



Not half-done

Voter turnout remains high, but the ECI must be quicker in acting on code violations

The first phase of voting on Thursday to elect the 17th Lok Sabha witnessed enthusiastic participation of voters in 91 Lok Sabha constituencies across 20 States and Union Territories. In this opening phase of a total of seven, the challenges in ensuring a free and fair poll, as well as the trend of high enthusiasm among voters, have been highlighted. The drive of the Election Commission of India against malpractices led, ahead of the first phase, to seizures worth ₹2,426 crore of cash, liquor, drugs and other items meant to unduly influence voters. The ECI's decision to ban the release of a biopic on Prime Minister Narendra Modi and its order to stop the broadcast of political content on a TV channel meant for his propaganda were measures in the right direction. But the trail of serious violations of the Model Code of Conduct and the defiance of its previous directives by the ruling dispensation and Mr. Modi himself raise a lot of questions regarding the ECI's effectiveness in being a neutral and fair arbiter. The questions regarding the integrity of the elections arising out of doubts about EVMs have been addressed with 100% Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trails, followed by a Supreme Court-directed increase in their random counting rate from one machine to five per Assembly constituency/segment. But doubts arising out of the ECI's conduct fall in a different category, and it needs to do more to reassure voters that the process is not vitiated by partisanship. The seemingly biased moves by Central agencies such as the Income Tax department targeting only Opposition leaders point to the possible misuse of office by the ruling party to target opponents. Mr. Modi's appeal to voters in the name of soldiers – something the ECI had explicitly warned against – was unfortunate, as was the Commission's failure to take prompt action. While the ECI must urgently respond to MCC violations, the government must act fairly.

Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim and parts of Odisha also voted to elect their State Assemblies. Tripura and West Bengal topped in turnout, with 81.8% and 81%, respectively. This is the first general election with VVPATs attached to all EVMs. According to the ECI, 1.7% of VVPATs, 0.73% of the ballot units and 0.61% of the control units of EVMs had to be replaced on Thursday. Stray incidents of violence were reported in Andhra Pradesh, but in Jammu and Kashmir the polling went relatively peacefully. In the Jammu constituency 72% polling was recorded, while in the Valley's Baramulla constituency the figure was 35%, marginally lower than the 2014 figures. Isolated complaints regarding mismanagement arose in some parts, but by and large the first phase went on well, and upheld India's reputation in managing what is the world's largest democratic exercise. It is going to be a long summer.

Seeing darkness

The first image of a black hole is a reassurance of science and reason

On April 10, the Event Horizon Telescope collaboration showed the world the 'unseeable': the very first image of a black hole. Of course, the black hole itself cannot be seen, because light cannot escape its intense gravitational attraction. The so-called event horizon that envelops the black hole is the point of no return and any object transgressing this boundary is lost. Just outside is a region where a photon (light quantum) can orbit the black hole without falling in. This is called the 'last photon ring', and this is what the EHT imaged, seeing in effect the silhouette of a black hole. About a hundred years after the black hole made its way into physics through Albert Einstein's general theory of relativity, soon after the LIGO collaboration first directly observed the gravitational waves made by the merging of two black holes, the 'dark star' had finally been imaged. The Higgs boson was detected 50 years after it had been postulated, and gravitational waves were observed a century after Einstein predicted them. Visual proof of the existence of black holes comes a century after they appeared in scientific literature. In a collaborative effort, eight telescopes around the world were used for the experiment. The challenges included making each observe the same broad range of wavelengths around 1.3 mm and having precise atomic clocks at each location, so the data could be combined.

A black hole marks the end of spacetime as commonly understood, and nothing that enters it can escape from the tremendous gravitational attraction. However, this is no real danger, as black holes are located at distances that humans do not have the power to scale. The EHT set out to image two candidate supermassive black holes – Sagittarius A*, which is 26,000 light years from the earth, at the centre of the Milky Way, and another which is 55 million light years away at the centre of the Messier 87 galaxy in the Virgo galaxy cluster. But the first image was of the more distant one. The very long baseline interferometry technique linked radio dishes of telescopes across the world to produce a virtual telescope the size of the earth. This was needed to obtain the high resolution required for this measurement. Combining data from telescopes, each with different characteristics, was a separate challenge. Cutting-edge developments from computer science related to image recognition were used. As Katie Bouman, Assistant Professor at the California Institute of Technology, who led the efforts to develop an algorithm to put the data together and create the image, said in a TEDx talk, projects such as the EHT succeed owing to interdisciplinary expertise that people bring to the table. This experiment endorses the diversity of collaboration just as much as it does unrelenting patience and good faith in the power of science and reason.

Message from the martyrs of Jallianwala Bagh

They beckon all of us to give human freedom respect, human beings dignity, and human rights recognition



GOPALKRISHNA GANDHI

One hundred years ago, on April 12, a letter dropped into the British Raj's postal system. The writer of the letter was a world-famous poet. That is not the only reason for the letter having been unusual. It was, by the political sights of the governments of the times, seditious. But luminously so.

The Raj's censors must have been greatly tempted to see its contents; perhaps they did, spurred by the ruling 'order' of the day, the Rowlatt Act. Curbing, in the name of war-time discipline, every conceivable civil liberty, the Act enabled stricter control of the press, arrests without warrant, indefinite detention without trial. It empowered the police to search a place and arrest any person they disapproved of without warrant. Naturally, it outraged India, and both the writer and recipient of the letter.

Written on April 12, 1919, by Rabindranath Tagore to Mohandas K. Gandhi, it was about what its writer called "the great gift of freedom". He said: "...India's opportunity for winning it will come to her when she can prove that she is morally superior to the people who rule her by their right of conquest."

'Faith or life in death'

Tagore knew, doubtless, that the phrase "morally superior" would strike a chord in Gandhi. As would the sentence that followed: "She must willingly accept her penance of suffering, the suffering which is the crown of the great. Armed with her utter faith in goodness,

she must stand unabashed before the arrogance that scoffs at the power of spirit." Tagore ended the letter, as a poet would, with a verse: "Give me the faith of the life in death, of the victory in defeat, of the power hidden in the frailness of beauty, of the dignity of pain that accepts hurt but disdains to return it." Prose is ever the 'doer', poetry the 'artist'. And so this letter and the line just cited cannot hope to compete with Tagore's much-quoted poem "Where the mind is without fear...". But taken for itself, this sentence has to rank among the greatest expressions in prose of truth's protest against power. Certain words, poetic word-images, in that line are scorching: death, defeat, dignity, pain, hurt.

India had, only a few days earlier, seen all those five word-images at play in Delhi. As the scholar-lawyer Anil Nauriya has recently reminded us, on March 30, 1919, the Raj's police fired at a gathering in Delhi protesting the Rowlatt Act on a call by Mahatma Gandhi for a nation-wide hartal. Nauriya lists among them Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims.

A sample: Abdul Ghani, b. 1894. Killed in bayonet charge by a British Army unit near the Town Hall, Delhi. Atam Prakash: Received bullet wound in firing by the police and died the same day. Chandrabhan, b. 1889. Received bullet wound in firing by an Army unit and died the same day. Chet Ram: Received bullet wound in firing by the police and died the same day. Gopi Nath, b. 1889: Received bullet wound in firing by an Army unit and died the same day. Hashmatullah Khan: b. 1890: Received bullet wound in firing by an Army unit and died the same day. Mam Raj: Received bullet wound in firing by the police and died the same day. Radha Saran, b. 1897: Received bullet wound in firing by an Army unit and died the same day. Rad-



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hey Shyam, b. 1891: Received bullet wound in firing by an Army unit and died the same day. Ram Lal, b. 1886: Received bullet wound in firing by an Army unit and died the same day. Ram Saroop: Received bullet wound in firing by the police and died the same day. Ram Singh: b. 1891: Received bullet wound in firing by an Army unit and died the same day. Chandermal: Received bullet wound in firing by the police and died the same day. Swattin: Received bullet wound in firing by the police and died the same day. Son of Abdul Karim: Received bullet wound in firing by the police and died the same day.

The Delhi firing was, as it were, a macabre rehearsal for what was to follow. And it was doubtless on Tagore's mind when he wrote the letter to Gandhi. It was still in the post's pipelines when, the next day, on April 13, 1919, his poetic vision was to find prescient corroboration. Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims gathered in Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar, Punjab not to oppose Rowlatt but for a festival that marks the Sikh new year, Baisakhi. Its intent was totally un-political. But who is to say how arrogance will work?

On April 13, 1919

What followed is now part of the world's annals of state-led crime. Troops under the command of Brigadier General (temporary rank) Reginald Dyer entered the garden,

blocking the main entrance after them, took up position on a raised bank, and on Dyer's orders fired on the crowd for some ten minutes, minutes that were an eternity. They stopped only when the ammunition supply was almost exhausted. Official sources themselves gave a figure of 379 identified dead, with approximately 1,100 wounded. In those ten minutes Amritsar became India. It embodied a nation's death-defying dignity in pain, hurt.

Tagore was, at the time of the mowing down 'Sir' Rabindranath. And he had been a Nobel Laureate for Literature for six years. On May 30, 1919, Tagore picked up his pen, this time, not that of a Nobel Laureate but of a Knight of the British Empire, to write a letter to the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford. "News of the sufferings," he wrote, had "trickled through the gagged silence, reaching every corner of India". He then said: "The time has come when badges of honour make our shame glaring in their incongruous context of humiliation... I for my part wish to stand, shorn of all special distinctions, by the side of my countrymen who, for their so-called insignificance, are liable to suffer a degradation not fit for human beings." And he asked of the Viceroy, "relieve me of the title of knighthood".

Solidarity with suffering, especially when it is spontaneous, takes many forms. One is sharing by renunciation. Tagore's self-divestment of the title, then perhaps the most coveted, of 'Sir' was an act of spontaneous solidarity with the suffering of Delhi, of Amritsar. And it was a chastisement, in Tagore's words, of the "arrogance that scoffs at the power of spirit".

The martyrs of Jallianwala beckon this generation, all of us, including India and Indians, Pakistan and Pakistanis, Bangladesh and Bangladeshis, Myanmar and Myanmar, not just Britain, to

give human freedom respect, human beings dignity, human rights recognition. Looking around them at those slain – Hindu with Dalit among them, Sikh and Muslim – the martyrs of Jallianwala would want correction and atonement from those on the Indian subcontinent and beyond its boundaries, who today foment division, discord, disunity.

Enduring arrogance

They also beckon us to see that "arrogance of power" is not a colonial or imperial patent, nor "the power of spirit" an attribute of liberation struggles alone. Arrogance can occur under post-colonial, post-imperial, 'independent' skies and can – must – summon the power of spirit.

'Rowlatt' is a temperament that seeks domination, control, hegemony. It has the characteristics of the bully – strength and insecurity. Asia, Africa and Latin America have known that temperament in both the hubris of the external ruler, the hauteur of the one within. And they have seen peoples' power dismantling both. Bowing to public opinion in India and in the U.K., the Raj repealed the Rowlatt Act, the Press Act, and 22 other laws in March 1922 – a victory of the people. The Rowlatt temperament is not a feature of governments alone. It works in society as well, keeping sections of it in a state of chronic enfeeblement. The Rowlatt temperament is also to be seen in corporate India seeking monopolist domination over its natural resources and public commons.

This centenary of India's rebuffing of the Rowlatt Act's scowl through what Tagore called "the power of spirit" is one to be cherished, celebrated and be inspired by.

Gopal Krishna Gandhi is a former administrator, diplomat and governor

A grim future in Israel

India needs to go beyond token homage to the cause of Palestinian freedom



SUKUMAR MURALIDHARAN

With criminal indictment imminent on charges of corruption, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pulled off a fourth consecutive win in general elections to the Knesset on April 9. Though tied on seats with his main rival, Mr. Netanyahu has a clear pathway towards power in coalition with a bloc of right-wing allies. As with earlier wins, eked out by strongly running against counsels of sanity from the diminishing peace camp, he has pulled the political centre of gravity sharply, yet again, to the ultraright.

Sources of support

Two notable triumphs achieved against the tide of global opinion facilitated Mr. Netanyahu's win. In securing these, he counted on the unquestioning – and unthinking – support of the Donald Trump administration in the U.S. and the reservoir of evangelical fervour from which it draws sustenance.

Mr. Netanyahu's opponents within Israel say that Mr. Trump effectively created a publicity video for him with a decree during the late days of the campaign, recognising Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights. This followed

Mr. Trump's gift on the 70th anniversary of Israel's formation last year, shifting the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and consigning the Arab third of the city's population to a future of indefinite occupation.

The comatose peace process, which was never more than a charade enabling the U.S. to keep its coalition of allies in the Arab world, was declared dead then. Even Mahmoud Abbas, the normally acquiescent Palestinian Authority President, has refused all offers to resume talks since.

Despite his professions of hurt innocence at the Palestinian refusal, Mr. Netanyahu has proved them right in every respect. In July 2018, the Knesset enacted a Basic Law declaring Israel the nation-state of the Jewish people. Jerusalem would be its indivisible capital and Hebrew its language. The right to self-determination within the state of Israel would by law be unique to the Jewish people.

This is a law that puts the status of Israel's 1.26 million Palestinian citizens and the estimated 5 million living in the West Bank and Gaza into a permanent limbo. It marks the final fruition of an effort that began in 2007, when the U.S. resumed its token effort to broker a peace after all efforts at re-engineering the regional strategic architecture, beginning with the invasion of Iraq, had failed.

Condoleezza Rice, the U.S. Secretary of the State at the time, records her shock at the preconditions set by her Israeli counterpart



REUTERS

Tzipi Livni, for returning to the talks. Under no circumstances, Ms. Livni insisted, would a peace accord grant any concession to the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes, since that would be a mortal danger to Israel's Jewish character.

Ms. Rice took a while to get over the implications of what she heard: "Though I understood the argument intellectually, it struck me as a harsh defence of the ethnic purity of the Israeli state... [and] shocked my sensibilities as an American. After all, the very concept of 'American' rejects ethnic or religious definitions of citizenship. Moreover, there were Arab citizens of Israel. Where did they fit in?"

The hesitancy was very brief since Ms. Rice quickly signed up for the project that had the endorsement of her right-wing fraternity in the U.S. After the George W. Bush administration vanished into history in 2008, Barack Obama sought to dissuade Israel from this insistence on ethnic purity. Mr.

Trump, in his part-comical effort to be all that Mr. Obama was not, has waded on the project of Zionist purity. In tearing up the nuclear deal with Iran, Mr. Trump has also reversed other steps his predecessor took to create a new regional architecture of power through conciliation rather than coercion.

Strong campaign

Mr. Netanyahu's campaign rhetoric since his debut in politics was often called out for incitement against the Palestinians. He excelled himself this time, vowing in the last days of the campaign to never allow a Palestinian state and to annex parts of the West Bank.

He is also on record telling Knesset colleagues that controlling the entire territory between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean is indispensable "for the foreseeable future". And he has been unapologetic about "living forever by the sword" if that be Israel's need.

The people of Gaza have lived through this experience after the fraudulent Israeli withdrawal of 2005 which converted the densely populated strip into the world's largest open air prison. March 30 marked a year since the people of Gaza began their "great march of return", a mass mobilisation demanding the UN-mandated right of refugees to return home. No less than 70% of the 2 million people in Gaza are refugees from villages and towns razed to establish Israel.

Israel responded to the Gaza

mobilisation with brute force, killing nearly 300 people, including children and paramedics. After an inquiry, a UN Commission identified a pattern of violations of international humanitarian law, possibly amounting to war crimes, and urged individual sanctions against those responsible for Israel's actions in Gaza.

The view from India

India continues to be among the biggest overseas patrons of the Israeli military-industrial complex. Increasingly, in the public discourse, Israel is portrayed as the role model that a "new India" should emulate in terms of its security posture in a troubled neighbourhood. The cause of Palestinian freedom continues to gain token homage, but the myth that this commitment can be "de-phenated" from India's relations with Israel looks increasingly hollow.

A renewal of India's commitment to Palestine should run concurrently with fighting back against the growing expressions of intolerance in political life and the shredding of the fabric of secular democracy. With Israel taking another perilous turn to the right, India's endorsement of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, today the only option to gain justice for Palestine, seems a moral imperative.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

The first phase

The world celebrates India's general election as a festival of democracy. So far so good. And the first phase of elections is over. Again good. But as far as Andhra Pradesh is concerned, this great event, which many of us looked forward to, was marred on Thursday by malfunctioning electronic voting machines (Page 1, "As polls begin, violence mars voting in A.P., J&K" and "Parties, leaders complain about polling lapses", both April 12). This created much agony, with women and the elderly deeply disappointed. The perception over the performance of EVMs still stands and events on Thursday have only

strengthened this. Was it sheer coincidence that a number of EVMs malfunctioned even before polling started? Was there a check list to ensure EVMs were properly installed? Why weren't sufficient technical support teams put in place to handle such contingencies? The Election Commission of India should have been completely ready before an exercise of such magnitude was conducted. The ECI has been a big disappointment.

ANANDA RAO MUKKALA,
Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh

■ It is good to note the moderate to heavy polling, but what is more remarkable is that even in Naxalite-affected districts polling was

good, with enthusiastic tribals walking kilometres to exercise their democratic right. There were cases of violence but let us note that voting was, by and large, peaceful. This augurs well for the forthcoming phases of voting. However, one has to watch for the lure of money and other incentives to entice voters.

D.B.N. MURTHY,
Bengaluru

■ When I asked a daily wage earner, a 30-year-old woman, whether she had voted, her prompt reply was this. She voted in the Assembly elections but not on Thursday, the reason being she "hadn't been paid for her vote". After I had recovered from the rude

shock, these questions ran through my mind. Who is giving and who is taking? Is this the sole reason why the voting percentage is below average in some parts? Why this indifference? It seems voters are coming under the spell of the 'money-for-vote' syndrome. Let us not forget the selfless sacrifices our freedom fighters made for all of us to be able to vote for ourselves in a democracy. Please go to a polling booth and choose even NOTA.

MANGIPUDI MRUTHYANAJAYA RAO,
Hyderabad

■ The ECI should strive for an innovative solution to restore missing names on voter lists, a factor which did impact voter turnout. It is ironic that despite

successive and extensive campaigns, quite a few are still confused about voter slips and the voter identity cards. There was enough time for technological solutions to quickly identify missing/deleted names. Perhaps an overworked ECI was busy with the many issues to be resolved under the Model Code of Conduct.

VARUN S.D.,
Bengaluru

Seeing the unseeable
Another step towards getting to know the universe better has finally been engraved in the sands of time (Page 1, "From theory to fact" and "Capturing a trap where matter, space and time come to an end", both April 11). It marks yet another milestone

achieved by collaborative efforts and directed human potential.

ADITI POTE,
Pune

■ From the time Albert Einstein proposed his general theory of relativity and existence of black holes, an unseeable frontier has captivated the human mind. Now that there is photographic evidence, it makes it all the more real and fascinating. The achievement is a new jewel to add to our crown of human achievements. I look forward to more such discoveries.

GOWRI BABURAJ NAIR,
Thiruvananthapuram

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