

# Opinion

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2019

**A CONFIDENT GOVERNMENT** would have let the Interim Budget be the non-event that it should be, but confidence is one quality that is in short supply in the present BJP-led NDA government. Just look at the lugubrious faces of the BJP members of Parliament, especially those from the states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Uttar Pradesh and you will agree with me.

So, Prime Minister Modi decided that the occasion of presenting the Interim Budget will be converted into a significant event. The interim finance minister — like a player who has earned his first India cap — tried to convert it into a spectacle. The idea was to inject *josh* (spirit or enthusiasm) into the government's swansong. The result, unfortunately, may be very different from what was intended by the Prime Minister and the interim finance minister.

## The brazenness

The promises have begun to unravel. Let's look at the Big promise of ₹6,000 per year, in three instalments, to every farmer owning land of 2 hectares or less under a scheme called PM-KISAN. The government tried to pull the wool over the eyes of the Election Commission (EC) by making the scheme retrospective from December 1, 2018! How is that possible? Will the government credit the first instalment of ₹2,000 into the farmer's bank account retrospectively from December 1, 2018, and direct the banks to pay interest from that date? The EC may plead helplessness about the first instalment if it were disbursed before the Election Code kicked in, but, if the EC did not stop the second instalment, the people will conclude that another key institution has been undermined or taken over.

## The bribe

Now, to the merits of the PM-KISAN scheme: every marginal and small farmer — owning land of 2 hectares or less — is covered. That constitutes 86.2% of the total agricultural holdings in the country. While who is covered is important, who is not covered is equally important

- The owner farmer, whether he is a cultivating farmer or an absentee landlord, is covered and will get the money;
- The tenant-farmer is not covered;
- The farm labourer is not covered;
- The non-farm rural poor, like petty shopkeeper, hawker, carpenter, goldsmith, hairdresser etc, are not covered;
- The urban poor are totally excluded.

The owner-farmer's family, including the absentee landlord's, will get a grand sum of ₹17 per day. I am not mocking the scheme; it is the government that is heaping insult on the farmer after inflicting injury on him by raising the prices of diesel, electricity, fertiliser, seeds etc, levying GST on farm equipment like tractors, harvesters and threshers, and denying fair prices for his produce.

Will ₹17 per family per day alleviate the distress or poverty of a farmer-household? Obviously not. In many states the sum of ₹500 per month (or ₹6,000 per year) will be less than the pension for the aged or the disabled or widows. If ₹17 per day or ₹2,000 as the first instalment is not a sufficient poverty-alleviating measure, what is it? In plain and simple language, it is cash for votes. The government will give money to the voters on the eve of elections to win their votes — an art

**ACROSS THE AISLE**  
P Chidambaram

# An account for votes!



Finance minister Piyush Goyal with MoS finance minister Shiv Pratap Shukla arrives in the Parliament to present Interim Budget 2019-20 in New Delhi

perfected by some political parties using ill-gotten money. Under PM-KISAN, government money will be used for the first time to bribe voters.

Do state governments have updated and verified land ownership records? On the one hand, the government wrote to the states on February 4 asking them to update their land ownership records; on the other hand, on the same day, the secretary declared that the first instalment will be disbursed immediately and the government may disburse the second instalment too before the elections. The secretary is supposed to be the keeper of government's secrets!

## The boast

The other big promise was the pension plan — actually another pension plan after the first one, the Atal Pension

Joyana, flopped. The old contributory plan was launched in May 2015 and, until December 2018, could enroll only 1.33 crore subscribers. There were few who could understand the complex matrix of defined contribution that promised a defined benefit as well as return of the corpus contributed by the subscriber. The new plan is seemingly simpler but the contribution of ₹55 to ₹100 per month for a very long and presumably unbroken period (31 to 42 years) for an assured pension of ₹3,000 per month on attaining the age of 60 years does not make economic sense. If the maximum age for enrolment is 50 (as can be inferred from his speech), the interim finance minister knows there will be no payout for 10 years. I suppose with that knowledge and with no hope of enrolling 10 crore labourers and workers

as proposed, the interim finance minister set apart only ₹500 crore! (By the way, apart from paragraph 37 of the Budget speech, where is the allocation mentioned in the Budget documents?)

There were other boasts about Open Defecation Free districts and villages, electricity to every household, free LPG connections, and MUDRA loanes becoming job-creators — notwithstanding the fact that each of these claims has been exposed as untrue by field reports from academics, NGOs and journalists.

Altogether, the Interim Budget revealed that the BJP's strategy for the Lok Sabha elections is 'Boast and Bribe the voters'.

Website: [pchidambaram.in](http://pchidambaram.in)  
@Pchidambaram\_IN

**INSIDE TRACK**  
COOMI KAPOOR

## Pawar games

The three main issues which will dominate the Opposition's campaign in the 2019 election will be joblessness, farmer distress and the 'attack on democratic institutions' by the BJP government. Fighting against communalism and corruption, as represented by the Rafale deal, will be of secondary importance. This was the consensus among the representatives of 21 parties which met in Delhi on January 31 to discuss the use of EVMs in elections. It was the first time so many parties had met to formally chart out a common minimum agenda. Later, Rahul Gandhi voiced the views of the Opposition at a press conference. But the next day, Sharad Pawar, accompanied by Arvind Kejriwal, Derek O'Brien, Farooq Abdullah and Chandrababu Naidu, held a second press conference on the same subject. The message seemed to be that it should not be automatically assumed that Rahul is the sole spokesperson for the Opposition. Adding grist to the mill, on Wednesday night, Pawar held a dinner with representatives of all political parties, including Congress leaders and the BJP's Nitin Gadkari, at his house.

## Bill shelved?

It appears that the BJP has shelved plans to get the controversial Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016, and the triple talaq Bill passed. Pressure from NDA allies over the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill has mounted. Both Bills did not figure in the list of business placed before the Rajya Sabha Business Advisory Committee last week. Since the Budget Session ends on February 13, there is little time left. True, the BJP can always spring a surprise, as it did with the Bill for 10% reservation for economically weak in the general category which was announced only at noon on the day of the presentation. But the PM will be out of the capital next week.

## Lacuna in party

In a television interview last year, Akhilesh Yadav remarked jocularly that there was place for Amar Singh in the party, but would uncle Amar leave the PM? Singh took this to imply that the SP leader is feeling the absence of the party's key brains trust, fund collectors and organisational chiefs, Shivalp Yadav, Naresh Agarwal and Singh. Actually, Akhilesh's real concern is father Mulayam Singh Yadav. Now 79, 'Netaji' is sitting quietly at home with his second wife Sadhana, and sending mixed signals. Singh suggests that it may not be a simple

question of caste arithmetic in Uttar Pradesh, as the media assumes. "What happens to the 40 BSP, 40 SP candidates who expected tickets and are now jobless?" he asks mischievously, referring to the fact that many who were promised tickets would not be obliged in the alliance.

## Pricking press

Amit Shah has no love lost for the media. Which is probably why he held his press conference at 10:30 am last Sunday to announce that the party was organising 7,000 boxes to be taken around the country for people to put in suggestions for the party's manifesto. Sunday mornings are sacrosanct for newsmen, who seldom stir out before noon, particularly in Delhi's chilly winter. But the BJP president could hardly be ignored, so bleary-eyed journalists turned up in strength. Shah talked down to the media, cut journalists short in the middle of questions and even suggested to one woman scribe that instead of wasting time she should simply put her advice into one of the BJP's suggestion boxes. Rajnath Singh, who is the head of the manifesto committee, barely spoke, since Shah monopolised the mike.

## Game of numbers

With the tussle between Mamata Banerjee and the BJP hogging all the attention, few noticed that the numbers at the CPM rally in Kolkata last Sunday was in fact much higher than Mamata's much touted United India rally for opposition leaders from all over the country two weeks earlier at the same venue. CPM general secretary Sitaram Yechury tweeted videos of the two rallies as proof. The Bengali media did not interpret it as a revival of the Left. One conspiracy theory is that Mamata had secretly helped with infrastructure for the rally of her arch foe. It is in the TMC's electoral interest that the CPM retains its base of 20% vote share so that the BJP, which is increasingly been viewed as her main rival, does not benefit. The other theory is that the BJP itself helped swell the numbers in order to hit out at the common foe. Both explanations sound far-fetched. Perhaps the real reason the CPM supporters outnumbered the TMC gathering was that, on the day of the TMC's rally, police security for the many visiting *Mahagathbandhan* leaders was so stringent that several roads to the venue ground were blocked, and buses bringing in participants had per force to park several kilometres away.

# Southern comfort

It's frigid in north India. Golfers longing for a bit of sun and balmy climes should be heading south

**OVER THE TOP**

Meraj Shah



"YOU SHOULD COME over to my village. The Peermade Club Golf Course is close by and it's practically empty on most days," said Ouseph Chacko, observing with more than some amusement my extended practice swing sessions every evening. Chacko and I were on a four-day road trip from Delhi to Goa last week and experienced, in that order, the blistering chill of the extended cold wave that's raging in north India; the almost-perfect cool climes of Udaipur; and, finally, the ideal temperate zone along the coast, all the way from Daman and Diu down to Goa.

Now, Chacko, who till recently lived in Mumbai, has relocated his ancestral village—an hour's drive from Kochi. Still, remote as it is, I was taken aback because I'd never heard of Peermade GC. Readers will appreciate that as someone who's been playing and writing about the game for over two

decades now, there are hardly any lay-outs in the country that are completely unknown to your columnist. It was also perhaps the first time I'd heard 'village' and 'golf course' used in the same sentence. I mean, yes, there are villages that figure as landmarks en route to golf courses on the outskirts of Gurugram, but these hamlets also have residents who drive luxury cars and own condominiums in the tonier parts of town. But 'village' in his case, Chacko assured me, was not a euphemism.

To cut to the chase, I'm taking up Chacko on his invitation and heading down to Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Coorg to play some golf later this month. A number of courses have been added to my itinerary over the past week of planning my trip and shortlisting places and layouts. It's a veritable treasure trove, the coffee terroir in the south, when it comes to quaint layouts, most of them harking back to the colonial era. So, for the benefit of golfers in the national capital, who are longing for a bit of sun and balmy climes, here's a short, and by no means comprehensive, list of courses that I'm going to be teeing it up at down south.

I'm going to start in Kerala's capital city Thiruvananthapuram that has a



In Madikeri, the Coorg Golf Links beckons golfers with picture-perfect vistas and the ideal weather for golf

historic nine-hole layout. Members argue that it's the oldest golf course in the Commonwealth and, while the jury is still out on that one, there's no doubt that the Trivandrum Golf Club is one of the oldest in the country. Once part of the Maharaja of Travancore's hunting lodge, the course's clubhouse has been deemed a heritage structure by the Archaeological Survey of India. Barely

an hour's drive from the beaches of Kovalam, the promise of sun, sand, surfing and golf is precisely the foil needed to Delhi's grey, gloomy skies.

From Kerala, I'm going to move north to the foothills of the Western Ghats in Tamil Nadu and set up base in Coimbatore. With six golf courses within 200 km, the city is strategically located for someone looking to take a

golfing holiday in the south of India, each offering a completely unique golf and holiday experience. Amongst the lesser-known clubs on my shortlist are the Kovai Hills GC, Wellington Gymkhana, CIAL GC and Jayachamaraja Wadiyar Golf Club.

I'll start with Coimbatore GC: this par 72, 6973-yard golf course has matured over the last three decades into one of India's most challenging tracks. The main test of this track, as well as the panoramic vistas that it offers, is on account of its location in the Palakkad pass—where the Western Ghats break for a few kilometers and allow a constant gale to buffet the course all year. The Coimbatore GC probably is the windiest course in the country to tee it up at and the greens are amongst the finest you'll find.

The weather in Coimbatore, other than for two months in the summer, seldom crosses the mid-30s (centigrade) and the golfing season never ends.

From Tamil Nadu, I'll travel further north into Karnataka, but instead of heading for Bengaluru's tried-and-tested bouquet of golf courses, make a beeline for the quaint historic courses in Coorg. Mercara Downs, located in Madikeri, the capital region of Coorg, was established by the British over a century ago. This parkland course offers golfers a glimpse of links golf, with its wide open fairways, rolling hills and menacing bunkers. Apparently, the

course retains its original layout and harks back to how golf was first played at the very beginning in Scotland—the home of golf.

Also in Madikeri is the Tata Tea GC—a nine-hole facility located amidst the rolling hills of the company's sprawling 20,000-acre tea estate. Although it's a private course, I've been assured that the management is usually kind enough to accommodate itinerant golfers who make the journey to tee it up here. A surefire way to get a tee time is apparently to book a stay at one of the numerous Victorian-era bungalows around the course.

Given the surfeit of courses in the region, my itinerary has been increased from a week to a fortnight. And I've yet to accommodate some of the better-known courses in the region that include the Ootacamund Gymkhana Club, Coonoor GC and Kodaikanal Club. Even though I've played at these courses in the past, it seems a shame to give them a miss when travelling in the region. Chacko tells me that the weather seems fine and fair, and that I must extend my trip for as long as possible to include the art Biennale that's going on in Kochi. At this rate, I might just end up following his cue and relocating down south. Heck, if you can live in a village and play golf, then that's a picture of bucolic bliss if there ever was one!

*A golfer, Meraj Shah also writes about the game*