



Fighting together

The BSP, SP and RLD need to convince voters that they are on the same page

The chiefs of the Samajwadi Party-Bahujan Samaj Party-Rashtriya Lok Dal combine threw down the gauntlet to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party in Deoband in western Uttar Pradesh on Sunday. The scale and fiery rhetoric were clearly aimed at forcing the momentum as western U.P. constituencies go to the polls on April 11, in the first of a seven-phase parliamentary election in the State. The BJP and its partners had won 73 of 80 seats in U.P. in 2014, and the State is central to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's re-election bid. The political landscape in U.P., however, has changed significantly in the interim years, both in terms of party alliances and social realignments. Priyanka Gandhi Vadra's entry as a Congress strategist and campaigner has added new variables that could complicate electoral calculations in U.P. In this emergent situation in the State, the rally must have brought some reassurance to the triumvirate of Akhilesh Yadav, Mayawati and Ajit Singh, leaders of the SP, the BSP and the RLD, respectively. Mr. Yadav has been unambiguous in his deference to Ms. Mayawati, and they have been at pains to emphasise that they are reading from the same page, as coherence between the SP and BSP leaderships is crucial for vote transfer of their core supporters.

Ms. Mayawati is an icon of Dalit empowerment, and since the 1990s has often been deft in building social alliances around her core vote. Mr. Yadav is the inheritor of the rump of Socialist (Lohiaite) politics in the Hindi belt, which has been reduced to a purely caste-based entity around the SP's Yadav support. Both could be characterised as part of social justice politics, but the accent and rhetoric of their respective politics are dissimilar. Their opposing positions on the use of English is a case in point – the SP has been rather late in blunting its anti-English edge, while the BSP's Ambedkarite politics considers it as a tool of empowerment. Though the SP and the BSP had an alliance in the mid-1990s, they had parted ways bitterly, with an SP mob even trying to physically harm Ms. Mayawati. The rout in the 2014 Lok Sabha and 2017 U.P. Assembly elections have forced a rethink in their adversarial politics. Equally striking is Mr. Yadav's outreach to the BSP, compared to his father Mulayam Singh Yadav's. Both parties are conscious that recovering the support of their larger social constituencies, the backward castes and Dalits, which were drifting towards the BJP in the past five years with a new format of social empowerment through Hindutva, is crucial. However, since the Assembly elections, old caste cleavages have deepened under upper-caste Hindutva assertion. By joining hands with the RLD, which has a Jat base in western U.P., and reaching out to Muslims forcefully, the two parties are seeking to draw voters with a show of winnability.

Maldivian wave

President Solih consolidates power with his MDP's victory in parliamentary polls

The administration of Maldives President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih has received a shot in the arm with the parliamentary election held over the weekend. His Maldivian Democratic Party is poised to garner more than 60 out of 87 seats, paving the way for easy passage of bills and a policy agenda with a realistic chance of implementation. Mr. Solih, whose pro-democracy government assumed power after a presidential election in September 2018, has sought to break with the regime of his predecessor Abdulla Yameen, which had propelled the Indian Ocean nation into Beijing's economic embrace, described by some as "debt-trap diplomacy". While Mr. Solih was quick to signal the shift in his government's priorities, not least by ensuring that Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the chief guest at the presidential inauguration, his agenda has been hobbled by resistance from lawmakers on certain bills aimed at the previous administration. Specifically, Parliament Speaker Qasim Ibrahim, the head of the Jumhooree Party, a coalition partner of the MDP, declined to support a vote on a bill aimed at recouping stolen assets and looking into unresolved murders. With the election throwing up a single-party majority, Mr. Solih can push through his agenda with fewer stumbling blocks.

So far as India's interests in the Indian Ocean Region are concerned, warm bilateral ties between New Delhi and Male are a high priority after five years of strategic drift that benefited Beijing considerably. According to some analyses, the surging influx of Chinese infrastructure investment under the Yameen administration may have caused the Maldives' national debt to balloon to nearly a quarter of its GDP. As it seeks to unravel this web of Chinese loans, the new leadership has promised that what is owed would be paid. However, the honouring of such debt, especially where it was linked to the grant of land, lease rights and mega-construction projects, will be complicated. As Mr. Solih grapples with these challenges, the assurance that the Maldives has New Delhi's backing would be vital. Already, the elements of a strategic reset with India seem to be falling into place. When Mr. Solih visited India in December, a \$1.4 billion financial assistance package for the Maldives was announced, and the two governments agreed to exempt holders of diplomatic and official passports from visa requirements. MoUs on Indian grant aid for "high-impact community development projects" have been signed, as also agreements on clean energy and regional maritime security. So long as the new government presses on with the urgent task of rebuilding and deepening the Maldives' democratic credentials, there is hope for political stability and economic development across the 1,192-island archipelago and the wider IOR.

Open up the Supreme Court

A judiciary confident of its place in a democratic republic must not worry about public scrutiny of judicial appointments



GAUTAM BHATIA

Almost 10 years ago, on September 2, 2009, the High Court of Delhi handed down a landmark judgment dealing with the fledgling Right to Information (RTI) Act. It held that the Office of the Chief Justice of India (CJI) was a "public authority", and therefore, subject to the provisions of the Act. Information held by the CJI – including, in the context of the case, information about judges' assets – could be requested by the public through an RTI application. In ringing words, Justice Ravindra Bhat declared that the RTI was a "powerful beacon, which illuminates unlit corners of state activity, and those of public authorities which impact citizens' daily lives, to which they previously had no access".

The Supreme Court appealed against this judgment, and the case eventually wound its way to the Supreme Court, where a stay was granted, and matters remained in limbo for a few years. Earlier this month, however, a five-judge Bench of the court finally heard the case on merits, and reserved judgment. By this time, the issues under consideration involved not only Justice Bhat's ruling on the status of the Chief Justice as a public authority and the disclosure of judges' assets, but also the question of whether the correspondence of the Collegium (the body of judges that selects and makes appointments to the higher judiciary) was subject to the RTI.

The basic question

The basic question, i.e. whether or not the Office of the CJI is subject

to the RTI Act, has an easy answer: yes. As Justice Bhat correctly observed in the High Court judgment, "all power – judicial power being no exception – is held accountable in a modern Constitution". A blanket judicial exemption from the RTI Act would defeat the basic idea of "open justice": that the workings of the courts, as powerful organs of state, have to be as transparent and open to public scrutiny as any other body. Nor would bringing the judiciary under the RTI Act destroy the personal privacy of judges: as the High Court judgment noted, the RTI Act itself has an inbuilt privacy-oriented protection, which authorises withholding the disclosure of personal information unless there is an overriding public interest. While disclosure of assets is arguably justified by an overriding public interest, medical details or information about marital status, for example, are clearly not. There will always be borderline cases, of course, but that only calls for nuanced and fine-grained analysis of such cases, nothing more.

The Collegium

During the hearings, however, the question most at issue involved the disclosure of the correspondence of the Collegium. The Collegium includes the five senior-most judges of the Supreme Court, who collectively constitute the selection panel for judicial appointments to the Supreme Court (and the three senior-most judges when it comes to the High Courts). India is one of the few countries where judges have the last word on judicial appointments, through the mechanism of the Collegium. The Collegium itself is not mentioned in the text of the Constitution: it arose out of a judgment of the Supreme Court, and in response to increased executive interference in judicial appointments, particu-



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larly during Indira Gandhi's regime.

The Collegium began life, therefore, as a tool to secure and guarantee the independence of the judiciary. In 2015, the Supreme Court struck down a constitutional amendment establishing a National Judicial Appointments Commission, which would have replaced the Collegium. A majority of the five-judge Bench held that judicial primacy in appointments was the only constitutionally-authorized way of securing/ensuring judicial independence against an increasingly powerful political executive.

Through this time, however, the Collegium had come under increasing criticism. A major point of critique was its opacity: it was increasingly being perceived that judicial appointments were too often made in an ad hoc and arbitrary manner. Perhaps the most vivid example of this was when former Supreme Court Justice Markandey Katju admitted that, as the Chief Justice of the Allahabad High Court, he had refused to recommend a High Court lawyer for judgeship because that lawyer was in a live-in relationship without being married. One may wonder what connection there is between a lawyer's marital status and his ability to discharge judicial functions, but this was, at any rate, a stark example of what the critics

had in mind. Indeed, the Supreme Court's own NJAC judgment acknowledged this critique, and vowed to evolve a system where concerns of transparency were addressed. A small step towards this was made during Dipak Misra's tenure as CJI, when the resolutions of the Collegium began to be published online.

It is in this context that we must examine the arguments of the Attorney-General of India, who represented the Supreme Court before the Constitution Bench. The AG argued that disclosing the correspondence of the Collegium would "destroy" judicial independence. The CJI seemed to agree, noting that disclosing the reasons for rejection of a judge would "destroy" his or her life or career.

This is, however, a bewildering argument, when we consider that the Collegium system was specifically put in place by the Supreme Court in order to guarantee judicial independence. It is rather self-serving to argue, first, that there is only one permissible method to secure judicial independence – and that is through ensuring judicial primacy in the appointments process – and then to argue that the only permissible way in which this system can work is by making it immune to transparency. The Supreme Court cannot eat its cake and have it too: if it has instituted a process of appointment that makes itself the final arbiter of judicial appointments, then it must also ensure that that same process meets the standards of accountability in a democratic republic.

Indeed, a look at judicial appointments elsewhere suggests that transparency in appointments is integral to the process. In the United States, for example, candidates for judicial appointments in the federal judiciary are subjected to public confirmation hearings by the Senate. In Kenya

and South Africa, the interviews of candidates taken by judicial appointments commissions are broadcast live. The public, thus, is in a position to judge for itself the selection process. This is crucial to maintaining public faith in the impartiality of the institution.

The Collegium, however, has immunised itself from any form of public scrutiny. The nomination process is secret, the deliberations are secret, the reasons for elevation or non-elevation are secret. This creates an extremely unhealthy climate, in which rumours become staple, and whispers about executive interference are exchanged in court corridors. CJI Ranjan Gogoi's publicly stated concern that "in the name of transparency, you cannot destroy an institution" betrays a refusal to engage with the manner in which institutions are actually destroyed: in an insidious and incremental manner, through the slow drip-drip erosion of trust.

Open to sunlight

"Sunlight is the best disinfectant" is a trite and overused phrase. In the context of public scrutiny of the Supreme Court, however, it is an apt one. The Collegium's recent decisions to recommend a set of names for elevation, and then hastily backtrack on them without any publicly stated reasons, dealt a serious blow to its reputation for impartiality and independence. The only way to salvage this is to open up the court. A judiciary that is confident of itself and of its place in the democratic republic should not be worried about subjecting judicial appointments to public scrutiny. The occasional discomfort that might come from the harsh public glare is more than outweighed by the cleansing value of transparency.

Gautam Bhatia is a Delhi-based lawyer

Playing politics over the Golan Heights

U.S. recognition of Israeli sovereignty is a challenge to the rules-based international order



ARUN K. SINGH

On March 21, U.S. President Donald Trump upended another long-standing American policy, tweeting: "After 52 years it is time for the United States to fully recognize Israel's Sovereignty over the Golan Heights, which is of critical strategic and security importance to the State of Israel and Regional Stability!"

Third pro-Israel step

This was another major pro-Israel step Mr. Trump has taken as President. On May 8, 2018, he had walked out of the 2015 JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) with Iran, negotiated by the Obama administration with provisions for sanctions relief in response for Iranian restrictions on its nuclear programme. Israel had opposed the agreement and any sanctions relief for Iran, seeing a continuing threat to itself from Iran's growing presence in Syria, its support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, its refusal to recognise Israel's right to exist, and its military capabilities.

Before that, on December 6, 2017, in a speech from the White House, Mr. Trump had declared: "I have determined that it is time to officially recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel." He also pro-

ceeded to close the Palestinian office in Washington DC, as well as U.S. consulate in Jerusalem dealing with the Palestinian Authority.

Hitherto, U.S. policy had been that any formalisation of status changes on the ground, following Israel's victory and gains in the 1967 Israel-Arab conflict, could only flow from negotiations among parties concerned. UN Security Council Resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973) had asserted inadmissibility of acquisition of territory by force, and called for Israeli withdrawal. UNSCR 497 (1981) had declared that "Israel's decision to impose its laws, jurisdiction and administration in the occupied Syrian Golan Heights is null and void and without international legal effect".

Mr. Trump's decisions have a bearing on U.S. and Israeli domestic politics. The American Jewish community, traditionally around 65% Democratic, has grown in its support for him, despite an increase in anti-Semitism within the U.S. because of his encouragement to right-wing groups. His base among Evangelical Christians backs Israel. Some of the major contributors to his campaign are also ardent supporters of Israel. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, facing a tough election on April 9, and under threat of indictment for corruption and misdemeanour, is touting his influence on Mr. Trump as having potential for further gains for Israel. To consolidate right-wing support for himself, he just announced that if re-elected he



AFP

would not carry out any withdrawal of Israeli settlements from the West Bank, putting an end to the "land for peace" formula advocated since the Camp David Accords of 1979.

Faced with international opposition, Israel and its supporters have, in the past too, leveraged the support of the leading global power of the time to advance their cause. On November 2, 1917, Lord Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary, declared that "His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people". This eventually led to the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, despite Palestinian and Arab opposition. In an April 14, 2004 letter to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, U.S. President George W. Bush stated that "in light of new realities on the ground, including already existing major Israeli population centers, it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949" (position before the 1967 conflict). This has been interpreted by many in Israel as beginning of the process of establishing the legitimacy

of Israeli/Jewish settlements in the West Bank, and denting the viability of a fully sovereign and contiguous Palestinian state. Mr. Netanyahu's latest announcement would take this another step further. In Israeli political discourse, which has moved over time to the right, many now question the possibility of a two-state solution. The constraint for Israel is that its goal of a democratic and Jewish state would be difficult to achieve in a one-state solution with current near equal proportions of Arab and Jewish populations.

Mr. Trump's announcement on Golan Heights goes a step further. The Syrian Golan was part of the French post-World War I mandate, and hence technically not covered by the Balfour Declaration. Mr. Trump is now seeking to extend recognition of Israeli sovereignty to an area beyond Balfour, beyond the UN partition plan for Palestine in the 1940s, and beyond the outcome of the 1948/49 Arab-Israeli conflict.

In his proclamation of March 25, issued in presence of the visiting Israeli Prime Minister, Mr. Trump cited Israeli security interests and regional threats. The present situation in Syria is no doubt a factor. The U.S. wants to draw down its military presence, Russia and Iran have significantly enhanced their presence and influence. Israel is concerned about Iranian presence beyond Golan in Syria and that of Hezbollah on the Lebanese side. It has repeatedly targeted Iranian positions and supplies, including to Hezbollah.

Following Mr. Trump's announcement, U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton tweeted that to allow Golan Heights "to be controlled by the likes of the Syrian or Iranian regimes would turn a blind eye to the atrocities of Assad and the destabilizing presence of Iran in the region".

Tepid global response

The new U.S. position has not received support from any other country, including its European allies. While Iran, Russia, Turkey, among others, have been critical, the Arab response has been assessed as insufficiently strident. This is no doubt a reflection of reduced influence in Washington, with greater U.S. leverage on oil supplies, divisions among Arab countries over Qatar, pressure on Saudi Arabia because of Yemen and the Jamal Khashoggi issue.

India's interests are not directly involved immediately. It has a strong and growing relationship with Israel, and has maintained its relations with Syria. Indian troops have been a part of UN peacekeeping presence on the Golan Heights. Mr. Trump's move, however, is indicative of shifting geopolitics in the West Asian region, with longer-term implications for India. It also asserts unilateralism, is a challenge to a rules-based international order, and is contrary to positions U.S. has taken elsewhere, as for instance in its response to Russia and Crimea.

Arun K. Singh has served as India's Ambassador to the U.S. and Israel

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Gandhiji and politics

If Mahatma Gandhi were alive today, he would have never participated in our elections, national especially. He was never a leader of a political party; rather, he was the undisputed leader of the masses. He never required votes to gain power. His immense power sprung from the belief of the masses in him. But, hypothetically, if he were to, it would be to fill the large moral vacuum in the political sphere (OpEd page, "If Gandhi were alive today", April 8). Politics today is devoid of values and morals. It is largely about money and power.

SANDEEP SETHIA,
Mandsaur, Madhya Pradesh

■ Gandhiji predominantly based his leadership on secular principles and nation-building and not for any material gains or personal aggrandisement. The difference today is that political parties want to grab power by hook or by crook, which includes buying votes.

E.S. CHANDRASEKARAN,
Chennai

■ Young voters – like me – who are about to cast their first votes in these elections must note that Gandhian politics can alter our political parties. Most of the changes would be seen in the organisation of the Congress party itself as Gandhiji was strongly opposed to dynastic politics. Overall, it is foolish to expect our politicians to

ever follow Gandhiji in spirit.

KIRAN BABASAHEB RANSING,
New Delhi

■ In the current political era of coalition, competitive and unprincipled politics, it would be difficult for political parties to follow what is right and of long-term significance; anything which gives instant gratification to the masses works well.

Gandhiji is obviously well respected and studied but not followed because his ways were hard and do not suit the game of contemporary power politics. But why point a finger at our politicians, who only show the mirror to us; they are an integrated and extended part of us and

reflect the thinking of our societies at large. We as a society have to grow and evolve with maturity to see a future built on the principles of justice, equality, truth and peace. It is only then, with time, that we can demand and deserve disciplined politics from our leaders.

SALMAN MAHMOOD,
Noida, Uttar Pradesh

LPG and rural health

The data on a meagre 27% of the population under the Ujjwala Yojana using gas exclusively are discouraging and are a call for immediate intervention ("About 85% of Ujjwala beneficiaries in 4 States still use earthen stoves", April 8). This must be viewed in the backdrop of air pollution primarily

attributed to indoor pollution caused due to conventional *chula* use. Factors that must be considered are the possible high cost of a refill as well as the unavailability of an LPG cylinder in rural India. A point in the report, of a common misconception that "eating food cooked on gas causes gas in the stomach", can be tackled with proper awareness. The health and well-being of women in rural India are important.

N. VIJAI,
Coimbatore

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

An FAQ page story (April 7, 2019), on whether electoral bonds had reduced anonymous cash donations, erroneously said that prior to 2017, registered parties had to declare all donations made to them of over ₹2,000. It should have been ₹20,000.

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INTERVIEW | ABDULLA SHAHID

'India-Maldives relations have never been better'

The Maldivian Foreign Minister on the folly in playing India and China against each other

MEERA SRINIVASAN

For Maldivians, the election of President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih in September 2018 meant a possible opening up of democratic space in the country, after former President Abdulla Yameen's term, which was marked by an authoritarian slant. It also meant reconnecting with many countries with which Male's relationship had turned rather tense in those years, particularly India. In an interview in Male, Maldivian Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid talks about how Maldives sees its role in the region, and its relationship with the world. Excerpts:



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Since your government came to power, India-Maldives ties have undergone a dramatic change, marked by renewed cooperation, close dialogue and multiple high-level visits from both sides. How do you view the changing dynamic?

■ Since the new government came in, we have had very high-level visits. Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended President Solih's swearing-in ceremony. I was in New Delhi a week after taking office, preparing for the visit of President Solih, who was in Delhi a month after being sworn in. The recent visit by External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj cemented many aspects of the cooperation agenda we have been drawing up.

The level of cooperation between the two countries has never been better. We are continuously in contact, we speak to each other at the highest levels whenever there seems to be any difficulty, which is very rare. That is because the leaders have shown where they would like the [relationship between the] two countries to go. And for us Ministers and staff of the ministries in both countries, it is a question of delivering. We have to deliver.

The generous development assistance provided by the Indian government is deeply appreciated by the people of the Maldives. It is going into people-oriented projects like providing fresh water, sanitation, sewerage. Building roads and moving the Male commercial harbour to Thilafushi [island west of Male] are huge projects that are going to be major symbols of cooperation between the two countries.

Between 2013 and 2018, then-President Yameen's administration was seen as tilting heavily towards China amid growing tensions with India. Given that China has also been an important partner for the Maldives and the latter's strategic location in the Indian Ocean, how does the geopolitical tussle between the two big powers affect the Maldives?

■ The mistake President Yameen made was to play India against China and China against India. That is a childish way of dealing with international relations; it will blow up in your own face. And that is what happened. No one trusted him.

For us it is very clear. India and the Maldives might be very different, but the respect we have for each other is the main factor behind the friendship. Look at people-to-people contact. You have so many Maldivians living in India. We have so many Indians living in the Maldives. At times of need, we have always seen India as the first respondent. And that is something that the people of the Maldives really appreciate. On November 3, 1988, when mercenaries attacked the Maldives, India was the first to respond. In 2004, when the tsunami hit us, Indian naval ships were despatched to assist us. During the last government's term, we had the Male water crisis. Within four hours we had Indian Navy and Air Force vessels deliver water.

Of course, China has been a good friend, it has helped in many of the development projects in the Mal-

Power comes from the people and once people in large numbers start saying no to ultra-nationalism and hate politics, then we will be able to move forward.

dives. China is also going to be one of the largest economies in the world. We can't say that we will not have any relations with China because we have to appreciate what countries do for the people. If we have to choose between friends, or if we are forced to choose between friends, then we can't see our relationship go very far. Because of the geopolitical location of the Maldives, the government has a huge responsibility, which is to provide freedom of maritime trade in the Indian Ocean. The Eight Degree Channel is one of the major maritime lanes of the world. We need stability, maturity and democratic systems to function in the Maldives so that peace and security can be maintained in the Indian Ocean.

The issue of India-gifted helicopters in the Maldives has remained politically sensitive, especially since the Yameen government asked New Delhi to withdraw them. Among the people, is there a sense that a big neighbour might be trying to wield influence here?

■ I think there are a few people who are trying to spread hatred. All I have seen these two helicopters do is humanitarian work. They transport children, or elderly people, or some-

one who has suffered a stroke for immediate medical attention. Our islands are many and very widespread. We need this kind of assistance. I would ask the hate-mongers to go and speak to the families, who are very grateful. The helicopters are under the control of the Maldivian security services and much of what the hate-mongers say are lies.

What about the physical presence of the Indian military personnel? Is that a reason for discomfort for some?

■ For these hate-mongers it is. But it is not the first time we are having technical people on the ground from different countries. These are not military personnel stationed in barracks. There is no military presence of any foreign force in the Maldives.

Earlier, you pointed to renewed dynamism in Male-New Delhi relations. More broadly, what is your vision for the Maldives's relationship with the rest of the world?

■ The Maldives has been alienated in the past five years. The foreign policy of the [then] government was so one-sided that the credibility of the country was eroded.

During the last three months, President Solih visited India and the UAE. Since I was appointed Foreign Minister, I have met Foreign Ministers, Ambassadors, Presidents, Prime Ministers and Vice-Prime Ministers of 50 countries so far. I utilise my travels to conferences, to the UN and other meetings to connect with other countries so that they will understand that the Maldives is back.

How do you see the political landscape in the region changing?

■ We are a government that came to office promising reform and people-oriented development, both social and economic. Once we start implementing these reforms, they will realise that democracy functions. And in a democracy, we would have room for dissent, but you don't have to go to the extreme. You don't have to buy into hatred in order to attain power. Power comes from the people and once people in large numbers start saying no to ultra-nationalism and hate politics, then we will be able to move forward.

Locking horns with the wrong party in Wayanad

The Congress has failed to realise the meaning and scope of the great struggle to save India



BINOY VISWAM

In 2008, the Left parties withdrew support to the first United Progressive Alliance government (UPA-I). The Left parties insisted on implementing the Common Minimum Programme. UPA-I formulated policies for the common people solely because the Left took a stance. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the Forest Rights Act, and the Right to Information Act, among others, found a place in its agenda because of the Left. The Congress had thought up none of these laws.

UPA-II was under no such duress. A government that did not have the burden of a Common Minimum Programme or Left support soon found itself in a cesspool of corruption – seen in the coal scam, 2G spectrum scam and other scams – and anti-people policies. It was UPA-II that surrendered the right to fix the prices of petrol and diesel to oil companies.

There were political and policy-level differences between UPA-I and UPA-II. The differences at the policy level emerged over priorities about whose interests had to be protected.

Defining the enemy

In every decisive battle, a political party has to define its enemy. The Left has absolutely no doubt in this regard. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is being led by the fascist ideology of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), is its principal enemy. To uproot the BJP from power is the Left's paramount duty. The Left aims to increase its presence at the Centre and bring in a secular democratic government to rule the country. The complex situation at present guarantees that 2014 shall not be repeated. The BJP will not get a simple majority, nor will the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) secure such a brutal majority. There are many reasons to expect that India will see a hung Parliament. At such a critical juncture, the Left staunchly maintains its prime position in the array of forces fighting the BJP. The Congress should have played a significant role in this fight. But how many of its leaders are able to understand this crucial political scenario? Many Congress leaders are moving to the BJP. If

we get a hung Parliament after this election, how many of the Congress's MPs will withstand the temptation to move to the BJP? Nobody has an answer.

The Congress has been struggling to find its way in the political arena. It is unable to see the truth on the ground and take a stand. The same Congress that lashed out against the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi has chosen to field its president against a Left party candidate in Wayanad, Kerala. It is not aware of the actual stage of contest that we are in against the BJP. Instead of fighting its arch enemy, the Congress has come to Wayanad to lock horns with the Left. The BJP does not have a candidate in Wayanad; Thushar Vellappally from the Bharat Dharma Jana Sena is contesting against Congress president Rahul Gandhi. The BJP does not have a prominent presence in Kerala. Then why should Mr. Gandhi contest from Wayanad against the Left Democratic Front candidate P.P. Suneer instead of contesting against Mr. Modi?

It is in this context that UPA-I and UPA-II are being brought back into focus. UPA-I could be formed only because of the unflinching anti-BJP stance taken by the Left. The UPA-I experiment came to a close because the Left opposed the India-U.S. civil nuclear deal. The monumental failures of UPA-II and its flawed policies paved the way for the NDA to come to power.

The meaning of this election

During the Modi government's tenure, most of the time the Congress could not even be an effective Opposition party. When the general election was announced, the party made feeble efforts to talk about poverty and the troubles of the common people. It sparingly mentioned the need for a union of secular democratic forces.

The Congress is failing to realise the meaning, seriousness and scope of the great struggle that has been launched for saving the nation. It is distancing itself from its Nehru-Gandhi legacy. This is rendering it myopic to the extent of not even recognising the predominant enemy. The Nehruvian vision has never justified blind hostility to the Left. It is an approach that makes happy only those forces which do not want the Left to gain strength in Indian politics. Mr. Gandhi's arrival in Wayanad, where the BJP has no candidate, leaves a deep scar on the Nehruvian spirit. The party will have to pay heavily for it.

Binoy Viswam is a Rajya Sabha member representing the Communist Party of India

SINGLE FILE

Crorepatis in Parliament

A rich people's club is governing a largely poor country

SATYA NAAGESH AYYAGARY



It is an interesting facet of a changing India: there are ever greater numbers of crorepatis in the Lok Sabha, as well as among those who aspire to become MPs. According to the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), 430 out of the 521 sitting MPs in the Lok Sabha have assets worth more than ₹1 crore. In other words, 83% of our lawmakers are crorepatis. That makes them a rich people's club governing a largely poor country.

There was a time when members of most legacy business and industrial houses of the country stuck to their business of doing business and left politics to politicians. During the License Raj, politicians were content accepting donations from businessmen or seeking jobs for their kin. But business and politics never intersected with each other. However, there were exploratory undercurrents across the dividing line.

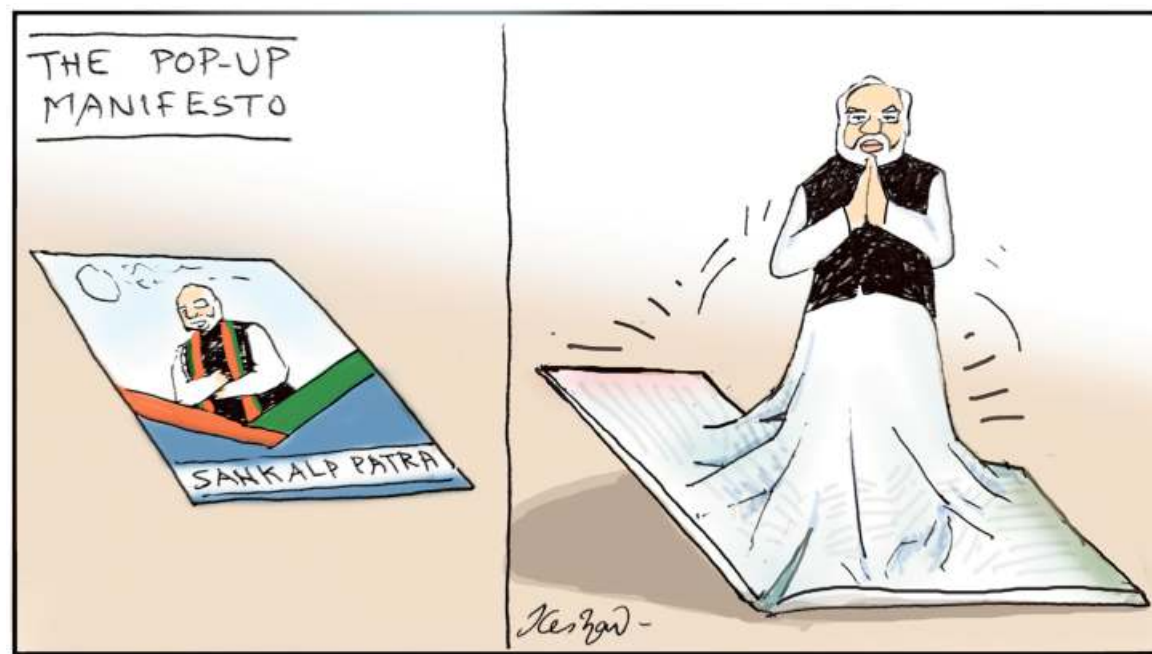
Come 1991, that changed. Liberalisation altered India's economic present and future. There was a permanent severance from the country's socialist economic past. The nouveau riche saw politics and political power as a means to first secure and then expand their business interests. It is a truism that business and politics share a symbiotic relationship. Today, they have almost become one, necessitating a new definition of businessman-politician or politician-businessman. The hyphenation is not semantic or syntactical, but reflects the emergence of a new class.

Some examples

Konda Vishweshwar Reddy, an engineer-turned-businessman-turned-politician and former Telangana Rashtreeya Samithi (TRS) MP, is now the Congress candidate from Chevella, near Hyderabad. His declared family assets are over ₹895 crore (the major share of which belongs to his wife). Nama Nageswar Rao, the TRS candidate from Khammam Lok Sabha seat who is a former Telugu Desam Party (TDP) MP, is the founder of Madhucon Projects. He was among the richest Lok Sabha candidates in the 2014 elections with declared assets worth ₹338 crore. In Andhra Pradesh, Jaydev Galla of the TDP is the managing director of Amara Raja Batteries and has declared assets worth over ₹600 crore. These are just a few crossover examples. There are of course plenty of examples from other States too.

As Walter Annenberg, American businessman and diplomat, posited, "The greatest power is not money power but political power." It suffices to say that the heady mix of economic and political power is even more intoxicating than either of its stand-alone constituents.

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DATA POINT

Voter turnout patterns

A region-wise analysis of voter turnouts in the last 10 Lok Sabha polls reveals significant variations. Many seats in West Bengal consistently saw higher turnouts, while J&K was on the other side of the spectrum. By Vignesh Radhakrishnan

The table segregates Lok Sabha seats into various voter turnout ranges. For instance, in the last 10 Lok Sabha polls clubbed together, 39% seats in Bihar saw a turnout between 50% and 55%, 23% seats saw a turnout between 55% and 60%, and so on

State	TURNOUT %																		
	0 to <5	5 to <10	10 to <15	15 to <20	20 to <25	25 to <30	30 to <35	35 to <40	40 to <45	45 to <50	50 to <55	55 to <60	60 to <65	65 to <70	70 to <75	75 to <80	80 to <85	85 to <90	
NORTH																			
J&K	5	2	5	5	0	17	0	14	10	12	10	0	2	12	2	5	0	0	
Punjab	0	1	3	1	3	1	0	2	1	3	31	21	18	14	3	0	0	0	
Himachal	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	50	34	9	6	0	0	0	0	
Haryana	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	29	35	20	6	0	0	0	
Uttarakhand	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	33	40	7	7	7	0	0	0	0	
Delhi	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9	36	38	7	11	0	0	0	0	0	
WEST																			
Uttar Pradesh	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	15	27	42	7	2	1	0	0	0	0	
Rajasthan	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	7	13	23	37	14	6	1	0	0	0	0	
Gujarat	0	0	0	0	0	1	6	13	14	23	27	9	4	2	0	0	0	0	
Goa	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	19	6	31	19	0	6	13	0	0	0	
Maharashtra	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	7	16	41	19	9	3	0	0	0	0	
Jharkhand	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	12	48	21	10	5	0	0	0	0	
Bihar	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	6	9	39	23	12	6	2	0	0	0	
Odisha	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	10	33	18	20	10	6	1	0	0	
EAST																			
West Bengal	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	6	16	28	36	11	0	
Madhya Pradesh	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	5	10	16	45	13	5	2	0	0	0	0	
Chhattisgarh	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	18	33	12	12	12	6	0	0	0	
Assam	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	4	11	20	29	21	10	2	0	
NORTH EAST																			
Meghalaya	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	13	31	25	13	13	6	0	0	0	
Mizoram	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	38	38	13	13	0	0	0	0	
Sikkim	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	13	0	25	0	25	38	0	0	
Manipur	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	6	19	19	13	19	0	0	0	
Nagaland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	13	0	0	0	0	13	25	0	38	13	
Tripura	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	31	0	19	31	13	0	
SOUTH																			
Arunachal P.P.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	50	6	13	13	6	6	0	0	
Undivided A.P.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	15	18	27	18	14	6	0	0	
Karnataka	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	7	26	17	27	19	1	0	0	0	
Kerala	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	25	38	24	8	0	0	0	
Tamil Nadu	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	25	27	21	12	10	2	0	0	

Several seats in J&K saw turnouts in the lower ranges and most of these constituencies were in the Valley. In the 1989 polls, the Srinagar, Anantnag and Baramulla seats saw less than 6% turnout

Many seats in Punjab saw low turnouts in 1992, following a poll boycott called by various Akali Dal factions. But in the later years, the State saw good turnouts

SOURCE: TRIVEDI CENTRE FOR POLITICAL DATA

FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO APRIL 9, 1969

Artillery duel across Suez

The precarious West Asia peace was threatened on two fronts to-day [April 8] by rocket and air attacks on civilian targets and a furious artillery and tank battle. Arab irregulars, the Israel is said, unleashed a salvo of 25-30 Katyusha rockets from the Jordanian port of Aqaba on the Israeli resort of Eilat on the Red Sea. Shortly afterwards a full-scale battle erupted between entrenched Israeli and the United Arab Republic forces raged along the Suez Canal. The fighting lasted for more than three hours before U.N observers arranged a truce. Thirteen Israelis were wounded in the rocket onslaught. Defence Minister, Mr. Moshe Dayan, surveying the damage, charged that the Al Fatah guerrilla organisation launched the attack but that the Jordanian Government bore the responsibility.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO APRIL 9, 1919.

Wastage of Foodstuffs.

A message from some of the merchants of the Rajahamundry says: Referring to our previous communication regarding the detention of goods here, we regret to once again inform that only two-thirds of goods complained of in our previous communication were cleared and the remaining one-third of the quantity, about forty wagons of foodstuffs, Chollam, Toor, Chillies, etc., have been still lying mostly on open platform, exposed to sun, rain, thieves and white-ants. When last time we complained of these, our grievances were not fully made understood to the higher authorities. The G.T.M. may be pleased to ascertain these facts by sending one from his staff. Though this is a great business centre, we regret there is no goods shed. In the absence of a proper goods shed, the Railway authorities may have the kindness to pay special attention to avoid unaccountable loss to merchants.

POLL CALL

Party symbol

Every political party in India has a symbol, which enables voters to easily identify the party on the ballot. For example, the BJP's symbol is the lotus and the Congress's symbol is the hand. Party symbols are especially important to aid voters who cannot read. But candidates also go to great lengths to be identified with their election symbols. The Election Commission stipulates that no symbol should represent a religion or a caste. A party can submit a symbol of its choice to the EC for consideration. Else, the EC allots a symbol to the party. Though the elephant is the symbol of the BSP and the lion is the symbol of the Forward Bloc, the EC in 1991 stopped allowing parties to use animals as symbols after complaints from animal rights activists.

MORE ON THE WEB

Video: In conversation with Tamizhachi Thangapandian

http://bit.ly/TamizhachiInterview