

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, Pragma 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 Pragma 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"

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 are 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 'Chowkidar 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.

SHUBHAJIT ROY: 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 previ-

'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

ous 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 a 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 Pragma Thakur for 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 Pragma Thakur is not a true Hindu?

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 Mr 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 Muftiji, where we found certain 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 per cent 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 service 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 Rohingyas, 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 per cent 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 separatness. 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.

RITUSARIN: 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.



"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"

ACROSS
THE AISLE

P CHIDAMBARAM

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

An outrageous campaign

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 country. 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, "I 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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FIFTH COLUMN



TAVLEEN SINGH

The wheels of democracy

WHEN I AM reviled for having supported Narendra Modi, and this happens often these days, I respond by asking if I should support Rahul Gandhi instead. Those are the two real choices before Indian voters today. You could vote for those who have ruled India (badly) for more than half a century or you could vote for a man who continues to promise change and prosperity. If Narendra Modi's most ardent supporters are no longer certain about what he truly stands for, it is because in his wake he has brought a very ugly kind of Indian whose political motivation is hate. I witness this first hand on social media every time I write anything critical about Modi. Currently the hatred has reached epic proportions.

This is because I said in last week's column that giving Pragya Thakur a safe ticket to the Lok Sabha was wrong. Hindutva harridians who are the most venomous of Modi's supporters accused me of everything imaginable, including (of horror of horrors!) living in Lutyns Delhi. Yes I have lived in this part of our capital city since my childhood, when it was a genteel enclave of wide, tree-lined avenues and sprawling bungalows. And, not a hated symbol of political power. This is because my grandfather was one of the contractors who helped Edwin Lutyns build New Delhi.

What intrigued me most, though, was the charge that I am confused about my political 'loyalties'. That I am a traitor to the 'ideological Right'. Only people with no understanding of politics believe that a political columnist should have loyalties to a person or a political party. In the ranks of Modi's followers, it has to be said, there are mostly people who have more understanding of hating Muslims than of the 'Right wing' ideology they claim to profess. In their very narrow worldview, if you hate Muslims, then you belong, but if you speak out against innocent Muslim dairy farmers and cattle traders being lynched, then you are a Pakistani. So those who vote once more for Modi will have to keep in mind that he brings with him some very bad people with very bad ideas.

They might end up voting for him anyway because the other side looks just as bad, albeit for different reasons. Rahul has taken to lying so much about Modi's "15 rich friends" that he gets his maths mixed up in every speech. He has also taken to making the utterly absurd suggestion these days that he will bring back the money that Modi has "given" Anil Ambani, Vijay Mallya, Nirav Modi and Lalit Modi, and that it is this that will pay for his NYAY. Lalit Modi has taken serenity offence and is running a campaign against the Gandhi family whose message is that they are the most corrupt people in India. But, even assuming that it is somehow possible to squeeze thousands of crore of rupees out of these men, how does the Congress president believe that this is enough to pay for a scheme that is likely to cost Indian taxpayers more than any other welfare scheme to date?

What is even more worrying is the manner in which Rahul has turned his election campaign into a war between rich and poor Indians. By the way, if despite what he says about them, big Indian businessmen continue to finance the Congress, then they deserve what they get. The point, though, is that in vilifying rich Indians, Rahul is hinting that he would like to take us back to that 'glorious' socialist era over which his grandmother presided, when rich Indians paid taxes as high as 97%. If he gets the chance to implement his 'vision of India', then it will not be long before India ends up in the same basket as Venezuela. It is a fate too awful to contemplate, but it could happen.

What worries me is that the Congress president has not noticed that in the golden age of socialism, that his grandmother supposedly bequeathed India, the only people who had access to basic necessities were officials. I have horrible memories of begging some political friend or official for a gas connection or a telephone and then feeling eternally obliged to them.

They, of course, had everything. Fine houses in hated Lutyns Delhi, free gas connections, free telephone services, free travel on State-owned airlines and railways and free domestic staff for their splendid government houses. For the rest of us, there were endless queues and endless shortages of everything. I can remember my parents queuing for 10 years to buy a Fiat car.

So those are our choices. Both seem risky. But, we must celebrate because we participate in the largest democratic exercise on the Planet. If only this celebration of democracy did not take so very, very long.

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INSIDE TRACK



COOMI KAPOOR

NAGAR POLITICS

AVTARSINGH Bhadana, a powerful Gujjar 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 Bhupinder 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 'saffron 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 *parikrama*. Singh's spiritual guru, Dwarka Shankaracharya Swarupanand, 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.

OUT OF MY MIND



MEGHNAD DESAI

ALL ATTENTION is focused on successive polling rounds. We are in the midst of a dance of seven veils. None of the veils is about to come off and reveal anything till after the seventh round. All the excitement is froth.

Yet a most important development happened during the week of the second round. It will have long-run consequences

HISTORY HEADLINE

A remarkable Dalit life

Dakshayani Velayudhan was India's first SC woman graduate, and lone Dalit woman member of the Constituent Assembly. Remembering Dakshayani



MEERA VELAYUDHAN

DAKSHAYANI WAS born in 1912 on a small island off the coast of Cochin in an agrestic slave caste, Pulayas. She was a child of social change. The early 1900s saw the early struggles for equality and recognition across Kerala. Ayyankali (1863-1941) led the anti-caste struggles for democratising public spaces and for the rights of workers, a precursor to the formation of rural labour and working-class organisations in Kerala.

Dakshayani's narration of the formation of the Pulaya Mahana Sabha conveys the private experiences and public practices of anti-caste assertions: "My elder two brothers and my father Kunjan's younger brother, Krishnethi (Krishnadiyasan, 1877-1937), Pundit Karrayan (professor Maharajas College), T K Krishna Menon (from the Thottelkal family which produced several Dewans) formed the Pulaya Mahajana Sabha, with Krishnethi as President. The meeting was held with country boats tied together in the sea in Bolghatty — the sea did not have a catch. In Kochi, the touchables were not allowed to hold a meeting 'on my land' by the Maharaja. The raft was made by joining together a large number of catamarans with the help and support of the fisherfolk..."

There were many firsts in Dakshayani's life. As the first Dalit woman graduate in India, Dakshayani wrote about her higher education at Maharajas College in Ernakulam, Kochi: "I was the only girl student for B.Sc Chemistry or for any science subjects in the college. It was 'sheer luck' to get higher education... (In the laboratory) an upper caste teacher did not show me experiments — I learnt things by looking from a distance and graduated with high second class in 1935... In July 1935, I was posted as an L2 teacher in the High School Peringothikara in the Trichur District..."

Titling her political journey as 'Down memory lane of politics', she called her Cochin Legislative Council nomination (1945) and Constituent Assembly election (1946) as "interesting and historical".

The wedding of Dakshayani to Shri R Velayudhan was held in Gandhiji's ashram, with the Mahatma along with Kasturba present, and with a leprosy-afflicted person



A leprosy-afflicted person officiating at the wedding of Dakshayani, as Mahatma Gandhi looks on

officiating as priest.

On Gandhiji, Dakshayani wrote: "One day, Gandhiji, seeing that I was not comfortable with the food in the ashram — chapatti and jaggery, said jokingly, did you expect fish here? He added that we could cook non-vegetarian in our own hut... I felt that cooking with firewood in an 'angithi' made of mud was a hassle so better to bear with the food in the common kitchen."

On August 2, 1945, Dakshayani spoke for the first time in the Cochin Legislative Council, in English. Pointing out that funds for the depressed classes were dwindling, she called for proportional reservation in panchayats and municipalities. Dakshayani also said that as long as untouchability remained, the word Harijan was meaningless, it was like calling dogs Napoleon.

There were just 15 women in the 389-member Constituent Assembly. She was the lone Dalit woman and at 34 years old, perhaps among the youngest. On her first speech in the Constituent Assembly (December 19, 1946) she wrote: "I spoke against separate electorates, against slave labour and (said) untouchability should be banned by an ordinance. I was asked by the party — Indian National Congress — to withdraw it as it was going to be one of the articles of the Constitution soon."

Although a Gandhian, she agreed with Babasaheb Ambedkar on many issues. She also argued against appointment of governors anticipating friction between a state government and a governor appointed by another party at the Centre. She also suggested that the final draft of the Constitution be adopted following a ratification through a general election. She again intervened during a discussion on draft Article 11 (Art 17 of the Constitution) which aimed at abol-

Women as third-class citizens

for all. This was the age old issue of gender discrimination. In the middle of tall claims about secularism, tolerance and Mother India, three cases have come up of injustice to women. First was the complaint of Priyanka Chaturvedi, who was working for the Congress on its media strategy. She was harassed by some co-workers, who were suspended. But then they were restored to their old positions. In her tweet, she called them 'goons'. No one heard her complaint and she left the Congress and joined the Shiv Sena. Far from anyone championing her, she was criticised for joining a Hindutva party. As if the Congress is not already just another Hindutva party. Her injustice remains uncorrected.

Then we had the issue with Pragya Thakur, the BJP's Bhopal candidate. She is out on bail for alleged involvement in the Malegaon blasts case. She is unlike any other political candidate. She reminds me of those student radicals in the Sixties who went out of their way to be provocative. That is fine, and she has the right of free speech. In this she is like the *tukde-tukde* people. The more shocking, the better.

Pragya has alleged that she was tortured under investigation by Anti-Terrorism Squad chief Hemant Karkare. Given his record in fighting terrorists during 26/11 and his martyrdom, Pragya lost most friends she had. There is no way of verifying her complaint as Karkare is not

there to defend himself. Even so, in law, her complaint has to be admitted. It will not be of course. She is only a woman and out on bail. (As Rahul Gandhi's jibe about Amit Shah shows, even leading politicians do not understand the distinction between people charged or under trial or even with their case dismissed, and guilty ones.) There is a broader case of setting up an inquiry into whether people arrested pending trial are routinely beaten, if their case concerns torture.

The third case reinforces the concern about women's safety in the workplace. This reaches the highest levels of the judiciary. A woman, call her X, has alleged that she was subjected to unwelcome atten-

tion by the Chief Justice of India. It was shocking to realise that the Supreme Court has no machinery to handle such claims. The first hearing breached all the norms of natural justice. The woman was also maligned by unknown persons, who said she was part of a high-level conspiracy to defame the judiciary. That claim has to be examined, but so does the complaint by X.

Better views seem to have prevailed and a suitable bench has been constituted. What are the proprieties of the case? Should the CJ go on leave while the case is pending? Not being a lawyer, I do not know. What is clear is that no matter how much education, or political status, she achieves, a woman is a third-class citizen in India.