

10 IDEA EXCHANGE

NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

I don't think the BJP did it (the raid), I don't think the CBI did it, I think it is Amit Shah and (Prime Minister Narendra) Modi's BJP that did it. There is a distinction. This duo will do anything"



WHY DEREK O'BRIEN

Last week, West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee's *dharna* to protest against CBI's raid on Kolkata Police Commissioner Rajeev Kumar's residence, turned into a show of Opposition unity. Politicians such as Andhra Pradesh CM N Chandrababu Naidu and RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav joined the Trinamool chief at the *dharna* site. "This is not

the Trinamool's *dharna*. This is a political '*satyagraha*' — it was organised to save our democracy, our Constitution, our federal structure..." Mamata said. Rajya Sabha MP Derek O'Brien says that after the January 19 rally, the TMC chief's protest has further strengthened the Opposition's resolve to take on the BJP



"In my eight years in Parliament, I have never seen this kind of engine-powered, united, cohesive, egos-in-their-pockets (Opposition) moving ahead... More things will be unfolding next week

ABANTIKA GHOSH: What made Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee sit on a three-day *dharna* for the Kolkata Police Commissioner?

To understand that story I will have to take you back to the day when Akhilesh Yadav and Mayawati announced their alliance in Uttar Pradesh, and what happened a few hours after that — the CBI landed up. Then you have to go back to Chandrababu Naidu's TDP, how the CBI was sent to harass and hassle him and his senior MPs, or you have to go to Arvind Kejriwal's time, and see how he was harassed by the CBI, or you have to go back to the number of times the Congress party has been hassled and harassed.

I don't think the BJP did it, I don't think the CBI did it, I think it is Amit Shah and (Prime Minister Narendra) Modi's BJP that did it. There is a distinction. This duo will do anything... They have seen that in their internal polls they are somewhere between 150-160 (seats in the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections).

In Kolkata, 41 CBI officials landed up... Forget his name, he is the Police Commissioner of Kolkata. Nothing happened between 2014-2019, and few weeks before the elections they do this. The Chief Minister went and sat on *dharna* in support of the state administration. She is also the Home Minister. These are the times we live in and we will take these guys head on. Basically, this is political vendetta against your political opponents. It's so obvious.

HARISH DAMODARAN: But why were the policemen sitting on *dharna*?

They were not sitting on *dharna*. The Kolkata Police Commissioner (Rajeev Kumar) had 41 CBI officials outside his house. Then, the Chief Minister, within an hour, decided to sit on *dharna* to show solidarity with the state administration, not only for those in Bengal, but for every IAS and IPS officer, and to tell Modi and Shah that you cannot run your banana republic like this. So they (the policemen) were there for an hour and then they moved on. Some pictures may have gone out and worked as bad optics... But I think the bigger picture, the bigger message was to save institutions, save the Constitution.

RAVISH TIWARI: While talking about CBI action in your earlier answer, you missed out one party. Was that deliberate or a slip?

It was a slip. I could also mention the DMK and I could also mention Lalu Prasad. I think the message is very clear. In my eight years in Parliament, I have never seen this kind of engine-powered, united, cohesive, egos-in-their-pockets (Opposition) moving ahead...

I will give you examples. It started on January 19 (at the Opposition's 'United India' rally in Kolkata). The Congress president couldn't be there, but there were Congress leaders. That is one. Number two: there was a very important meeting on January 19, off camera, where the 22 parties worked out a document to send to the Election Commission. It's crucial. Some of the parties that signed on the document are rivals in their states. The third thing is what is happening in Parliament, and the fourth thing is what happened at the Kolkata *dharna*. More things will be unfolding next week.

RAKESH SINHA: How do you respond to the BJP's charge that choppers flying their leaders to West Bengal are not being allowed to land?

We have done some research. We figured that 72 per cent of the seats where Yogi Adityanath campaigned, they (the BJP) lost. Why on earth would we not want Yogi Adityanath to come to Bengal? We welcome him, Shivraj Singh Chouhan... We have enough data to suggest that when BJP leaders come without translators, from Delhi or wherever else, that actually helps consolidate the Trinamool votes. They don't understand the culture. It's like, you know, at one point, actors from Mumbai would come to Bengal to receive awards, and they would say '*Mishti Doi!*'. Same way BJP leaders now come and say '*Sonar Bangla*'. But Bengal is more than *mishti doi* and *Sonar Bangla*.

They are trying to create hype where there is none. Now if there is a helicopter problem, it may be once or twice, after that come...

ABANTIKA GHOSH: The PM has called the Opposition '*mahamilavar*'. He also spoke about BC as Before Congress, and AD as After Dynasty.

What *mahamilavar*? They are a *jumla jodi*, a party of two, Shah and Modi. As for BC and AD, it can also be 'Before

'None of us in the Oppn are expecting 272 seats... But it is match on. We have got the momentum'

TMC Parliamentary Party leader (Rajya Sabha) Derek O'Brien calls CBI action against Kolkata Police Commissioner "political vendetta", denies cracks in Opposition's unity, asserts foundation of next govt will be laid down by states, and says the BJP is not a threat in Bengal



Trinamool MP Derek O'Brien with Senior Assistant Editor Abantika Ghosh in *The Indian Express* newsroom. Gajendra Yadav

Chowkidaar and '*After Dhokha*'. We can also come up with clever lines if we want.

On a more serious note, they (the BJP) promised to double farmers' income. What you have promised in 2014, you haven't done in 2018, and now in 2019 you say give us till 2022. You come to my state, we promised to double farmers' income in our manifesto in 2011. Now, in 2019, from Rs 90,000 we have taken it to Rs 3,05,000 per year. We have trebled the income.

Another example is the difference between West Bengal's Kanyashree scheme, and the Centre's Beti Bachao programme. The budget for Beti Bachao every year is Rs 100 crore — about Rs 3 crore per state. So in the last five years, you have spent Rs 500 crore on the programme. But how many lives have you touched? West Bengal's Kanyashree, which won the United Nations award, has a budget of Rs 6,500 crore. Lives of 15 lakh girls have been touched. And then Modi and Shah come to Bengal and tell us that Kanyashree is a copy of Beti Bachao. Kanyashree started two years before Beti Bachao. These are the things they can't debate.

During the recent joint sitting of Parliament, the loudest thumping of desks in Central Hall came from the Treasury Benches when the words 'surgical strikes' were mentioned. Did those thumping their desks know that the current defence budget (Rs 3 lakh crore) is merely 2.5 per cent of the GDP — the lowest since the 1962 war? Did those thumping the desks know that the PMO was running parallel negotiations with the French government in the Rafale deal?

I have to give credit to Modi on three things. He is a good one-way orator. He won't take questions. He makes big promises but he doesn't keep them, and he is the prince of deception and the grandfather of corruption. There is enough in the public domain, but no one discusses his corruption.

DEEPTIMAN TIWARI: The CBI says that for the past two years they have been sending summons, they have been asking for documents, and seeking cooperation in the Saradha

investigation.

There are five letters written by the Police Commissioner of Kolkata, offering himself for questioning to the CBI. It is in the public domain. Four letters have been written by the CBI asking people to appear as witnesses, but they are all wonky in terms of dates. Someone has been asked to appear before the CBI on August 20, but the letter is dated September 5. It's blatant political vendetta.

Tomorrow, I may get a CBI notice for saying something against Shah. Our fight is not with the CBI. It is with the Centre. But the more you provoke people in the Trinamool and Mamata Banerjee... We are not chicken-hearted, we will take you on. But we will not be like you when you are controlling these things in a few months from now. We have to be gracious.

India is a Union of states and, in the coming months, the government at the Centre will be one whose foundations are laid by the different states.

LIZ MATHEW: After Mukul Roy, another Trinamool leader has switched sides to the BJP. The BJP says there are more Trinamool leaders who will join them.

Mukul is a traitor. One or two MPs will go, they have been suspended from the party. I have never fought an election, I am in the Rajya Sabha, but Mukul's track record is even better. He has fought one election in the Assembly,

and lost that by 25,000 votes. So who are we talking about?

LIZ MATHEW: Are there more?

Not that I know of.

LIZ MATHEW: Political observers have noted that the weakening of the Left and the Congress has strengthened the BJP's position in West Bengal. So is there a proposal for all the parties to come together and fight the BJP in the state?

No. The Trinamool is fighting all the 42 (Lok Sabha) seats in Bengal. Also for the Left... their rally was held recently... it was a fair rally.

AVISHEK G DASTIDAR: There is a theory that the Trinamool is creating the BJP hype in Bengal so that the Muslim votes in the state do not get divided.

We are not doing anything of that sort. The BJP, CPM and Congress in Bengal are working together, whether it is official, unofficial, we don't know... However, in Delhi, with the Congress... we are all on the same page. Our focus is going to be jobs, agriculture, breakdown of institutions and corruption.

RAVISH TIWARI: On the ground, which party is your competitor in West Bengal?

The BJP, CPM, Congress. You can inter-

pret it in any order. The bigger picture is that we have to do what it takes to remove Shah-Modi BJP from Delhi, including the much easier job of choosing a leader of that coalition after we have the requisite numbers.

ABANTIKA GHOSH: About the January 19 rally, the BJP said it was a stage full of prime ministers. You called it 'United India'. There is a perception that 'United India' is already disunited and that the Trinamool is unhappy with Rahul Gandhi being at the helm.

No. You have to understand that 22 parties signed the document that was submitted to the Election Commission. The Congress party raised the Rafale issue. (On February 8) in Parliament, the five-page Rafale document prepared by the Congress... the Trinamool was distributing the leaflets. So the focus is much bigger. The focus is 'Save India, Save Democracy, Save the Constitution'.

LIZ MATHEW: The Prime Minister has said that the Congress has outsourced its job to the Trinamool...

If you want me to give a clever line in retort, I can say the BJP has outsourced the party to Shah and Modi. If you talk to the people in the BJP they will tell you a lot of things. My observation is that Amit Shah and Narendra Modi are fighting this election on two fronts. They are fighting against a united Opposition and they are fighting another election within their own party.

AVISHEK G DASTIDAR: The coalition UPA II government, towards the end, wasn't a stable one. Some credit for this also goes to the Trinamool Congress. Now you are again pitching for a coalition government.

Nobody pitches for a coalition government. A coalition evolves. The other thing is that the government will be formed by 272 MPs who can come and pledge support. Let's not get carried away. They (the BJP) say, 'We will sweep Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan'. This is hype. My guru in advertising, David Ogilvy, had a simple lesson. He would say you could go to a family and sell a pressure cooker

and they will buy it from you. But the problem is when you have to get them to repurchase that pressure cooker. This is the BJP's problem. Great packaging and marketing delivered in 2014. Now they are painting the pressure cooker up, patching it up.

RITIKA CHOPRA: What is the Trinamool's stand on going back to the ballot paper system?

The stand of the 22 political parties is the same. Since you (the Election Commission) cannot provide 100 per cent VVPAT, we all agreed to 50 per cent. So it will be 50 per cent VVPAT on a random basis.

The ideal thing to do would be to go back to the ballot paper. All the parties in discussion in Kolkata and New Delhi were practical. They thought 50 per cent was a fair number to ask for. Some parties may have said something else earlier, but they have now agreed to the document that was submitted to the Election Commission. And I think that the results getting delayed by two or three days is fine till we get the right results.

AAKASH JOSHI: You said there is a danger to the Constitution from Amit Shah and Narendra Modi. Is there an ideological problem with the Sangh? In case there is a situation where the current prime minister is not there, would you join the coalition?

I am going to tell you what's going to happen without being arrogant or making predictions. The NDA will get 150-160 seats. They will try to get to 272. So these situations that you mention are impossibilities. Nothing of this sort will arise. Once the numbers come in from Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Bihar — these are major states — and everyone will give their letter of support, then anything can happen.

None of us (Opposition parties) are expecting 272. The BJP may claim they are getting 340 seats. As far as I have seen since January 19 to now, this is match on. I think we have got the momentum. We want to focus on what we have in common than what we don't have in common. Eventually, what matters is how many seats you win.

DEEPTIMAN TIWARI: There have been allegations against the Trinamool in the Saradha and Rose Valley chit fund scams. There was the Narada sting operation as well.

Narada came out one month before the 2016 Assembly elections. The tape was played across every channel. What happened to the Trinamool after that? We won 211 seats out of 290. You throw unsubstantiated muck at that white sari of Mamata Banerjee, no one in Bengal will believe you.

DEEPTIMAN TIWARI: What about the allegations of the Chief Minister selling her paintings to chit fund scam companies? The CBI has sent notices in this regard to many people, including you.

The Chief Minister has made public statements regarding this matter. She paints. She donated all her paintings to *Jago Bangla*, the Trinamool Congress's weekly newspaper. *Jago Bangla* sold the paintings in a public exhibition. The money came into the account. There is no secret here. Some companies which might have bought the paintings went belly up.

DEEPTIMAN TIWARI: With the CBI questioning Kolkata Police Commissioner Rajeev Kumar, are you going to see another *dharna*?

This country is in a dangerous situation. Sitting on *dharna* is similar to *satyagraha*. Mamata Banerjee doesn't see if something is going to help the Trinamool or not. When we started the Singur protest on December 4, 2006, every political party said this is drama. Today, after 14 years, whatever the Trinamool said... every political party now has a similar view on land. Farmers are getting the best deal on land. The Supreme Court of India endorsed whatever we said. Mamata Banerjee is known for her conviction. Singur is one example.



"BJP, CPI(M), Cong in Bengal are working together... However, in Delhi, with Congress... we are all on the same page. Our focus is jobs, agriculture, breakdown of institutions and corruption

FIFTH COLUMN

ACROSS
THE AISLE



P CHIDAMBARAM

If Rs 17 per day or Rs 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 perfected by some political parties using ill-gotten money. Under PM-KISAN, government money will be used for the first time to bribe voters

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 Rs 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 Rs 2,000 into the farmer's bank account retrospectively from December 1, 2018,

An account for votes!

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 per cent 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 Rs 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 Rs 17 per family per day alleviate the distress or poverty of a farmer-household? Obviously not. In many states the sum of Rs 500 per month (or Rs 6,000 per year) will be less than the pension for the aged or the disabled or widows. If Rs 17 per day or Rs 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 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 Yojana, 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 Rs 55 to Rs 100 per month for a very long and presumably *unbroken* period (31 to 42 years) for an assured pension of Rs 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 Rs 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'.

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TAVLEEN SINGH

Modi's farewell speech

LAST WEEK the Prime Minister made what could be his last speech in the Lok Sabha. He tried to sound feisty and fighting fit but sounded defensive and vulnerable. This was because he wasted time listing the failures of Congress prime ministers. This was unnecessary because they are history and you, Narendra Modi, are the first Prime Minister in 30 years to be given a full mandate by the people of India. Recent polls indicate that a full majority will be hard to get next time and we may even be in for a spell of rule by a government of what you correctly called '*mahamilavat*'. Mega-adulterated goods.

Adulterated is an unusual word in politics but not a bad one for the leaders in the coalition that seeks to defeat Modi. This ensemble does not include leaders with shining records. Half of them have entered politics not for reasons of public service or through a political process but because their Daddy or Mummy bequeathed them political parties. Those who do not come from the hereditary stream mostly have serious charges of corruption against them and yet this caboodle dominates the narrative for 2019 because the 'secular' left media is on their side. Modi failed to discover that in national politics the media's support matters.

In a recent interview he said he had been unable to please 'Lutyens Delhi'. His handful of supporters in the media spit the word Lutyens out as if it were singularly responsible for all Modi's failures. The truth is that Modi's failures are of his own making. I noticed that in his long speech last week he did not mention demeritisation once. Nor is this mentioned any more on the campaign trail. Could it be because it marks the exact moment when Modi began to falter? It was a seriously bad idea and was one of the main reasons why the economy began to slow down. The other reason was Modi's failure to understand that for jobs to be created you need masses of private investment from rich Indians and he should ask himself why this did not happen.

In the last years of the Sonia-Manmohan government, Indian businessmen were treated like criminals and major projects put on hold or closed down. This happened even as huge welfare programmes were created to give every Indian cheap foodgrain and unemployed rural Indians dole in the guise of guaranteed jobs. Had this money been spent on creating real jobs in rural India, it may have changed the face of this country. This is what people like me hoped Modi would do. He chose instead to digitise the welfare programmes he inherited with the idea of making them less leaky but without noticing that it would cause immense suffering for people who lived many kilometres away from the nearest bank.

Having said this, it also needs to be said that Modi's great achievement is that he has managed to drag India, kicking and screaming, into the digital age. This is no small achievement, but its benefits will only be felt long after the coming election in which Modi could be defeated for one reason and one reason alone: jobs. Whatever his officials tell him about how well his schemes to 'start up' India are doing, the truth is that unemployment today is higher, according to reliable recent data, than it has been in decades. This is why political leaders in the coalition that hopes to defeat Modi are strutting about so smugly these days.

Modi has other achievements that he can be proud of. The Swachh Bharat programme has been a spectacular success. It has changed social behaviour in huge swathes of rural India. Those who mock Modi for spending so much energy on building toilets have forgotten that open defecation is the cause of many horrible diseases. These are diseases that permanently stunt and disable children. So if rural India today has thousands of districts that have managed to end the disgusting practice of open defecation, it is a major achievement.

The point I am making is that Modi did not need to sound defensive at all in his speech. His achievements are many and anyone who travels in rural India can see them. There are roads where none existed before, gas connections and electricity available to people who never dreamed such things were possible and there are *pucca* homes where once there were mud huts. These are real achievements.

As someone who has criticised him in this column for his mistakes, let me admit that when I compare him with those who seek to unseat him, he looks good. In the name of 'secularism' we have in that maha-caboodle leaders whose politics are founded on caste, creed and a sickeningly obvious desire to be in politics for personal gain. They make Modi look like a real leader.

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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 per cent 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

OUT OF MY MIND



MEGHNAD DESAI

IF THERE is one matter on which there is almost universal agreement in Indian politics, it is the Constitution. It is one of the longest in the world and has been amended practically continually since the day after it was promulgated. There have been frequent debates about changing it fundamentally, most recently during the Atal Bihari Vajpayee era. There is also a frequent cry, as it happened last week of 'Constitution in Danger'.

chiefs, Shivpal 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.

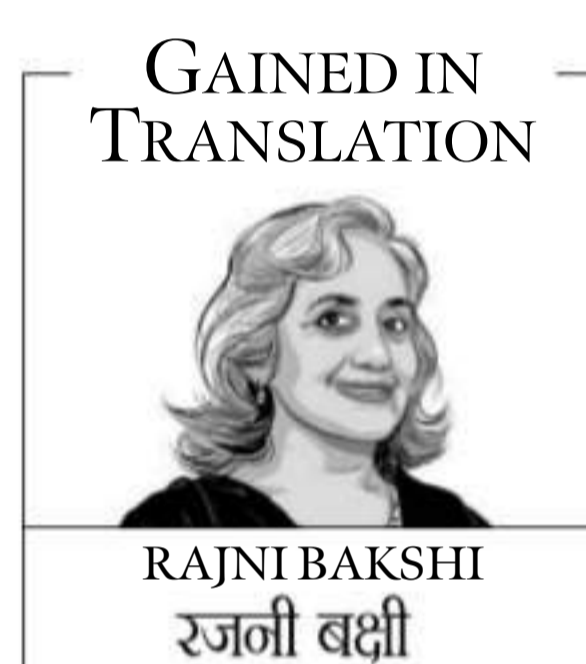
PRICKING PRESS

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 per cent vote share so that the BJP, which is increasingly being 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 Mahagathabandhan 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.

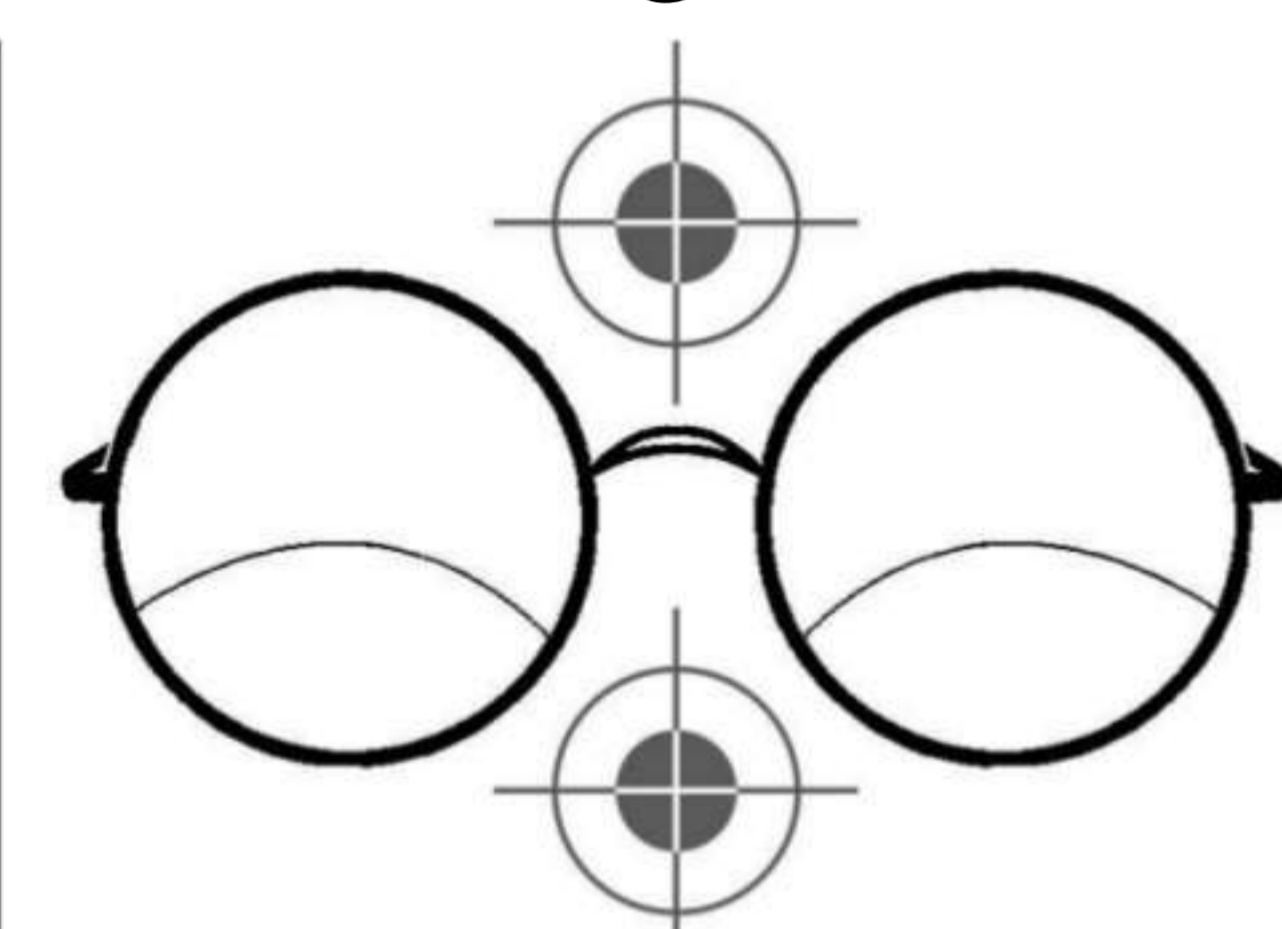
Gandhi's art of disagreement



ON THE evening of October 30, 1947, exactly three months before Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was shot dead, one person who had come to the prayer meeting on the lawns of Birla House objected to verses from the Quran being included in the prayers. A majority of the people present were in favour of the entire multi-faith prayer and they compelled the person who had objected to leave. The entire episode deeply pained Gandhi. He said all are welcome to the prayer meeting, "but after coming here it is not good manners to raise any objection".

This was no mere difference of opinion on some fleeting issue of the moment. The objector was striking at the very heart of what was most dear to Gandhi — prayer, and acknowledging that all faiths are paths to the same divinity. Yet even this did not prevent Gandhi from approaching the objector with empathy and seeing that there was pain behind his anger. At the same time, Gandhi firmly stood his ground: "...I am helpless because it (verses from the Quran) is an inseparable part of my prayer". This story does not offer any easy copy-paste solution for our times. But it is potentially an entry point for reflecting on the art of disagreement. Diversity of views and convictions has been an essential part of what has brought our species this far. The scale of viciousness and open hatred over social media may be new but the problem itself is very old. Historically, disagreement has led to a wide range of responses — from killing, shouting down or ignoring opponents to listening and attempting dialogue with the "other".

Gandhi's life and politics brought forth a truth that ordinary people knew instinctively — namely, that a *mat-bhed*, difference over an issue, need not become a *man-bhed*, a division of hearts. Among the millions who lined up to pay respect to Gandhi's ashes, many would have disagreed with him on many specific issues but that paled in comparison with the glow left behind by his art of disagreement. Current projections of Gandhi's assas-



CR Sasikumar

sin, Nathuram Godse, as a hero are essentially about obliterating the vital difference between disagreement over an issue and a division of hearts.

In this context, what are the key lessons from Gandhi's experiments with the art of disagreement? First we must recognise, if not celebrate, that Gandhi's practice was not perfect. This is why it is human, accessible and replicable. For instance, Gandhi's differences with BR Ambedkar over separate electorates are perhaps the best known instance where Gandhi fell short. Gandhi's fasting onto death on this issue had an internal and authentic logic, but it acted upon Ambedkar as a form of coercion and laid the grounds for a lingering bitterness. Here then is just one version of Gandhi's key gains in the art of disagreement. One, engagement with the other's views is always possible and worthwhile. Two, this can and must be done while being true to the fundamentals of your own conviction. Three, this requires a willingness to both listen deeply to the "other" so as to decipher their underlying concerns and anxieties and to respond accordingly.

Of course, all of the above is possible only if we seek power with others rather than over them. When there is confidence in power with others then there is potentially strength in agreeing to disagree. It is when we crave power over others that disagreement veers towards fatal conflict and any reduction in the polarisation seems threatening because a resolution of the conflict becomes anathema. Gandhi was able to cultivate the art of disagreement not because he was drawing on modern liberal values but because he located himself in the spiritual traditions of the Indian subcontinent. Seeing all faiths

as different paths leading to the same truth was only one part of this legacy. More importantly, he was rooted in the conviction that when primacy is given to the spiritual domain then our worldly disagreements become proportionally small and fleeting. Therefore, the shouting down of the man who objected to the Quran verses was a form of violence. That evening, on October 30, Gandhi refused to have the prayer meeting. But he was clear that "disappointing 300 persons for the sake of two or three is also a kind of violence".

So the next day the multi-faith prayer gathering proceeded complete with verses from the Quran. In case anyone objects, Gandhi had said earlier, the rest of those gathered must put up with the objection without anger: "Because you are in the majority, you should not think that you can ignore the people who are protesting..."

Having refused to drop the Quran verses from his prayers Gandhi invited any objectors to meet him later and explain how he was harming the Hindu religion. "Personally, I think I have only done some good to Hinduism. Through this practice of reciting from the Quran I am able to draw my Muslim friends nearer to me." After the prayer meeting, Gandhi thanked the objectors for remaining silent and complimented the rest for tolerating their protests. Three months later, the objector took the form of Godse and killed Gandhi. It is for each one of us to decide whether it was violence or *ahimsa* that was victorious on the Birla House lawns on January 30, 1948.

This is an abridged text of the 46th Vishnu Shastri Chiplunkar Memorial Lecture delivered at Ruia College, Mumbai on January 24. Abridged and translated from Hindi by the author

Power of Centre against that of states

The issue is the power of the Centre against that of the states, or the nature of federalism. Few people remember that as late as July 1946, the proposed Constitution of India (undivided) was going to be a Confederate one with powerful Provinces whose elected heads were called Prime Ministers and a weak Centre with Defence, Foreign Affairs and Currency among its subjects. The Government of India Act 1935 was the basis for the 1946 elections which created the Legislative Assembly which became the Constituent Assembly.

Partition changed everything. Instead of a Union of powerful Provinces and weak Centre, the Constituent Assembly chose a strong Centre with states whose boundaries could be altered by the Centre. There

was an implicit assumption that the Congress will rule at the Centre and all the states forever, which would allow Centre-state disputes to be settled at party level.

That lasted till 1967, though the arbitrary dismissal of the first Communist government of Kerala showed that even Jawaharlal Nehru's commitment to democracy had limits. It got worse and the Centre misused the President's Rule powers shamelessly, not to mention the Emergency. It was as the Congress began to lose its monopoly of power that federalism blossomed. States became powerful. Tamil Nadu became practically autonomous after 1967 when the Congress was thrown out and then no outside party ever came to power. West Bengal asserted its independ-

ence when Jyoti Basu ruled supreme. States' demand for revenue sharing was accommodated by successive Finance Commissions, but on political matters the power equation between the Centre and states alters with personalities. There is no redress except via the Supreme Court. When the Centre was weak during 1988-1998, the Supreme Court gathered lot of power to itself and became autonomous, as its system of Collegium shows. It has not given up that power despite a Constitutional amendment to establish a National Judicial Appointments Commission. Here the disproportionate weakness of the principal opposition party has helped the court. Lately, the fissures within the topmost judges and the cavalier attempts to impeach the Chief Justice

of India have done no one any good. The system may not be broke but it is not working as expected.

The most recent fracas, between the West Bengal CM and CBI, has shown once again that it is not rules of established practice that govern Centre-state relations. Luckily, the Centre showed restraint and did not slam President's Rule as in the old Congress days, but the fact remains that the balance between the Centre and states is not as was assumed in 1949. States are developing tariff barriers when it comes to jobs and reservations wanting to favour their 'native sons of the soil', as the most recent example of Madhya Pradesh shows. This will only grow as the NRC issue in Assam demonstrates.

The glue of the Constitution is drying up.