

Why is the yardstick of secularism only used for us? What is Mamataji doing? Religious processions are being physically stopped... In Kerala, RSS workers are being killed cruelly. There has to be a holistic view"



WHY RAVI SHANKAR PRASAD

Contesting his first Lok Sabha election, from Patna Saheb constituency, Union minister Ravi Shankar Prasad argues that while the BJP has also been talking about its development work, the Opposition's suggestion that the attacks may have been engineered has made security an issue in these polls. Currently a Rajya Sabha

member, Prasad holds the important portfolios of Law and IT in the NDA government and is its face when it comes to tackling contentious issues. The 64-year-old who began his career as a student leader and was also jailed during the Emergency, is confident that the BJP will win the Lok Sabha polls "convincingly"



"We are not saying you can't raise questions. You can. But the narrative (that the Opposition is trying to create) is that the (Balakot) strikes were engineered by the government for political gains. It is regrettable"

RAVI SHANKAR PRASAD: The India of 2019 is not the India of the '90s. It's an aspirational India now. As the Minister for Information Technology, I see a new kind of aspiration in the youth. The way India has picked up on innovation... India has become the second biggest centre for mobile manufacturing. India is the second biggest start-up country in the world.

Also, the security of the country will figure prominently in the (election) discourse. The alarming regularity with which Congress leaders and their gurus have been challenging the whole narrative (of the Balakot aerial strikes) will also be a part of the public discourse.

We are quite hopeful of winning the elections conclusively and convincingly. People of India want Narendra Modi to be the Prime Minister once again. You can't remove someone when there is no alternative — no alternative programmes or no alternative leader. The people of India are very mature. They know how to distinguish between a Vidhan Sabha election and a Lok Sabha election. The people of India will ensure that the BJP-led NDA will come back to power in a very conclusive manner.

LIZ MATHEW: How different is the 2019 general election from 2014?

Before the 2014 election there was policy paralysis, stinking corruption and a sense of hopelessness. The 2019 election is backed by performance, expectation, India emerging as a global power, which was clear in the way countries supported India at the UN Security Council in our bid to get Masood Azhar listed (as a global terrorist). We have ensured the complete isolation of Pakistan. People see this as a continuation of 2014, with the addition of better performance and hope which the government and the Prime Minister have created.

LIZ MATHEW: What will be the main agenda in this election?

The issues in these elections will be development, economic growth, India being recognised by global industries. It will be about inclusive development which we have brought about. Nine crore people have benefited from the Ujjwala Yojana. We need to remember another statistic. From 1947 till we came to power, about 6.25 crore toilets were constructed in rural parts of India. In the last five years alone 10 crore (toilets) have been built.

Also, after the Pulwama terror attack, the manner in which opposition parties have raised questions, on the sacrifice of our jawans and the armed forces, which was designed to weaken their morale, has become an issue.

LIZ MATHEW: So will the issue of national security dominate the discourse in the run-up to polls?

I won't say that national security will be the only issue. It is an important issue. Nationalism will be an important issue. If an argument is made that the entire Pulwama tragedy was engineered for political consideration, it becomes an issue. But we have also been talking about development. We have talked about the job opportunities we have created in the country and what we have done for the farmers.

KRISHN KAUSHIK: Speaking of jobs, data from the National Sample Survey Office's Periodic Labour Force Survey 2017-18 has revealed that for the first time since 1993-94, the actual size of India's male workforce has shrunk.

I seriously question the methodology of this report. It is a draft report. What questions were asked? If you ask, do you have a job, and if you ask do you have a livelihood, the answers are bound to be different. I also read in your newspaper that job opportunities for urban women have grown.

Nearly 14 crore Indians have received Rs 7.8 lakh crore (as loans) under the Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana, of which four crore-plus are first-time entrepreneurs. Is it not employment and livelihood creation? So many roads have been constructed in rural parts, more than 100 kilometres of national highways... Around 73.50 lakh new subscribers were added to social security schemes of the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation last year.

Nearly 127 mobile phone manufacturing units have become operational in 2018 as compared to only two in 2014. In Noida and Greater Noida (where these units have come up), nearly five-six lakh people have got employment. So many airports and Metros have been added. All villages have been electrified. The economy is the fastest-growing economy in the world. Does it mean that no employment opportunity has been created? I regret to say that the NSSO data does not capture this.

KRISHN KAUSHIK: You said the Opposition is questioning the armed

'There is no alternative leader... Indians know how to distinguish between state, LS polls. BJP will win'

Union Minister for Law and Information Technology Ravi Shankar Prasad questions methodology of NSSO survey, clarifies the govt stand on judicial appointments, says Women's Reservation Bill needs debate and calls for Ram temple hearing to be expedited



Union Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad with Associate Editor Liz Mathew in The Indian Express newsroom. Renuka Puri

forces. What is wrong with that?

They are not questioning the armed forces but the very authenticity of the Balakot strikes; it's different. The Foreign Secretary has made the Government of India's official statement. The Air Chief has held a press conference confirming the strikes. Not a single country in the world has questioned the strike. When you say that give me evidence of the strikes then you are seeking to question the entire narrative. That has clear implications on morale. We need to trust our forces. That's all we are saying. We are not saying you cannot raise questions. You can question. It's an accountable government. The narrative (that the Opposition is trying to create) is that the attack was engineered by the government or the ruling party for political purposes and that Balakot was an extension of that. It is regrettable. Also, just to remind you, when Osama bin Laden was killed, did anyone ask the US where they buried him? They just released elementary sketches.

RISHI RAJ: There have been a series of dialogues with social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter on checking the spread of fake news and leak of users' data. However, there is no clarity on what the government has achieved so far.

We respect freedom of the press. I appreciate social media because it is a new empowerment tool for ordinary Indians. But the constitutional norms under Article 19 should also be kept in mind. So when a social media platform is used to promote radicalisation, terrorism, massacre, mayhem, we will be tough on them. They have realised it. We have also told them that if you abuse the data of Indians for collateral purposes, that will not be acceptable. The Election Commission is now on the job.

I had issued a warning to Mark Zuckerberg, a good friend of mine. The very next day he apologised. Cambridge Analytica was issued a notice. They replied to one and eloped thereafter. The matter is now with the CBI.

I had an interaction with WhatsApp. In the wake of lynchings, I asked them how was it that on the same day, on the same issue, at the same time, and in the same area, lakhs of the same message are being circulated. It's not rocket science to identify them. They have now limited forwarded messages to five. I also told them

to set up a grievance cell and office in India. They have agreed.

PRANAV MUKUL: There was a lot being done on the draft Personal Data Protection Bill, 2018. But it yet to see the light of the day.

The Bill required more concentration. I said that since the whole world was awaiting our data protection law, so we must concentrate. Don't forget that the Justice B N Srikrishna Committee submitted that report (draft Bill), we had two-three rounds of consultations... We needed some more consultation. I said if they want some more time, go ahead. I think we are coming back to power and then we will take care of it.

KAUNAIN SHERIFFM: The revised Memorandum of Procedure (MoP) on appointment of judges has not been finalised yet. We know that in at least seven appointments, especially names recommended for elevation by the collegiums of the high courts of Kerala and Allahabad, you have raised objections citing the proximity of some candidates to sitting judges and judicial officers, and asked for a wider pool of names. Will we see some of these criteria in the finalised MoP?

I think a judge should not be disqualified merely because of a relationship. That should not be the only criteria. If you are independently competent, then why not? That's our approach and I am very happy that the judiciary also has the same.

My approach to the MoP is very clear. There has to be a screening process based on suitability and merit. There must be a

corpus of competent people to choose from. There must be an institutional mechanism of screening — at the collegium, high court and Supreme Court. That job is still going on. We will discuss it again. I have never said that the appointments are bad, I wish to make that very clear.

RAVISH TIWARI: The Modi government seems to have a very tense relationship with the judiciary. Why are you so angry with them?

It's not about anger. We had mentioned in our manifesto that the present system of appointments should change. This has been said in three Law Commission reports as well. Also, the highest number of judicial appointments have happened in the last five years. The average appointment of high court judges since 1989 has been between 83-84. In 2016, there were 126 judges appointed to high courts — the highest in 30 years. There have been 110-115 (appointments) every year.

About the collegium architecture, the Supreme Court itself has said that the government has the right to seek reconsideration. And, whenever we have sought a reconsideration, it has been objective, fair and reasonable.

RAVISH TIWARI: But the government doesn't seem to respond to the judiciary's concerns. Last January, when four senior judges held a press conference and spoke out against the then chief justice, the government was silent. There was no attempt to address their concerns.

The government should not interfere

in the workings of the judiciary. The government must not at all interfere in the constitutional workings of the Supreme Court. I don't want to get into the circumstances under which (the press conference) was held. The concerns of the judiciary family should be settled in the family itself.

I did intervene in a definitive case. It was about the appointment of a judge to the Karnataka High Court against whom there were serious allegations of misbehaviour with a lady. There was a complaint against him. I said you will not be appointed till a fair enquiry is conducted.

KIRAN RATHEE: You mentioned the increase in mobile phone factories in India. But these are mostly assembling units. Real manufacturing isn't taking place here. Mostly Chinese companies are coming here to set up a base and many Indian companies are being pushed out of the market.

I differ with you on the point that these are only assembling units. Assembly is the initial process for manufacturing. Also, I don't agree that Indian companies are being pushed out. Overcoming hiccups is a part of the process and we will overcome them. If you have Chinese companies coming here then there are a lot of Indian companies in China too.

LIZ MATHEW: What do you make of all the hatred and negativity directed at minority communities and Muslims on social media?

We don't support it at all. When the lynchings were happening, the Prime Minister said, 'Unko mat maro, himmat hai toh mujhe maaro (Don't kill them. If you have the courage, kill me)'. It was a tough message and tough action has been taken.

But yes, why is the yardstick of secularism only used against us. What is Mamataji (Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee) doing in Bengal? The number of religious processions that have been physically stopped there... In Kerala RSS workers are being killed cruelly. Even Congress people are being killed. There has to be a holistic view. If you look at our record objectively... I have raised the issue of triple talaq. I thought women leaders such as Soniji (Gandhi) and Priyanka Gandhi will do more, but nothing. These are important issues.

LIZ MATHEW: But triple talaq affects less than 2 per cent of the Muslim

population. It's an important issue, but what about issues such as lack of social development and education that affect the community? Shouldn't the government focus on that?

You can't say why did you do this and not that. It's a gender equality and gender justice issue. Yes, we have to take care of other things as well. So many women have been covered under the Ujjwala Yojana, it also includes Muslim women. If two crore people in India have got the benefits of Ayushman Bharat, it also includes Muslims. Of the 14 crore Mudra Yojana beneficiaries, almost one-third are women, minorities and SC/STs. It is not from the perspective of getting votes. It is the duty of the government to take care of everyone.

ABANTIKA GHOSH: Speaking of gender quality, why has the women's reservation Bill not been passed yet?

It has been discussed. At the panchayat level, many of our states have given 50 per cent reservation to women. In municipalities too. In a first, the Prime Minister has given women pilots a chance to fly fighter planes. We have had BSF women on bullet motorcycles showing their riding prowess on Rajpath. There are other things as well, such as the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao Yojana.

Yes, there is a genuine divide (on the Bill). We need to build a consensus. Some believe that only OBC women should be given reservation. They believe that if there is blanket reservation, then only elite, educated women will occupy the positions. Some want reservation for OBC, SC/ST and other extremely backward castes also. We need to find answers to these questions. These issues need to be debated.

RAVISH TIWARI: For a long time now we have been hearing about Ram Lalla, 'mandir wahin banayenge (We will make the temple there)....

It's our firm commitment that a Ram Lalla temple should be erected. The matter is in the Supreme Court. Both the President and the Prime Minister have said that you have to achieve it through constitutional means. And yes, we would like the hearing to be expedited. In the case of Sabarimala, Section 377, urban Maoists, the hearing was expedited. This suit is 70 years old, and as a lawyer for Ram Lalla, I know that there is overpowering evidence available on which the argument to expedite the hearing can be made. I hope the court does that.



ACROSS THE AISLE



P CHIDAMBARAM

Congress manifesto takes battle to BJP

A 54-PAGE document has set the cat among the pigeons. That the BJP is a flock of pigeons — ignore the boast about a 56-inch chest — was proved by the apoplectic fit that seized the BJP after the release of the Congress party's Election Manifesto (CEM) for the 2019 Lok Sabha elections.

The BJP has not released its manifesto yet. The first phase of polling is on April 11, barely four days from Sunday. I suspect that the BJP is revising its draft manifesto hurriedly to counter the Congress's. That is good. Let the BJP engage in a battle of ideas. So far, the BJP has relied on hyper-nationalism and abuse. I would welcome it if the BJP shifts its campaign to ideas and arguments

party's manifesto was attacked so vehemently by the ruling party. It raises the question, why? What has got the goat of the BJP? I can think of a few things that must have riled the BJP. First, the promise of jobs. Unemployment is at a 45-year high of 6.1 per cent. There were obvious and immediate solutions but, ignoring the obvious, Mr Modi promised to create 2 crore jobs a year. That promise has returned to haunt the BJP. Instead of creating jobs, the BJP government destroyed jobs through demonetisation and a flawed GST.

Extension Services, repeal the Agricultural Produce Markets Act, replace the Essential Commodities Act, and set up a College of Agriculture and a College of Veterinary Sciences in every district of the country. NOT SHYING AWAY The CEM did not shy away from addressing issues that are sensitive. For women, it promised the passage of the women's reservation Bill and reservation of one-third of all posts in the government. For SCs, STs and OBCs, it promised an Equal Opportunities Commission, more affirmative action and reservation in private higher education institutions.

the BJP supporting enforced disappearance, sexual violence and torture? Why is Section 124A (sedition), a colonial-era provision, necessary when Parliament has made the Defence of India Act and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act? It is apparent that the Congress has rediscovered its combative skills and was willing to take the fight to the BJP. I welcome the debate but I am disappointed that the Prime Minister's speeches are becoming shriller and shriller by the day. WANTED: BATTLE OF IDEAS The BJP has not released its manifesto yet. The first phase of polling is on April 11, barely four days from Sunday. I suspect that the BJP is revising its draft manifesto hurriedly to counter the CEM.

FIFTH COLUMN



TAVLEEN SINGH

Just feudal arrogance

THE THING I find most repugnant about socialist feudalism in our political parties is the sense of smug entitlement that it breeds in heirs. Nearly all the heirs who inherit political parties and careers (and there are too many) have this unfortunate quality, but none more so than Rahul Gandhi. And, why should he not? He is after all heir to the Dynasty that has ruled India for most of our years as an independent country.

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INSIDE TRACK



COOMI KAPOOR

OUT OF BACKROOM

When Amit Shah filed his nomination from Gandhinagar, it was described by some as his official coming out from the shadows of being a backroom operator. In fact, ever since Shah took over as party president in July 2014, he has exerted his authority and made clear that he is number two in the BJP's pecking order.

UNOFFICIAL ALLY

One of Amit Shah's bigger assets in Uttar Pradesh is not an official ally. Shivpal Yadav, Mulayam Singh's brother who formed a separate party, the Pragatisheel Samajwadi Party [Lohiya; PSP(L)] after splitting with the Samajwadi Party, is helping the BJP in more ways than one.

HEAVY DUTY ARMOUR

There is a new trend in politics in Uttar Pradesh, Delhi and Haryana. Netas contesting elections are hiring strapping bodybuilders as security guards. Most are dressed in black so that they resemble the SPG personnel who protect the Prime Minister.

MISSING PRADHAN

There has been a silent power shift in Odisha's BJP, which few in Delhi seem to have noticed. Petroleum Minister Dharmendra Pradhan is not standing for the Lok Sabha elections. Till recently BJP posters in Odisha displayed only two photographs, Narendra Modi and Pradhan, projected as a prospective chief minister.

A place called Wayanad

GAINED IN TRANSLATION



KALPETTA NARAYANAN കൽപ്പറ്റ നാരായണൻ

IF ELECTION is a big festival, in all its acoustical and visual glory it is taking place in Wayanad. Ending its centuries-old existence in the underground, Wayanad is putting up a booming parade. The world is scrambling up the ghat to Wayanad, which, until now, had to travel down to be a part of the mainstream, to partake in festivities. Wayanad is now in limelight not just because of its natural beauty, but also because of its political significance.

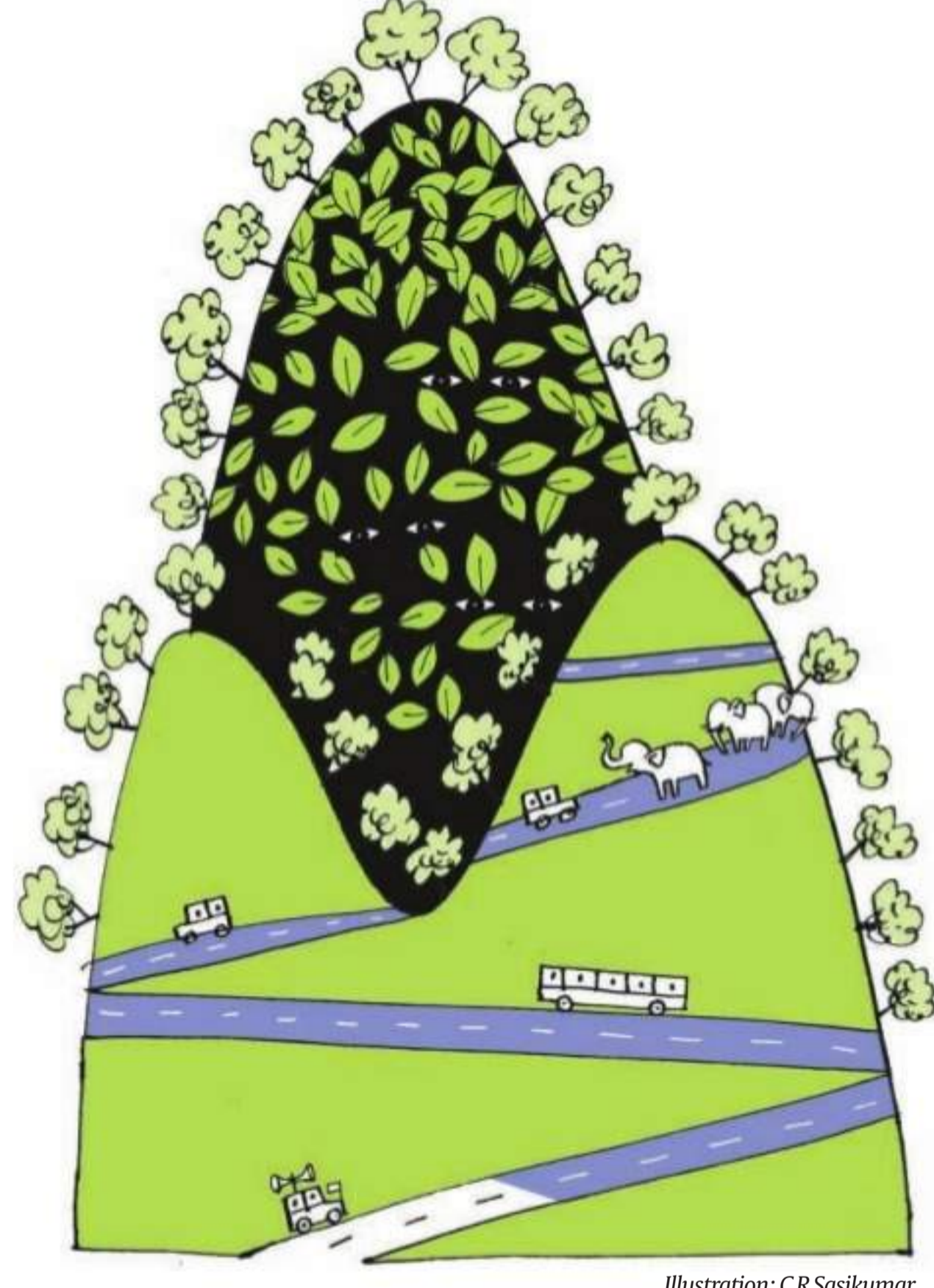


Illustration: C R Sasikumar

pansive of gardens on this Earth. Wayanad gets enveloped in the fragrance of coffee blooms. For some reason, Wayanad has never received the attention it deserves. Pilgrims in pursuit of beauty are still uncommon here. No one can understand Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath more than a resident of old Wayanad.

unlikely that there's another place where so many trees have been cut down. Nowhere else would so much money have been spent in the name of tribals. The diverse tribes of Wayanad, who almost make up the majority here, do not live a life of dignity and self-respect, unlike their counterparts in the Northeast.

OUT OF MY MIND



MEGHNAD DESAI

Rahul has claimed his legacy

its name was invariably in English which then was shortened to some jaw-breaking acronym, such as the MGNREGA. People turned that into 'Narega', but even then it makes no sense in any language. NYAY is different. It is Hindi or Sanskrit. You can see that someone must have gone through tortuous variations to arrive at such a striking title.

Yet the more surprising, indeed radical, policy move was what Rahul said during the manifesto launch. He said "We are all Hindu". It is difficult to recall that just five years ago, no Congress person or indeed any one in politics wedded to the Nehruvian Idea of India would let the word Hindu pass his lips.

Hindus, Muslims especially. To say that Hindu is anyone living in the land associated with the Indus was not enough for him. So he distinguished among the inhabitants of the Indus-land by the location of their holy place (punya bhumi), thus including Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, but excluding Muslims and Christians.

spect, the BJP has won the culture war. Atal Bihari Vajpayee was careful to keep his commitment to the RSS suitably hidden. Modi has not been shy, though nor has he used the word Hindutva in any public speech. The severe defeat in 2014 taught the Congress that they were losing out by being thought not as secular so much as pro-Muslim and, worse, anti-Hindu.

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