



# Caste away

How the Aam Aadmi Party perpetuates upper-caste politics, Sagar finds out

On 6 December 2018, the Chief Minister of Delhi, Arvind Kejriwal, told the residents of the Vikaspuri colony, in west Delhi, that the Election Commission had removed three million names from its electoral rolls. Kejriwal was inaugurating 30 new colonies, which he said would also cover over 300 unauthorised colonies in the neighbourhood. Vikaspuri is home to a large number of settlers from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, who are often referred to as Purvanchalis. Kejriwal claimed that along with the names of 1.5 million Purvanchalis, eight hundred thousand Muslims and four hundred thousand Baniyas—who rank third in the Hindu caste hierarchy—had also been removed from the voter list, at the behest of the Bharatiya Janata Party. The basis for this allegation, he said, was an “internal analysis” of surnames that his team had conducted.

Over the preceding week, legislators and core committee members of Kejriwal’s Aam Aadmi Party had held a series of press conferences to highlight the alleged deletions. Like Kejriwal, they did not explain whether identifying voters by their last name was a foolproof method of determining caste, or place of birth. Sheyphali Sharan, a spokesperson for the Election Commission, tweeted that the party’s allegation on the deletion was “factually incorrect.”

Nevertheless, AAP leaders continued to stick to their allegations. “The BJP has made a second Muslim community out of us,” Sushil Kumar Gupta, a Rajya Sabha member from the AAP, who is a Baniya by caste and a businessman by profession, said in a press conference. “They always conspire against Muslims, and hadn’t given tickets to Muslim candidates. They have now put the Baniyas in the same category.”

The basis for Gupta’s claims, it appeared, was that the BJP had not given a ticket to anyone from the “Agrawal community”—a Baniya sub-caste—in the Madhya Pradesh assembly election, in 2018. Gupta argued that Baniyas were unhappy with recent moves such as demonetisation, the goods and services tax and the sealing of unauthorised

businesses in Delhi. A day later, the AAP legislator Rajesh Gupta went a step ahead in invoking Baniya victimhood. “There is an attempt to make us political Dalits,” Rajesh said.

Earlier in August, Atishi, a member of the AAP’s top decision-making body and a Lok Sabha candidate from East Delhi in the upcoming general election, dropped her surname, Marlena. Her father, Vijay Singh—a Punjabi Rajput and a retired Delhi University professor—had given her that surname, which was a combination of communist icons Marx and Lenin. An AAP official, who worked closely with Atishi and Delhi’s education minister, Manish Sisodia, told me that the party took the decision to drop her surname because it sounded European, and led people to believe she was Christian.

These measures mark a pivot on how the AAP has treated caste in its public discourse. Having previously been careful to not be seen pandering to a particular caste or community, the party is now making public overtures to dominant-caste constituencies. With a sizeable number of Baniyas, Purvanchalis and Muslims in Delhi, it is perhaps unsurprising that they have become electorates of interest ahead of the general election. The party, however, continues to be largely silent on Dalit issues. Questions of social justice have been wiped out from the political conversation in Delhi, and the AAP contributed to this political oblivion. For instance, the AAP has failed to set up systems of grievance redressal and accountability as required by the 2013 Food Security Act, even a year after the deaths of three minor Dalit girls due to starvation last July. In the recent past, in Delhi and in neighbouring states such as Haryana, the AAP has continued to pursue a politics of uppercaste appeasement.

In the 2013 election to Delhi’s legislative assembly, as the country’s newest political party, the AAP was attempting to break into the capital’s circle of power. It was challenging a Congress bastion, where Sheila Dixit had held power as chief minister for 15 years. Its campaign strategy involved eschewing what it framed as the old binaries of caste and religion. Instead, the party

promised social change through the delivery of services, such as water, electricity and roads. It emphasised the common man at the heart of its movement, but refrained from defining the contours of such a figure. For AAP, the rich business owner with political connections and the domestic worker living in a slum were all part of the category of “common people.”

The AAP’s rationale for entering the electoral system was to present an alternative form of politics. As outsiders to the entrenched political class, its leaders were propped up as individuals committed to clearing the systemic rot, whether it was corruption, vote-bank politics or bureaucratic complacency. One of the earliest charters prepared by the core committee before the party’s launch, in 2012, outlined five principles—participation, accountability, transparency, decentralisation and integrity. It sought the direct involvement of the general public in the preparation of its manifesto and other decision-making processes.

And yet, it said nothing about whether the historically marginalised—Dalits, Adivasis, backward classes, Muslims or women—would be adequately represented in the core bodies of the party. Instead, the trajectory the party has taken has only made it complicit in steering the narrative away from questions of affirmative action and social justice. On the face of it, simply focussing on civic issues such as education and health—where it has indeed achieved some considerable success—may appear progressive and forward-looking. In reality, it works to conceal the communal tensions and caste atrocities that continue unabated under the current government.

In the years following its formation, the AAP has cracked and fractured, but it has retained a certain form of populism. As it tries to break into the national stage more decisively, the party has

increasingly participated on terms set by the Hindu Right. Even during the anti-corruption movement that preceded the party’s formation, Kejriwal and other leaders did not shy away from building ties with godmen and members of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the ideological parent of the BJP. These ties have been used to increase the party’s voter base. The narrative of Baniya victimhood now being deployed by the AAP can reveal a dimension of its politics that has otherwise remained unknown.

According to Anand Kumar, a retired professor of sociology at Jawaharlal Nehru University who was a former member—and a parliamentary candidate, in 2014—of the AAP, the party’s appeal to Baniyas is a natural progression in parliamentary politics. A new party, he argued, needs to find its “social base.” Upper-caste voters, such as Baniyas, Brahmins and Rajputs, are traditionally understood to be the BJP’s voter base, while Muslims, Dalits and Adivasis constitute that of the Congress. And with a sizeable presence in Delhi, Baniyas may have become an electorate of interest for the AAP ahead of the 2019 general election. An AAP official I spoke to acknowledged that the party’s agenda to raise the issue of the deletion of Baniya voters was a deliberate political strategy: “Seedhe seedhe BJP ka Baniya vote todne ki politics hai”—This is an effort to break Baniya voters away from BJP. “This is the genius of Kejriwal. He uses their”—the BJP’s—“own politics to counter them. He doesn’t really care about these issues.”

“Till now, the base that AAP built was an outcome of a politics of citizen versus the elite,” Kumar said. “But once you get in the government, you are exposed because people can see you were all talks... So they are now trying to utilise the politics of identity as well.”

The AAP has done this in the same years that caste violence has re-emerged in the public discourse, largely through social media and mass agitations. The suicide of the Dalit scholar Rohith Vemula, in 2016, sparked an uproar in various universities and caught the attention of the mainstream media. In Una, a video of four Dalits being flogged for skinning a cow went viral. After the incident, large protests took place across states, led by various Dalit leaders. Further, the representation of Dalits and Adivasis in the corridors of power is minimal. Out of 81 secretaries employed with the union government, only two are Dalits and three are Adivasis, according to a media report.

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The party official argued that AAP’s work in the field of education and healthcare had mostly benefited “the marginalised community, Dalits and Muslims,” and that it would be wrong to assume that the party was sidelining vulnerable communities for political gain. “If you look at the first mohalla clinic that came up, it was in the Peeragarhi settlement camp, which is completely scheduled caste,” he told me. “The majority in government schools are Dalits and Muslims.”

Whether AAP will be able to win over Baniyas in the coming Lok Sabha elections is yet to be seen, but such politics of invoking upper-caste victimisation ensures that the public discourse revolves only around the concerns of economically and socially influential communities. Since the BJP swept to power, in 2014, the narrative in national politics has shifted towards an aggressive Hindutva ideology. It has forced the Congress to adopt several strategies of the Hindutva agenda that is fed to upper-caste voters. The Congress president, Rahul Gandhi, took great pains to portray himself as a temple-going Brahmin ahead of the Gujarat assembly elections, in 2017, as well as the elections last year in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. I asked the party official why AAP leaders did not advertise the wideranging benefits to Dalits and Muslims they claimed to have delivered. “How AAP chooses to articulate something or doesn’t choose to articu-

late something is also a political decision of the party,” the official said.

The AAP was born out of a protest movement demanding an end to political corruption. Its key demand was a bill to appoint a national anticorruption ombudsman, called the Jan Lokpal—an independent investigative body, comparable to constitutional institutions such as the Election Commission. Anna Hazare, who undertook multiple hunger strikes to compel the government to agree to the movement’s demands, described it as India’s “second independence struggle.” The protests, which accelerated in April 2011, received wall-to-wall media coverage.

The protests had strong support from a cross-section of society, including the RSS. Mayank Gandhi, who was a member of the movement’s core committee and the national executive of the AAP, writes in his book *AAP and Down* that when the crowds dwindled at the protest sites in Delhi and Mumbai, he approached businessmen and self-proclaimed godmen, such as Ramdev and Ravi Shankar, to enlist their support. “I was privy to information that the RSS headquarters in Nagpur, in fact, informally approved of their cadres extending such support.” According to him, members of the RSS did not cease to be citizens just because they held a particular ideological viewpoint.

This same logic, however, did not seem to extend to Bahujan leaders. Gandhi makes it clear that he never approached a Dalit politician for support. “I have often suspected that leaders representing minorities and backward classes choose their community’s concerns over the nation’s welfare,” he writes. “I wished to reach out directly to those community representatives whose primary interest was the country’s well-being.” In the 2014 general election, Gandhi contested the Mumbai North West constituency, and lost his deposit. He blamed the Muslim community for his defeat.

The core team of the India Against Corruption movement was made up of successful professionals with comfortable economic situations. There was a revenue officer, a businessman, a lawyer, an academic, an engineer and a chartered accountant. Some of them were also part-time activists. They were a predominantly upper caste group.

At the time, the United Progressive Alliance government was reeling under a number of corruption charges, most notably in the allocation of coal blocks and telecom spectrum. Kejriwal mobilised the people’s anger against these scandals. “Corruption is what provokes people,” Kejriwal told Gandhi. “They’re livid, what with so many scams unfolding. With corruption as our one point agenda, we will create a massive movement. Once people come together, we can work on electoral reforms, too.” When Gandhi asked Kejriwal about the optics of making common cause with popular leaders who had clear right-wing allegiances, Kejriwal said, “That’s a valid concern but they have large followings, and right now we need dedicated numbers.”

The movement was soon plagued by internal problems and a lack of cohesion. There was growing factionalism between various members of the group. At each protest, the agenda shifted slightly, whenever earlier goals were not met, or only partially fulfilled. It changed from the demand for a Jan Lokpal Bill, to the indictment of corrupt UPA leaders, to free electricity and water for Delhi’s residents.

Eventually, there was a split between Kejriwal and Hazare. A majority of high-profile figures in the movement joined Kejriwal in his decision to start a political party. They enlisted volunteers, many of whom quit their jobs to offer their services fulltime. Lacking the funding and marketing teams that other political parties had, they campaigned door to door. The party’s goal was participatory democracy, and it attracted many people who had earlier considered themselves unsuited to politics.

*Excerpted from the April 2019 issue of The Caravan, a Delhi Press magazine*

IMO



The SC has allowed leaked documents to be used as evidence in the Rafale case

## SUPREME COURT ON RAFALE CASE REVIEW

**P. Chidambaram**@PChidambaram\_IN  
The order of the Supreme Court in the Rafale Review Petition case is a huge rebuff to the central government which raised the specious plea of ‘stolen documents’. We demand the resignation of the Defence and Law ministers who authorised the plea of ‘stolen documents’.

**Ashok Swain**@ashoswain

Wah Modi Ji Wah – Pakistani Airforce pilots will fly Rafale Jets before Indian Airforce pilots, but Modi doesn’t give information about his Rafale Deal to Supreme Court saying it is highly confidential. Is Modi trying to hide Rafale information from Bangladesh or Bhutan?

**Milind Deora**@milinddeora

The Supreme Court has dismissed the Centre’s ‘preliminary objections’ and allowed the admissibility of three documents in the Rafale case. Heartening to see that our institutions are fiercely protecting their independence despite attempts at interference.

**M K Venu**@mkvenu1

Supreme Court has effectively reopened the Rafale issue by agreeing to look at a review based on fresh evidence which was so far suppressed in the name of national security. Until then it is

advantage opposition in elections.

## THE FIRST PHASE OF GENERAL ELECTION

**Kiran Mazumdar Shaw**@kiranshaw

My mother’s voter ID has been deleted on some flimsy excuse that there was a report that she no longer lives at her address. She is so upset I can’t tell you becos she has been at the same address for 19 years. So much for ‘verification’

**Mehbooba Mufti**@MehboobaMufti

A voter at polling booth in Jammu was manhandled by the BSF because he refused to cast his vote for BJP. Using armed forces at polling stations to coerce people to vote for the BJP shows their desperation & hunger to usurp power by hook or crook.

**Rifat Jawaid**@RifatJawaid

First phase of voting over, EVMs packed and they will now be kept in strong rooms for 42 days with a possibility of all kinds of hera pheri. And we expect free and fair elections in India. Keep dreaming people!

## BLACK HOLE PHOTOGRAPHED FOR THE FIRST TIME

**Sarah Mervosh**@smervosh

A photo of Katie Bouman circled the earth, but as she points out, the incredible black hole image was a team effort (with some definite girl power!) Congratulations to Tamy Emma Pepin

**Lauren Wolfe**@Wolfe321

She’s only 29, but men who do great things at 29 are not phenoms because they’re young. It’s expected they’ll succeed. So let’s take a moment to applaud this woman’s achievement, while not making it about anything other than an outsider winning from within

# The one thing millennials haven’t killed is houseplants

Record demand for Instagram-ready flora has sent ‘plant parents’ scouring the web for fiddle-leaf figs

**MATTHEW BOYLE**  
13 April

Aisha Richardson, a 34-year-old designer living in Brooklyn’s Bushwick neighbourhood, started buying plants a few years ago to relieve job stress. Before she knew it, Richardson was hooked. She now has about 30 plants—minus one that her cat ate—and follows dozens of plant-focused Instagram feeds. How much does she spend? “I don’t want to think about it,” she says.

American millennials have been accused of dooming all sorts of things: beer, golf, cereal. But the cohort is credited with reviving the once-moribund market for houseplants. In the past three years, US sales have surged almost 50 per cent to \$1.7 billion, according to the National Gardening Association. With many millennials delaying parenthood, plants have become the new pets, fulfilling a desire to connect to nature and the blossoming “wellness” movement. For a group that embraces experiences and travel, moreover, plants give Gen Yers something to care for that won’t die—or soil the rug—when they’re not around.

Most plants are still purchased at garden centres or big-box retailers like Home Depot and Walmart, which mainly carry inexpensive, hardy varieties tailored to novice buyers. But a host of upstarts are targeting millennials with strategies straight from the playbooks of Warby Parker and Glossier. The Sill, for example, sells most of its plants online and offers care advice, free returns and the newbie-friendly slogan: “Can’t Kill It. Just Try.” Small brick-and-mortar plant shops



Plants give Gen Yers something to care for that won’t die—or soil the rug—when they’re not around

with names like Tend, Tula and Soft Opening are also proliferating in Brooklyn and other hip precincts. “We are talking about an antiquated industry that hasn’t changed and a consumer that has,” says Eliza Blank, The Sill’s 33-year-old founder. “Millennials don’t want to go to Walmart to buy their plants.”

Cultivating indoor plants dates back to the ancient Chinese and the famed Hanging Gardens of Babylon. The development of home heating systems in the 1800s made growing indoors much easier, and the Kentia palm, a favourite of Queen Victoria, became the must-have plant to own.

The houseplant business boomed in the 1970s, when hippies snapped up spider plants and crafted macrame hangers for them. Then sales wilted as a mini-

malist, IKEA-inspired ethos took hold. Today, in the Age of Instagram, the Swiss-cheese-leaved monstera deliciosa and trendy fiddle-leaf fig have become such objects of affection among millennials, they’re half-jokingly considered children and given names.

“I know what people who buy plants feel like,” says Darryl Cheng, whose *House Plant Journal* on Instagram has gained a following (and a book deal) by reassuring skittish owners that not every plant will look perfect and to accept whatever surprises Mother Nature throws their way. A Toronto native whose time-lapse video of his snake plant growing over 80 days has garnered more than two million views, Cheng has answered thousands of questions on plant care. Another popular hashtag, #plantsofinstagram, boasts as many

posts—2.7 million—as one for the New York Yankees.

Social media has fuelled the current craze, sending buyers to e-commerce sites like Etsy Inc, better known for handcrafted items, and eBay Inc. Even Amazon.com jumped in last year with a dedicated site for plants. Instagram could be next, as it recently added a shopping feature to its app. Searches on Etsy for “live plants” increased 82 per cent year over year.

The supply chain for live plants hasn’t changed much in the last half-century, and the industry is ripe for disruption. Growers, mostly based in Florida with operations throughout Latin America, work with a vast network of wholesalers, brokers and retailers. They have no direct contact with consumers (some don’t even own a cell phone). As a result, it’s hard for them to detect new trends, and when word does trickle down about a hot new plant, it can take several years before it’s readily available.

Some of the most sought-after plants are difficult to grow commercially, like the variegated monstera, a mutation whose leaves are a blend of green and ghostly white. Some big growers like Costa Farms, whose plants are found everywhere from Amazon to Walmart, employ “plant hunters” who scour far-flung locales like Tanzania to find new varieties. But growers simply can’t chase every new plant fad that pops up on Instagram, breeding frustration among sellers. “It’s hard to convince a grower to do something new,” says Kay Kim, co-founder of Rooted, a plant company based in Brooklyn’s Greenpoint neighbourhood. “It’s a chicken-and-egg problem.”

BLOOMBERG



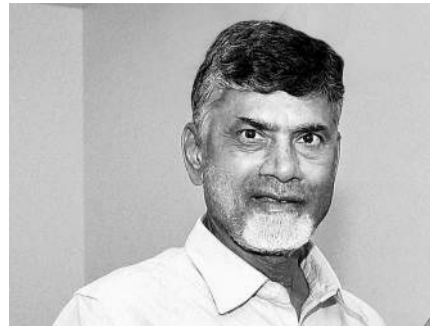
**Where goes the minister?**

Himachal politics has taken a new turn. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) power minister, Anil Sharma has resigned, days after the Congress fielded his son Aashray Sharma as its candidate from the Mandi Lok Sabha constituency. Sharma has been under pressure from the BJP after his father, former Union minister and chief minister Sukh Ram, quit the saffron party and joined the Congress along with Aashray Sharma last month.

This action was not prompted only by his son seeking greener pastures. At a public meeting, Chief Minister Jai Ram Thakur said in Sharma's assembly segment in Mandi: "Anil Sharma is lost somewhere and if someone knows about his whereabouts, they should let me know." "If the CM loses his faith in a minister, there are only two options: Either the CM should expel him from the ministry or the minister himself should resign. So, I thought it better to resign from the ministry," Anil Sharma said.

The real reason for his resignation is his toothlessness in the ministry. Despite being the power minister, he had no control over the state electricity board. As he had only recently joined the BJP from the Congress, he continued to be critical of the functioning of the BJP government, going so far as to apologise publicly in January for the lack of public health facilities provided by the state government — of which he was a part.

Anil Sharma's other son Ayush is married to film actor Salman Khan's sister. In fact, Khan was supposed to come campaigning in the elections. Now the plans are not clear.

**DID THEY REALLY SAY THAT?**

**"The Election Commission is an autonomous body. At the same time, they are working on instructions of the government of India and not cooperating with us"**

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu after meeting Election Commission of India in New Delhi on April 13

**CHECKLIST****APRIL 18 ELECTIONS: CONSTITUENCIES TO WATCH IN KARNATAKA**

**Bellary:** The bastion of mining king B Sriramulu, who won the seat as a BJP candidate in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. He got his sister Shantha to contest the seat that fell vacant after he opted for an assembly seat in November 2018. She lost to Congress leader VS Ugrappa. Ugrappa is now seeking re-election as a Congress-JD(S) nominee. The BJP has fielded Y Devendrapa as its candidate. The outcome could have a serious bearing on the BJP-JDS fortunes if the BJP loses again.

**Mandya:** Chief Minister H D Kumaraswamy's son Nikhil Gowda, is contesting against popular Kannada film star Ambareesh's widow Sumalatha as an independent. Ambareesh, a former Congress MP, represented Mandya in the Lok Sabha thrice. The seat is in the Vokkaliga community heartland where H D Deve Gowda's party holds sway. Sumalatha's meeting with S M Krishna of the BJP recently suggested the BJP is

backing her. Sumalatha's decision to contest the polls from the seat stems from the fact that Ambareesh was very popular in Mandya and represented Mandya in the Lok Sabha thrice from 1998 to 2009. He began his electoral political career from Janata Dal (S) in 1998 but later joined Congress in 1999. This is what is causing discomfort to both JD (S) that sees him as a betrayer and Congress that viewed him as a newcomer. **Udupi-Chikmagalur:** Shobha Karandlaje is the BJP candidate, while Pramod Madhwaraj of the Congress has finally got the ticket after initial sulking by the JD (S). Madhwaraj will be the common 'coalition' candidate. Karandlaje won the Udupi-Chikmagalur seat in 2014 by a margin of 1.81 lakh by defeating the then Congress candidate K Jayaprakash Hegde, who is now with the BJP. As the JD(S) candidate, the late Dhananjay Kumar managed to get just 14,895 votes.

**OPINION**

BHARATIYA JANATA PARTY

**Our security doctrine will be guided by national security**

The decisive leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has fundamentally altered the national security paradigm of India in the last five years. Looking ahead, we propose to do the following:

**Zero-tolerance approach to terrorism**

Our security doctrine will be guided by our national security interest only. This is exemplified by the surgical strikes and the air strikes carried out recently. We will firmly continue our policy of "Zero Tolerance" against terrorism and extremism and continue to follow our policy of giving a free hand to our security forces in combating terrorism.

**National security**

Strengthening our Armed Forces — We will speed up the purchases of outstanding defence related equipments and weapons. In order to equip the Armed Forces with modern equipment, we will continue to take focused steps to strengthen the strike capability of the Armed Forces.

Self-reliance in defence sector — In order to ensure self-reliance in procurement of defence equipment, we have taken several effective steps in the last five years. For instance, the most modern AK-203 automatic rifles are being manufactured at Amethi under our "Make in India in Defence" initiative. We are committed to focus on "Make in India in Defence" to enable indigenous production of defence equipment. This will also generate employment and encourage investment in the defence sector.

**Welfare of soldiers**

We have already demonstrated our commitment to the welfare of our veterans with the implementation of long delayed OROP. To take this commitment forward, we promise to create a more effective framework for the resettlement of our Armed Forces veterans.

**Modernisation of police forces**

We will continue to take forward the process of modernising the Central Armed Police Forces to further increase their capacity and readiness and enable them to effectively combat internal security challenges.

We will provide assistance to the states to upgrade their police forces through the "Scheme for Modernisation of Police Forces". We will encourage expedited police reforms in the states and help state police forces to be more sensitive to the citizens.

**Combating infiltration**

There has been a huge change in the cultural and linguistic identity of some areas due to illegal immigration, resulting in an adverse impact on local people's livelihood and employment. We will expeditiously complete the National Register of Citizens process in these areas on priority. In future we will implement the NRC in a phased manner in other parts of the country.

We will continue to undertake effective steps to prevent illegal immigration in the Northeastern states. For this, we will further strengthen our border security.

**Reinforcing border security**

We will focus on creation of developmental and other necessary infrastructure in border areas to ensure that border security is strengthened, and to enable increased participation of and benefits for border areas in the country's development and progress.

We have completed building six integrated check-posts with another under construction to facilitate easier trade and travel from the neighboring countries. We will further ease the movement of goods and people by constructing 14 more integrated check-posts by 2024.

**Coastal safety**

Effectively strengthening coastal security through implementation of a coastal security scheme to provide modern equipment and allocating funds to the states for establishing coastal police stations, establishment of National Committee for Strengthening Maritime & Coastal Security, Island Information System and National Academy of Coastal Policing.

**Citizenship Amendment Bill**

We are committed to the enactment of the Citizenship Amendment Bill for the protection of individuals of religious minority communities from neighbouring countries escaping persecution. We will make all efforts to clarify the issues to the sections of population from the Northeastern states who have expressed apprehensions regarding the legislation.

**Combating left wing extremism**

We have already taken strong actions to reduce left wing extremism to a very large extent and limited them to small pockets. In the last five years, we have focussed on the development of economic and social infrastructure such as roads, mobile towers, schools and medical facilities in the tribal areas affected by left wing extremism.

**Jammu & Kashmir- Article 370**

In the last five years, we have made all necessary efforts to ensure peace in Jammu and Kashmir through decisive actions and a firm policy.

We reiterate our position since the time of the Jan Sangh to the abrogation of Article 370. We are committed to annulling Article 35A of the Constitution of India as the provision is discriminatory against non-permanent residents and women of Jammu and Kashmir.

Edited excerpts from the manifesto of the Bharatiya Janata Party released in Delhi, April 8



ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

Samajwadi Party (SP) Spokesperson **Ghanshyam Tiwari** co-founded the Harvard India Conference and Harvard India Student Group in 2011 as a student at the Harvard Kennedy School. He has worked for global organisations such as McKinsey and Intel. He tells **Aditi Phadnis** that SP may have lost the perception battle in the assembly elections but has succeeded in forging a political as well as social alliance in UP that will yield surprising electoral results. Edited excerpts:

**'We want to bring equality in society'****Your party has just released its manifesto. Tell us a little bit about it**

We are fighting the election with the clear understanding that Uttar Pradesh (UP) is at the centre of the Lok Sabha election 2019. We are mindful of the fact that we are fighting as part of an alliance, but we are still conscious that we are fighting as a party led by Akhilesh Yadav on the ethos of Dr Ram Manohar Lohia. The manifesto is a 16-page document and starts with a quote of Dr Lohia who used to say that caste will not go away from society but if we succeed in our social justice programme then the differences between caste will go away.

In that spirit, the manifesto starts with a note from Akhilesh Yadav where he specifically talks about the rising inequality in society and also, in a provocative manner, speaks about the caste equations behind the inequality: How 60 per cent of the wealth in our country belongs to 10 per cent, largely the upper castes; and how, with inflation, those who are poor continue to become poorer because the

rise in their earnings is lower than the inflation rate in the country.

Against that background, we speak about the economics of social justice, which is about three things: upward social mobility; housing and the dignity that housing brings to the lives of the poor; and income for the poor.

In the part about income, we speak about the successful scheme that Samajwadi Party implemented — which was, pensions for elderly women. We want to scale it up and through the federal structure, would seek to implement it across the country so that elderly women get a pension of ₹1,000 per month.

In addition we look at opportunities of wealth transfer instead of economic inequality clearly calling out the fact that 0.1 per cent of our nation has assets of over 2.5 crore and maybe the time has come to speak about wealth transfer through taxing the assets of the wealthy to transfer it to the poor through government intervention and various schemes of the government.

**A city where the mind is without fear**

Through workshops on gender violence, consent and self defence, AWARE is making Chennai a safer and better place, writes **Sneha Bhattacharjee**

Stories of gender-based violence narrated by his mother and sister were a regular feature of Sandhiyan Thilagavathy's childhood days. So the thought of doing something to empower women to protect themselves was always there in his mind. The December 2016 grapevine incident in the national capital acted as the trigger. "I started a Facebook page AWARE — Awareness for Women to advocate their rights and equality — and started sharing articles, created online campaigns to create awareness on how women can fight back gender-based violence," he says. In no time, the page was a success, with messages from far and wide flooding his timeline.

Sandhiyan didn't stop there. Following his social media success, he, along with his friends, adopted a fishermen community in Chemmenchery, a small hamlet 25 kms from Chennai. He and his friends have been working with the community for the past three years on their holistic development. The aim is to create first gender empowered community in Chennai by 2020 through educating and empowering the children, who are the real changemakers. "There are eight trustees and at least 50 volunteers actively working at any given point of time. We have three full-time employees and everyone else is either a student or a young professional," says the 28-year-old software engineer-turned-founder of AWARE.

"We primarily run four projects in the urban and rural areas of Chennai. A lot of our revenue comes from conducting workshops in urban Chennai, and we use this to fund our projects in Chemmenchery, an officially recog-

nised slum, under the slum development board, and few other peri-urban and rural areas around Chennai," says Janani Viswanathan, project head of initiative NoMoreNirbhaya. Janani, who is an environment professional based in San Francisco, has been volunteering remotely with her team in India in the project.

The projects currently under way at AWARE include, Save the Smiles — born out of a serious need to address Child Sexual Abuse (CSA). "We have seen a lot of acceptance in the need for awareness, being proactive in addressing CSA, readiness in reporting and preparedness in taking support for healing, over the last two years," says Sandhiyan. However, it hasn't been as easy to conduct workshops. Often the participants are wary of attending them, and express no interest in learning or understanding talks around gender-based violence. "While at the end of the workshops, they come forward to join hands with AWARE; getting them to attend the workshop in itself is a tough ask," says he.

NoMoreNirbhaya is another initiative that aims to address gender based violence by promoting gender equality among all, and sensitize age-old stereotypes and norms. "This initiative consists of four types of workshops. The first one deals with safer transportation. Here, we conduct gender sensitivity training for Madras Transport Corporation staff, sticker campaign of Helpline Numbers, social experimentation of conductor behaviour and rewarding them accordingly," says Janani.

Other workshops focus on creating safer communities by conducting women safety audits in the city of Chennai, working with

The third is housing. There we refer to our proven track record of providing housing with basic amenities and solar-powered electricity and electrical appliances.

**All this sounds like the fruitless debate between potato chips and silicon chips. India wants silicon chips and you're giving it potato chips. What are your policies for growth?**

I don't think so. Eventually, whether it is potato chips or silicon chips, the cornerstone of Samajwadi Party 2.0 is that you have to bring equality in society and prosperity in society, both via capital (which is infrastructure) and at the same time continue the process of social justice.

Where we want ourselves to be judged as a party is whether what we say is logical; whether it is do-able; and whether there is a track record of our doing these things.

If we go beyond this, we speak of the way the Bharatiya Janata Party is seeking to put nationalism — and their version of nationalism — down everyone's throat. Our priority is the danger looming before India from unemployment. 60 per cent of our youth is under 30 and it is time to figure out do-able ways to employ the youth.

One figure is the government must fill at least one lakh vacancies in government jobs every year. That is the minimum that the government must do. At the same time, evaluating the services sector and examining which aspect of government does not provide services proportionate to the population. Do we have education that is proportionate to the population? The same goes for healthcare and other government services. Wherever there is a gap, we will use that to create employment...

Third, we are looking at ways in which education could be transformed to cater to people's requirements in the local languages, it builds the esteem of the local youth; it facilitates their moving to cities if they have to, where they can find opportunities to stay in hostels which minimises their cost of living

**There is a sense that while there is a contract between the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and SP, on the ground there is a fear among the BSP that while its votes might be seamlessly transferred to the SP, the reverse might not happen...**

UP as a state is 75 per cent rural. Politics revolves around the chemistry in the hinterland and the field. When this talk started, it seemed like a good theoretical construct. But when it was tested in a snapshot in the Gorakhpur-Phulpur-Kairana elections where just before the elections Mayawati announced her support to the SP candidate, it was clear that people wanted these two forces of social justice to come together. That people voted in such large numbers without leaders campaigning extensively; without cadres exerting themselves too much... this was last year. We have had one year to strengthen the success

**GHANSHYAM TIWARI**

Samajwadi Party spokesperson

**But isn't it true that Chief Minister Adityanath has been able to fix law and order. He is putting bad guys in prison which the SP regrettably was not able to do. In fact many of the bad guys were members of your cabinet. Farmers' loans have been waived. It is an agricultural economy, as you say...**

We have had an uphill battle of perception where we were able to bring in institutionalised and powerful systems like Dial 100 that broke the gap of access in law and order. If a poor person needed the help of the police, he could use caste neutral technology to access the help. Earlier when they went to the police station, they would neither get dignity nor a sense of protection. Dial 100 was a direct call line. That worked. Yet, we lost the perception battle.

We respect the view from the ground. We have worked to soften that view. At the same time, the way Adityanath has built this perception of being tough on law and order is by daily headlines in newspapers about encounters. But media has exposed these encounters. Many are very questionable. Families are still searching for answers about the circumstances in which their loved ones died. Police officials have been caught. Promotions after encounters... money, and rewards for including people in the list of encounters... all this points to a situation where the police is becoming trigger happy.

A headline that someone has been 'encountered' may fall in people, a false sense of security. But in the current Vidhan Sabha, out of the 325 MLAs that the BJP has, more than 100 have criminal charges against them — serious criminal charges. Adityanath himself has a track record that cannot be denied. So no matter how much he tries, I don't think he can be a good advertisement for law and order.



PIC COURTESY: AWARE

**SELF DEFENCE AWARE's message to the youth and their parents is clear. Create safe spaces around yourself, your family, friends, and colleagues**

stakeholders to address the missed safety features and training and creating safe spaces like safe school, safe colleges and so on. Empower is the third type of workshop where they train young women in basic self defence. There is also GEMS — Gender Equality Movement in Schools — a curriculum that is incorporated in school education with activities and games that imparts gender equality among students. "We also try to conduct events and panels related to mental health (Survivor Series), toxic masculinity (Men talk) and legal rights sessions," she adds. Apart from these, the organisation also conducts workshops on "safe active periods" and holistic community development.

"Every single workshop creates a great impact. CSA prevention is the need of the hour for every child and parent. Sessions like men talk consent involve men in the conversation

about gender-based violence. The self-defence workshops make young girls and women truly feel more confident than they were before the workshop," says Sandhiyan, pointing at the importance of these workshops in today's time and age. "A pregnant woman had once come to attend our workshop. She said that while sexual harassment is an offence, if that happens to a child who doesn't even know what good or bad is, it is worse than anything else. It showed her concern towards the child she was carrying in her womb," he adds.

AWARE's message to the youth and their parents is clear. Create safe spaces around yourself, your family, friends, and colleagues. Keep an eye out for their safety and have open conversations. Educate yourself and attend workshops by organisations like AWARE to understand the issues better.