

The pesky priests



MARGINAL UTILITY

TCA SRINIVASA RAGHAVAN

Will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?" said Henry II of England in 1170 when he got irritated with his friend Thomas Becket who was also the Archbishop of Canterbury. The priest was giving the king impractical and unwanted advice.

In modern India this can be said of NRI economists who swan in and out of the country dispensing advice like agony aunts to NGOs. The latest advice is that taxes must be increased to pay for the socially necessary — but fiscally disastrous — Nyay project of the Congress.

Nothing wrong with that except just the one thing: these guys don't earn Indian salaries and pay Indian taxes. I call these jet-borne economists and the India-based Jesuits amongst them the 21st century Salvation Army. Their approach to public finance is exactly the same.

They are very much like the Victorian priests who invaded India in the 1870s and hugely influenced legislation. As a result of their interference, a different morality was imposed on India's laws.

But before proceeding with these NRI economists, let me dispose of a fallacy, namely, that Indians are undertaxed. That statement is true if — and only if — around half the population is earning enough to be taxed, which it is not.

Second, even those who don't earn enough to pay income tax, do pay a lot by way of indirect taxes. So, please let us stop this nonsense about being undertaxed once and for all. It's boring.

The real problem, which the NRI economists don't seem to know, lies in the way governments use tax revenues. Take pensions, for example. No one wants to talk about them.

So let me ask: Why should an employee of the central or state government get a fully inflation-indexed pension? Why should they all get 50 per cent of the last pay drawn? Why not fix the pension at 50 per cent of first pay drawn for Class One employees and then gradually go down to the Class Four level where the pension can be 50 per cent of the last pay drawn? What sense does it make to spend so much on those who have often saved enough to have two, if not more, houses?

If some grand Rawlesian notions are driving these NRIs, why not look at unrequited transfers to the underserving? I look forward, keenly, with bated breath, in prolepsis, for just one of these guys to endorse my proposal.

If they won't, they should shut up because being a contextually clueless bunch they should understand the contexts first.

Contextually clueless

Basically, the issue is this: If compassion has to underpin politics — which it must but doesn't — what is the best way to transfer some of this sentiment into fiscal policy?

The easy way is to tax the rich and hand over some money to the poor. I call this the Robbing Hood obligation. It converts a political need into an economic obligation, dripping with moral gulab jamun juice.

But the fact is that this obligation is better met by leaving more money in the hands of the well-off than less. In economics, lest the compassionate NRIs have forgotten it, this serves two ends.

One, it increases aggregate demand for non-wage goods and two, it increases the savings rate. Both are necessary for investment, which is necessary to create work for the poor.

India's problem since 1957 — thanks to Sir Nicholas Kaldor whose ideas were rejected in Britain — is that we have done the opposite. We have taken money from those who can use it most productively and handed it over to those who use it least productively. This includes the government which uses the money for consumption rather than investment.

The results are there for all to see — overwhelming poverty and the growing moral need for direct income transfers. But if it hasn't worked when it was indirect via subsidies, why should it work now?

Let me put this another way. You don't solve either the economic problem of poverty or even the moral one via income transfers. You only solve the political one.

A larger question is whether economists should be concerning themselves with moral issues. Reading Adam Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments may be necessary but it is not sufficient. His principles of taxation should be read as well.

They will open eyes and minds.

Patna Sahib will be make or break

The outcome in that Lok Sabha seat will decide what is more important: The Modi-Shah hegemony or winning the seat



PLAIN POLITICS

ADITI PHADNIS

Mr X was insistent. "Please don't use my name," he begged. "Raviya hamara dost hai," he said lapsing into Hindi in his anxiety "and you can't be a Kayastha in Patna and not know R K Sinha — or Shatrughan Sinha, for that matter". This report is based on his analysis.

Patna Sahib is going to be one of India's most interesting contests: Because nowhere else has caste, power politics, and generational change come together to form a combination so potent that it is combustible.

R K Sinha is a venerable and respected pillar of Patna's "prabuddha" (intellectual elite) population. A journalist to begin with, he is self-made and has been the backbone of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's (RSS) activities in Bihar for several decades. In Bihar, the upper castes used to be with the Congress. In fact, the winning combination for the Congress used to be an amalgam of upper castes, especially Kayasthas (dating back to the days of Rajendra Prasad, Sachidanand Sinha and Mahamaya Prasad Sinha) and the Dalits.

This changed with the Emergency when another Kayastha — Jayaprakash Narayan — challenged the Congress' caste hegemony. More, he was able to create a new social combination, inviting the intermediate castes to the amalgam on the back of a promise of their empowerment. The rise of figures like Lalu Prasad led the Kayasthas to look for leadership elsewhere: And when the *rathayatra* led by the face of anti-Congressism, L K Advani, hit Bihar, the Kayasthas moved to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) en masse. Shatrughan Sinha was the recipient of this bounty. He is not an inconsiderable figure in the politics of Patna and is considered the local boy who

made good but returned to his roots.

Then there's Ravi Shankar Prasad. The son of the Jana Sangh/BJP President of the Bihar unit in the 1970s-80s, Thakur Prasad, Ravi Shankar is the illustrious son of a well known father. The father rose to be a minister in the Karpooi Thakur government. Ravishankar took an opposite position and along with friend Sushil Kumar Modi, fought the legal case against Lalu Prasad's complicity in the fodder scam. He is certainly not a newbie in politics but is generally considered a non-resident Bihari.

Patna is a place where everyone knows everyone. R K Sinha's son Rituraj worked in the BJP's 2015 assembly election campaign, leading the war room. There is no Kayastha function in Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh that RK Sinha does not attend or finance. He has organised self help groups, his Chitragupt Sabha does a lot of charity work all over north India. He raised his voice publicly in 2012 about the denial of a place to a Kayastha in the Janata Dal United-BJP government in Bihar. He is the ultimate liberal at heart, a great votary of a free press. He never shirks from telling the truth: Whether people like it or not.

Backed by an assurance from the RSS, Sinha

put in a bid to contest the Lok Sabha election. Deputy Chief Minister Sushil Kumar Modi ascertained the views of MLAs from the constituency. All but Nawal Kishore Yadav, the new entrant into the BJP (he crossed over from the Rashtriya Janata Dal some months ago and was made a minister) supported Sinha's claim.

When the Central Election Committee of the BJP met, it was clear that Shatrughan Sinha would not be given the BJP nomination. R K Sinha was generally considered a shoo-in. Instead, Ravi Shankar Prasad was named the candidate although he still has four and a half years of his Rajya Sabha term left. Supporters of the two leaders clashed at the airport. It was both unseemly and ugly.

Recognising that R K Sinha was hurt, Arun Jaitley called him to assuage his feelings and seek his support for Prasad. It was too late.

Now, Mr X says, it will be touch-and-go for Ravi Shankar Prasad. The Kayastha vote will be split. And if Shatrughan Sinha can attract some Yadav votes (which Ravi Shankar cannot) and some Muslim votes (which will not go to the BJP any way) it will not be easy for Prasad to win: Unless he can make up with R K Sinha. That's not happening.

Mr X's personal, private opinion is that the move addresses a post May 23 situation: The Modi-Shah combine doesn't want independent-minded MPs, least of all MPs who can pick up the phone and speak to the RSS's top leadership. They also want a generational change. The outcome in Patna Sahib will decide what is more important: The Modi-Shah hegemony or winning the seat.

COFFEE WITH BS ► PRANNOY ROY, CO-FOUNDER & EXECUTIVE CO-CHAIRPERSON; DORAB SOPARIWALA, EDITORIAL ADVISER, NDTV

The originals

Roy and Sopariwala tell Uttaran Das Gupta why 2019 will be the most important election of our lives

On the results night in 1977, Prannoy Roy and a few of his associates sat hunched over a radio in their *barsati*. "AIR (All India Radio) was still operating under the fearsome shadow of the Emergency. As the results began to come in, AIR persisted in presenting a falsely 'balanced' picture," writes senior journalist and NDTV founder Roy in his new book, *The Verdict: Decoding India's Elections*, co-authored with market researcher and pollster Dorab R Sopariwala. But even the limited information revealed to them "that there was a sweep... in favour of the Janata Party". Wine bottles were already being uncorked. The Emergency era, the lowest point in the history of the Indian democracy, was drawing to an end.

In their book, Roy and Sopariwala claim that 1977 marked a shift from the "pro-incumbency" phase of the previous 25 years — the first general elections were held in 1951-52 — to an "anti-incumbency" phase. "Dorab coined the term," says Roy. "I don't remember," replies his co-author. The duo had analysed data from 78 state Assembly elections for the first phase (1952-77) and 93 elections for the second phase (1977-2002). "Now, 2002-19, we are in a 50-50 era, where governments have a 50 per cent chance of being re-elected, if they perform," they write. The message from the voter is clear: "perform or perish".

When I meet Roy and Sopariwala (in March), everyone is eagerly waiting for the Election Commission (EC) to announce the dates for another election. I meet the duo at Roy's cabin in the NDTV office in south Delhi. The small L-

shaped room has glass windows. From where I sit, I can look out at the parking lot of the building complex. On one wall of the cabin hangs a large, rectangular TV playing eight news channels. On another wall, directly over Roy's neat desk, hangs another large flat screen playing NDTV. Both are mute. On the desk is a small Indian flag.

This book has taken a long time to write, claim the authors. "Like true Librans, we are perfect procrastinators," says Sopariwala. "But he (Roy) is the king of them all." Roy agrees. "If the elections were not around the corner, we would never have finished it," he says. "There were many late nights, staying up till 3-4 am to meet a deadline. I work best to a deadline." Roy adds that he had, however, finished his PhD in three years flat. "That

was to a deadline, right?" I ask. Roy demurs: "In Delhi University, six-seven years was the norm." I am curious how Roy, who did a PhD in economics, and Sopariwala, a graduate from the London School of Economics, got involved in the profession of election journalism and poll forecasting. "It is such an aphrodisiac," says Sopariwala. "If you are in India, you are always watching elections. I am deeply interested in politics, though not as a participant." Roy says he was not interested in politics. "But I am an election junky," he adds. The very nature of Indian democracy and how elections are conducted — and consequently forecasting and analysing polls — has seen a sea change over the past

40 years. "You could call this one (2019) the WhatsApp election," says Roy. At this point, Roy and I decide to go for some coffee; Sopariwala sticks to water. One of the most important factors for elections anywhere now is the internet and social media. After the Cambridge Analytica scandal (2018), governments all over the world and even in India are demanding more accountability from social media giants such as Facebook and Twitter for information spread on their platforms. Sopariwala says this is not such a significant factor for a pollster. "We are trying to analyse the output (the vote), not the input," he says. "As long as the voter is not lying about whom they are going to vote for, how does it matter what influence is working on them?" Roy says the influence of the internet is an added factor for those analysing elections. "The great

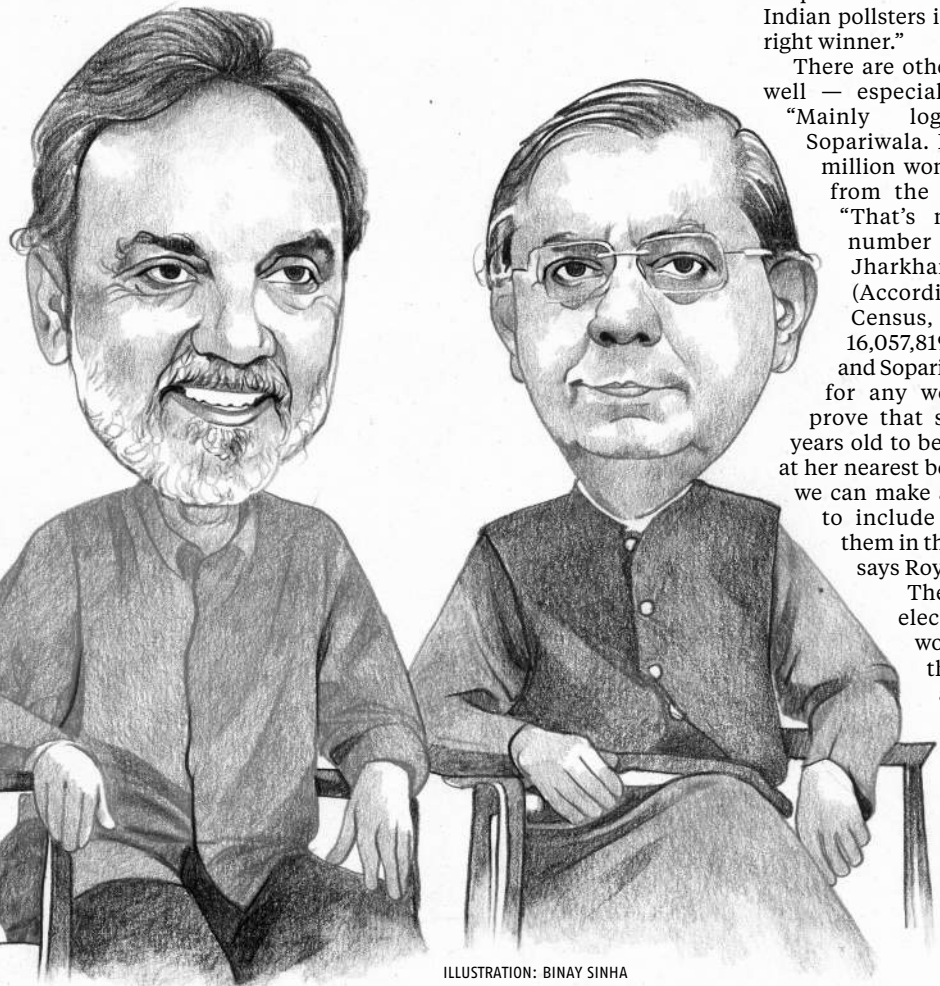


ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

97 per cent strike rate among Indian pollsters in predicting the right winner."

There are other challenges as well — especially for the EC. "Mainly logistical," says Sopariwala. For instance, 21 million women are missing from the electoral rolls. "That's more than the number of women in Jharkhand," says Roy. (According to the 2011 Census, Jharkhand has 16,057,819 women.) Roy and Sopariwala are arguing for any women who can prove that she is above 18 years old to be allowed to vote at her nearest booth. "And, then we can make a genuine effort to include many more of them in the next election," says Roy.

The focus of this election will be women in villages, they claim, adding that since 1971, when the number of rural women turning out to vote was 8 per cent lower than their urban counterparts, there has been a complete reversal.

So, who will come to power in 2019? This is a question I could not help but ask the two leading pollsters in the country.

"Anyone who tries to predict an election is either a liar, a fool or a politician," says Sopariwala. "No one has the foggiest (idea)." Roy adds: "A swing of 3 per cent means 100 seats changing hands. Can you feel a swing of 3 per cent? The job of a journalist is to tell the story and the issues in an election, not to forecast. Leave that to the pollsters." In India, there are 29 elections being fought, not one, "this is not a 'national election. It's a 'federation-of-states' election", they add. "Lok Sabha is becoming less and less important for the voter vis-à-vis state or local elections," says Roy.

The very next day, the EC announced the dates for the 2019 Lok Sabha elections.

Return to tradition



PEOPLE LIKE THEM

KEYA SARKAR

In recent years, the residents of Santiniketan await the festival of Holi or *Basanta Utsav* with great trepidation. As the Visva Bharati University celebrates the coming of spring in the tradition of Rabindranath Tagore, hordes of lovers of Bengali culture descend on this small town to participate in the festivities.

The programme, held by Visva Bharati, comprises singing of and dancing to Tagore's songs of spring by the students of the school, college and university. The university has always welcomed outsiders to participate. Held in the open with no restrictions on admission, this programme has probably been one of

the best welcoming of spring that the country sees. However, while earlier tourists (mainly Bengalis) who came from across the globe were aficionados of Tagore literature, those who come now, by the bus from mufossil towns within and without Bengal, may not even know who Tagore was.

So from a cultural festival, *Basanta Utsav* has become a merry making weekend jaunt hugely aided and abetted by the innumerable hotels and lodges selling weekend packages. While the number of visiting tourists usually hovers around 1-1.5 lakh, this year the number crossed 2.5 lakh, as put out by the university.

The police and administration in their wisdom block entry and exit from the *Basanta Utsav* venue except through specific roads. The civic volunteers on duty are often from outside of Santiniketan and have no clue about these. The resulting traffic chaos and stampede is dangerous and growing every year.

In addition to those tourists who spend a couple of days, there are of course the day trippers. This year this meant that every open area within Visva Bharati's large campus had become a parking lot for Volvo buses. Each bus opened its hatch at the back and cooked for the trav-

ellers that it had carried. Once the buses had fed all and thrown what they didn't wish to carry back, the open spaces were a sight to behold. This was in addition to the millions of empty plastic water pouches flying around, which the university had distributed to its 2.5 lakh guests. For residents who can barely cope with the daily garbage that they generate (because Santiniketan has no municipality), the *Basanta Utsav* merry making aftermath is truly horrific.

This year, however, the recently appointed vice chancellor was all enthusiastic and ensured that over 1,000 members of the university staff and students cleaned the campus over the next two days. Like every year, this year too there has been a lot of debate about the need to have an unrestricted, free-for-all *Utsav*. Tagore started it for those who lived and studied in Santiniketan and maybe it was time to go back to that.

But the hotel lobby is powerful and moneyed and every year they manage to win this debate. For the university too, as its educational standards are on a decline, its administrators take far more pride in the numbers that attend the *Basanta Utsav* and the *Pous Mela* (held in December) than its academic achievements.

Weekend with my mother



PEOPLE LIKE US

KISHORE SINGH

No one is giving my mother's request for a family weekend getaway much thought. Maybe because a summer break needs to be longer than a weekend, or even an extended weekend. All that planning, all that travelling, for it to be over in the blink of an eye? On the family group, where my kid brother has been given charge of rallying the family's forces, he has been getting little traction. With prices hardening and bookings becoming increasingly difficult, no one can blame him for sending peevish messages.

Meanwhile, plans for longer vacations are under more active — if secre-

ture — consideration. My own family rarely shares these with me, having labelled me the holiday wet-blanket. I am loath to commit to dates because office programming, fluid at the best of times, is likely to change just when you've splurged on non-refundable tickets and rooms. Better, I think, to pay more at some later date, than to lose it all on the whim of a colleague. My family tells me they would like us all to vacation together. There was a time I thought this charming. I now know better. All they're hoping for is for me to fund the trip.

When they are able to spend their own money, they do not care to include me. These are vacations to be enjoyed within their intimate circle of friends. So, my wife, who was in one place earlier this week, is going to be in quite another as you read this — and they're both far from home. Of course, she says it's work, or at least work-related, but I do not think that is the truth, or at least the entire truth. I miss her more than she misses me when she is away from home. There is no one to hang the clothes in the cupboard, you see.

Passing by my daughter's room, I heard her arguing with friends about where she did *not* want to go this summer, and that included New York

because, she said, she was "bored" of the most exciting city in the world, or London, because, well, how many times can you return to the same place again. So, her friends, one batch of which is meeting in NY, and the other in London, is collaborating on how to start, or end, their trip in a part of Europe in which my daughter has some interest. Having travelled extensively these last years on bachelorettes, bridal showers, shopping escapades and getaways for no reason at all, my daughter, I think, would prefer something closer home. She has been the first — and only one so far — to endorse the weekend break with my mother.

I am not privy to my son's holiday plans since he no longer shares them with us, having recently acquired a wife. He will be travelling for professional reasons to a distant part of the world, but unlike in previous years, he has not asked us to join him for an extended sabbatical as he would previously. Since no one seems keen to have me around any longer, I'm signing up for my mother's retreat. I had thought being on my own would be liberating, but you don't want everyone else to have fun while leaving you to cope with New Delhi's heat, dust and outings.

A manifesto in two parts

Two broad points should be made about the Congress election manifesto, released earlier this week. First is the commitment to increase government expenditure in many ways: Double general government expenditure on health to 3 per cent of GDP, double expenditure on education to 6 per cent of GDP, spend close to 2 per cent of GDP on the *Nyuntam Aay Yojana* (Nyay), the hand-out programme, by the second year of its operation, and increase defence expenditure in relation to GDP. Taken together, they constitute an expansion of government expenditure by somewhere between 5 per cent and 7 per cent of GDP. But in the 52 sections of the 55-page manifesto, there is almost nothing on how resources will be found for all of this, other than an anodyne statement in the Nyay context on raising revenue and cutting expenditure.

The additional commitments being promised must be weighed against the reality that the tax revenue of the general government (Centre and states combined) is only about 17 per cent of GDP, and there is already a general government deficit of over 6 per cent of GDP. Meanwhile, 400,000 government vacancies will be filled, and a million people appointed in panchayats and urban local bodies to help people claim government benefits. All those people will have to be paid. The only conclusion one can draw is that the promises must be taken with a generous pinch of salt, despite the assertion by Rahul Gandhi that he has never broken a promise that he has made.

The second key aspect of the manifesto concerns an entirely different set of issues, to do with individual liberties. The Congress deserves generous applause for taking the position that it has on the sedition law and various laws that provide for detention without trial — some of them dating back to colonial times and some worse than the laws imposed by colonial rulers. The party has also promised to de-criminalise defamation (as most other democracies already have), and to review the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act. Going further, it promises to enact legislation against custodial torture, hold the police accountable to an independent body, make bail the norm rather than the exception, and to set selected under-trials free, depending on the nature of the accusation and how much time has already been spent in jail. The manifesto mentions that the relevant provisions of the Indian Penal Code, such as the one on sedition, have been misused; the question is whether such misuse is inevitable.

It is doubtful whether even this second lot of promises is easily deliverable. For instance, court orders are already on record asking governments to free under-trials who have served half the maximum sentence prescribed for the crimes they are accused of committing, but no action has followed. Still, the fact that a national party has come down so unequivocally on the side of individual freedoms is to be welcomed wholeheartedly when the issue of national security has been so framed as to encroach on those freedoms, when even asking questions is said to be anti-national, and when the Congress itself has in the past been guilty of encroaching on the same freedoms, including press freedom.

There will also be legitimate questions about whether such sweeping changes are practicable in a short span of time. Third-degree torture is almost the primary method of interrogation by the police. If a new law rules this out of order, and the police are to be held accountable in a way that they are not currently, the system will need to radically re-orient the police force and invest in training. How quickly can that be done? Similarly, there can be legitimate questions about whether the state does need some special powers when it is faced with armed revolt in parts of the country. The issue is how to provide for such situations while building in effective safeguards. Those questions are for later. For the moment, it is enough that a major political party has come down on the side of Constitutional freedoms and internationally recognised human rights.

A national election of state leaders

India today has about 20 strong state leaders and no national leader can take their voters away. Modi can't swing majority for BJP in more than seven states

You have to get out of Delhi often if you want to understand that there are two ways of looking at India: Inside-out, that is, from Delhi and the heartland at the rest of the country; or outside-in, which is, looking at the heartland from beyond.

Essentially, when you look inside-out, it brainwashes you into seeing the picture purely in national party-national leader terms. If you give yourselves the gift of distance and an open mind, you might see the change in this new India. National parties as we knew them are in decline. The concept of the Great Pan-National Leader ended with Indira Gandhi. What about Narendra Modi? We will come to that in a bit.

This new writing on the great political wall of India was read out to us earlier this week by two of our strongest state satraps, not even regional leaders. Telangana strongman K Chandrashekar Rao (KCR) and young Y S Jaganmohan Reddy (of YSRCP) in next-door Andhra made the same point, each in his own chosen words: There is no such thing as a truly national party in India any more. The ones you describe as national parties, the BJP and Congress, are also regional. They just happen to have a footprint across a few states.

The Congress declining as a national party you can understand. But how can the BJP not be called a national party? After all, it won a national majority of its own in 2014. Get out of Delhi and see.

Sitting in Delhi, we confuse the Hindi heartland for the nation. The BJP's 2014 majority tally of 282, for example, mostly came from UP, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Haryana, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand (190). Of the rest, 49 came from the two western states, Maharashtra and Gujarat. This accounts for 239 seats of the 299 in these states, a strike rate of 80 per cent. From the rest of the country, which is the entire south (Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Tamil Nadu), east (northeastern states, West Bengal, Odisha) and even including far north, Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab, the party only won 43 out of the 244, or just 17 per cent. Plot this on the map of India. This isn't the footprint of a pan-national party. It is a 10-state party, which maxes out the seats there and gets a majority.

And pan-national leaders? Mr Modi is the only one today with that claim. Everybody knows him. But can he get people to overwhelmingly vote for him in more than these 10 states? Even within these 10 states, in the most important ones, his challenge comes from local parties and leaders. He is now fighting a make-or-break battle in Uttar Pradesh with Mayawati and Akhilesh Yadav.

Bihar's equivalent of these state leaders is Lalu Prasad and Nitish Kumar. Both the Congress and BJP have aligned with one, as a junior partner. In Punjab, the BJP is an adjunct of the Akali Dal, in Haryana, both the BJP and Congress are searching for a local ally. Even Mr Modi, with his phenomenal oratory, cannot swing a majority for his party, even hypothetically, by himself in more than seven states today. Hypothetically, because these include Uttar Pradesh.



NATIONAL INTEREST

SHEKHAR GUPTA

Check out the Congress. If the BJP is a national party of seven-nine states, Congress has just six, albeit many of these smaller: Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Kerala, Punjab and Karnataka. It is extinct in West Bengal, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, UP and Bihar.

That's why the maximum the Congress can aim for, if all the electoral Gods smile on it, is about 150. I know it's unlikely and 100 will be an optimistic target. But it serves our limited purpose of proving that if the BJP is half a national party, the Congress is no longer even a one-third. You want a further reality check? Name a state, any one state, where Rahul Gandhi could swing this Lok Sabha election by himself.

The fact is, Indira Gandhi was the last truly national leader who could win in almost all states. Since her passing, barring the unusual election of December 1984, no truly pan-national leader or party has emerged. That space has been taken by charismatic, powerful leaders of states and castes. To call any of them even a regional leader is a misnomer. Vote tallies support this hypothesis.

From just about 4 per cent in 1952-77 now regional/state parties' vote share has risen to 34 per cent (2002-18). This summer it will go higher. What's even more important, because these parties' vogue is concentrated in a region, they get more bang for the buck, or seats for their vote percentage. Today, with 34 per cent vote, these parties win 34 per cent of the Lok Sabha seats. With each additional per cent, they get 11 more seats whereas the national parties get just seven. I am taking this data from The Verdict by Pranroy Roy and Dorab Sopariwala — just in case you thought I made it up.

In undivided Andhra Pradesh, the Congress vote share was traditionally around 40 per cent. It has fallen to just under three in the new state. The BJP's

boasts of a coming boom in West Bengal and Odisha will be tested soon. But, barring Assam and Tripura, it has conquered no new frontiers, despite a Modi with a majority and Amit Shah with his BJP membership of 100 million.

India, today, has about 20 leaders so strong within a limited geography or political demography that no national leader, including Mr Modi, can take their voters away. Most of them have acquired administrative and political experience, and networked across regions. They might have different concerns and ideologies, but are united on one point: Abomination of dominant national parties.

There is a large, populous and progressing world outside of our Hindi-Dilli dugout that doesn't share the insecurity of our elites in the polling season, of a 'klichid' taking over if Mr Modi doesn't win. You can spend days in the south and the east without hearing that familiar chatter: But if not Mr Modi, who? For three decades now, as the Congress declined, India has been evolving into a truly federal republic, and the idea of a national election has been replaced by a sum of 30 state elections — as it should be, with no party dominating even a third of the states, and the BJP plus Congress significant in less than a half.

Why does the TINA (There is No Alternative) factor dominate the politics of the heartland, but doesn't impress people beyond these? One important factor is that in none of the states where the Congress and BJP fight for domination a true regional leader has grown. In Bihar and UP, Lalu, Nitish, Mayawati and Akhilesh are formidable leaders, but each has his or her limitations. The BJP either challenges them or compels them to share the turf with it. Of the major states, national parties still dominate Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, and, to some extent, Karnataka, since they lack their own leaders.

The second reason is of course national parties do not like to build strong state leaders. The Congress committed suicide in Andhra Pradesh rather than let the obvious successor for its state satrap grow. It was so furious with his ambition that it didn't even treat him with basic respect after his father's death in a helicopter crash. It has only one state leader of consequence, Capt. Amarinder Singh. The BJP today has just none, maybe a half, Yogi Adityanath. The three others — Shivraj Singh Chouhan, Vasundhara Raje and Raman Singh — have been consigned to deep-freeze.

Indian politics, therefore, is at an interesting juncture with no truly pan-national leader or party and yet a declining insecurity over coalitions beyond the heartland. As 2014 demonstrated, you can still produce a counter-intuitive full-majority government if one party can sweep contiguous states containing upwards of 20 seats.

There's nothing in the 2019 campaign air, the *chunavi hawa* that tells you it's a wave election, for anyone. We can say now with confidence that this election will be fought state-by-state, more like 2004 than 2014. Don't ask me who will lead the next coalition, because I do not know. All I can tell you is, irrespective of who leads the next government, it will be a cabinet in which Ram Vilas Paswan can also open his mouth.

By special arrangement with ThePrint

When cash is king



AL FRESCO

SUNIL SETHI

the income tax officials are monitoring the matter. I have asked the state party president to look into the matter," he baldly stated.

This may be small change in a small state with two Lok Sabha seats but, crucially, also facing an Assembly election to 60 seats. However, if further proof were needed it is now officially provided by the EC on a daily basis. Its seizures as of April 4 totted up to ₹1,618.78 crore — the largest component being cash (₹399.50 crore), followed by liquor (₹162.89 crore), drugs and narcotics (₹708.54 crore), gold and other "freebies" (₹347.83 crore), etc.

Only speculation exists as to the extent of cash sloshing around as the election juggernaut gains momentum. According to one estimate it could be as much as ₹50,000 crore — a 40 per cent jump from 2014 — a higher spend than what Donald Trump's election cost was in 2016. Where does the money go? Substantially larger sums are splurged on social media, amply confirmed by evidence of the eyes, in what is being dubbed as the country's most expensive election. Then there are the rising costs of shoring up legislators' support, as in Karnataka and Goa recently; in the cut-throat "trade" of seat distribution; or the apparently limitless supply of logistical backup by leading moneybags that includes cavalcades of cars, helicopters, and airplanes in return for future favours once government is formed. "When political

parties choose candidates on the basis of 'winnability' it also means money power. The number of *crorepatis* in parliament and state legislatures is a clear indication of parties putting their faith in moneyed candidates to be able to win elections," says Chakshu Roy of the Delhi-based think tank PRS Legislative Research on parliamentary practice. Together with Jagdeep Chokkar, former professor at IIM Ahmedabad and founding member of the Association of Democratic Reforms, these organisations offer comprehensive analysis on money power and criminalisation of electoral politics.

Votes-for-notes no longer only means blandishments of cash and goodies for fence-sitting voters. In 2017 it was alleged that TTV Dhinakaran, Sasikala's nephew, who later won the late Jayalithaa's seat with a thumping majority and formed his own party, had offered huge bribes to EC officials to win rights to the AIADMK's two-leaf symbol. The intermediary involved apparently confessed to the crime. Mr Dhinakaran was let off in the court case but Chennai was rife with videos of cash-distribution — a step up from gifts of kitchen blenders, television sets, and gold trinkets that the chief minister was famous for in her Lady Bountiful days.

In 1943 B R Ambedkar criticised his contemporaries Gandhi and Jinnah, saying, "In establishing their supremacy they have taken the aid of 'big business' and money magnets. For the first time in our country, money is taking the field as an organised player." Several government reports since the 1990s,

including the Law Commission and the Administrative Reforms Commission, have pondered on how to purge elections of dirty money or, as one of them politely put it, of reducing "illegitimate and unnecessary funding". All have abysmally failed.

Several of the EC's regulations on campaign financing are so credulity-stretching as to invite derision. Here are some choice examples:

- "No donations above ₹2,000 in cash, anonymous limit remains at ₹20,000";
- "Each party to submit to the Income Tax Authority, a report of contributions in excess of ₹20,000 from individuals or companies";
- "Spending on election campaign by any person without the written authority of the candidate carries a fine up to ₹500...Any person who fails to maintain election accounts as required by law shall be punished with fine up to ₹500";
- "An MP/MLA/MLC convicted of bribery shall be disqualified." There is also a blanket ban on foreign contributions to candidates or political parties.

"Let's face it," says Chakshu Roy, "the quest for political power begins with a lie. The minute a winning MP or MLA, having spent a fortune, declares to the electoral officer and the income tax that he has not exceeded the limit of ₹20,000 you suspend disbelief. That is where our sense of apathy and disillusionment begins."

Charisma and oratory and mind-bending cross-country rallies, all have their uses in election campaigning. But cash is the undisputed king.

and are an integral part of its campaigns. The *Huffington Post's* excellent investigation into Association of Billion Minds (ABM) should be required reading this election season. ABM sees itself as Amit Shah's team, and serves as one of the BJP's political consultants. It helps design and advertise party campaigns, but runs them from what look like fan pages and fan accounts. Much of ABM's content is communal, much of it is fake, and all of it is about the relentless promotion of Narendra Modi.

The Election Commission is playing whack-a-mole already; it cannot possibly rein in all of the Hydra's heads. But it can, when there is a financial link involved, consider it part of election campaign funding. As the *Huffington Post* story points out, the BJP is not the only political party engaging in these tactics — it is only the largest and best funded.

It's not just tragic, but also dangerous, that "professionalised" elections, with data profiling, marketing "innovations" like ABM, and complete comfort with spreading hate and fake news, as well as utterly complicit media, have destroyed voters' access to truthful information, and distorted their perspectives on candidates and the quality of their representation.

Can the Election Commission step up to the plate and exert its constitutional powers with non-partisan conviction, to see us through a free and fair election? Upon its credibility hangs the credibility of this democracy.

Batsmen ruled out

EYE CULTURE

UDDALOK BHATTACHARYA

R Ashwin is out of luck. Had he been the first to do what he did — Mankading a batsman, which is running him out at the non-striker's end if he (the batsman) goes beyond the popping crease — the matter would have died down as a peccadillo. In the age of instant cricket, quite an oxymoron, one looks askance at ethical niceties. But Ashwin's supposed moral infraction (the rules defend his action, though) is getting prominence because more than 70 years ago, our own Vinoo Mankad, considered one of the greatest all-rounders of all time, had done the same thing in Australia, in a series in which the Indians were expected to be mauled and they were. Mankad, in all fairness, had given the Australian batsman a warning that he was going beyond the crease when the Indian spinner was about the send down the ball. He didn't listen, perhaps in the hope Mankad would go not ahead and do it. What followed was anger all round, and doubts about Mankad's sportsmanship. However, the matter did not go very far because Bradman weighed in in favour of Mankad.

It is strange that what happened so many years ago is still relevant to a game that had perforce to transform itself under the pressure of those who had never quite liked the game. And it is entirely possible many more cases of amoral, wonky tactics, mimicking extraordinary dismissals that took place decades ago, are waiting to happen. While Ashwin can defend his action by saying he acted when the game was in motion, Sarfraz Nawaz can't do so. In a Test match, again in Australia, when Andrew Hilditch, the non-striker, picked up the ball and gave it to Nawaz for him to start his run-up, the bowler appealed. The umpire did not believe him and so Nawaz appealed not once but eight times for the umpire to regain his composure and rule the batsman out. This was in early 1979, and perhaps for this reason Asif Iqbal did not pick Nawaz when Pakistan toured India under him (Iqbal) later that year.

But irony was in store for Iqbal. In 1983 in a Test match in Bombay, when Desmond Haynes was given out for handling the ball, and the "offending" bowler who appealed for him to be given out was Kapil Dev, Iqbal was spotted in the gallery. When TV asked him what he would

have done, Iqbal's reply was: "I would have done what Kapil did." Haynes had edged the ball with his bat and there was a possibility that the ball might have travelled towards the stumps, when he stopped it. But had he stopped it with his leg and not with his hand, there was no way he could have been given out.

At a time when the umpire's decision was final there were at least two occasions when their verdicts were reversed to accommodate the wishes of people who were thought to be impeccable. The first was in the West Indies, 1974. Alvin Kalicharran, believed Tony Greig, had started for a single and he ran him out. The crowd thought the batsman had played the last ball of the day and began his long walk towards the pavilion. What Kalicharran thought we do not know but there were questions on Greig's sporting spirit, also.

Vivian Richards was Vivian Richards. So he could get away with coercing the umpire into changing his decision in a one-match against India in Nagpur when Dilip Vengaskar was given out. No questions asked! No issues raised!

Dismissals in cricket have been a subject as much of rancour as they have been of humour. But they happened many ages ago. In a county match when WG Grace was bowled, he quietly lifted the balls, put them back on the stumps, and asked the umpire: "It's windy, isn't it?" The umpire said: "Hold your cap tight as you walk back to the dressing-room."

Wilfred Rhodes was, understandably, very hurt when Harold Larwood's ball hit him on the boot. Umpire Frank Chester, appearing as concerned as he could be, asked, "Willie, are you hurt?" "Aye," was the reply. "Can you walk?" Chester asked again. "Maybe with some difficulty," said Rhodes. Chester commanded: "Please walk." He was out LBW.

In 1987, long after cricket had ceased to be a gentleman's game, Courtney Walsh proved he was a fine gentleman on the field, and in a World Cup match at that. In Pakistan and against Pakistan, he had a wonderful opportunity to Mankad the last man of the opponent's innings. He didn't, and Pakistan won. As a reward for his wonderful gesture, Zia-ul Haq presented him a carpet.

By the way, when and where was the expression "Mankaded" coined? Perhaps it was in Australia. And why just "Mankaded" to the exclusion of all others that might have fitted different situations? Many Australians have acquired fame for their antics on the cricket field.

Election season whack-a-mole



INTER ALIA

MITALI SARAN

schedule, and faced criticism of its handling of EVMs and voter rolls. The governing party defies it so much that it's hard to avoid the conclusion that the EC is its creature. Like many other institutions by now, the EC is widely perceived as toothless. Now, with elections just a few days away, it will need to hold the line against a tidal wave of propaganda, fake news, and overt communalism.

The EC has dealt with the easy stuff, like the Indian Railways serving customers in cups provided by the NGO Sankalp, emblazoned with 'Main Hoon Chowkidar', and Air India printing tickets and boarding passes with Narendra Modi's image and 'Vibrant Gujarat' on them. It took up a complaint from traders in Delhi about Gujarati cloth in Delhi's wholesale markets being sold in wrappers emblazoned with the Prime Minister's image and the BJP's party symbol.

It has written to *Doordarshan* about airing the PM's 'Main bhi chowkidar' programme. It has pulled up Yogi Adityanath for calling the Army 'Modiji ka sena', though it has not pulled up the PM for saying that Rahul Gandhi was contesting in Wayanad because it is a Hindu minority constituency — a statement factually incorrect. The EC remains oddly unsure, at the time of writing, about whether a movie about Mr Modi's life

and accomplishments, whose makers have links to the BJP, should or should not be allowed to run just before voting begins.

The thorny issue of *NaMo TV*, which spews propaganda 24/7, remains to be sorted. The channel has recently resurfaced after its pre-election run last year. Its content — compilations of the PM's speeches and promotions of the BJP's schemes and programmes — is available to all channels on the direct to home network. *NaMo TV* is on air despite having no licence or certification. The EC sought a report from the I&B ministry, which said it was merely an advertising platform paid for by the BJP; the Tata Sky CEO tweeted that the feed comes from the BJP. He also said that the earlier Tata Sky tweet describing the channel as a "Hindi news service" was wrong, that it is a "Special Services" channel, and that for more information approach the client, i.e. the BJP. These contortions make it look shady, even though it may well be within the rules for *NaMo TV* to operate. However, its ownership, and liability for content, remains unclear.

But the Election Commission's greatest challenge probably lies in the governing party's vast network of social media pages and handles, which purport to be independent citizens' groups with no visible link to the BJP, but which receive funds from the party