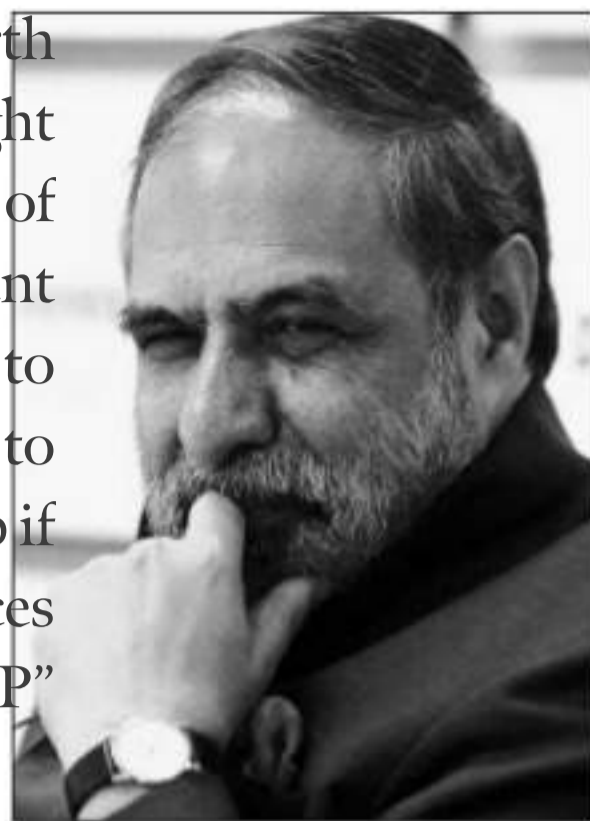


Electoral bonds worth Rs 295 crore were bought from SBI branches, of which Rs 290 crore went to BJP. Rs 4 crore came to Cong and Rs 1 crore to others. This is the gap if you see the resources available to BJP”



**PVAIDYANATHAN IYER: With less than a month to go for the Lok Sabha elections, how is the Congress's publicity campaign shaping up?**

It is something which evolves. It is not decided in a day. The narrative is changing. The new media is going to play an important role, much more than 2014. We are putting together an integrated campaign across platforms. How to reach the targeted audience, that is something we are grappling with. You will soon see the campaign picking up.

**PVAIDYANATHAN IYER: What is your strategy for mediums like WhatsApp, where the BJP is very active?**

There has been a significant improvement in the Congress's social media department. All state units, and all the front organisations such as the youth wing, Mahila Congress, have social media teams. There is a big network that has been created. My own committee has made a dedicated portal on which the data of users — party activists, sympathisers, from across the country — has been collated.

I agree that the BJP has been ahead and they have used mediums such as WhatsApp very effectively. It is because they have a formidable, well-funded machine. There is no match in terms of the resources available to them. Even in 2014, the BJP had beaten the Congress party when it came to money power and resources. We are depending more on our cadres and supporters. The BJP has dedicated infrastructure for it. They do it 24/7, 365 days. We do not have the exact numbers, but in states such as Gujarat, the BJP has 18,000 people employed doing only this work.

We have now brought in a digital media company, Silver Push. It has been formed by IITians in Delhi. They have invented technologies that I find very helpful.

Also, political parties have to be mindful of the kind of campaigns undertaken on social media. It is a double-edged sword. If you convey the correct message, it's fine. But if social media is abused, it is used for trolling, to spread fake news, there is a big danger there.

**PVAIDYANATHAN IYER: What kind of expenditure do you see ahead of the Lok Sabha elections?**

I don't deal with the party funds.

Anyway, I don't think the Congress party is receiving that kind of support or money. I taken after the Mumbai attacks. I know will give you one example. Electoral bonds how effective our diplomacy was — at the worth Rs 295 crore were purchased from time, and how we succeeded vis-a-vis the various SBI branches, of which Rs 290 crore Lashkar-e-Toiba, Hafiz Saeed, went to the BJP. Of the remainder, Rs 4 crore Effectiveness comes from whether the came to the Congress and Rs 1 crore went country is more secure. India is far more to the others. This is the real gap if you see vulnerable today than in 2014. Kashmir is the resources available to the BJP and the violently unstable compared to 2014. If we others. There cannot be any comparison. had achieved the right results against ter-

Secondly, as a political party, the BJP has roicism, then why are our enemies across emerged as the largest advertiser in the the border, Pakistan, bolder than they were country. The government's spending in counter-attacking and openly support-power on advertisement and propaganda... ing terror infrastructure on their soil! I per-Between January 15 and the day the Model sonally feel that on the challenge of secu-Code of Conduct came into force, the gov- rity, terrorism and dealing with Pakistan, erment had spent Rs 4,000 crore. The BJP the present Prime Minister has been clue-has beaten Unilever, Amazon, Netflix, Tatas less, incoherent. He believes in the trans-and Reliance Industries put together. In the actional conduct of foreign policy. One day previous three years they have spent you go to Japan and say you are my best Rs 4,297 crore only on advertisements. This partner, the next day you receive the is unprecedented. The question is, should Chinese President and say you are my best this kind of money be available to any po-partner. People aren't silly.

Manmohan Singh came from Pakistan after Partition. It was his desire also to visit Pakistan. But did he as Prime Minister? No, because the environment was not conducive. However, the present Prime Minister did, whether invited or uninvited. When he landed there (in Lahore,

Both are equally important. Our slogan December 2015), there was no salute of ho-will also be focused on people and their is-nour. The Pakistan army men refused to do sues. In the last one month, there has been it. It was an insult to my country. Will he a well-orchestrated diversion, deflecting then be considered a strong PM?

any discussion or questions on the real is- Diplomacy is not about photo-ops, sues that confront India. Prime Minister there should be gravitas and depth. Modi does not want to discuss what he said Diplomacy does not have to be loud, it has in 2014. The BJP campaign will not talk to be silent, you have to look at results. For about jobs, they will not talk about farm-the Prime Minister, everything is propa-rs' distress, they will not talk about ganda. He is a loud Prime Minister, who is women's safety, social security, harmony clueless about foreign policy. in the country... On all these issues they are bound to be rejected.

**COOMI KAPOOR: As the person in charge of the party's publicity, how do you prevent leaders in the Congress from speaking in different voices? Like the comment made by Sheila Dikshit that Manmohan Singh was not as strong as Modi in dealing with terror.**

That is her view. It's not a question of political party. With what Prime Minister controlling leaders. The BJP can do that. If Modi is doing, he is setting a dangerous the RSS diktat comes, they will shut up. The precedent, which must be curbed. Congress party allows people to express their views. Sheilaaji, who was earlier the

**HARISH DAMODARAN: There are many issues facing the country — slowing economy, joblessness, rural wage stagnation. Why has the Congress not managed to leverage these issues, and view. I was privy to some of the decisio**

**is focusing only on national security?**  
We realise that the BJP wants to use this

## WHY ANAND SHARMA

The BJP's move to shift the narrative to national security post the Pulwama terror attack and the aerial strikes in Balakot, has forced the Congress to go back to the drawing board — despite the early momentum it got in the form of electoral successes in the Assembly polls in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. Congress

Working Committee member and former Union minister Anand Sharma says the party is working on bringing the focus back to “real issues” such as unemployment and agrarian distress. As head of the Congress's publicity committee, Sharma is also devising the party's digital strategy



“In 2009, we all fought separately and had a post-poll coalition. All opposition parties are of one view, that post-poll coalition is on... 2019 won't be 2014. No matter what Modi, Amit Shah do, they can't repeat 2014

# ‘We respect SP-BSP decision, but we can't euthanise ourselves. We can't kill Cong in UP’

Senior Congress leader and Deputy Leader of Opposition in Rajya Sabha, Anand Sharma, talks about the challenge of catching up with the “well-funded” BJP's digital campaign, accuses the Centre of deflecting discussion on real issues, calls PM Modi “clueless” on terror and Pakistan and says the Congress won't cede seats to Oppn parties in states where there is a direct contest with the BJP



Senior Congress leader Anand Sharma with Executive Editor (National Affairs) P Vaidyanathan Iyer in *The Indian Express* newsroom. Abhinav Saha

(national security) issue to deflect attention from the issues that you mentioned. We want to bring attention back to these them. The economy, despite claims of the government, is struggling. All the four engines that fire the growth of the economy — the national investment rate, credit off-take, gross fixed capital formation and exports — they are all shut. How is the economy then flying?

We (the UPA) faced the financial crisis of 2008-09. In the last few years, there have been no shocks to the global economy. In fact the government has been fortunate. They have made windfall gains at the cost of the consumers, with the very low oil and commodity prices in the world. They are all talk and propaganda. Where is Make in India? Even its logo is not made in India, it is plagiarised, from a watch-maker in Geneva. It's a shame.

**HARISH DAMODARAN: But Rahul Gandhi is only talking about Rafale, Digvijaya Singh is asking for proof of the aerial strikes in Pakistan...**

Rahul Gandhi is also talking about jobs. He has been talking of farmers' loans, agrarian distress, women security.

Rafale, yes, because the Prime Minister is complicit and he is accountable. How can he refuse to answer questions on that? There is a defence procurement policy in place; you violate that. You have done away with the transfer of technology policy, you have cut out HAL. The PM has personally negotiated the deal. How can we not believe what former French president François Hollande said? The PM has not uttered a word, even in Parliament, because he knows if he makes false statements there he will be hauled up for

breach of privilege.

**ABANTIKA GHOSH: Every day we see opposition leaders pledging to come together to fight the BJP. But you are fighting the SP-BSP in Uttar Pradesh, the TMC in West Bengal...**

It is not because of lack of will on our part. We are very clear where to go for pre-poll alliance. There are states where we have done that — Tamil Nadu, Bihar, Kerala, Maharashtra, Jharkhand. The Congress has alliances in about 200 constituencies.

But there are states where we have some real issues. For example, if somebody wants an alliance with us in Rajasthan, or in Madhya Pradesh, or Punjab, we are not at all agreeable, because we want to win as many Lok Sabha seats as possible for ourselves. These are places where there is a direct fight between us and the BJP, and where we have demonstrated that we are capable of defeating them in their strongholds. In these heartland states we cannot cede space. In states where we feel that both the sides will gain with an alliance, like the RJD and Congress alliance, and the alliance with the NCP, we have done it.

UP is a large state. We respect the decision of the SP-BSP, but we cannot euthanise ourselves. There is always hope for revival. We cannot kill the Congress. Somebody gives us two seats and should we be happy and say you take 78 seats? We are not comfortable with that. Don't forget 2009, we all fought separately and later we had a post-poll coalition. All opposition parties are of one view, that post-poll coalition among all these parties is definitely on. I am very optimistic that people of India have maturity and wisdom. 2019 will be different from 2014. There is no way, no matter what

Modi and Amit Shah do, that they can repeat 2014. That is a firm, firm no.

**KAUNAIN SHERIFFM: In these general elections, most of the voters are going to be in the age group of 19-35. What alternative narrative will the Congress provide to this chunk of new voters?**

The first issue is jobs and we will come up with an actionable plan to revive job creation in India for the youth. Secondly, we will take forward the national priorities. Why has the government not spoken about industrial and freight corridors in the last five years? The Prime Minister's priority has been a bullet train. His priorities are wrong. India does not need bullet trains, India needs completion of work on these corridors, which will revolutionise job creation and economy.

**RAVISH TIWARI: How are you looking at the Congress's 2019 numbers vis-a-vis previous elections. Have things changed? Also, what is your position in states such as Andhra Pradesh and Telangana?**

There are states where we will improve upon even our 2009 performance. Don't count us out in UP either. We surprised in 2009 and we are going to pick up seats this time too. We are going to win many more seats than what people think we are capable of. We have some very good candidates.

Andhra has been a huge setback. It has been a sensitive issue. Some of us thought that the bifurcation should not have happened. Our calculations may have gone quite wrong in the Assembly polls in Telangana, but for Parliament, there will be a fight. I think we will do much better in Lok Sabha polls in Telangana.

We are also hoping to pick up a sizeable number of seats in the Hindi heartland, besides in west India. We got nil in Gujarat, that is not going to repeat. We got zero in Rajasthan, that's not going to happen. We got two seats in Madhya Pradesh, and another after a bypoll. That will not be repeated. Chhattisgarh we had one and the BJP had 10. Look at the size of the mandate we got in the Assembly elections. Perhaps there are challenges... I can't speculate on the numbers. But I can tell you that the BJP numbers will come down, sharply. The Congress will emerge as a party with a strong presence in the Lok Sabha.

**RAVISH TIWARI: Since the UP polls, Congress leaders seem reluctant to use the word 'secular' in their speeches. Is**

**there a hesitation?**

I don't think there is any hesitation. We talk about India's pluralism and diversity, and the importance of treating all religions equally in our campaigns. We have not moved away from that commitment. I feel politics and religion is a toxic mix and dangerous for any society. There is nothing wrong in going to a temple, mosque or gurdwara, but don't use religion to capture power, to divide society, to discriminate.

**ABANTIKA GHOSH: Does poaching by the BJP worry you?**

The same is happening with the BJP also. Why did Kirti Azad and the others leave? I am talking about sitting Lok Sabha members of the BJP. They left because they were disgusted with the politics of Modi and Amit Shah. In Gujarat, if the PM and BJP are so confident, why are they stealing MLAs? Poaching is one thing, but there is daylight dacoity. Look at what happened in Manipur, Goa, Arunachal... They tried it in Madhya Pradesh. They are still trying in Karnataka. (Poaching) is part of their political philosophy. It is in the BJP's political DNA to steal MLAs and governments.

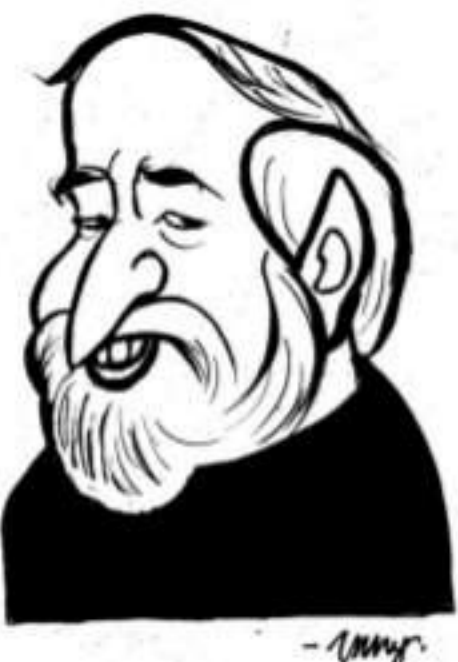
**ABANTIKA GHOSH: What role will Priyanka Gandhi Vadra play now?**

She is a valuable addition to the Congress organisation. She has spoken about her intention to strengthen the party and she is in charge of Eastern UP. She is a forceful campaigner, orator; We cannot say when she will contest. It's her decision.

**RAVISH TIWARI: Throughout its campaign, the BJP has spoken about having a clear, decisive leader. Who is the Opposition's leader?**

The wisdom is in leaving the choice to all the coalition partners. We are very clear that for the Congress it is Rahul Gandhi. All leaders will decide together after the polls.

It is easy to use the word decisive and strong. You don't expect your PM to be a WWE wrestler. He should be strong in the mind, convictions... Mr Modi fails on all parameters. He is not a strong leader. Will you call his move of demonetisation reckless or decisive? The hasty imposition of the GST, terming it second Independence. It was only imposing a tax! You don't have to be loud, shrill, to be decisive. My concern is that the political atmosphere is getting very vitiated. The PM and his party president are responsible for it. The PM's language has lowered the dignity of the discourse and his own office.



“Manmohan Singh came from Pakistan after Partition. He too wanted to visit Pakistan. But did he as PM? No, it was not conducive. But Modi did... When he went, he got no salute of honour. Is he then a strong PM?

ACROSS THE AISLE



P CHIDAMBARAM

The last-ditch hope of the Modi government is you will ignore the questions or, at any rate, they will be swept away by the 'fervour' of nationalism following the Indian Air Force's strike on Balakot in Pakistan... Pulwama-Balakot... will not banish fear or bring jobs or relieve farmers' distress or revive MSMEs or bring back Vijay Mallya or Nirav Modi or Mehul Choksi or restrain investigative agencies or return peace to the Kashmir Valley

THE ELECTION Commission sounded the bugle on Sunday, March 10, 2019. They had done their last act of favour to the government. The announcement was received with a huge sigh of relief by the people: there will be no more foundation stones, no more ordinances, and no more desperate 'launch' of ill-conceived and under-funded schemes. By one count, the Prime Minister had 'inaugurated' or 'laid the stone for' 155 schemes since the end of the Parliament session on February 13.

Here is a hilarious example. The Ahmedabad Metro was long in the making, since the work had started on March 14, 2015. It did not show much progress. The government of Gujarat was the object of ridicule. It was decided to 'complete' a section and inaugurate the 'service'. So, 6.5 km of the Metro line were hurriedly completed. On March 4, 2019, the Prime Minister proudly inaugurated the service.

The story does not end there. There are 6.5 km of tracks but only two stations; the other stations are under construction. What's running now is virtually a joy train — no tickets, no charges, just a free ride!

SAY YES OR NO

Now, to serious issues. About 90 crore eligible voters will vote to elect a new government. The main issue will be the performance of the Modi government. Some questions are pertinent:

1. Do you feel that you are a free citizen in a free country and are not afraid of being lynched or stripped or beaten up or boycotted or discriminated against because of your religion or caste or language? If you are a female, are you afraid of being harassed or molested?
2. Are you confident that your conversations or messages will not be snooped upon by the government?
3. Do you think that a large number of jobs were actually created in the last five years? If you are a parent, are you confident that your son/daughter will soon find a job? (According to the CMIE, 312 lakh persons were actively seeking jobs at the end of February 2019.)
4. If you are a farmer, do you think your lot has improved in the last five years? Has your income increased? Are you happy to be a farmer and will you encourage your son/daughter to be a farmer?
5. Do you think demonetisation was a good idea? Do you think you benefited from demonetisation? Do you think the economy of the country benefited from demonetisation?
6. Do you think the GST, with its multiple tax rates and three returns a month, benefited micro, small and medium industries? Do you think it is easy for a small businessperson to comply with the GST law? Do you think businesspersons are happy with the manner in which the GST was implemented?
7. Did the Modi government keep its key election promises — Rs 15 lakh in

the bank account of every person, Rs 2 crore jobs a year, bringing back the black money stashed abroad, Rs 40 to an American dollar, ending terrorism especially in Jammu & Kashmir and, more generally, that *achche din* will come to India?

8. Do you think that the Modi government's muscular, militaristic, majoritarian approach to Jammu & Kashmir will end violence and bring peace to that state, especially the Kashmir Valley?

MR MODI & FRIENDS

9. Do you believe that Vijay Mallya, Nirav Modi and Mehul Choksi fled India without the knowledge of the government?

10. Do you think that the Rafale deal struck by the Modi government was squeaky clean and there was no favour shown to a private company at the cost of HAL? Do you think that nothing requires to be investigated in the Rafale deal — pricing, reduced number of aircraft, waivers granted, delivery schedule, choice of offset partner, etc.

11. Do you think that premier investigating agencies like the CBI, ED, Income Tax etc have been fair and independent? Did the infighting in the CBI enhance the credibility of the agency?

12. Was it correct to give all six airport privatisation contracts (Ahmedabad, Guwahati, Jaipur, Lucknow, Mangaluru and Thiruvananthapuram) to one business house from Gujarat? Do you think it

was a routine decision?

FRENZY OR WISDOM

These questions capture the real issues facing the country. If you, as a citizen, are concerned about the real issues, I request you to answer the questions. You may say yes or you may say no, but you cannot ignore the questions. The last-ditch hope of the Modi government is you will ignore the questions or, at any rate, they will be swept away by the 'fervour' of nationalism following the Indian Air Force's strike on Balakot in Pakistan.

The IAF belongs to the country and made every Indian proud. Pulwama was a failure of the government, Balakot was the success of the IAF, the retaliation by Pakistan the next day was another failure of the government.

Pulwama-Balakot is not an answer to any of the questions listed above. It will not banish fear or bring jobs or relieve farmers' distress or revive MSMEs or bring back Mallya or Nirav Modi or Choksi or restrain investigative agencies or return peace to the Kashmir Valley.

Mr Narendra Modi's election speeches are centred on the IAF's action in Balakot and are intended to whip up a frenzy among the voters. He hopes that Balakot will carry him to victory. I believe the people of India are wiser.

Website: pchidambaram.in  
@Pchidambaram\_IN

FIFTH COLUMN



TAVLEEN SINGH

Where is the Rafale bribe money?

AS A SOLDIER'S daughter I spent most of my growing years in Army stations across India. Often these were just encampments in which the only public place for entertainment, sports and assembly was 'The Club'. This was usually an old British bungalow with high-ceilinged rooms and wide verandahs. Remnants of the Raj lingered in dusty billiard rooms, bars and ballrooms even if the new *sahibs* were brown and not white.

It was in clubs such as these that I first heard complaints about the Ministry of Defence before I even knew what it was. I remember many, many conversations between my father and his fellow officers in which they spoke angrily about 'those b... in Delhi'. Their grievances were almost always about how the armed forces were being denied basic necessities. They talked of obsolete weapons, inadequate clothing and boots for troops posted on our borders, politicisation of senior officers and a disturbing disdain for those who put their lives on the line for India. This was 50 years ago. So it is deeply disheartening that little seems to have changed, although half a century has gone by.

At the India Today conclave two weeks ago, held after the attack on terrorist camps in Pakistan, the Prime Minister hinted that if the Air Force had Rafale fighter planes, the operation would have been less risky and more effective. He was immediately criticised for saying this, but those with expertise in security matters agree that the Indian Air Force urgently needs better fighter jets. In the words of a friend who has considerable expertise in military matters, "I cannot understand why we are only buying 36 Rafale fighters. The Air Force needs at least two squadrons. It is a real disgrace that this has all taken so long."

The decision to buy Rafale fighters was taken nearly a decade ago and we are still awaiting delivery of the first batch. Why? Having lived through Bofors times I am fully aware that one reason for caution in defence deals is proven bribery in that deal. The money trail led for once right to the Prime Minister's family. And, to this day, the Congress party has been unable to explain why an Italian fertiliser salesman would be bribed by an armaments company unless it was because he had special influence at the very top. The Bofors ghost haunts the Gandhi family for this reason.

Is this why Rahul Gandhi continues to try and prove that Narendra Modi has 'stolen' Rs 30,000 crore (Rs 45,000 crore in his latest speech) to put in the pocket of 'his friend' Anil Ambani? It is difficult to believe that so much money could have disappeared from a deal that is worth less than Rs 60,000 crore, but if it is true, let us see some evidence. It is not good enough to wander about waving a toy Rafale jet on the campaign trail. It is not good enough to say that the Supreme Court is lying, that the Prime Minister is lying, that the Defence Minister is lying and that the CAG (Comptroller and Auditor General) cannot be trusted.

The Congress president's team includes Arun Shourie, who was once famous for investigative journalism. Let him do what Chitra Subramaniam did in the Bofors case. She traced Bofors bribe money to Swiss bank accounts in the name of Mr and Mrs Quattrocchi. If the Prime Minister has 'stolen' Rs 30,000 crore and put it in Anil Ambani's pocket, it is time to see where this pocket is. For the rest, all we know is that the Prime Minister was going over the head of the Defence Minister to deal directly with the French government. So? Why would the Prime Minister's Office not be involved in so important a defence deal?

What is far more imperative is to learn when the Air Force will get their first batch of Rafale fighters and how soon we can hope to see the rest. It is shameful that the Air Force does not have the modern fighters it so badly needs. Shameful that there really has never been a full inquiry into the number of pilots India has lost because their planes or choppers mysteriously crashed. A PIL in the Supreme Court says that in the past 10 years, 75 helicopters and fighter planes have crashed. Was this the reason why the government was trying to open defence production to the private sector?

It is not just the Air Force that struggles along without the modernisation it needs. The Army and Navy fare no better. During the Kargil War, we found to our horror that the Army did not have enough coffins to bring dead soldiers back from that mountainous battlefield. This was deplorable 20 years ago and it is much more so now. The armed forces need much more than crocodile tears.

(This article was written before UK Parliament voted to delay Britain's departure until at least June 30)

Follow Tavleen Singh on Twitter @tavleen\_singh

INSIDE TRACK



COOMI KAPOOR

ART OF RECOVERY?

AN EGO clash between two wings of the Finance Ministry could have serious implications in recovering dues from absconding diamantaire Nirav Modi. The Enforcement Directorate is attempting at the eleventh hour to sabotage an auction organised by the Income Tax authorities for the end of March to sell 68 contemporary and modern Indian art paintings by leading artists worth between Rs 30 and Rs 50 crore, seized during raids on the Mumbai office of M/s Camelot Enterprises Private Ltd. It is believed to be a shell company of Modi, who owes Rs 96 crore in taxes. Someone from the ED claimed to a TV channel that the directorate has already attached the very same paintings and will file an FIR if the IT attempts to go ahead with the auction. The ED's unprofessional approach will not merely frighten away potential buyers, but also make India look foolish in the eyes of the world, since the auction is well-publicised. Modi had excellent taste in art even if some of his diamonds were duds.

BOWLED OUT AT START

FORMER cricketer and sitting BJP MP from Darbhanga Kirti Azad had been suspended from the party in 2015 after he targeted Arun Jaitley, who headed the Delhi and District Cricket Association at the time. Azad, however, did not resign from the BJP as he would have lost his seat. But with elections around the corner, last month, Azad joined the Congress in the presence of Rahul Gandhi. It was *ghar wapsi* for him since his father, Bhagwat Jha Azad, was a Bihar Congress chief minister and central minister. Azad presumed that he would be contesting from the family seat Darbhanga, but discovered to his shock that Congress ally Lalu Prasad was insistent that the constituency go to the RJD. Azad has made some 10 trips to meet the jailed Lalu, but has had no success in making him change his mind. The former cricketer is unwilling to stand from any other parliamentary seat in Bihar.

TAKING A BACK SEAT

Priyanka Gandhi Vadra's debut on the national scene in Gujarat was not quite the command performance that the Congress had been hoping for. There were cutouts of

OUT OF MY MIND



MEGHNAD DESAI

HOW DOES a political system handle an existential crisis? The UK House of Commons has for a second time rejected Theresa May's deal. Its own decision to open negotiations for withdrawal under Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty (the EU Constitution) allows a two-year period for negotiations. The British Parliament voted to withdraw on March 29, 2019, as a response to the Referendum of June 2016,

HISTORY HEADLINE

Lessons from 1952, 1967, 1977



RAJMOHAN GANDHI

WHEN MPs were elected to our Republic's first Lok Sabha in 1952, Delhi had no *Indian Express* or *Times of India*. The only competition to *The Hindustan Times* came from *The Statesman*, British-owned at the time.

Living with parents and siblings in a Connaught Circus flat above the offices and printing press of *The Hindustan Times* (my father Devadas Gandhi was the paper's editor), I, 16 at the time, would often go behind the glass frame that displayed 'Spot News' from the HT building's first floor to passers-by or a crowd below. I had learnt to read that 'Spot News' panel from behind. On counting day in 1952, 'Spot News' declared: 'SUCHETA KRIPALANI DEFEATS MANMOHINI SAHGAL'. A Bengali lady who had left the Congress to join the Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party founded by her Sindhi husband (Aacharya Kripalani), Sucheta had narrowly beaten the Congress candidate in the New Delhi constituency, a Kashmiri lady related to the Nehrus.

Standing as an Independent, Durga Das, the ace reporter who had left *The Statesman* to join *The Hindustan Times*, had come a distant third.

In 1952, Jawaharlal Nehru was widely loved and hugely popular. The Congress won 45 per cent of the national vote and 364 seats out of a total of 489. Though not officially called Leader of the Opposition, A K Gopalan of the Communist Party, a Malayali Nair, led the largest Opposition bloc in the Lok Sabha — his party had won all of 16 seats. KMPP, the Kripalani party, won 9 and the Socialists 12. From Delhi, Sucheta was the sole non-Congress MP.

But Nehru did not obtain 1952's largest tally. That feat belonged to Ravi Narayan Reddy, the Communist MP from Nalgonda (now in Telangana), who had polled over 3,00,000 votes.

By 1967, when the 4th Lok Sabha was chosen, the picture was very different. Nehru had died in 1964, Lal Bahadur Shastri in 1966, and the mettle of Shastri's petite successor, 50-year-old Indira Gandhi, was as yet untested.

Though the Congress again won, with 40.78 per cent of the vote (283 out of 520 seats), the Opposition had finally scented the possibility of a non-Congress government at the Centre. In several states, moreover, opposition parties in 1967 either re-



Casting vote in the time of the ballot box. Express Archives photo by Rajnish Katyal

placed the Congress (the DMK in Tamil Nadu, the Left in Kerala and Swatantra in Odisha), or mauled its strength, as UP, West Bengal, Bihar, Rajasthan, and Punjab saw.

Opposition disharmony, however, was reflected in the 4th Lok Sabha. Swatantra, which had 44 seats, Jana Sangh (35), CPI (23), CPM (19), SSP (23), PSP (13), and DMK (24) had arrived in Parliament with clashing agendas.

Indira Gandhi's audacity, which few foresaw, split the Congress in the 1969 summer and the state of Pakistan in the 1971-72 winter. In March 1971, well before the liberation of Bangladesh, that daring had fetched Indira's Congress 352 seats out of 545 in a mid-term poll.

Four years later, early in the morning of June 26, 1975, my wife and I arrived at Chennai's Central Station. Making the journey at the last minute, we had slept on newspapers on the train's floor. I heard someone on the Chennai platform speak of 'Emergency'.

A year-and-a-half later, in January 1977, Indira Gandhi surprisingly announced fresh elections and the release of political leaders. I was once more in Chennai, staying at Kalki Gardens, which belonged to that incomparable pair, T Sadasivam and M S Subbulakshmi. Kalki Gardens was also where Acharya Kripalani, then 88, was lodged.

Though he had opposed the Emergency, Dada Kipalani was too old to be arrested. As January 1977 turned to February, and February to March, when elections to the 6th Lok Sabha were held, I had the privilege of following political developments in Dada Kripalani's company and that of the Sadasivams.

These happenings included the formation of the Janata Party, Babu Jagjivan Ram's crossover from the Congress, and Mrs Gandhi's defeat in Rae Bareilly.

For many in India, the night of election

results, on March 20, 1977, saw the steady mounting of a dreamed-of yet unimagined joy. Someone from Delhi would later recall to me: "We were standing in front of *The Indian Express's* Spot News. Alphabet by alphabet the news was being flashed. When after 'Indira Gandhi' the letter 'D' appeared, we exploded in celebration."

In that 6th Lok Sabha, the Congress (I) won not a single seat in UP, Bihar, Punjab or Delhi, and only one seat in MP and Rajasthan, and only three in West Bengal. Yet, South India voted resoundingly in Indira's favour. In Kerala, all 20 Lok Sabha seats were won by a Congress-led alliance. In Andhra, the Congress won 41 out of 42 seats, in Karnataka 26 out of 28. And in Tamil Nadu, a Congress-AIADMK-CPI alliance won 33 out of 39 seats. In Maharashtra, the Congress won 20 out of 48 seats in 1977. The Congress's all-India tally was 154, compared with Janata's 308.

What then does history say about elections in India? Among other things, it reminds us that the Indian voter likes at times to surprise. Overall, history also suggests that while some politicians may be daring, or able to stitch alliances, build a ground-level machinery, and lubricate that machinery with funds, the last word has usually belonged to the Indian voter.

However, the history of other parts of the world contains a caution. Be watchful when nationalism merges with hatred. As the poet Manash Firaq Bhattacharjee reminds us, while Indians usually celebrate elections as festivals, malice equals the festive spirit. Toxicity, the world has warned, can for a while sway large numbers. In due course toxicity will dissipate, but no one knows how long or short that course is.

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The meltdown in Britain

which voted to leave by a majority of two million in a total vote of 34 million (74 per cent turnout).

There are now only days left to make a decision. By the time you read this, two more decisions would have been made. One is whether the UK should exit without a deal. The government hopes this would be rejected as a no-deal exit would prevent all trade between the EU and UK going through with zero tariff. Long delays will strangle the economy as it depends on daily imports of fruit, vegetables and medicines.

The second vote on Thursday, March 14, will be to seek an extension of the deadline beyond March 29. This is also likely to be rejected. So by Friday there will

be a return to the rejected deal being put to vote for a third time. Remember that the government is defeated despite its slim majority in the Commons. To bolster the majority, the Conservative Party got into a coalition-type deal with a small party from Northern Ireland. They had been promised extra public spending in return for votes. Alas, the discipline in the UK is not like in India. MPs are free to vote against their party.

It is quite possible that within a fortnight, the UK could crash out of the EU without a deal. Let me set aside the economic issues. How is it that a mature democracy can get into such a disaster with open eyes? The shortest answer is the Tyranny of History. The present crisis

can be blamed on a number of old hangovers. First is the loss of the Empire, which happened in the 50 years between 1947 and 1997. The UK joined the EEC (now the EU) in a post-imperial decline phase. But it was also proud that it had rescued Europe from Hitler. It could never feel equal to the rest. It never felt at home within Europe if it could not be top dog. So it remained semi-detached, not joining the free borders (Schengen) agreement or the Euro and complained about its budgetary contribution.

The Conservative Party was divided between Eurosceptics led by Mrs Thatcher and Europhiles in her Cabinet. She failed to win leadership in 1990. This has led to a 30-year-old civil war in the Conservative

Party between the two factions. The Labour Party was originally against entering the European Common Market. The Hard Left was strongly against. But in a referendum in 1975, Harold Wilson led the bulk of the party to vote for it. That triggered a long war of the Hard Left against the rest for control of the party. The Hard Left was defeated in the 1980s. It came back 30 years later when Jeremy Corbyn became the leader of the Labour Party.

History has crippled politics. But don't worry. The UK remains the fifth largest economy in the world.