

INTERVIEW | RAHUL GANDHI

'This is a fight for the very idea of India'

Congress president says there is a clear link between national and livelihood security and the aspirations of youngsters and farmers; PM Modi is missing it completely

SANDEEP PHUKAN

Congress president **Rahul Gandhi** speaks about the issues that will define the 2019 Lok Sabha election, including the lack of jobs, agrarian distress and state of the economy. Excerpts:

You've travelled non-stop, criss-crossing the country. What is your sense of the election? What is the mood on the ground?

■ This election centres on the issues of unemployment, the unrelenting plight of our farmers and agrarian distress, and the state of our economy. These issues will define the 2019 election. These are the issues that people want to hear about. Even pollsters agree on this.

Our manifesto has set down a framework to draw India out of the mess that Mr. Modi's policies have created. Compare it with the BJP manifesto, which doesn't even talk of jobs or the issues that matter to the people of India.

We have the highest unemployment rate in last 45 years, but Mr. Modi doesn't have a word to say about it!

Instead, BJP has sought to divert the narrative of this election by making national security their key election narrative. But this has failed to fire as people will not be fooled: the fact is that the biggest national security issue is unemployment. And the other big livelihood and national security problem for India is the huge rural distress and the state of our farmers.

There is a clear link between national security, livelihood security and the aspirations of our youngsters and farmers. But the PM and the BJP are missing it completely.

Why do you say it has not fired? At rallies, the Prime Minister talks of a *dumdaar sarkar*, talking about a muscular nationalism. Does the BJP want to corner the Congress on issues of nationalism?

■ Let us talk about the term '*dumdaar*'. Where does India get its power from? Where does India's strength come from? India's strength lies in its huge economic potential, in the millions and millions of aspirational youth who can help India build a strong economy; who can start a massive number of businesses that, in turn, can employ millions of Indians. That is where India's power truly lies.

If you want a *dumdaar sarkar*, you need to first employ India's youth and give them opportunities to reshape their future and simulta-

nously rewrite India's future. Only then will India become a powerful country.

Give our farmers a chance to usher in India's second green revolution and India will become a powerful country. Kick-start our economy and get it back on track and India will be a very powerful country. Empower India's poor and we will become a powerful country. Why can't Mr. Modi see the connection between a *dumdaar sarkar* and employment for our youth, prosperity for our farmers and a vision for India that every Indian can feel a part of?

Don't you think the mood of the country has changed post-Pulwama and -Balakot?

■ No, I do not think it has. The core issues for every Indian continue to be the issues of jobs, agriculture, opportunities for our youth, justice and equality.

Here is a government that is trying to build a narrative that terror strikes happened earlier as well, during the UPA. But this is the Modi *sarkar* and we go inside enemy territory, defeat them and come back. So they are trying to portray a decisive leadership...

■ Mr. Narendra Modi came to power on five major issues: jobs, economy, price rise, farm distress and black money and corruption. We have dismantled his false narrative on every one of these five issues.

We have dismantled him when it comes to corruption. You go out and you say *chowkidar* and people say *chor hai*. Everywhere, every State I go, I just need to say *chow-*

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We punctured his false promise on jobs. He promised 2 crore jobs a year. Today, India's unemployment is at a 45-year high. We are losing 27,000 jobs a day! Millions of jobs were lost due to demonetisation.

Demonetisation was a completely ridiculous and absurd policy. Any economist will tell you that. Every Indian now knows that Mr. Modi's 'Gabbar Singh Tax' is a disaster. In addition, prices



today are more out of control than ever.

We have dismantled Mr. Modi's injustice on the issue of farm distress. His inability to protect our farmers and provide them a remunerative price for their produce is patently and tragically obvious. Mr. Narendra Modi stands exposed as a politician who only lies and spins false promises. That is why Mr. Narendra Modi only speaks about national security. But the real national security and livelihood security issues are his creation.

Why doesn't he speak about jobs, farmers, economy, aspirations and justice? Because if he does so, people will say, 'What are you talking about Mr. PM? And by the way, why did Mr. Anil Ambani get ₹30,000 crore? Who is he? Other than being your friend?'

The Congress party has torn Mr. Modi's bluster to shreds. What you will see is that Mr. Modi's *gubbara* (balloon) is going to burst! No wonder, after the first phase of election, they are moving

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from 'national security' back to 'vikas'.

Let me take that further. The Congress party, through its manifesto, is proposing concrete solutions to India's critical problems. Mr. Narendra Modi demonetised, we will remonetise.

Mr. Modi said 'Make in India' in words alone. We will give every entrepreneur the chance to start a business without taking any permission for the first three years. This is real 'ease of business'.

We will give our farmers a

separate budget. At the beginning of the year, we are going to tell them, this is what the government will do for you. No lies. No false promises. This is how we will give you the MSP.

So, we have thought through the solutions. We have spoken to thousands of people. We are going to implement everything we have learned from listening to India's people.

You've raised the issue of Rafale. *The Hindu* has been reporting it extensively. Do you think that Rafale cronyism allegations will click with the voter? Is it an election issue?

■ The Rafale issue has already resonated with the people of India. It has exposed the false smokescreen created by Mr. Modi. Every Indian now believes that Mr. Modi helped Anil Ambani get the Rafale offset contract.

Your newspaper has shown that Defence Ministry officials protested against Mr. Modi holding a 'parallel negotiation' with the French on Rafale, bypassing the designated Indian Negotiating Team. The documents published by *The Hindu* prove criminal intent. When an investigation starts in India, and perhaps in France as well, layers of corruption in the Rafale deal will be as clear as daylight for everyone to see. Recent expose of mysterious tax write-offs in France to companies linked to Anil Ambani point in this direction.

But in a recent interview, the PM said the Rafale allegation was a lie; he made counter-allegations of corruption in the

AgustaWestland case, talked about a 'family'...

■ Mr. Modi is the Prime Minister for the last five years. Why hasn't he taken action on this alleged corruption he keeps talking about? He's free to investigate. But, why isn't he investigating Rafale as well? Why is he not ready to face an investigation in the Rafale scam? That is because, there is clear proof of his own involvement.

I have a challenge for our Prime Minister. Why doesn't he agree to debate with me on corruption? I guarantee you that the PM won't be able to show his face after 15 minutes of me asking him questions on Rafale.

The BJP has gone to the Supreme Court and accused you of lying and alleged that you used an interim order to make a political statement. How do you respond to that?

■ There is a legal process on, so I won't comment on the SC, because I respect it.

Your manifesto also says that if you come to power, you will investigate the Rafale deal...

■ Absolutely, it will be investigated. And by the looks of it, I seriously think it will be investigated in France also. Someone will need to answer why Mr. Anil Ambani's companies were given a tax break of over 140 million euros by the French, as recently reported by a French newspaper. It is not going to go away, and it's going to bring Mr. Modi down.

Coming to NYAY, or Nyuntam Aay Yojana, will it click with voters? The BJP calls it an election gimmick and asks where will you get the money from?

■ Firstly, we committed a farm loan waiver to the farmers of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. We implemented it in 48 hours. We have a clear track record of keeping our promises.

Congress brought in iconic legislation like MNREGA, the Right to Information and many others. The same people questioned us then saying, "Where will the money come from?" MGNREGA became the world's biggest anti-poverty scheme and we kept our promise.

On NYAY, we have done the math. NYAY is needed for two reasons. One, it's needed to overcome the incredible damage caused by Mr. Modi through demonetisation and a flawed GST. The

UPA government took 14 crore people out of poverty, but Mr. Modi's policies have pushed crores back into the very same cycle of poverty they had broken out of.

NYAY will make 25 crore of the poorest Indians participate more meaningfully in India's economic growth by putting money in their hands. This will enable them to meet their essential needs by spending this money. This

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is where the second part of NYAY comes in – jump-starting the economy.

Mr. Narendra Modi squeezed the purchasing power out of the economy. We want to jump-start the economy and fire the economic engine of growth.

NYAY will ensure that as people meet their needs and spend, demand increases tremendously and large numbers of jobs are created and a positive economic cycle is generated.

Where is the money going to come from? It's going to come from Mr. Anil Ambani and Mr. Modi's other crony-capitalist friends, who have been looting this country.

It's not going to come from the middle class. Not a rupee is going to come from the middle class. There is going to be positive economic traction, strong economic and GDP growth and money will come through that.

We have done the math and that is why we can talk specifics: ₹72,000 a year to 5 crore of the poorest families. We have checked it, double-checked it and taken it to the best economists in the world and told them that this is what we seek to implement. What do you say? And they have all said, 'Yes, it makes sense, go ahead and do it.'

We are seeing an engaging Twitter exchange between you and Mr. Kejriwal...

■ No, it's not an exchange. I've just made one point. I've just said that the Congress party wants to defeat the BJP in Delhi. I have convinced everyone in my party that it is a valuable and an important thing to do. We can defeat the BJP in all seven seats.

I've made it very clear. We are flexible. Now it's up to Mr. Kejriwal.

But he replied to your tweet saying 'Aapne UP mein

gathbandhan nahi kiya...

■ What does that have to do with it? There are seven seats in Delhi. It's a clear-cut thing. Let us get together and defeat them, if you want to. If you don't want to, then that's a different issue.

So you are open?

■ I've clearly said in my tweet that we are open.

Do you think opposition to Mr. Modi is enough to bring the Opposition together?

■ We are fighting for India's youth, its farmers, its small traders and businessmen, its women, its deprived sections and its poor. We are not only in opposition to Mr. Modi, but this is a fight for the very idea of India.

But many of these leaders are talking about protecting the country from Mr. Modi's style of functioning...

■ Mr. Modi is the manifestation of an idea. He is the manifestation of anger, of hatred, of fear and is backed by an organisation that wants to use that fear and anger to capture India's institutions. That is what we are actually fighting. We are fighting the attempted capture of all of India's institutions: the Supreme Court, the Election Commission, the Reserve Bank of India, the investigation agencies and the destruction of the very essence of democracy. The idea that India should be run out of one super-mega institution in Nagpur is unacceptable.

I am in Kerala today and if you listen to my words, you will see that what I am actually doing is defending the history, the spirit, and the culture of the people of Kerala, which is an intrinsic part of India's civilisational values.

I do the same in Tamil Nadu, I defend Tamilians and their right to expression, culture, history, language and sentiment.

And I do that for every State in the country and its people.

The Prime Minister suggested that you decided to contest from Wayanad as it is a minority-dominated seat. The BJP tweeted saying you got scared in Amethi...

■ I am fighting from Amethi in Uttar Pradesh and I am fighting from South India. I am fighting from South India because I want to give a clear message to the people of South India: that each part of India – North India, South India, East India, North East India and West India – are equally important.

India must realise that all ideas, perspectives, languages are important, despite their diversity. That is why, I'm fighting from South India.

This message is loud and clear. Mr. Modi has actively discriminated against South India and every South Indian knows it. This is true for many other parts of India. You go to Tamil Nadu and ask them. They feel it. They feel it in Kerala too. There is a feeling that the space and respect they deserve is not given.

They believe that an organisation in Nagpur cannot express what Chennai or Kerala or Bengaluru or Hyderabad or others feel. I agree with them.

The Congress has maintained the suspense over the Varanasi Lok Sabha seat. Is your sister, Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi-Vadra going to be the candidate in Varanasi?

■ I will leave you in suspense. Suspense is not always a bad thing!

So you're not denying it?

■ I'm not confirming or denying anything.

Where does the Congress party and Rahul Gandhi go from here if Mr. Modi wins the 2019 election?

■ Mr. Narendra Modi will be rejected by the people and will not form the next government. But let me just say this about the Congress party. The Congress party is an expression of the voice of this nation. It listens to this country and reacts to what this country tells it. Our manifesto is an example. Another is our role during the freedom struggle.

Then there is what we did in the green revolution, white revolution, the telecom revolution. The Congress party is nothing but the expression and the sentiment of the Indian people. So the Congress party will always be there, will always be powerful, as long as the Congress party is humble enough to listen carefully to what the people of India are saying.

[IN FOCUS: RAJASTHAN]

Congress turns its back on smaller parties, BJP courts them

From caste dynamics to support prices for agricultural produce, both the national parties are facing new challenges

MOHAMMED IQBAL
JAIPUR

Locked in a direct contest in Rajasthan, the Congress and the BJP are trying to retain their traditional vote banks while also attempting to win "swing votes".

The BJP, which has entered into an alliance with the Rashtriya Loktantrik Party, won all the 25 Lok Sabha seats and a 55.6% vote share in the State in 2014.

Though agrarian distress and unemployment are among the major issues in almost all constituencies of the State, the Pulwama terror attack and the subsequent Balakot air strikes are high on the narrative in the districts bordering Pakistan.

The political benefit, if any, will depend on the BJP leaders' ability to whip up sentiments.

Stiff test

The decisions of the Congress government in the State, which assumed charge after the 2018 Assembly election, for public welfare and relief to farmers through loan waiver are facing a stiff test during the

Last time Rajasthan voted

Map depicts the seats won if the 2018 Rajasthan Assembly election results are aggregated for Lok Sabha seats. The BJP would have led in 13 seats and the Congress in 12



Raging problem One of the issues in this election is stray cattle as they have been wreaking havoc on farmers. Here, Raghuvir Singh Meena, a farmer from Pilani, is seen guarding his fields. AFP

division of votes. The RLP won three seats in the Jat-dominated constituencies and the BJP won two in the tribal-dominated constituencies in the Assembly polls.

Changing equations Mr. Kothari said that since the caste equations were changing with the dominant communities being challenged by smaller combinations of Mali, Gujjar, Meena and Kayamkhani voters in rural areas, a "liberal attitude" of the Congress would have helped widen its support base.

The BJP has decided to support the candidature of RLP president Hanuman Beniwal for the Nagaur Lok Sabha seat after he agreed to join the National Democratic Alliance.

Mr. Beniwal, who was previously a BJP MLA, wields considerable influence among Jats in Nagaur, Ajmer and Barmer districts.

To attract the smaller caste groups, the Congress has fielded two Scheduled Tribe candidates – Namo Narain Meena and Ram Narayan Meena – for the general seats of Tonk-Sa-

Lok Sabha election, especially because the model code of conduct has prevented full implementation of various schemes.

Though the certificates for loans obtained from cooperative banks were distributed in February, the loan waiver with

respect to nationalised banks may be carried out after the election.

The confidence among the Congress leaders, who have rejected the overtures of the RLP and the Bharatiya Tribal Party (BTP) for an electoral understanding, has baffled

many political observers in the State.

Kalyan Singh Kothari, secretary, Lok Samvad Sansthan, a media advocacy group, told *The Hindu* that an alliance with the smaller parties would have been in the interest of the Congress, as it would prevent

wai Madhopur and Kota, respectively.

Seven MLAs belonging to the Meena community were elected from general seats in the Assembly election.

Popularity ratings Ashfaq Kayamkhani, a Sikar-based analyst, said though the support extended by 12 Independent MLAs to the Congress at a party workers' meeting addressed by party president Rahul Gandhi in Jaipur recently created an impression that the State government was becoming popular, the Congress would have to work hard to get the support of Gujjars and other communities in the run-up to the two-phase election in the State to be held on April 29 and May 6.

The Gujjars have been threatening to launch another agitation for reservation.

From the caste dynamics to minimum support prices for agricultural produce, the poll-related factors have thrown up new challenges for both the Congress and the BJP for maintaining public sentiments in their favour for the two-phase polling.

Polling official shot dead

BEHRAMPUR A few hours before the start of the second phase of voting in Odisha, a woman polling official was shot dead by Maoists in the Gochhapada police station limits of Kandhamal district on Wednesday. Sanjukta Diga, a Gram Rojgar Sevak in Luisingi panchayat, was attacked when she was travelling with three others to a booth at Barala village. Prakash Chandra Dash, an assistant sector officer who accompanied the deceased, said a landmine exploded just ahead of their vehicle, and when the driver tried to get away, the extremists started indiscriminate firing. One bullet hit Ms Diga in the head and she was killed on the spot. The rest three in the vehicle escaped unhurt.

POCKET | SATWIK GADE

