

## A nation of tweeters



**COUNTRY CODE**

RAHUL JACOB

"There was lying on Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp; there was lying on TV... doctored pictures were aired and shared, and real pictures were dismissed as doctored... On both sides (the lies) suggested a society that had slipped the bonds of rationality and fallen completely into the post-fact order."

Farhad Manjoo, tech columnist for *The New York Times* on the

coverage of the India-Pakistan conflict.

Given all the fake news proliferating in the world today from sources as varied as the Trump White House and the people who pushed for Brexit in Britain, it is worrying when a lead commentator on the digital zeitgeist singles out India and Pakistan as the global exemplar of how social apps infect the media. What makes the subcontinent remarkable is that the fake news of WhatsApp forwards is enthusiastically taken up by so many of India (and Pakistan's) irresponsible TV anchors — in this case calling for war as if watching a cricket match.

With the hotly disputed stealth strike of Balakot as messy prologue, the elections of 2019 are shaping up as arguably the most significant in India's history and paradoxically the most trivial. The hashtag triumph of the Prime Minister's "Main Bhi Chowkidar" campaign on Twitter over the equally silly Congress "Chowkidar Chor hai" sloganeering reads like a TV soap about politics. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) spokesmen argue the Prime Minister's tweet is the beginning of a social movement — and perhaps it is. "With every Indian opposing corruption at every level, India's rise as an economic superpower is imminent," Anil Baluni, a BJP MP, wrote this week in *The Indian Express*.

The irony is that over the past decade or so the huge rise in the number of security guards — who are more visible today than any other segment of the Indian workforce in the nation's pampered capital and seem more ubiquitous than potholes — is a reminder also of the country's inability to create productive, well-paying jobs in manufacturing. The release of data this week that showed that 32 million casual labourers in rural areas lost their jobs between 2011-12 and 2017-18 underlines what a catastrophe demonetisation was for the cash-dependent village economy. Add to that, the loss of remittance income from casual labourers in the urban economy who lost their jobs as small and medium enterprises retrenched in the wake of the goods and services tax and the damage to the village economy seems akin to choking somebody violently and then congratulating them for deep yogic breathing.

One of the misfortunes of being a business journalist is that this pseudo-socialist/profoundly oligopolistic country often seems a nouthouse writ large, from its hysterical media to its hypocritical posturing politicians. Rahul Gandhi's big economic idea appears to be a universal basic income in response to the government's rollout of a similar rural scheme. It does not take a genius to guess that as these ideas proliferate, few attempts will be made to cut back on existing subsidies in electricity, water and fertiliser. Rahul's rhetoric only confirms what we already knew: That mother and son are socialists through and through. The run-up in the stock market recently — partly a global emerging market phenomenon — suggests a second term for the Modi government is preferred. Pushing through of GST, albeit a version world-beating in its complexity, and the bankruptcy court stand as achievements.

But what will this supposedly more business-friendly government do if it gets a second term? Important labour law and land reforms remain off the table. Reforming the bureaucracy and adding more judges and courts seem beyond its bandwidth. In its tendency to alter or, erm, clarify rules mid-course — witness the arm-twisting of foreign players in e-commerce and all but one player in telecom — and it is very hard to justify this perception that the BJP is business friendly. There will also remain the real risk of ideas seemingly gleaned from the pages of *Amar Chitra Katha*, overlaid with PowerPoint presentations.

What is self-evident in the past few years of a prolonged export slowdown amid the overhang of cleaning up non-performing loans among state-owned banks is that India's leaders and businessmen are not a storehouse of economic wisdom or best practices. It is bad enough to be lapped by China on every yardstick of economic development. By our next election in 2024, Vietnam, a country of less than 100 million, will likely see its manufactured exports rise past ours to \$400 billion at a projected growth rate of 10 per cent a year, which is conservative by comparison to its growth over the past five years. They now have a huge lead over us in the mobile phone supply chain while also seeing huge transfers of labour-intensive work from China in footwear and garments.

The stark reality is we have likely missed the labour-intensive jobs growth spurt in perpetuity. An Asian Development Bank report out this week suggests robots are making larger inroads even into labour-intensive sectors such as garments. Abusing each other on Twitter will have to count as a job along with other more useful work. Repeat slowly: *Main bhi* small businessman, *main bhi* teacher, *main bhi* exporter, *main bhi* fitness professional. It's a mantra for global domination.

## Sawant's twin challenge

Can the new Goa chief minister rein in the bureaucracy and assert the primacy of the Goan people?



**PLAIN POLITICS**

ADITI PHADNIS

There are 10 people in the room. If (Maharashtra Chief Minister) Devendra Fadnis is among the 10, you will be able to spot him in minutes: He has that kind of personality. But Pramod Sawant? He is self-deprecating, low profile, and it will be hard to pick him out in a crowd. And yet, he has some obvious, shining qualities that made Manohar Parrikar spot him and nurture him," said a supporter of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) with long innings of work in Goa, about the state's new chief minister.

Sawant belongs to Bicholim in rural Goa, has never been a minister and became an MLA only 11 years ago. His rise was dizzying: He became speaker in his second tenure as MLA, the youngest speaker in the country. "Parrikar promoted Sawant because in him, he saw himself," said a senior Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader in Goa. Sawant is an uncomplicated human being, with simple wants and needs: Fish curry and rice will do for him, he gets into no protracted arguments and works quietly.

But everyone from the RSS-BJP family in Goa agrees that he has big shoes to fill. Manohar Parrikar had a compelling quality — leadership. He knew he had to take along 38 per cent Christian minorities in the state, not only for electoral reasons but also because it was the right thing to do. Sawant comes from the same stock: He is second generation RSS, joined the BJP at Parrikar's nudging but knows that he cannot make beef or nationalism an issue because then the Congress will team up with other malcontents and dislodge him.

And malcontents there are aplenty. It took nearly six hours after Parrikar's death to settle on a successor and Sawant was sworn in as chief minister at 2 am. The reason? In the 2017 assembly elections, the BJP got only 13

seats, four less than the Congress's 17, in a house of 40. It was able to form a government largely because of Congress lethargy and the special persuasive powers of Nitin Gadkari and Manohar Parrikar. Now, with the death of two MLAs (Parrikar and Francis D Souza) and the resignation of two others, the strength of the house is 36 but this is no barrier for alliance partners to demand their place in the sun. Foremost among them is Ramkrishna "Sudin" Dhavalikar of the Maharashtra Gomantak Party (MGP) who stayed away from Parrikar's funeral because he got wind of the fact that he was not becoming chief minister. Vijai Sardesai, mentor of the Goa Forward Party (he has said publicly that he believes recitation of Vedic mantras is a good way of enhancing agricultural yield) also made similar noises. They didn't get the top job — BJP President Amit Shah made it plain to them that they must either accept Pramod Sawant's leadership or prepare to fight another assembly election so they fell in sulkily. But a price was paid. Both have been made deputy chief ministers. Goa will have a 12-member council of ministers and two deputy chief ministers.

The fun and games is just starting. Not

COFFEE WITH BS ▶ RASHESH SHAH | CHAIRMAN, EDELWEISS GROUP

## Long-distance runner

Shah tells Dev Chatterjee and Krishna Kant that his experience in running marathons helped him weather the NBFC storm

Rashesh Shah, chairman of Edelweiss Group, who had been shuttling between New Delhi and Mumbai for most of 2018 as president of industry lobby body, Ficci, is hard to pin down. After many emails, we are meeting him over coffee at Sofitel hotel at Mumbai's Bandra-Kurla Complex, a five minute drive from Edelweiss' swanky headquarters in Kalina. Shah, a well-known marathoner, is bang on time and orders a cappuccino and cookies while we order two *masala chais* for ourselves.

A former ICICI Bank manager, Shah set up Edelweiss in 1995 and is considered a veteran in Mumbai's financial circles. In his 30-year journey in finance, Shah has seen many ups and downs in the Indian financial world. We, therefore, start by asking about the liquidity crisis facing non-banking finance companies (NBFCs) that has led to a few of Edelweiss' competitors to sell their assets. The share price crash in the NBFC sector has aggravated the crisis.

Edelweiss, like many others, is hit by the headwinds but Shah says the group can face any eventuality, thanks to the cash in its books. "I have not seen such a tight liquidity situation for a long, long time even though the industry has faced similar storms in the past because of the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008 and the 2013 rupee crisis," Shah says.

The crisis in the NBFC sector has its genesis in the demonetisation of certain bank notes in 2016 and peaked with the collapse of IL&FS in August 2017. India Inc continues to feel the after-effects of the IL&FS crisis, says Shah. Despite the pessimism in the sector, he says he would give credit to

the NBFCs for what they have achieved in the last 15 years by cornering 25 per cent of total credit disbursement market.

"NBFC debt is lower than equity which means they are bringing a lot of equity to the table. They have gone into segments such as commercial vehicles financing, micro-finance, two-wheeler loans, gold loans and equipment finance where banks did not have much of a presence. NBFCs also have a far better non-performing assets (NPA) management mechanism compared to traditional lenders (banks)," he adds.

The Edelweiss group, says Shah, is in a better place than many of its peers because it has a balance sheet size of ₹54,000 crore and every year, the group raises ₹18,000 crore in debt. In the December quarter itself, Edelweiss borrowed ₹8,800 crore and can convert almost 40 per cent of its balance sheet into cash to meet any liquidity crisis. "Despite this, growth will be postponed by a year or so due to the current external environment," warns Shah. "Let's say if we were growing at the rate of 30 per cent per year earlier, this year, we may grow at 15 per cent," he says, sipping his favourite coffee.

In the asset reconstruction business, where Edelweiss has emerged as the largest player, Shah says he would call stressed assets good assets because it is the promoter or the balance sheet of a company that is under stress and not the asset itself. Many assets are doing well like Essar Steel and Bhushan Steel plants, which are producing very good quality steel. "While India has a lot of good assets, it is either the balance sheet

that is in trouble or the promoter who is stressed. So if the asset is good, then it will always have value. Ultimately, every good asset will have a buyer like the way banks found in the case of Binani Cement, Essar Steel and both the Bhushan assets. The Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, the Real Estate Regulation Act (Rera) and the goods and services tax have been the game changers in the country and their effects would be visible only after 2020," he says with confidence.

Shah says the IBC has helped the banks as well. While banks have taken a 50 per cent haircut on an average, the rest of their capital is unlocked and the NPAs on their books have gone away. "Due to the ARC process, the banks are realising 10-15 per cent more than what they would have realised otherwise in any other debt resolution process. The National Company Law Tribunal must not allow unnecessary delays as these are assets that belong to the country and can be put to use very quickly," Shah points out.

Will the coming general elections in India and global events like Brexit have any impact on India's financial markets? Shah says while events like Brexit may impact a few, overall, the economy is in a safe zone. However, he warns that the equity markets will face some sell off given the looming elections. "Foreigners are holding back investments in India and for the first time they will become underweight on India. The MSCI has reduced its weightage on India and we will see at least \$1.5 billion outflow from the country. This outflow, however, can be easily absorbed



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

by local investors."

Shah says though the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has kept liquidity very tight, the underlying economy has come out of the slowdown brought upon by the roll-out of GST in 2017 and the

only will Sawant have to keep an eye on his colleagues, he will also have to make sure he continues Goa's march towards infrastructure and industrial development without compromising the Goan identity. This is crucial. In 2008, Goa scrapped eight proposals for special economic zones (SEZs) rolled out after a law was passed by the central legislature and notifications issued following a public outcry against the acquisition of land. The protestors argued that "outsiders" would flood Goa in search of SEZ jobs that locals will not be able to fill. This cancellation was the first time in history that ethnic issues led to reversal of a central industrial policy. Goa does want infrastructure and industrialisation — but without diluting its identity, and on its own terms.

Sawant has been speaker of the assembly and headed the Goa State Infrastructure Development Corporation Ltd as chairman. And before that he was an ayurveda doctor. That's it. He now has to run a coalition, take forward Goa's development despite fetters on mining and casinos, and keep challengers both from his party and the Opposition at bay.

Those in the RSS who have watched Parrikar from close quarters summed up the challenge before Sawant thus: "In Goa, in the period when Parrikar was ill, the bureaucracy took over. We know that the bureaucracy is like a horse: If not ridden firmly, it can go wild. The challenge before Sawant is not political — it is administrative. Can he rein in the bureaucracy and assert the primacy of the Goan people?"

demonetisation of ₹500 and ₹1,000 currency notes before that in 2016. Though the rupee's value has fallen, the good news is that exports will become more competitive.

We can't resist a question on the job slowdown, which is threatening to become a big issue in the Lok Sabha election. Shah says we need two kinds of jobs in India. The first one to absorb the new people who are joining the labour force and the second, to shift people from agriculture to non-agriculture or related jobs. "In total, India needs around 20 million new jobs in a year but we are creating jobs at around 8 to 9 million jobs a year, according to our estimates. This job creation data is based on triangulation of data looking at car sales, home sales and other consumer products sales. Though nobody knows the exact numbers, I think we are doing a lot but not enough."

Time is running out and we switch tracks, literally. Shah and Tata Sons Chairman N Chandrasekaran run marathons, including the 42-km long full marathons across the world. Shah, who took up the sport 10 years ago, says he plans to run the Boston Marathon in April and expects to break his own previous record. Being an asthma patient, Shah was restrained from playing many sports in his childhood. But as the years went by, Shah took up running marathons as a challenge. "It's more about mental strength. The first few kilometers of a marathon might be easy but it's the last few kilometers that are the worst and tests your mental strength.

The same principle can be applied in the business world. If you can last long and build endurance, you will do well," he says. And where sponsoring the Indian Olympic team and sports persons is concerned, it fits in well with his firm's overall fitness ethos. "We are happy to contribute to creating awareness about these athletes and while they're at the peak of the physical health, we aim to improve their financial health," he says as we see him off.

## Water: A pipe dream



**PEOPLE LIKE THEM**

GEETANJALI KRISHNA

An old woman carries a bucket of water from the hand pump to her house. This is the 40th time she has had to make this trip in a day. "The tube well is about 400 m from my house; by the end of the day, my arms and legs start protesting," says Rangalata Behera, a resident of Gobindapur village in Odisha's Bhadrak district. "It is as if the only thing I do all day is carry water back and forth," she adds. Behera isn't alone. In the village that is merely 150 km from the state capital Bhubaneswar, households are yet to get piped water connections. So as the world observes World Water Day 2019, Behera and thousands of others like her continue to spend most

of their day ferrying water from the hand pump to their homes.

Come to think of it, Gobindapur has all the water-related woes. As this district is on the coast, sea water contamination has made the water saline. Summer makes it worse when water in Bhadrak's rivers and ponds evaporates. "We often face a water shortage as the ponds dry up," Behera says. "During the rains every single year, our village gets flooded and we have water problems of another kind," she adds. To make matters worse, the district is also prone to cyclones, which have recently been occurring with clockwork regularity year after year. "During floods and storms, it becomes that much harder to go to any water source to fill our buckets," she says. Consequently, accessing safe drinking water is a problem throughout the year.

At the hand pump, groups of women wait for their turn to fill their buckets. Their children play nearby. Since her husband is too old, son works in the city and daughter-in-law is pregnant, the job of fetching water falls solely on Behera's frail shoulders. "I worry about what will happen when I'm too old to fetch water," she says. "I can't lift heavy loads already so am forced to carry back only half a bucket at a time".

It strikes me that fetching water is restricted mostly to women. "It's true," says Behera. "Men go out to work, so it's the women who break their backs carrying water." It's worse during floods. "We have to find higher ground and walk much longer distances to get water," she says. Recently, the government of Odisha announced a ₹754 crore project to ensure safe drinking water in some of Bhadrak district's worst affected blocks. Even if the project is executed, it simply may not be enough. "Sometimes, when I'm too tired to go to the hand pump, I fill the bucket from the pond near our house," she says. "I wonder what my life would be like if we actually had pipes delivering water to our doorsteps."

This year's theme for World Water Day — "Leaving no one behind" — will hopefully draw international and domestic attention to the plight of Behera and countless other women like her who spend most of their productive lives simply ferrying buckets of water for their daily needs. Unless this happens and water reaches each household in every Indian village, the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals to which India is a co-signatory, will remain little more than a pipe dream for much of rural India.

## A flight to Bikaner



**PEOPLE LIKE US**

KISHORE SINGH

There are now two daily flights from New Delhi to Bikaner. Before that, one would have to board a train from a station called Sarai Rohilla somewhere in the vicinity of Karol Bagh. Since most of the snobbish New Delhi is unaware of Sarai Rohilla, it used to cause my friends no little mirth every time I told them I was off to visit my parents. Especially since, on a junket, we had once asked a bunch of them along. At the time, the train used to take 12 hours on a metre-gauge track, and the bogies would lurch over sand banks. It was like being on a roller-coaster which, if you have motion sickness, can be a tad uncomfortable. As a result, I had taken to driving from Delhi

to Bikaner, but since our vacations coincided with either Jat or Gujjar agitations in the state, highways were often blocked. Since then, of course, the metre-gauge tracks have been replaced by broad-gauge ones, and the train now takes a mere eight hours — but the flight, of course, is more convenient.

The first time I flew to Bikaner — the defence airport is at considerable distance from the city — there were no cabs to be had. Fortunately, a passenger on the flight recognised me and gave me a ride into town. I took to taking flights even though tickets were unreasonably priced, perhaps because the flight was always full on the sector. The passengers seemed to comprise of businessmen carrying samples, or hoteliers returning from meetings in the vicinity of Karol Bagh. Mostly, though, I would encounter groups of jabbering *baraatis* — Bikaner, with its palaces, has emerged a favourite venue for destination weddings.

This week, I was glad to learn there is now a second flight, and though it seems to have done nothing to ease the prices, it was as packed as before. But the passenger profile seems to have changed. There were more foreign tourists on board, but for most part the flight seemed crammed with groups of friends from Delhi and

Mumbai en route to Bikaner for the Holi weekend. They spoke in the accented English of the privileged, threw abuse about freely, and talked loudly throughout the one-and-a-half-hour flight about design, fashion, architecture, travel to other exotic destinations, and food.

It seemed that in Bikaner they were going to check out the jewellery stores, had meetings with local suppliers, and wanted to stock up their boutiques, or redesign their Alibagh houses, or carry samples for buying houses. They were meeting textile printers and *kaarigars* who inlay silver into wooden furniture. They were all looking forward to *lal maas*, but it appeared they had also been promised *teetar* and *khargosh* on the table. It didn't seem to bother them that the killing and consumption of partridge and hare is banned in the state.

While the excited group kept up their chatter, another quieter group went about its business with just as much efficiency. A bunch of Marwari ladies popped open *dabbas* of *parathas*, green chilli pickles, raw onions and a variety of chutneys that they passed around with the flair of society hostesses. They were polite to their co-passengers as well. Thanks to them, I did not have to eat the unappetising sandwich that Air India serves on the route.

## The price of efficiency?

Could it be that success rather than failure explains, partially, the sustained sluggishness in investment demand — which in turn has affected overall economic growth? Consider, for a start, the demand for heavy trucks, which reportedly fell by 22 per cent in recent months. The principal cause seems to be new rules announced last July, allowing trucks to carry heavier axle loads. That step may have been prompted by the improved quality of highways. Whatever the reason, the same trucks can now carry more freight, so the demand for new trucks has dropped. Meanwhile, manufacturers are looking at re-designing their vehicles for the new axle load levels.

Or take the demand for diesel-generating (DG) sets, which is less today than it was a decade ago. Indeed, demand fell more than 40 per cent between 2010-11 and 2015-16, but has recovered partially since. The primary reason: The number of telecom towers reached saturation point, so the demand for the category of DG sets that power these towers collapsed by 70 per cent. Demand has picked up since because of other sectors, but the absence of power shortages in most parts of the country has meant that DG sets are now used in 90 per cent of cases as stand-by. If the reliability of power supply were to improve further, even stand-by demand for DG sets would come down.

The creation of more than adequate power-generation capacity in the country complements this story, for new capacity creation (other than in renewables) has dropped to virtually nothing. The figures are striking: New generation capacity created in 2013-14 was 17.8 Gw. This rose to 23.9 Gw two years later, but new capacity added in the first 11 months of the current year is all of 2.3 Gw — a tenth of what it used to be. Despite this, there is headroom available in terms of idle capacity as actual generation has not kept pace. Elsewhere in the power sector too, new capacity for power transmission and for transformer capacity have peaked and then dropped off, though not quite as dramatically as with generating capacity.

There may be other sectors where similar trends may manifest themselves, like the railways. Unprecedented sums have been poured into investing in new rail capacity and upgrading facilities, yet the railways have shown virtually no growth if you consider the freight and passengers carried on the system. Thus, the net tonne kilometres of freight carried has grown in total by a miserable 3.6 per cent in the last five years, while total growth in passenger kilometres was less than 1 per cent in the three years to 2016-17. Of course, revenue did much better because tariffs have been raised, but you don't need big new investments for that. Perhaps traffic will grow only after the two rapid freight corridors are completed, and when speeds on the existing system improve subsequently. At that point, you could expect to see investment in the railways also peaking and then slowing, just when the railways show good traffic growth!

The last example is provided by telecom, where Reliance and the other companies poured massive sums into their infrastructure in recent years. All telecom companies other than Reliance are now steeped in debt, and unlikely to keep investing at the same pace. Meanwhile, the sharp drop in tariffs engineered by Reliance has caused a spurt in data traffic on mobile phones, but at rates so low that one is not sure how national accounts would measure such activity.

The short point is that, in key infrastructure sectors, greater efficiencies and the saturation of under-served markets have reduced the need for capital investment on the same scale as earlier. At least some of the downstream effects would register as an economic slowdown. Meanwhile, Uber and Ola may be partially responsible for the drop in car demand. And in aviation, if the gap between two aircraft taking off or landing is halved, runway efficiency is doubled. These are all examples of improved productivity, which national accounts are supposed to capture in calculations of gross domestic product. But do they?

# Congress marches into poll battle in NGO gear

Congress has questions but no answers, 'leaders' but no winners. Weeks before elections, it's behaving more like a virtuous, anti-establishment NGO just doing its thing

With just over two weeks to go for the first phase of voting, how battle-ready does the Congress look? How is the *josh* of its generals and foot-soldiers? Who are these generals? We know that it's been telling us for some time that the Modi government is the most corrupt, inept, divisive and disastrous in our history. But it isn't telling us how it plans to fix it. Where does it stand on the key issues that matter to almost every voter this summer: Jobs and the economy, nationalism and social cohesion?

At this point, let me confront you with another question. The spin on the ball is mine, and deliberate. What do you think the Congress is today? Is it a political party heading for a life-and-death battle? Or an NGO, just doing its thing and hoping it will improve the state of the world?

It might anger many Congress supporters but we must turn this knife. Your rival has had you on the mat for most of these five years, and is sharpening the hatchet for that final strike. If the Congress does poorly again, it can be sure many more of the desperate and demoralised members of its "middle" will go away. It is also most likely that at least two of its new state governments, Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh, would be toppled. Even Rajasthan would need luck to survive.

What will then remain of the Congress? Chances are, it will still be the same old, or maybe even a new lot of self-styled Kautilyas and Machiavellis and self-styled intellectual giants with one common feature on their CVs: Never won, or contested an election. Or even lost what they were ever given charge of.

A political party has only one mission statement: To win elections. It calls for hard work and commitment, brings bountiful reward for success, but also a stiff price for failure. In short, it adds up to that one word: Accountability.

Do tell me you think this is what's been happening with the Congress lately. If the answer is no, I will tell you why it looks like an NGO. NGOs too work hard. But their aims, targets and focus can change with the season, or the mood in their "market place". Their competition is essentially the government. They will always look virtuous and efficient in comparison. And accountability is limited to the donor or good people's own conscience. There is also, generally, an anti-establishment streak.



NATIONAL INTEREST

SHEKHAR GUPTA

The Congress has become more feudal over the years, and also less meritocratic. Very little has come up by way of new, battle-worthy, electoral talent. Some old dynasts — the Gandhis included — barely hold on to their shrinking, feudal boroughs. They can't expand the party in their regions, they also won't vacate space for new talent. Young, bright and articulate spokesmen are great. But they do not go and fight elections, risking reputations, wealth and sunburn. You can do a listing of the top 50 Congress people all over the country. This paradox will be established.

On the contrary, as in a *durbar*, or an accountability-lite NGO or family-owned business, sycophants survive many disasters. You might not even remember a man called Mohan Prakash, a nothing, old socialist Rahul Gandhi took a shine to. One after the other he was handed over major states to run, including Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. He apparently became famous and a favourite when, early on, he called Rahul Gandhi the Jayaprakash Narayan of the Congress Party.

One thing you can say for him is, he was consistent, if in failures. Ask Congress people more about him, and they sing you the line from Aamir Khan's 3 *Idiots*: *Kahaan se aaya thha woh, Kahaan gaya usey dhoondho...* (where did he come from, where do we find him now!).

He isn't the only one of his kind. C.P.Joshi is another long-time Rahul favourite who turned everything he touched into dust — the North-east being the latest. Was he held accountable, you think? No, unless you think being Speaker of the Rajasthan Assembly is a punishment.

My colleague and *ThePrint*'s political editor, D K Singh, took me through what might be called Rahul Gandhi's 'A' team. It's a loser's parade. Raj Babbar continues to be the UPCC chief though the Congress hardly exists in that state. Ashok Tanwar, once Rahul's young Dalit star, continues heading the Haryana Congress though he lost his own Lok Sabha election and the party was wiped out in the assembly.

Another key dynastic figure from Haryana is the party's media head, Randeep Singh Surjewala. He recently contested the by-election in Jind and finished third by some distance. Among the general secretaries, Ambika Soni and Mukul Wasnik are a spent force but continue to be in charge of Jammu and Kashmir and Kerala plus Tamil Nadu, respectively. Dipak Babaria (who's he!) continues to be in charge

of Madhya Pradesh. He has never contested an election. Nor have Anand Sharma (head of the foreign affairs department) and Jairam Ramesh (convener of the powerful party core-group).

Within the core group, A K Antony hasn't contested after 2001. K C Venugopal is an outgoing MP but unlikely to contest this time to focus on party work. You'd presume Amit Shah won't be focusing on his party as he fights for Gandhinagar.

The key counsels around Rahul are all smart, superbly educated people: Trusted aide Kanishka Singh, ace tweet-writer Nikhil Alva, ex-bureaucrat K Raju, data-scientist Praveen Chakravarty, chief ideological trainer Sachin Rao, ex-banker Alankar Sawai and social media head Divya Spandana. Spotted something common between them? Except Spandana, none is a politician. And note the most visible among these *'navratnas'*: Sandip Singh, former JNU activist and a leader of the ultra-Left All India Students' Association (AISA), who apparently writes Rahul's speeches.

If you look at the general secretaries, core group, and Rahul's key advisors, only a handful have political minds. The sharpest among these, Ahmed Patel, is no longer a central figure. Remember, he is the one Congressman with old wives and the spine to fight Amit Shah in their home state and wrest that Rajya Sabha seat from him in that dirty late-night face-off at the Election Commission.

All this, however, would count for less if we at least knew the Congress party's mind on the three key issues we listed earlier. It can keep attacking Narendra Modi on jobs, economy and farm distress. But how is it going to resolve these issues, we aren't told. Even if he is going to recast the Congress into the ideology of the activists he's now fascinated with, an AISA style raving, crimsons Left force, it might even have sex appeal for some. A colourless, we-shall-tell-you-when-we-get-there approach is dead on arrival.

On nationalism, security, fight against terror, foreign policy, the Congress is frozen, until a Sam Pitroda shoots it in its butt. Nobody from the Congress states the fact that every weapon system you are fighting with, including the Mirages and Sukhois, were bought by their governments. On the other hand, they make Rahul speak easily verifiable falsehoods like "HAL (Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd) made these Mirage". It didn't. Dassault did. HAL has never made a Mirage, nor will make one. But his grandmother ordered in 1982 the ones we fly now. Politics needs hard work, more than just retweeting the boss. On the third key issue, social cohesion, the talk of love and tolerance is wonderful. But, how are you different if your view on Sabarimala, triple talaq and Ram Temple is about the same as the BJP's?

In his recent Weekend Ruminations T N Ninan listed the considerable achievements of the UPA government, from lifting people out of poverty, farm growth, infrastructure spending, Aadhaar. I'd add the nuclear deal. He asked: Why is the Congress not talking about these but letting Mr Modi get away with this totally outrageous claim that everything good you see in India came in his five years? This is for the Congress to reflect. If it doesn't, you take a call: Is it a political party or an NGO? You know, NGOs are also supposed to be anti-establishment. Even when you were the establishment for a decade.

By Special Arrangement with ThePrint

# Marketing offence as self-defence



AL FRESCO

SUNIL SETHI

Offence is the best form of defence. So goes the epigram, and there's no more striking instance than Narendra Modi's progress from *chaiwalla*, a tea-vendor, in 2014, surrounded by the clutter of teapots, to the self-appointed, baton-wielding *chowkidar*, or watchman, of 2019. *Chaiwalla-to-chowkidar* — the most quoted coinage of the week — tells us many things about his transformation between two election campaigns. First, the leap from the local to the national stage: The tea-seller image harked back to the Dark Ages, of an apparently impoverished youth who rose to seize control of the Bharatiya Janata Party and become prime minister; the watchman's trademark propels him to the guardianship of the nation — its manners, morals, money and safety.

Second, both appellations — of *chaiwalla* and *chowkidar* — emanated as barbs from

the Congress party's quiver. At an AICC meet in mid-January 2014 it was Mani Shankar Aiyar's sneering dismissal that Narendra Modi could never be prime minister in the 21st century and, instead, "he might want to sell tea at the venue" that Mr Modi pounced upon and turned into an election catchphrase. Pitching it as a contest between *shahzada* (crown prince) Rahul Gandhi and *chaiwalla*, he made a beeline to garner aspirational youth votes — both as repudiation of entitled privilege and endorsement of county's unemployed millions aiming for the top job. As the tea-dispensing image gained traction it was expanded to establishing direct contact with voters through *nukkad*-style "*Chai Pe Charcha*" events.

Mr Modi's marketing mavens have now flipped Mr Gandhi's stinging missile of "*Chowkidar chor hai*" ("The watchman is a thief") on the Rafale deal into a self-promoting blitzkrieg.

A week ago when the Prime Minister tweeted "*Main bhi chowkidar*" — "Yes, I am the watchman" — he let loose garrisons of followers that one observer calls "The Emperor's New Clothes".

And, thirdly, for the uninitiated into the uncharted no-holds-barred terrain of social media — Facebook, Twitter and Instagram — is added a new mobile technology called Tick Tock that instantly uploads brief videos. The Tick Tock app is described as "raw, real, and without boundaries — whether you're brushing your teeth at 7:45 am or you're mak-

ing breakfast at 7:45 pm...it's from the gut, come-as-you-are storytelling told in 15 seconds." Mr Modi's closely-guarded marketing machine is making liberal use of TickToc to spread the "*Main bhi chowkidar*" message.

The extent and exactitude of the "*Main bhi chowkidar*" barrage is an unprecedented exercise in political packaging that is a fusillade, exhortation and appeal — sometimes all rolled into one. Many members of Mr Modi's cabinet now prefix "*Main bhi chowkidar*" to their Twitter handles. Focus groups of opinion makers are personally targeted, either individually or collectively. These include movie stars, sports heroes, religious leaders and, of course, a large and well-known tribe of BJP torchbearers in the media.

Here is a verbatim example of a message to "my young friends" Ranveer Singh and Vicky Kaushal, popular film actors: "Many youngsters admire you. It is time to tell them: *Apna Time Aaa Gaya Hai* and that it is time to turn up with high *Josh* to a voting centre near you." The message is copied to actresses Deepika Padukone, Alia Bhatt and Anushka Sharma and, of course, to television anchors who are unabashed Narendra Modi fans. South Indian cult stars like Mohanlal and Nagarjuna are flatteringly co-opted: "Your performances have entertained millions...I request you to urge people in large numbers...The award here is, a vibrant democracy."

Spiritual gurus like Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Sadhguru and Baba Ram Dev get a nice ego

rub-down — "leaders like you inspire many through words and work". Sports champions such as javelin thrower Neeraj Chopra and gold medalist wrestlers Sushil Kumar and Yogeshwar Dutt receive customised messages; badminton stars P V Sindhu and Saina Nehwal are touchingly reminded that "the core of badminton is the court and the core of democracy is the vote...Just like you smash records, do also inspire a record-breaking turnout." Nor are captains of industry such as Ratan Tata and Anand Mahindra forgotten.

In many respects, this is no firecracker election. Burning issues of the day, such as growing joblessness, are ripped up in a welter of claims and counterclaims. For every economist who says that the government's data on unemployment is fudged, a phalanx of "*Modi chowkidars*" — lately a large group of professional chartered accountants — demolishes the analysts as wrong. And as more Congress loyalists queue up at the BJP's doorstep even the ruling party's fiercest critics admit that the result is probably a foregone conclusion.

Critics of social media apps in the single-device world of the mobile phone point to its limitations in influencing voters — technology, after all, is by definition gender-neutral, agnostic and amoral. "Social media may be a force multiplier, but it is not the force," says one, pointing to the BJP's losses in three states and several by-elections.

Still, if there is one difference between 2014 and 2019 it is this: The days of a convivial *chaiwalla* dispensing tea and sympathy are over. "*Chowkidar Modi*" and his brigade is out there, defending its turf to the hilt.

# Superheroes are like us and more

## EYE CULTURE

KUMAR ABISHEK

*Avengers: Endgame* will be releasing in a month's time and millions of us are eagerly waiting to see how the remaining Avengers will defeat Thanos. *Avengers: Infinity War* had ended in heartbreak for many of us. Or, who wasn't in tears when Wolverine dies in *Logan*? Or, was choosing sides in *Captain America: Civil War*?

We feel an emotional connection with our favourite superheroes — through movies and comic books. The influence of superheroes on popular culture is growing each day.

I and millions like me religiously spend time and money on superhero characters. Arguably, movies have played the biggest role in the recent past to take the popularity of our modern-day gods to a pinnacle. But why such a global obsession?

"If heroes are idealized humans, then today's reflect an exaggerated Cult of Self. They are unique, supremely talented beings who transcend laws, even those of nature. Hollywood has always cherished mavericks, but these are, literally, cartoons — computer-generated," writes Mark Bowden of *The New York Times* in a 2018 opinion piece. Pretty damning, huh!

Not only movie or culture critics, but there is also a wide section of the general audience who consider superhero fandom childish.

Indeed it is childish. As children, we do not easily distinguish between reality and fantasy, and our belief in special abilities wanes only after we grow up. Still many among us never quite lose the sense — regaling superhero stories is a break from the mundane to the spectacular. "They are really reading fairy tales for grown-ups when they read or see superhero stories today... (But) to me the human aspect of superheroes is perhaps the most important part," the late Stan Lee once said.

It's not only the superhuman abilities that attract us to characters like Superman or Spider-Man, but it is also their human side. Superheroes aren't infallible. Sometimes they fade away, merely saying: "Mr Stark, I don't feel so good." They lose, they break their own rules, they overcome inner challenges and they die (only to come back).

"Audiences watch superhero characters cope with the human experience through these films, an experience with which audience

members can identify. Viewers see a part of their own reality on the big screen through superhero characters. This is what makes the characters so relatable and inspirational to the viewer," argues *The Artifice*, an online magazine.

We first connect with our superheroes (or supervillains) based on their origin stories, be it the murder of his parents in front of him that turned Bruce Wayne into Batman, or the death of uncle Ben that helped Peter Parker (Spider-Man) understand "with great power comes great responsibility".

"As a clinical psychologist who has written books about the psychology of superheroes, I think origin stories show us not how to become super but how to be heroes, choosing altruism over the pursuit of wealth and power. I've learned this through hundreds of conversations at comic book conventions, where fans have been remarkably candid about their lives and the inspiration they draw from superhero stories," says Robin Rosenberg in *Smithsonian Magazine*.

But it is more than just one life-altering event that makes superheroes so admirable — it is their humanity that makes audiences/readers fall in love with them. So, when Wonder Woman foolishly thinks that killing Ares will end all wars, we are reminded of the narrative that killing Osama bin-Laden will end terrorism.

Anyone who depends on a medical device, physical accommodation, or medication can relate to Tony Stark's (Iron Man's) dependency on the arc reactor. We all can understand the loneliness surrounding the all-powerful Superman.

This connection we find with supervillains, too. So when Thanos talks about wiping half of all the living creatures to ensure the survival of life itself, it helps us find the rationale in the arguments for population control. Or when we learn about the origin story of Killmonger and his goal of black supremacy, we empathise with him.

So when we walk around wearing Batman t-shirts, buy posters of Green Lantern and collect little vinyl figurines of Hulk, such actions remind us that these heroes deal with the realities running rampant in our own lives, and yet they are a little more than us, mortals.

Courage and determination fuel superheroes, and not their powers. And it's perhaps why they have created such a fanbase. They give us the confidence to conquer our villains and weaknesses.

# What you see is not always what you get



INTER ALIA

MITALI SARAN

Less than three weeks from now we will once again witness the great marvel of Indian democracy, in which hundreds of millions of Indians demonstrate that they are perfectly capable of forming orderly queues. Just kidding! But not really — I don't know of any other situation in which we patiently wait our turn instead of treating the line like an obstacle race. That's comment enough on how dear we hold the right to adult franchise.

Anyway, we will all troop in to elect the next central government — and not a day too soon. I think it's safe to say that whichever button we end up pressing, we're all heartily sick of the politicking, sick of the ugly dis-

course, and sick of the *chidiya dekho* tactics that pass for campaigning.

Delhi is agog with one burning question: "This government sucks, but who else can one vote for?" Maybe it's just me, but that is a daft question. We have dozens of opposition parties, big and small, and no matter who you end up voting for, the idea that there is no choice is utterly specious. No choice will be perfect, but if you're smart, you'll cast your vote in the direction of a preferred bigger picture. If not, well, it's a free country, dummy.

The BJP occupies the largest part of the national headspace, flush with funds (including electoral bonds, the opacity of which has generated a stunning lack of outrage) and propelled by fabulous tailwinds from its mouthpieces in the media. But it is also, therefore, the target for the largest part of blame for the national headache. By most performance indicators — the economy, unemployment, law and order, public safety, social justice, data gathering and analysis, accountability, and due process inside and outside Parliament — it has its back to the wall. So it spends a lot of time telling people not to be so "negative", and a frankly ridiculous amount of time talking about the failures, mistakes, and general loser-iness of the Congress Party in the past.

The Congress, as the largest opposition

party, has dusted itself off, though it is tragic that, less than three weeks to the election, it still hasn't got as much as a snappy campaign tag line to counter the BJP. Snappy campaign tag lines do not governance make, as we painfully learned from "*Sabka saath, sabka vikas*" and "*Achhe din*", but they do handily increase mind space. The BJP has a very clear vision, if a toxic and jumla-ridden one; it shouldn't be impossible for the Congress to put some brains together in a room to come up with a catchy distillation of its own vision. Having said that, it seems to me that all this wailing about a lack of electoral options and nitpicking over media strategy is a luxury given to people whose economic, social, and personal security and freedom are only marginally, if at all, diminished by the Modi Sarkar. Many other people will have far less trouble deciding how to vote. And although the noise encourages us to believe — happily or reluctantly — in a BJP victory, I am unconvinced that it is a foregone conclusion.

Why? Because, like all the other inconvenient data sets generated under this government and its media bullhorns, public sentiment has also repeatedly been fudged — either with a media blackout or PR spin, or sometimes, ("1.25 crore Indians feel that...") entirely imagined. That, and a talent for brazen denial, is what explains Arun Jaitley