

Opinion

SUNDAY, APRIL 28, 2019

IN JUNE 2015, a candidate in the election for President of the United States said, "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're sending people that have lots of problems. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists." People were outraged, yet 62,984,825 persons voted for him in November 2016.

In January 2017, that candidate was sworn in as the 45th President of the richest and most powerful nation in the world. He is Mr Donald Trump.

I suspect that there are several candidates in India who would like to do a Donald Trump and be as successful in the elections to the Lok Sabha that are underway. In March and April of this year there was a rash of statements and there will be more in May—scaling new heights of hate and extremism—before the campaign winds down on May 17.

Brace yourself to listen to voices that spew venom and vitriol. Let me begin with the one that appears to be the mildest: the familiar motor-mouth Mr Sakshi Maharaj, MP, kicked off the campaign with the following words—"There won't be an election in 2024. I am a *sanyasi* and can see the future. This is the last election in the country." It was an 'auspicious' beginning to the Lok Sabha 2019 elections!

Abuse and ridicule

Abuse was the first weapon in the campaign. Here are some examples of the choicest abuses:

On March 18, Mr Mahesh Sharma, union minister, said, "*Pappu* says he wants to be Prime Minister. So there is Mayawati, Akhikesh Yadav, *Pappu* and now *Pappu's Pappi* has also stepped in."

Mr Surendra Singh, MLA (BJP, Ballia) said on March 24, "Rahul's mother (Sonia Gandhi) was also in the same profession in Italy and his father made her his own. He (Rahul Gandhi) should also take the family tradition forward and make Sapna his own."

Ridicule was next: Mr Mahesh Sharma, on March 20, targeted Ms Mayawati and said, "Mayawati ji does facial every day, she gets her hair coloured to look young."

Threats

Threat was a commonly used weapon: Mr Ram Shanker Katheria, a BJP candidate (Etawah), said on March 23, "We are in power in the state and Centre. We will break any fingers that are pointed at us now."

Ms Maneka Gandhi was not beyond threatening. On April 12, she told a gathering of Muslims, "I will win this Lok Sabha election anyway but I won't feel good if I win without the support of the Muslims. Things become sour after that. Later when a Muslim comes over for some work, I feel let it be, how does it matter?... I am winning with or without Muslims."

Mr Ranajit Bahadur Srivastava, a BJP leader, had no qualms in saying (on April 19), "In the past five years, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has made attempts to break the morale of Muslims. Vote for PM Modi if you want to destroy the breed of Muslims."

There were other kinds of threats too. Sample these:

"The Opposition says what is this surgical strike and who did it. Then you should have tied a bomb to Rahul Gandhi and sent him to another coun-

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



An outrageous campaign



Prime Minister Narendra Modi waves during an election campaign for Lok Sabha polls in Hardoi, Uttar Pradesh

try. Then they would have understood."—Ms Pankaj Munde, minister in Maharashtra, on April 21.

On the same day, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a highly irresponsible statement. Referring to Pakistan's alleged boast about tactical nuclear weapons, Mr Modi said, "What do we have then? Have we kept our nuclear bomb for Diwali?" No Indian Prime Minister before him and no leader of the world (North Korea's Mr Kim excluded) has spoken so casually about use of nuclear weapons since 1945.

Hate speech

There were curses. Leading the pack was Ms Pragya Singh Thakur, who said (April 19) that she had pronounced "*tera*

sarvanash hoga (you will be destroyed)" and, lo and behold, Mr Hemant Karkare (a genuine hero among police officers) was killed while fighting terrorists.

The BJP's weapon of choice was hatred towards the Muslim community, in the hope that hate speech will inevitably lead to polarisation of the two communities. Look at the statements made with that intent:

Declared Mr Adityanath, chief minister of UP, on April 9: "If the Congress, SP and BSP have faith in Ali, then we too have faith in Bajrang Bali."

Mr K S Eshwarappa, former deputy chief minister of Karnataka, said (April 1), "We won't give tickets to Muslims in Karnataka, because you did not believe in us."

On April 11, Mr Amit Shah made the BJP's intent clear when he said, "will remove every single infiltrator except Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs".

The Opposition had its share of speakers but nothing that they said came anywhere close to abuse or threats.

There are still four phases — and 19 days — to go in the campaign. There will be many more gems dropped by candidates and campaigners. With every irresponsible utterance, India will descend one step on the ladder of civil discourse in a democracy. What is ultimately in danger is not the discourse but democracy itself.



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INSIDE TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR

Nagar politics

Avtar Singh Bhadana, a powerful Gujar leader from Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh, and four-time MP who defected from the BJP back to the Congress early this year, was the obvious choice as the Congress Lok Sabha candidate from Faridabad. But the AICC announced that the ticket was to go to Lalit Nagar, who had won in the 2014 Haryana Assembly election defying a Modi wave. Lalit's brother Mahesh's name had popped up in the Justice Dhingra Commission's inquiry into the land deals of Robert Vadra. Mahesh had helped Vadra purchase land in Haryana and Rajasthan. However, when Rahul Gandhi came to hear of Lalit's selection by former Haryana chief minister Bhopinder Singh Hooda and the Delhi high command, he lost his temper and asked that the nomination be cancelled and the party symbol allotted to Bhadana. Vadra, incidentally, has not been seen at his wife Priyanka Gandhi Vadra's election rallies of late.

Cong disintegrates

The Congress may have been on a weak wicket in Odisha, but state president Niranjan Patnaik is responsible for striking a death blow. He has selected candidates for the Assembly and Lok Sabha polls on his personal whims and fancies, with the Delhi high command too preoccupied to interfere. The situation is so dire that all the PCC organisational heads have resigned and five of the 15 MLAs have left the party and migrated to the BJD or BJP. The few strong contestants for Parliament, such as Sucharita Mohanty, who in 2014 won an impressive 2,60,000 votes from Puri, and Sangram Jena from Bhadrak, were quietly replaced at the last moment by non-entities. Sumitra Jena, the president of the state Mahila Congress, was not given the Bhadrak Assembly ticket and she promptly joined the BJD and was appointed party general secretary. Niranjan Patnaik's way of dealing with increasing internal dissidence is to hand out tickets to sons and daughters of senior leaders to ensure silence. There are several family members in the Congress fighting the current elections.

Turning a new leaf

In Delhi, Digvijaya Singh built up an image as a fierce defender of minorities, from dubbing the Batla House encounter in the capital as fake to protesting against the US government burying Osama Bin Laden at sea. He was accused of coining the phrase 'safran terror', a charge which he emphatically denies. In Bhopal, as the Congress Lok Sabha candidate, Singh has

turned a new leaf and projects himself as an orthodox *Sanatan Dharmi*. He has visited all the major temples in the constituency, offered donations to numerous shrines, fed cows and spoken on the benefits of cow's urine. In Assam, he performs animal sacrifice at a temple annually, and he also frequently refers to his six-month Narmada *parikerama*. Singh's spiritual guru, Dwarka Shankaracharya Swarupnand, recently pointed out that Pragya Thakur, Digvijaya's BJP opponent, cannot even call herself a *sanyasin* since she uses surname Thakur.

Zip her Lip

Pragya Thakur was nominated as the BJP candidate from Bhopal in the belief that she would be the antithesis of Digvijaya Singh's pro-minority and anti-majority community image. Initially, Amit Shah was keen on Shivraj Singh Chouhan standing, but the former chief minister resisted, sensing that there was still an opportunity for him in state politics, depending on the 2019 election results. The BJP did not anticipate that Digvijaya would play the soft Hindutva card to the hilt and project himself as a defender of the Hindu faith, a title he inherited as a scion of the Raghogarh royal house. Nor did it bargain that Pragya would shoot off her mouth and embarrass the party from day one. After her Ram Mandir remark, Pragya was ordered to go on a day's *maun vrat*, and now former BJP state spokesperson Hitesh Bajpai has been given charge of monitoring her interactions with the media.

Great expectations

After the sudden defections of Tom Vadakkan and Priyanka Chaturvedi, the Congress wants to introspect about the casual manner in which spokespersons were recruited by the party. Several are self-promoters who got co-opted over time, instead of rising through the party ranks. Chaturvedi, a glamorous face, joined the Congress media cell in 2010 and had a meteoric rise once Randeep Surjewala was put in charge. If Congress spokespersons have high expectations of their future prospects, it is because they see inspiring examples in the BJP, where senior ministers Arun Jaitley, Sushma Swaraj, Prakash Javadekar, Smriti Irani and Nirmala Sitharaman, all started as party spokespersons. Chaturvedi was reportedly keen on a Congress parliamentary seat. According to party insiders, she talked to Priyanka Gandhi Vadra and threatened to leave. She was taken aback when Vadra reportedly responded with "All the best", leaving her no choice.

Now or never

Seven losses in nine games have created a serious crisis at Manchester United

RINGSIDE VIEW

Shamik Chakrabarty

EARLY INTO THE second half during the Manchester derby at Old Trafford on Wednesday, Pep Guardiola introduced Leroy Sane. Ferdinand hobbled off the pitch, but regardless of his injury, the Manchester City boss was going to make the attacking substitution. For the defending Premier League champions, an extra defensive midfielder against a subservient Manchester United was surplus to requirements. City had to win the game to stay to lead Liverpool in the title race and Sane's arrival was the need of the hour.

Guardiola's counterpart, United manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer had opted for a five-man defence, bringing Matteo Darmian back from oblivion. Solskjaer gave City a little too much respect to start with and as Sane came, he also failed to make the tactical switch. Nemanja Matic or Diogo Dalot should have been an immediate replacement for Fred. As it turned out, Sane just rolled over Fred, whom Roy Keane

described as a "fake" in a post-match TV show. The decision to sack Jose Mourinho before Christmas was spot on. The Old Trafford dressing-room had become toxic under his charge. Appointing Solskjaer as the caretaker manager, too, was the right decision. A club legend, he brought in the feel-good factor. The team bounced back spectacularly, started winning in the Premier League and made a memorable comeback against Paris St-Germain at Parc des Princes to reach the Champions League quarterfinal. Ole was at the wheel then. The wheel is coming off now.

Solskjaer is a greenhorn as far as top-level football management is concerned. He indulged Paul Pogba, whose relationship with Mourinho had reached a point of no return. Pogba had posted a cryptic tweet before deleting it, when the club announced Mourinho's departure. It was in bad taste. Following Solskjaer's appointment though, Pogba started to put more effort on the pitch and gradually became the team's main axis. Then, he suddenly stopped playing to his potential. He is now reportedly flirting with a move to Real Madrid. In fact, the midfielder has become so emboldened that his agent Mino Raiola 'cancelled a meeting with the club over a new deal'. According to a British media report, Pogba has refused to obtain a visa,



Manchester United players seen before their match with Manchester City in Old Trafford, Manchester, UK

which would allow him to take part in United's pre-season tour of the Far East'. Once upon a time, Ryan Giggs used to tear the opponents apart at Old Trafford. Now, Pogba is said to be tearing the home dressing-room apart. This is United's fall from grace in microcosm.

David de Gea, too, has started to play hardball over his new contract, placing a £350,000-a-week wage demand. Once the world's finest goalkeeper, the Spaniard is now on a steady decline. He concedes at the near post for fun these days. But Solskjaer

seemingly doesn't have the personality to rein in his star players. Even a spring chicken like Marcus Rashford, who has achieved nothing yet, has started to show attitude in the dressing-room if reports are true. Mourinho considered Pogba a bad influence and maybe, he was right.

Keane, the legendary former United captain, tore into Pogba after the Manchester derby, indicating that the 26-year-old couldn't be trusted. "I wouldn't believe a word he says," Keane said, adding: "There's no meaning behind it. I don't

even think he believed what he was saying there. He is a big problem, no doubt about it." United would be better off by offloading both Pogba and de Gea, as they seem to have lost focus to play for the club. But it's unlikely that Solskjaer will exert his authority. Seven losses in nine games have created a serious crisis at United. This is the time when strong managers take brave decisions. Sir Alex Ferguson showed courage by clearing out Paul McGrath and Norman Whiteside—they were fan favourites—after taking charge. The great manager proved to be right in the long-run. Then again, Sir Alex was one of a kind. Solskjaer still calls his erstwhile boss the "gaffer". He needs to take a leaf out of his mentor's book. Unfortunately, the Norwegian doesn't look to be the man for the long-term. The United board jumped the gun and played to the gallery by appointing him the permanent manager following his early success. This was despite the fact that a club statement at the time of Mourinho's sacking spoke about going through a thorough process before picking the right candidate at the end of the season. United let slip a golden opportunity to prise out Mauricio Pochettino from Tottenham Hotspur. They had to break the bank, yes. But £34 million to trigger Pochettino's release clause was peanuts for a club of United's financial might. As for the Argentine, although he has now become 'Mr Tottenham', it's always very difficult for any manager to say 'no' to the United job. The 20-time Premier League champions are living in the past. A

large chunk of players are not worthy of the red shirt. A mass clearout and rebuilding would have become mandatory. Pochettino would have been the best man for the task by a country mile.

An inexperienced manager, limp players and smugness have pushed back United. There will be no Champions League football for them next season if they lose to Chelsea on Sunday. The blame lies squarely on the club owners—the Glazers—and their go-to man, executive vice-president Ed Woodward. For the last five years, since Sir Alex's retirement, the club is on a sharp slide, football-wise. Without a director in football, there's no clear roadmap with regards to player recruitment. Woodward is happy to make big-name signings. It helps the club's shirt sales. Social media went on a meltdown when Alexis Sanchez was at the piano in his United arrival promo. But the harsh reality is that his signing turned out to be the biggest disaster in the club's recent history. Sanchez's reported £500,000-a-week wage completely dismantled the club's wage structure. Also, it wasn't taken kindly by Pogba and company. They started to arm-twist Woodward. As for the Glazers, they use the club as a cash cow, where the proper display of a commercial partner is probably more important than Gary Neville's inputs. Hope the Glazers know that Neville was the finest right-back of his generation and not a Republican. Joking apart, United are on the verge of retreating into modern football insignificance. It's now or never.

Idea Exchange

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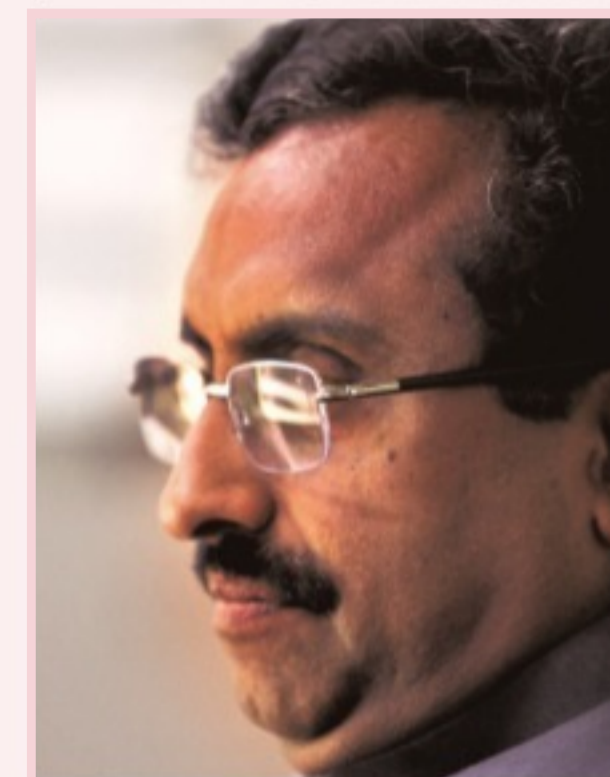
When a man wakes up, he needs a toilet. There's a Modi campaign for that. Next, he has tea. There's is a Modi campaign there. He goes to bank, there is a Modi aspect. He thinks of Modi 10 times a day. It's an advantage"



WHY RAM MADHAV

AS THE BJP'S general secretary in charge of the Northeast and Jammu and Kashmir, Ram Madhav has been instrumental in increasing the party's footprint in these parts. The region is crucial for the BJP in these general elections after the party's losses in the Hindi heartland in the three Assembly polls last year. As a key campaigner for the BJP,

Madhav has been travelling across the country, talking about the government's work. Recently, when the BJP's Bhopal candidate, Pragya Thakur, accused in the 2008 Malegaon blasts case, attacked former Maharashtra ATS chief Hemant Karkare, Madhav was one of the first leaders in the BJP to distance the party from her comments



"There is a strong feeling that Pragya Thakur has been wrongly implicated for a fictitious thing called 'Hindu terror'... The prime mover of this was Digvijaya Singh. So the local state unit decided to challenge him

We hoped Oppn would put up a credible fight at least... But see Varanasi drama, all self-goals

BJP general secretary Ram Madhav says the polls are all about PM Modi, dismisses charge of Citizenship Bill being biased, says the protests in NE have been handled, defends BJP not talking about temple in UP but the Balakot strikes, and says party is in fairly good place in the Hindi heartland



BJP national general secretary Ram Madhav with Associate Editor Liz Mathew in *The Indian Express* newsroom

ABHINAV SAHA

RAM MADHAV: The main states, where the BJP has huge stakes, will go to polls now. We are confident of winning a good number of seats in the remaining phases. We will not have losses in states where we have a large number of seats. We are looking at a fairly good situation in the Hindi heartland, and we are also going to win a good number of seats in eastern India and the Northeast. Then, we are hoping to win a few seats in Telangana. We will add to our numbers in Maharashtra and Bihar. Overall, I think, it will be as good as 2014, if not better. This election has become about 'Modi versus who?' Where there is no answer to that 'who', it will be Modi all the way. That has become the central theme of the campaign. It will give us good results.

COOMI KAPOOR: What are the indicators that show that your campaign has picked up?

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's campaign has always been on top. We have launched a high-pitched campaign. We have focused our campaign on four issues — national economy, national unity, national security and the projects that directly affect the lives of ordinary people. We had hoped that the Opposition would at least put up a credible fight. We have seen the drama over the Varanasi Lok Sabha seat, then the 'Choukidar Chor Hai' slogan. It's like the Opposition is scoring self-goal after self-goal. They have failed to come up with a strong campaign.

LIZ MATHEW: In 2014, Prime Minister Modi and the BJP's campaign was about change. In 2019, it was expected to be about what he has done. Is the campaign going as you were expecting it to?

Yes, of course. 2019 will be about continuing the change, but it is also about hope. I have noticed the support PM Modi has received from urban Indians. I am deliberately saying PM Modi (and not the BJP) because even in places where we do not have a strong organisation, even there we see a lot of support for Modi. I have travelled extensively in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana. I won't be surprised if our Lok Sabha candidates in these states get more votes than the aggregate votes won by Assembly candidates in the constituencies. It's a vote for Modi all over.

Let me put it in simple terms: When a man wakes up in the morning, he needs a toilet. There is a Modi campaign for that.

Next, he has to have a cup of tea. There is a Modi campaign for gas cylinders. He steps out of his home, he goes to the bank. There is a Modi aspect there. So in his daily life he remembers Modi 10 times in a day. This is the advantage we have.

LIZ MATHEW: But the BJP campaign so far has focused more on the Balakot aerial strikes, and less on the work done by the government.

You (the media) pick up things that serve as headlines. We are talking about all the issues. We speak about the economy, how we have uprooted corruption in this country, and introduced a good number of reforms. We are also talking about national security, but it's not just about Pakistan. We are also talking about terrorism in Kashmir, Maoism in rest of the country. The Union Home Minister has said that India will be free of Maoists in the next couple of years. We are talking of creating an India where people are secure. We are trying to provide a dignified life to people.

P VAIDYANATHAN IYER: The Election Commission has urged leaders not to invoke the armed forces in their campaign, but the Prime Minister and other BJP leaders continue to do so.

National security has always been an electoral issue in this country. Don't preach to us now. When Indira Gandhi had major successes, it went to her credit. In 1974, when there was a nuclear experiment, it was attributed to the then government. This is because the government is there to secure your life. We have not violated the EC's guidelines ever. Whenever it (violations) has happened, action was taken. We don't talk about Balakot as much as the Opposition does. They are trying to project Balakot as a failure. As far as we are concerned, we are saying that we have given people a secure nation. 'Judge us on that'. We are not asking people to vote for us only because we have conducted airstrikes on Balakot.

SHUBHAJITROY: But under this government, one of the bloodiest terror attacks took place in Kashmir, which saw the death of 40 of our security personnel...

The violence in Kashmir Valley is a historical problem that we have been facing. But look at the records of previous years. We taught the terrorists a lesson. I am not saying that Kashmir is terror-free today but we have taken a number of steps to

address terrorism there. We have neutralised close to 600 terrorists in last four years. We taught terror groups a lesson by undertaking Balakot. Except for the Kashmir Valley, India has largely been terror-free. This is what we are telling people.

ABANTIKA GHOSH: In Bengal, BJP president Amit Shah has repeatedly raked up the fear of the 'other' with statements such as 'pure desh main NRC karenge' (We will conduct the National Register of Citizens drive across the country). What do you make of that?

Why should there be any fear over citizens' register? The NRC in Assam is a result of the decision taken by then prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru in 1951. It could not be completed though the Act had been promulgated. It had to be done in Assam in 2010. (The then chief minister Tarun Gogoi developed cold feet because there were protests. We completed it and the Act is only limited to Assam. Following that, there have been demands from other states in the Northeast (for the NRC). The NRC in Assam is being directly monitored by the Supreme Court.

DEEPTIMAN TIWARY: The BJP has fielded Pragya Thakur from Bhopal. You may have been within the law but don't you think you have violated the spirit of Indian elections?

All moral questions should now be left to the people. There is a strong feeling that she has been wrongly implicated for a fictitious thing called 'Hindu terror'. So many people have said that it was something that the UPA government had deliberately created. The prime mover of the whole campaign was none other than Digvijaya Singh (the Congress candidate from Bhopal). So the local state unit decided to challenge him on the same ground... Even



people who are out on bail are contesting.

LIZ MATHEW: But don't political parties have the responsibility to field clean candidates?

What do you mean by clean? The EC does not stop you from contesting elections merely because you are an accused. Anybody can be accused in any case.

DEEPTIMAN TIWARY: The Prime Minister has said that a Hindu cannot be a terrorist. How can one say that?

A true Hindu who believes in the real essence of Hinduism can never become a terrorist. People misled by circumstances or motivated by wrong interpretations of religion or provoked by happenings in the country and the world, take up weapons. These have to be addressed through the law and order machinery.

The incidents which have been branded as Hindu terror are part of a fictitious propaganda. If in any incident some persons are found to be involved, it has to be seen as a larger issue, and not as Hindu terror.

AMRITH LAL: So could it be that Pragya Thakur is not a true Hindu?

No, she is only an accused... Until you are proven guilty, you are only an accused.

SUNIL JAIN: In your alliance with the PDP in J&K, where do you think you made a mistake?

Our tie-up was with Mufti Mohammad Sayeed (the late PDP chief). We came together on the agenda to give good governance to the state. We had a comfortable understanding with him (Sayeed), but it lasted only for 10 months. Subsequently, after a gap of three months, we had to have a government headed by Mehbooba Mufti, where we found cer-

The Valley has various facets. I am not denying that there is an anti-India narrative. But it is not as though we have lost the plot. We have minimised that narrative. We have to further overcome that narrative

tain things unacceptable and so we walked out.

LIZ MATHEW: During the 2017 Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections, the BJP raised demonetisation frequently. Why is the party silent on it in these elections?

Whether it is demonetisation or any other reforms that we have undertaken in the last five years, the objective was to set certain economic fundamentals right. The Insolvency Code, Goods and Services Tax, demonetisation... At the end of the day, results speak. Today, we have a strong economy, with a 7.2% growth rate.

LIZ MATHEW: Has demonetisation contributed to the loss of jobs?

First of all, the entire argument about joblessness is not based on facts. I've seen massive infrastructural development in the Northeast, Kashmir, and in many other states that I travel to. Lots of new jobs are being created, new kinds of jobs, especially in the services sector, and in large numbers. I see the number of e-rickshaws... I really don't buy this theory of national joblessness. But the figures also vary so much. Some reports say 50 lakh jobs lost, some say 5 crore. There is massive employment generation on the ground.

AAKASH JOSHI: Under the earlier draft of the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, the Rohingya, Hazaras, Ahmedis were eligible. Under the new Bill, which you have proposed, will that be the case, as it explicitly lists religious minorities excluding Muslims?

This new Bill is applicable to persecuted minorities coming from erstwhile Pakistan and Afghanistan. In that sense, it doesn't apply to Myanmar. The essence of this Bill is that if under the Foreigners' Act a foreigner comes to India, and he/she wants to seek citizenship, he/she will have to live in the country for 12 years to be eligible. Under the new Bill, one can seek citizenship after living in the country for seven years. Also, foreigners coming into India had to seek citizenship on the basis of employment, livelihood etc. Under the new Bill, the reason can also be religious persecution. But in this case, the process is more strict than the Citizenship Act. It's a very strict Bill. The whole argument of it being against certain communities is totally baseless.

Also, the Bill has not been passed yet. Once that is done, we will need to define

persecuted minorities. There are certain minorities mentioned, and then there is a term 'and others'. Which communities fall into that 'others' category is not detailed and the Home Ministry will work on it.

SUNIL JAIN: What has been the reaction to the Bill in the Northeast?

It has been beyond our imagination. We thought we would face some opposition... Ultimately, we handled it successfully. It's there in our manifesto and we are talking about it.

COOMI KAPOOR: Do you think the mahagathbandhan in Uttar Pradesh can put a spanner in your election plans?

It could throw a big spanner in the Opposition's plans. The way UP is responding to the Prime Minister's call has me convinced that we will do pretty well in the state.

LIZ MATHEW: No one is talking about Ayodhya in the campaign...

Ramjanmabhoomi is an article of faith for us. Every election we do not want Ramjanmabhoomi to be converted into an electoral issue. It's a question of a larger commitment, a principled commitment. Ideology is our inspiration but Statecraft demands the nation's good.

P VAIDYANATHAN IYER: The BJP has a very strong stance on J&K and Articles 370 and 35A. The statements by the mainstream parties in the state, the PDP and National Conference (NC), probably reflect the sentiments of the people. In the face of this, do you think your party can go ahead with the total integration of the state with the rest of the country, as you keep repeating?

Firstly, I don't think only they are speaking for the people. Had that been the case, there wouldn't have been 7-8% polling. That is not the mainstream mood of the Valley. These leaders are misleading. Kashmir's technical and constitutional integration with India was full and final on the day the Instrument of Accession was signed by Maharaja Hari Singh in 1948. But there is an emotional issue which was created due to Articles 370 and 35A in 1954. It is creating emotional separateness. What I'm saying is that they (the NC, PDP) are not helping in the integration. Politically speaking it is a part of India, and that's where we stand. Let the Supreme Court take a view.

AVISHEK G DASTIDAR: But irrespective of the Instrument of Accession, don't you think the Indian State has failed in handling the situation in Kashmir in the past five years?

People have a tendency to only pick and highlight certain aspects of the Valley. If there is one Pakistani flag, it is highlighted throughout the day and then there is a big debate over it for one hour on television. The Valley has various facets. I am not denying that there is a narrative that is anti-India. But it is not as though we have lost the plot. We have minimised that narrative. We have to further overcome that narrative.

We are working on three fronts. First of all, for that narrative to fall, you have to remove the gun-wielding terrorists. When they are there, no sane person can raise his voice for India. If they are not going to be killed for saying 'Hindustan zindabad', then they will have the confidence. We have done our best at removing terrorism. Today it is confined to two-three areas in South Kashmir.

A large network of people from the Hurriyat, Jamaat-e-Islami, businessmen, traders, politicians, and middlemen go to Pakistan at the drop of a hat, and they have access right up to the Pakistani Prime Minister. Then they come back to give their narrative to the people of Kashmir. We stopped all that through legal means.

Third, we have invested in development activities. Most importantly, we have taken democracy to the grassroots. Parties like those of Omar Abdullah and Farooq Abdullah were opposed to panchayat elections, local body elections, because 'Article 35A was under threat'. But they are not opposed to parliamentary elections. They don't want grassroots democracy. You give democracy at the grassroots and the narrative will change. You don't see stone-pelting today, and if it is happening, it is because of Mehbooba Mufti.

RITU SARIN: How many seats do you expect to win in Kashmir?

We hope to win three seats. We hope the Valley votes for pro-India elements in a big way.