha voters, close to 130 million (born generally 1996 onwards).

The difference between them and the rest is they haven't been out in the job market yet. As I have noted during my travels through state elections, they are still dazzled by Mr Modi's power and charisma, believe the propaganda on his schemes, from *Swachh Bharat*, Skill India, war on corruption to India's "rising" global profile. They haven't been exposed to a counter-story yet, or to the hopelessness of unemployment. It's the great hedge holding Mr Modi/BJP back at the edge of the cliff.

2) The political mood isn't so much about the current reality as the momentum. If you plot the numbers of each poll from what was Mr Modi's peak in post-demonetisation January 2017, when *India Today* gave the BJP 305 and the NDA 360 seats, the momentum is downhill. It isn't hurtling down, but isn't too gradual either, a "loss" of one-third, in two years. If it continues that way, the BJP number could logically fall by another 25-40. Can Mr Modi stall, or even reverse this momentum?

Visualise Indian public opinion, with all its diversity and complexity, like a juggernaut: Massive, primitively engineered, creaking. It takes masses of people to make it move slowly. But once it is cranked, it is tough to reverse. Remember, momentum is mass multiplied by velocity. Reversing it is near-impossible, and Mr Modi knows it.

That is why the flurry of radical, near-impossible populist actions, from reservations for upper castes, quotas for all in private institutions, to a last-minute avalanche of CBI raids on the "corrupt and the powerful", and whatever next week brings, with the Budget, etc. Mr Modi and Amit Shah know any loss below 180 is curtains. If they can change the direction of this juggernaut in the next 100 days, it will be a most remarkable feat. So fully expect more desperate and radical announcements in the coming days. Remember again, their bulwark will still be the 130 million first-time Lok Sabha voters, with their still uncluttered minds.

3) If you take out Uttar Pradesh and the SP-BSP *gathbandhan* there, it is remarkable how the BJP's numbers in the rest of India are about the same as before. Various polls show the BJP losing 45-55 seats in UP. That's precisely what it's losing over its overall 282 tally. It seems to be holding its sway, if not a clean sweep, in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat despite the recent assembly elections setbacks. Some losses in the north



NATIONAL INTEREST
SHEKHAR GUPTA

Panchayati Raj and Rural Development. Many BJP heirs are raring to go, at the slightest hint of a heads up.

Priyanka Gandhi Vadra is to the manner born among a glittering group that in New Delhi's elite circles is known as Rahul Gandhi's "chamber of princes". If she appears pleasant, and instinctively knowing, it's because she's grown up among courtiers in the oldest court in town.

As for her husband Robert Vadra's embarrassment and swiftly acquired millions that an *India Today* cover memorably titled "The Unreal Estate of Robert Vadra" it's a fly in the ointment to be stoically borne. Is it a bigger or lesser issue than the numerous cases of disproportionate assets several party leaders and their progeny stand accused of amassing?

Political corruption, dynastic succession or pre-election giveaways such as farm loan waivers and reservation quotas are old tropes voters are familiar with. What they want are jobs, agricultural reform, policies that work, not unimplemented schemes. What they appreciate in leaders is the promise of humility and common touch that Priyanka has over Narendra Modi's arrogance and swagger. That's why she may be more than a mere show-stopper.

of a Tolkienesque wizarding war, and wish it could be toned down to "Greater Alliance" or something, but it beats me how people can so easily forget that coalitions have done their fair share in bringing India into the 21st century, not to mention that this time the protagonists have uncommon common cause. A coalition might involve a slower consensus and be more difficult to manage, but a secular, diverse coalition would almost certainly do less damage than the strong, centralised Hindutva-inclined leadership we have now. A smart coalition will never forget that what it is fighting today, it will be fighting for a very long time.

The heart of every January 26 celebration, ultimately, is the citizen — that long-suffering creature, shafted by every government in one way or the other, and justifiably cynical — who periodically recreates the Republic from the voting booth. This year, as the tanks roll and the camels preen, we can cheerily take the day off to celebrate the fact that this summer we get to extend its life once again. And, of course, to make fun

Is Priyanka more than a show-stopper?



AL FRESCO
SUNIL SETHI

Priyanka Gandhi Vadra's empowerment as the key party functionary in eastern Uttar Pradesh for the upcoming election campaign is the sort of news break that suddenly has the political dovescootes aflutter. The question of will-she-won't-she has hung so long in the air that now she's taken the plunge intriguing speculations arise.

Could Priyanka be the Congress party's trump or Get Out of Jail card in a crucial state that returns the largest number of MPs — and where its stock fell from 21 in 2009 to an abysmal two out of 80 seats in 2014? Is she a mere show-stopper or a potential vote-snatcher? Does the five genera-

tion-old Congress dynasty now establish it as a truly monarchical enterprise? And can the Gandhi siblings — under the protective benediction of a Queen Mother — build on an anti-incumbency wave against Narendra Modi, clearly visible in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh?

Phrases such as "show-stopper" or "good optics" oddly originate in the fashion trade when designers attempt to lift faded shows by pulling out a friendly film star on catwalks to rack up media footage. There is no evidence, however, that such moves translate into retail sales with customers queuing up.

Ten years ago Priyanka declared that she was "very clear [that] politics is not a strong pull, the people are...and I can do things for them without being in politics". Today those words echo what Indira Gandhi, claiming to be a reluctant entrant, used to say before her active rise in politics in the 1960s.

Styling herself in the manner of her grandmother — simple cotton saris, radiant smiles, reaching out to crowds — she proved an undeniable crowd-puller while campaigning vigorously in the family pocket boroughs of Amethi and

Rae Bareilly in 2014. Then she quietly dropped out of public view though it's widely known that she is one of party president Rahul Gandhi's closest political counselors. Certainly she has greater visual appeal than Mayawati, Akhilesh Yadav (and definitely Smriti Irani). On private occasions, such as shopping locally or attending a family friend's funeral she is restrained and unpretentious, keen to avoid any undue attention.

It's worth recalling that in 2008 she went to Vellore jail to meet Nalini Sriharan, one of the conspirators in her father's assassination. "I do not believe in anger, hatred or violence," she said later, emphasising that her mother had intervened to commute Nalini's death sentence to life imprisonment.

It's what you might expect from a practicing Buddhist with degrees in psychology and Buddhist studies.

But can compassion, common courtesy or an "emotional connect" win seats in the harsh realpolitik of Uttar Pradesh, a state riddled with divisions of caste and religion, and confronted with a seemingly impregnable BSP-SP alliance? "When you're down to a

near-cipher tally of two seats and a vanished party base anything Priyanka brings home will be a bonus," says a former Congress MP from the state.

Strategically, her appointment to manage UP's eastern flank is aimed at Narendra Modi minding his shop more closely in Varanasi and, equally, tie down Yogi Adityanath to his home turf, having disastrously lost the Gorakhpur by-election last March. "Rahul Gandhi has dropped the idea of alliances in favour of going it alone. His testing ground is to revive the Congress base," says a shrewd Shiromani Akali Dal Rajya Sabha MP with an old acquaintance with the Gandhi family.

The Gandhi siblings are royalty, not merely dynastic legatees.

The country's landscape of leadership, from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, simply teems with scions of political dynasties. An abbreviated list would include Omar Abdullah, M K Stalin, Akhilesh Yadav, Jayant Chaudhury, Tejashwi Yadav, Naveen Patnaik, Supriya Sule, H D Kumaraswamy, K T Rama Rao and Chandrababu Naidu's only son Nara Lokesh who currently holds triple cabinet portfolios of Information Technology,

The Republic will be reborn, again



INTER ALIA
MITALI SARAN

It's Republic Day again. This is traditionally the time to reflect on our history and make fun of the floats. Everyone has their favourite marching contingent, most of us are happy to have the day off, and who doesn't love a good flypast? It only remains to ditch the joyless belief that national days should be alcohol-free.

Still, after four years of loud chest-thumping, this year's Republic Day feels slightly subdued. People are so busy sulking

ferences that it's hard to paste a smile on, though we can still encourage each other to go fly a kite. Politicians in particular cannot afford to be misty-eyed about the past — they're keeping their eyeballs polished and beadily focused on the future.

The big old ship of the Republic has weathered plenty of horrendous storms, and will see plenty more. But the 2019 general election is a special challenge, and everyone knows it. The Republic is currently captained and crewed by people who seem interested in the safety and well-being of only a select kind of passenger, advising the rest to swim to Pakistan. So it's been a while to watch politicians across the board sink their egos, gather on the same platform, make seat-sharing agreements, and shake hands across their differences, swearing to oust Narendra Modi's government. They're even saying nice things about each other occasionally. And chances are, for a change, that they're doing it all for the right reasons.

Those reasons should be familiar to those who saw the Emergency, when even the Sangh held hands with their mortal enemies, the Commies, to oust Indira Gandhi; but oddly, Mr Modi is spending a lot of rally time crying, "No fair, all they want is to get me out." It's as if he has no idea what elections are for.

Even Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, who thus far has steadfastly remained a backroom operator and election campaign cameo player, has taken an official seat at the table. I can't imagine too many other political situations that could have convinced her to do so. Her actual effect on Congress party workers and on the electorate remains to be seen, but she has plenty of fight to bring eyeball to eyeball with the prime minister, and what could be more fun than to watch him have to diss a smiling young woman?

On the subject of gushy comparisons between Priyanka and Indira Gandhi, one can only hope that they don't run too far beyond

the striking physical resemblance. We should all hope that the Gandhi siblings' youthful idealisation of their grandmother, in her capacity as politician, has been tempered by a long and clear-eyed study of power. Both Indira Gandhi and Mr Modi have shown that a) leaders who fear losing power can wreck a country, b) strong leaders tend to overestimate their own strength and popularity, and c) there are many ways to skin a democracy, each of them very effective. I like the idea that Priyanka comes to an official role in politics after spending a great deal of time examining herself and her motivations. And I, for one, am always glad to see one more intelligent, secular, and apparently compassionate person throw her hat in the ring. We'll find out, over time, what she's made of.

The idea of a *Mahagathbandhan*, or Grand Alliance, is regularly pooh-poohed as a useless *khichdi* of people who spend all their time jockeying for power. I would say that "Grand Alliance" sounds like something

will be compensated for in the east and Northeast. UP, therefore, is the one factor keeping it away from a majority. Can it find a trick to counter that? Something of such sentimental appeal that it consolidates the Hindu vote, cutting through caste.

4) The Congress is reviving. In terms of percentage over the base, its gains are much bigger than the BJP's losses. The difference is its base is low. So even a 200 per cent increase would keep it to under 140. Current opinion polls put it just over 100. Even if you extrapolate these most generously presuming that Mr Modi is not able to reverse the momentum, you do not see a spectacular surge.

Its best hope lies in denying Mr Modi more of the seats in the three heartland states it has just won. The key number for it is 150. Either take its own tally there, or keep Mr Modi below it. A third way would be to widen the UPA tent and persuade more regional or caste-based parties to come under it. All three look improbable at this point. But a second pole is back in Indian politics.

5) In the previous week's National Interest we had talked about the third, and our notional fourth and fifth fronts. If about 150 seats go to leaders not aligned to either the Congress or BJP, many will hope to become prime minister in a grand compromise. It is highly improbable.

None of the parties other than the BJP and Congress can reach 50, in fact even 40. The only way such a grand-bargain fantasy would come true is if the Congress and the BJP together are somehow kept below 272. That has never happened and is most unlikely this May. But anyone with 15 seats or more will have the power to strike other big bargains, from getting certificates of good conduct from the CBI and ED on the Bellary Brothers' pattern, special packages for their states, and key portfolios.

Final alliances depend as much on who you cannot go with as on who you can. We know that the Left and SP can never go with the NDA, just as the Akalis and Shiv Sena won't with the UPA. Now look at those who've been flexible in the past. Mamata Banerjee has been with both coalitions, but her current dominance in West Bengal rules out her return to the NDA. There are others in the 15-plus category who will have options open: DMK/AIADMK, Naveen Patnaik, Chandrababu Naidu, Telangana's KCR, Jagan Mohan Reddy's YSRCP and, for heavens' sake, the sharpest of all, Nitish Kumar. About 100 seats will be shared among these non-ideological parties who will likely go with the winner.

6) This is where we return to Mayawati. If Mr Modi is denied a second term, it will be primarily because of the unique power she commands in our politics: A transferable vote. She has happily bonded with the BJP in the past. She is fully non-ideological in Left-Right terms. If anti-*Manuwaad* is her only ideology, the NDA and UPA are equally evil and she can drink that poison from either chalice. Mr Modi and Mr Shah know the key-card to their second term sits in her fancy hand bag. She is the one plank they want to pull away from their rivals, through charm, threat or both, before the elections or after. Unlikely, but you can never rule that out, even if it means the hatchet being buried later in Yogi Adityanath's back.

To sum up: Mr Modi's personal popularity and vote bank are mostly intact but the momentum is negative, the UP alliance is all that threatens his second term, the Congress is rising but not enough, any party with 15 or more MPs will be a kingmaker but not the king, 100 seats will go to parties that can go with any winner. And keep a close watch on Mayawati.

By Special Arrangement with ThePrint

India's Cleos, anyone?

EYE CULTURE

AMRIT DHILLON

While watching the magnificent *Roma*, directed by Alfonso Cuarón, the first thought that came to mind was "why hasn't an Indian made this film?" Is there any other society on earth that offers richer material on the subject of the dark dichotomies, the heavy sub-texts, and ambivalence of the servant-employer relationship?

This moving, beautiful film with its sweeping blend of the larger forces of history as the backdrop against the domestic life of a family in Mexico City in the 1970s, is a contender for the Oscars. The film is about Cleo, a young maid working for an upper middle class family with four rambunctious children. The first scene shows her at work; the camera follows her around in a long tracking shot as she moves from room to room, clearing and tidying up in this idyllic family home with its books, toys, lamps, and beautiful furniture.

Cuarón, who made the film to honour the nanny who looked after him as a child, lays out, with a delicate touch, the complexities of the servant-employer dynamic.

Cleo is a maid but for the four children, she is a beloved angel. She kisses them good night. She wakes them up in the morning with a gentleness that is more a caress than a jolt. She is the calm presence in the house as their parents' marriage collapses. Cleo is the one who is responsible for their safety when they venture out into the city streets and when they go on holidays — this includes the marvellous scene at the end when she has to wade into the surging ocean, even though she can't swim.

She is the one who makes sure that the lovely hum and rhythm of this family home runs smoothly. Isn't this what our maids do every day too? The mystery is why this rich material hasn't been mined not just for films, but for sitcoms and TV drama series. Just think of the tragicomic potential in these situations: The employer's righteous indignation when the maid asks for a pay rise equivalent to the price of a latte; the expectation that she must love and comfort your child and stay up at night during their illnesses even though she can be thrown out for one trivial mistake; the expectation of loyalty although she can be packed off back to her village if she contracts TB; the endless expansion of her job description to encompass the massaging of feet, the walking the dog, and looking after the incontinent elderly; the unhappy watchfulness of the plain mistress of the house who cannot bear the gleam in her husband's gaze when it rests on the pretty maid; the mat given to her to roll out on the floor when she goes to sleep when the mansion where she works has empty bedrooms.

Food alone offers rich pickings for a film director. Doing out the maid's din-

ner — ladling out the dal and counting the chappatis — as though employers have measured her stomach. Or the fridge. India is the only country in the world for which global manufacturers have made an evil model — the fridge with a lock on it. Or the family that goes out to dinner and makes the ayah stand beside their table throughout the meal. Or the separate utensils given to the maid?

Not a single aspect of this fascinating relationship has been examined by Indian directors. A recent film, part of a Netflix anthology film called *Lust Stories* and directed by Zoya Akhtar, depicted a young single man living alone and having sex with his maid while simultaneously checking out prospective brides brought over by mummy and daddy.

The film was a ham-handed, glib, shallow effort that failed even to touch the surface of what is often a daily work hazard for some maids. Contrast this with Cuarón's light touch when he shoes the family sprawled on a sofa watching a funny show on TV. Cleo, who has been clearing the dishes, sits down by one of the young sons to watch too and he instinctively puts his arm around her shoulders. Seconds later, the wife tells Cleo, just as she has sat down, to go and get some tea for her husband.

The moment is fleeting but perceptively captured because of Cuarón's sensibility. This is a classic scene enacted in homes every day in India. The moment a maid sits down, some instruction comes. But more importantly, it is the relationship between the maid and the children — as shown by the boy putting his arms lovingly around Cleo — that generates a grey area where no one is quite sure, neither maid nor employer, of the protocol. That's because little Indian children love the maid. If they go somewhere, they want to take her with them. If they order a pizza for dinner, they want to share it with her. But the maid has to almost discourage this affectionate, egalitarian approach of the children because her instinct tells her it does not sit well with the adults.

It is this space — constantly shifting and fluid — that she must negotiate all the time. A space where, one moment she is a loved member of the family, laughing with them and sharing a joy or a sorrow but in another, she can become the outsider who is excluded from a treat or an activity shared by everyone else.

Many talented directors and writers have finally started delving into contemporary Indian society for stories. To mention only a handful, films such as *Fandry* and *Masaan* explore caste with great sensitivity. *Bombay Talkies* looked at homosexuality. But these merely scratch the surface. Maybe the subject — master-servant relationship — feels too quotidian. But surely the hallmark of a great director is the ability to make us look at everything that has always surrounded us in a different way?