

# Opinion

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**MR NITIN GADKARI** is an uncommon politician. By his own admission he is a foodie, he wears chic clothes and seems to enjoy life. He enjoys speaking at public functions and he speaks as if he does not have a care in the world.

At the same time, he is a *swayamsevak*. He is believed to be a favourite of the RSS. He nurses his constituency, Nagpur (Maharashtra), and keeps the RSS, his party leaders and his party workers in good humour.

Mr Gadkari and Mr Devendra Fadnavis belong to Nagpur and draw their support from the same region and the same political base of leaders and workers. The talk in Maharashtra is that Mr Gadkari wanted to be chief minister of Maharashtra but Mr Narendra Modi scuppered the plan. Mr Modi chose Mr Devendra Fadnavis, a loyalist. It was supposed to be a smart move to check Mr Gadkari's ambitions, if any. However, the irrepressible Mr Gadkari has cut loose and carved out a path for himself.

## Gadkari Gems

Mr Gadkari is known for his focused attention to his portfolios — highways and road transport, water resources, river development and Ganga rejuvenation. He has a mixed record of performance as a minister. Good in highway construction, hype about Ganga rejuvenation, underperformance in water resource development and woefully behind on irrigation projects.

Outside his office, he is blunt and forthright in his utterances. In March 2018, at a media-organised conclave, he said, "Media has in the past trapped us over the question of *achche din*. Please don't misinterpret what I say. There is no such *achche din*... *Achche din* is a belief, if you believe, it is there." Again in August 2018, when the agitations for reservation were gathering strength, he said, "Even if reservation is given, there are no jobs. Jobs in banks have shrunk because of technology. Government recruitment is frozen." Many people suspected that Mr Gadkari's target was not the agitators (for demanding reservation) but the Modi government (for its failure to create jobs).

In recent times, he has been creating minor storms by his cleverly crafted statements. The election results of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan gave Mr Gadkari a great opportunity. He didn't mince words. He said, "Success has many fathers but failure is an orphan as, when there is success, there will be a race to take credit, but, in case of failure, everybody will start pointing fingers at each other. Leadership should have the *vrutti* (inclination) to own up defeat and failures. Loyalty of the leadership towards the organisation will not be proven till the time it owns up responsibility for defeat."

On Republic Day, 2019, he was more outspoken: "People like political leaders who show them dreams. But if those dreams are not fulfilled, the people will thrash these leaders."

## Preparing to Challenge

There was no doubt in anyone's mind that the target was Mr Narendra Modi. If the BJP does not win an absolute majority or finds itself unable to form the government, it is believed that Mr Gadkari will challenge Mr Modi

## ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



# The importance of being Mr Gadkari



Union minister for shipping, road transport and highways Nitin Gadkari

for the leadership of the party.

Earlier, Mr Gadkari had obliquely targeted Mr Amit Shah, the president of the BJP. Delivering the annual IB Endowment lecture on December 24, 2018, Mr Gadkari said, "If I am the party president and my MPs and MLAs are not doing well, then who is responsible? I am." At the same event, he threw a challenge to the prime minister as well: "Tolerance is the biggest asset of the Indian system. You can't win elections only because you speak well... you might be a *vidwan* (learned person) but people may not vote for you. One who thinks he knows everything is mistaken — people should refrain from artificial marketing."

Mr Gadkari has said all that a dissident in the BJP could say or all that an Opposition politician would say. He has virtually called the prime minister a

failed dream merchant and chided him for lacking in *vrutti* to own responsibility for defeat; he has accused the prime minister of being intolerant and one who indulges in artificial marketing. Strong words indeed from a Cabinet colleague!

## Leadership Flummoxed

Despite these utterances, the BJP leadership has not said a word in public. The RSS also has not rebuked Mr Gadkari. Presumably, everyone is baffled and not clear about how the situation should be handled. I suspect the hesitation to act is because the party leadership knows that there are many more leaders — especially MPs from Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh —

who are apprehensive about the outcome of the Lok Sabha elections and their own political future. In 2014, the BJP and its ally in UP (Apna Dal) won 135 of the 145 seats at stake in these four states. By any calculation, the BJP is poised to lose at least 80 of those 135 seats. That is the outcome that Mr Gadkari and his supporters would devoutly wish for. The murmurs are growing louder every day and that should be music to Mr Gadkari and his merry band of followers!

More and more voices (the latest is Mr Ram Vilas Paswan) are predicting that the BJP's individual tally in the elections may slide from the 2014-high of 282. As the slide continues, you can be certain that the frequency of Gadkari gems will rise!

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## INSIDE TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR

## Holes in the net

Despite gloomy reports of its prospects in the 2019 elections, the BJP puts up a brave face. The party brains trust assumes that even if the NDA is well short of the half-way mark, there is a safety net because neutral parties in four states, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Tamil Nadu, will eventually back the single-largest party. But, by unnecessarily poking its nose in Tamil Nadu politics, the BJP may have lost the support of the two main political contenders in a state which contributes 39 Lok Sabha seats. True, the DMK is now with the Congress, but by propping up the weak AIADMK government led by EK Palaniswami and O Paneerselvam, the BJP has alienated the main inheritor of Jayalithaa's mantle, TTV Dhinakaran, who has popular support even if he doesn't have the party symbol.

## Aap ki pasand

The Congress high command has a problem convincing its party state units in Haryana, Delhi and Punjab regarding a tie-up with AAP for 2019. It fears that if it doesn't tie up, the BJP stands to benefit. This happened in the Jind Assembly by-election last week, when the Congress's Randeep Surjewala came third, behind Digvijay Chautala's new party that teamed up with AAP. The Congress's local units are reluctant for the tie-up since they fear that their clout will diminish in seat distribution. The high command, on the other hand, fears that the BJP could win all seven Lok Sabha seats in Delhi, for example, if there is no alliance with AAP. Incidentally, in talks with potential allies in states, the Congress's position is that seat-sharing agreements cannot be based only on the party's performance in the last parliamentary polls, when its popularity was at its nadir, and that its performance in the last three parliamentary elections must be taken into account.

## Proximity pays

Many high-flyers in the Congress were eyeing the key post of general secretary in charge of organisation after Ashok Gehlot's departure to Rajasthan. But to everyone's surprise, Rahul Gandhi picked the relatively unknown KC Venugopal, an MP from Kerala, who carries some baggage. Venugopal's performance as in-charge of the Karnataka Assembly polls was lacklustre and he has faced allegations of sexual misconduct in his home state. Venugopal's strength is that he does not belong to the old-guard faction, nor is he

one of the high-profile young heirs of political dynasties. But Venugopal's biggest plus point is that he was allotted a seat in the Lok Sabha right next to Rahul. Venugopal used this proximity to his advantage. He makes it a point to attend Parliament regularly and stands unobtrusively beside his party chief whenever possible.

## Belated award

When the late journalist Kuldeep Nayar met Manmohan Singh for the first time, Singh, then economic adviser to the government, told him: "You deserve the Bharat Ratna". His remark was in appreciation for Nayar's work in trying to bridge the gulf between Hindus and Sikhs post-1984. However, when Singh became Prime Minister, far from recommending an award for Nayar, he never even invited him for a cup of tea during his 10-year tenure. Nayar felt that he probably did not want to risk annoying Sonia Gandhi. Ironically, Nayar was posthumously awarded the Padma Bhushan last month, though the well-known journalist had often written critically of Modi. Nayar's recollections of his meetings with Singh and other key figures of India's political history — Gandhi and Jinnah to Indira Gandhi, Vajpayee and Modi — are featured in his latest book, *On Leaders and Icons*, which will be released posthumously this week. Among the many interesting anecdotes, Nayar recounts that Sanjay Gandhi informed him after the Emergency that he had assumed his mother would not call elections for three to four decades.

## Kicked upstairs

While Priyanka Gandhi's induction as AICC general secretary in charge of eastern Uttar Pradesh was greeted with euphoria, many are puzzled by Jyotiraditya Scindia's appointment as general secretary of western UP. The Madhya Pradesh royal has little association with the region. In this strange work allotment, Congress workers are also curious to know who gets control of Awadh in central UP. Scindia's selection was perhaps an attempt to mollify him since the party could not make him president of the Madhya Pradesh unit, although he had earlier been denied the chief minister's post. The seasoned Kamal Nath, backed by the shrewd Digvijay Singh, ensured that Scindia was totally cut off from state politics. Nath continues as MPCC chief, at least till the polls. By elevating Scindia to the same status as Priyanka, the Congress felt it could smooth Scindia's ruffled feathers.

# A sea change

On February 1, a new chapter began in the Davis Cup with 12 qualifying-round ties

## RINGSIDE VIEW

Shamik Chakrabarty



**GERARD PIQUE** MUST be having a sense of immense satisfaction at the change that he described as "historic". The Barcelona centre-half picked the Davis Cup to invest in sport, proposed a radical overhaul of the 119-year-old event and revelled in the International Tennis Federation's (ITF) kowtowing. A footballer has altered the very fabric of the most prestigious team tournament in tennis by pumping in \$3 billion over 25 years through his investment group Kosmos.

Last Friday, a new chapter began in the Davis Cup with 12 qualifying-round ties. The winners progressed to the finals, to be played in Madrid in November. A total 18 countries will turn up for the finals. Last year's semi-finalists — Croatia, France, Spain and the United States — were given direct entry, while Britain and Argentina received wildcards. The Davis Cup was first played in 1900 and in 1981 it created a World Group with 16 teams.

That's history now, as also its home-and-away format and best-of-five sets matches. All the matches have now been reduced to best-of-three sets.

It's unlikely that if Roger Federer goes to Fifa and proposes a change in the World Cup format, football's global body will give him a patient hearing. Actually, it's almost unthinkable that Federer will make such a weird approach. From that perspective, Pique approaching the ITF and getting the job done bordered on the grotesque. It's a different issue that he picked tennis over football to invest, especially at a time when La Liga wasn't exactly in the pink, money-wise.

Talking about Federer, the great man had warned last year that the Davis Cup shouldn't become the 'Pique Cup'. "I haven't spoken to Gerard Pique yet, but I admit that it's a bit odd to see a footballer arrive and meddle in the tennis business. Be careful; the Davis Cup shouldn't become the Pique Cup. I'm globally for innovations; our sport needs to think a little outside the box to innovate. But it's a bit like in a part of Jenga, you have to be careful not to remove the room that will bring down the whole building," the tennis legend had said in August last year.

His comment came on the heels of the ITF annual general meeting in Orlando



India's non-playing captain Mahesh Bhupathi with other players at a press conference ahead of their Davis Cup match against Italy in Kolkata earlier this week

that approved the Davis Cup restructuring by a two-thirds majority. Pique was successful to change the Davis Cup into a world cup on his second attempt. Earlier, in 2015, he had met the ITF commercial director in Barcelona. But the negotiations fell through.

The Davis Cup wasn't the most popular tennis event in the world. Far from it... Several players had complained about its erstwhile year-long format, which according to them brought extra stress in an already cramped tour schedule. The

ITF said its rebranding would bring the top players back into the competition. As it turned out, both Federer and Novak Djokovic opted out of their respective Davis Cup ties, when Switzerland played against Russia and Serbia faced Uzbekistan this weekend. Even Italy's top-ranked player Fabio Fognini was absent for his team's Davis Cup tie against India at the Calcutta South Club.

India's non-playing captain Mahesh Bhupathi, however, supported the change, saying: "When someone takes a

proposal the people who are voting on the proposal, all the educated people on the idea of board, who all know everything about tennis. The proposal (was) voted on by the ITF board and unanimously passed, which means (the) ITF governing body is the one who changed the format because they feel that it's better for tennis."

Bhupathi probably missed a point that was highlighted by former India Davis Cup captain Jaidip Mukerjee. "For countries like India, the Davis Cup was

the only event that brought top stars in this part of the world. The likes of Stefan Edberg, Goran Ivanisevic, Rafael Nadal and several other top players came here for the Davis Cup ties. With India playing in the zonal group, fans here will miss out on the opportunity to watch the greats in the flesh," Mukerjee told this correspondent during a conversation last week.

At the exalted level, criticism was sharper. Australian legend John Newcombe described the change as "the recipe for the death". The Australian Davis Cup team captain Lleyton Hewitt tore into Pique and his investment group. "He (Pique) knows nothing about tennis. It'd be like me asking to change things for the Champions League," Hewitt told reporters ahead of Australia's Davis Cup qualifier against Bosnia-Herzegovina. "The two biggest points of difference were, one, the home and away aspect of it and, secondly, the best of five sets. If you look at the pinnacle of our sport, which are the four majors, they're best of five sets. Having it at one place I think is ridiculous, I don't think many of the top players will play," he added. Boris Becker reacted with a tweet: "Lost for words".

Last Thursday, ITF president David Haggerty announced La Liga's association with tennis, that the Spanish football league will sponsor the Davis Cup finals. It was further cross-dressing of an event that greatly valued its tradition.