

How many?



TICKER

MIHIR SHARMA

For months across India friends and colleagues have asked each other one question — a question that can substitute for a greeting, for an ice-breaker, to revive conversations that have stalled. It's a question that, in fact, doesn't even need to be spelled out in full. It is simply: How many?

How many seats will the BJP get? Nobody knows, of course, or may even be close — except the handful of pollsters sitting tight-lipped on exit polls from the first five phases. But most have a likely number in mind. More to the point, on that one number depends what the next five years will look like. So here is a rundown of what could happen, depending on that number.

272+: Another majority for the BJP alone means it will again have swept the Hindi heartland and probably made some major dents into the rest of India. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's place in history will be unique. He might have the political capital to move even faster on his agenda than he did in his first term. Modi will continue to be unhindered by the need to consult allies or even his own party. That said, he will know the repeat job came less from "vikas" talk and more from nationalism and polarisation — which would help set that agenda.

230-272: Even if the BJP falls short of a majority by a couple of dozen seats, it will still be an undisputed victory for Modi. He won 90 per cent of the 194 seats in the six largest states of the north and west in 2014; winning 230-272 would mean only a minor erosion of popularity in this area, which would still look solidly loyal to him. But, presumably, the BJP's inroads into the south and east would not have been completely successful. While Modi would remain undisputed in the ruling coalition, fractures within India — between areas now solidly identified with Modi-tinged Hindutva and those that will have rejected it twice — will continue to deepen.

210-230: The upper end of this range has long been my own answer to the "how much" question. It's logical: it would mean that opposition unity in Uttar Pradesh has dented the BJP's advance sufficiently for it to lose about half its seats in India's largest state, and that it has suffered a visible but not severe decline of its support across the rest of north and west India — in keeping with its close defeats in three states towards the end of last year. Modi's popularity will be seen as greater than that of his party, an argument he will use to try and remain firmly in command. Allies will line up, aside from those already in the NDA: most likely to join are the TRS in Telangana and perhaps Naveen Patnaik in Odisha and the YSR Congress in Andhra. But if Modi stays as PM, he will have less scope to manoeuvre. The allies will want to demonstrate to their voters that they are at least near-equal partners in governance. The PMO's centralisation of power within the Union government will have to be diluted.

190-210: More dicey territory. If the BJP just passes 200 or dips below it, Modi will find it hard to claim a resounding victory. The BJP and Congress fought head-to-head in about 200 constituencies in 2014; about 200 for the BJP in 2019 would mean that the Congress will have done much better than its 10 per cent strike-rate last time. In 2014, Modi won a majority on the back of decimating the Congress in head-to-head fights and on his spectacular sweep of both Bihar and UP. A total of 200 means neither of those has been repeated. However, given deep pockets and the BJP's still-commanding numbers — Modi may remain prime minister if he wishes. But a much broader alliance would be needed, probably including at least one component of the UP *mahagathbandan*, probably the Bahujan Samaj Party. This would be difficult to manage and organise, and Modi himself would have to credibly commit to reducing some of his power in office.

170-190: If the BJP falls significantly below the 200 mark — which I think is unlikely — it can still claim power, but in a genuine, Vajpayee-style coalition. In this case I suspect the allies will demand Modi be replaced as PM. Will he allow this? Or would he prefer to stay on the Opposition benches with these numbers? Nobody can predict his mind. But the Congress probably believes that if he takes power the coalition will be fractious enough that there will be another election in a couple of years, with Modi's image of strength significantly dented.

Below 170: Some believe this previously unthinkable result is possible. If so, then it would be an unmistakable defeat for the NDA generally, with the UPA likely rivalling its numbers or exceeding them. The question is: what now? Can the UPA, with say 160 on its own, put together a government? Perhaps not. In which case, we might be in a Third Front world. But who will support it from outside — Modi or Rahul Gandhi? My bet would be on Modi pulling a Rajiv — both supporting and destabilising such a government, in the expectation that another election would throw up a vote for stability and he would romp back to power.

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Saffron is a different colour now

The colour has been rendered to activities that would have astonished Swami Vivekananda



WHERE MONEY TALKS

SUNANDA K DATTA RAY

The censors forced Utpal Dutt to re-shoot some scenes in his film *Ghoom Bhangar Gaan* so that it was clear the goons attacking factory workers who hadn't been paid their wages were not Congressmen. He had to replace what might have been mistaken for Gandhi caps on their heads with the headgear of a private company's security guards replete with the company's badge of which a close-up had to be shown.

Today's censors would probably be equally solicitous about saffron. But for the comparison to be valid it must also be made clear that

in the absence of any rigorous all-India Hindu authority, any crook or criminal is at liberty to wrap himself in saffron. What was once the colour of purity is now the badge of a particular brand of politics. Adityanath, Uma Bharti, Pragna Singh Thakur, who is an accused in the 2008 Malegaon bombings, and Ramdev of Patanjali Ayurved Ltd have taken the colour to activities that would have astonished Swami Vivekananda.

Nor would Vivekananda have regarded "sant" and "saint" as synonymous, as many sants seem to do. They have been a power in the land since 18 May 2014 which, Britain's *Guardian* wrote, would "go down in history as the day when Britain finally left India". It wasn't a dirge for the passing of the Raj which would have been unthinkable for a left-liberal anti-monarchy newspaper. *The Guardian* exulted that Narendra Modi's triumph marked "the end of a long era in which the structures of power did not differ greatly from those through which Britain ruled the sub-continent" because "India under the Congress was in many ways a continuation of the British Raj by other means".

There was some truth in that for the methods, processes and institutions of effective and orderly administration remain the same when the political authority changes. But in its innocent idealism, *The Guardian* failed to realise that

the return to the grassroots it exalted could mean the end of rational thinking and a victory for the prejudices, superstitions and myths that sustain the impoverished and uneducated multitudes.

I recall a public discussion where a retired army general stormed in angrily to complain that unruly processions had delayed his journey by three hours. "Is this democracy?" he shouted in exasperation. "That's exactly what it is!" I explained from the platform. Two Greek words, *demos*, (the people) and *kratein* (to rule) make up the word democracy. What the general wanted was efficient management. That is not necessarily anti-democracy but the two go together only when the people — the beneficiaries of democracy — recognise the merit of discipline and voluntarily practise it.

They cannot do so without education, an adequate income, a decent standard of living and a sense of security. Security does not come from flamboyant boasting about "surgical strikes" against Pakistan. It comes from a stable peace which, in turn, demands wise governance and constructive diplomacy, in addition to economic well-being.

Disciplined democracy will remain elusive if instead of setting an example, the political leadership panders to the masses by adopting its worst instincts and values. Public havans and pujas are as characteristic of that back-

wardness as lynching, ghar wapsi, attacks on churches, love jihad vigilantes and gau rakshaks. Namdeo Das Tyagi, better known as Computer Baba, complains that the "saffron brigade (meaning the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Bharatiya Janata Party) has only exploited *sadhus* and nothing else". He should know. A man for all seasons, Computer Baba sports both saffron and white. He was a junior minister under the BJP's Shivraj Singh Chouhan, sought an Aam Aadmi Party nomination in 2014, and was appointed chairman of "Ma Narmada, Ma Kshipra and Ma Mandakini River Trust" by Madhya Pradesh's current Congress Chief Minister Kamal Nath.

Winston Churchill, that arch-imperialist whom Indians love to hate, didn't mean it as a compliment when he declaimed in the House of Commons during the debate on the Indian Independence Bill that "Indian political parties and political classes do not represent the Indian masses".

Thank heavens they didn't in those days. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee or K M Munshi wouldn't have dreamt of strutting around in monogrammed suits. Nor would the civilised C Rajagopalachari or erudite Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan obscenely abuse or invent lies about a prime minister who was cruelly murdered at the height of promise. Political leaders like Abul Kalam Azad or John Mathai, to pick two members of the Constituent Assembly at random, were men of education, refinement and sensibility for whom politics was a mission.

Under their successors, majority rule is becoming indistinguishable from mob rule.

LUNCH WITH BS ► RAJIV LALL | CHAIRMAN | IDFC FIRST BANK

A finger in many pies

Lall talks to Anjali Bhargava about his stint in teaching, working with governments and the private sector and his tryst with impact investing

He's taught economics at the Florida Atlantic University, dabbled in private equity with Morgan Stanley and Warburg Pincus, worked with the governments of Chad, Gabon and China during a stint with the World Bank, associated closely with people he affectionately refers to as "Andhrpreneurs" as CEO of IDFC, converted IDFC into a bank and led it through its recent merger with Capital First, set up Lok Capital (as a philanthropic initiative in 2004) and is in the process of setting up Social Finance India to create an ecosystem for impact investing in the country. He's also adding the finishing touches to a detailed essay that he hopes will morph into his first book at some stage.

So how precisely does one describe Rajiv Lall, chairman of IDFC First Bank? Is he an economist, academician or an advisor? Is he an equity shark or a do-gooder with a hyperactive social conscience? Is he driven by capitalism and the urgent desire to create untold wealth or is socialism his path to salvation? It would appear there's little he's left untouched in his 61 years. Do people like this do anything else, I think to myself, as I smile at him politely while listening to his story.

I am meeting Lall for lunch at Mumbai's popular eatery Yauatcha, minutes away from his office in the Bandra Kurla complex. The restaurant is packed with office groups and is far noisier than I had anticipated. We change places to avoid the din. He starts with a helping of chives dumpling. We order a spicy stir fried rice (for me) and a Singapore stir fried vermicelli (for him) and some stir-fried beans and a pak choy, which we decide to share.

A Modern School pass-out, Lall finished the last two years of school in the UK before heading to Oxford for a degree in politics, philosophy and economics. After completing his PhD from the Columbia University, he taught economics at

Florida Atlantic for a couple of years before heading to the Asian Development Bank in the Philippines. Soon after, he moved to the World Bank in Washington and found himself thrown in at the deep end.

Africa, back then, was an experimental ground even for the World Bank but for Lall, it was a totally alien animal. Many countries he was working with — from Equatorial Guinea to Chad — were emerging from civil war and were highly fragile states. He was totally out of his comfort zone, spending four months of the year in the field and functioning in French, a language he knew enough of to get by. To say those times were unpredictable is putting it mildly. He recalls making over 60 trips to these countries, often finding that government counterparts he met during a visit in a country were dead by the time he visited the country next, so widespread was the AIDS epidemic in the region at the time (1985-89).

He went from the frying pan to the fire, landing up in China for the first time only a few weeks before the Tiananmen Square protests. He worked closely with the Chinese government — including with Zhu Rongji, first vice-premier and then premier of the People's Republic of China from 1998 to 2003 — as it prepared for a WTO entry, and also on financial sector reforms with the country's central bank.

China was a great learning experience for him. As late as in 1993 the People's Bank of China did not have control over the country's monetary space. Each province was flying its own kite and even issuing its own currency, he says. "Considering where they were as late as 1993, the scale and speed at which they have transformed themselves never fails to amaze me," Lall adds. He's deeply impressed by how the country used the World Bank and its inputs strategically. He says he has many "very close friends in China", reflecting on a certain "open-

ness" often missing in India.

This experience brought him to the notice of Vikram Pandit, then with Morgan Stanley, who was looking for someone with experience and knowledge of China. Lall ended up running the Asia Economic Research wing for Morgan Stanley — albeit for a short stint — and conducted some of the early India-China comparisons as a self-styled analyst. In 1997, he joined Warburg Pincus, spending the next eight-odd years in the world of private equity and finance.

It was during this time — in 2004 specifically — that he set up Lok Capital in India, a philanthropic initiative to demonstrate the feasibility of raising and deploying capital for impact investing in India, particularly to support the micro finance sector. At that time, the idea of social impact investing was still new. Although he set up the organisation, he is no longer engaged with Lok Capital, leaving its running to a professional team.

We are distracted as our food arrives but quickly get back on course. It was not before 2005 that Lall would finally return to India. While working at Warburg Pincus, he met Deepak Parekh, then chairman of IDFC, a 1997 private-public initiative that aimed to catalyse private financing of infrastructure. By then, Lall had seen both worlds — government and private sector — inside out and was the perfect candidate for the post of CEO of IDFC. He was posted in Mumbai and not Delhi, his city of choice. Even at the outset, Lall was not convinced about the basic tenets that defined IDFC and its role. "IDFC was to serve public good by lending to long-gestation infrastructure projects. Yet, it was going public," he says. The economist in him spotted a contradiction in terms.

Nonetheless, he went on a tumultuous journey with IDFC, brushing shoulders with the "Andhrpreneurs", who dominated India's infrastructure scene that



ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

time. The size of IDFC's balance sheet grew many times but it had its share of vulnerabilities. The financial crisis of 2008 convinced him that a wholesale, funded finance enterprise with no financial legs of its own is limited in how much it can grow relative to the rest of the financial system. "Any kind of macro instability can lead to a total collapse," he realised.

That's when he started lobbying with the Reserve Bank of India to convert IDFC into a bank, a request that was turned down at the time. It took the subsequent unraveling of India's infrastructure sector — a collapse that began in 2011 and went on

till 2016, one from which the sector is yet to recover and that left the IDFC balance sheet highly stressed — that the stakeholders began to realise the advantages of converting the company into a bank. In 2014, IDFC and Bandhan were the two bank licences handed out by the RBI. IDFC Bank has recently merged with Capital First and Lall has now donned the hat of chairman, IDFC First Bank.

This fits in with his plan to extricate himself from mainstream finance because "there's so much else to be done". "India is the largest stomping ground in the world for impact investing as we have an extraordinary combination of entrepreneurial drive with huge, absolute demand for all kinds of social services," he elaborates. "Yet, it lacks any advocacy platform or ecosystem for such capital to thrive."

Social Finance India (SFI) will fill this gap. Ashish Dhawan (Central Square Foundation), Vikram Gandhi (Asha Impact) and Lall have together set up SFI (the search for a CEO is on), an organisation that will work to build an ecosystem for social outcome-based investing in India. The plan is to begin with a narrow focus — social impact bonds will be offered for financing in the public education space by bringing keen investors in contact with change makers. Eventually SFI will straddle every sphere of impact investing. Lall also has a solution for how to use CSR funds to finance the delivery of social services. He says "social outcome certificates" should be introduced in the country that can be purchased with CSR funds. This can be done at a district level. Define outcomes, get the official machinery to achieve the goals and raise money for the district by selling the outcome certificates.

Towards the end of our lunch, before Lall rushes off, he tells me he's working on an essay — which may end up as a book — on the trilemma of the political economy and argues one cannot have prosperity, freedom and justice at the same time. A trade-off is inevitable.

Well, that's another pie he has a finger in. No wonder time is at such a premium for Lall.

Travails of a 'priority' customer



PEOPLE LIKE THEM

KEYA SARKAR

I don't know what exactly to attribute it to: The small town nature or the changing times. For banking, as I knew it in Mumbai over a decade and a half ago, doesn't seem to be the same now in Bolpur, Santiniketan.

Immediately after I had relocated from Mumbai, one of the largest private sector banks opened a branch here. Having seen the insides of the other public sector banks before that, I was thrilled to open an account at a branch, the milieu of which was familiar to my Mumbai returned eyes.

Now thanks to electronic banking, I hardly ever visit the bank. Recently, however, I had reason to. First was an inward

remittance I had received from a Swiss customer that had not been credited to my account even after three days. The second was a mismatch in my credit card sales amount on a particular day from my shop and the corresponding credit that appeared in my current account. The latter was less.

One of the pleasures of visiting your bank branch in a small town is that you are immediately shown into the manager's room. My plea that the matter was not significant enough for the branch manager fell on deaf ears. My husband and I were seated in the manager's cabin and offered tea.

The manager could offer no reason for the inward remittance not showing up but offered to Whatsapp my transaction printout to his foreign exchange office. On the second problem, he had a few ideas. When I said I did not understand why the credit against my credit card sales was falling short he said, it "may be" because they had deducted the monthly rental.

When I said that the amount seemed to be too large for a month's rental, he suggested that it may be for a couple of months because I had not paid earlier. If it was a direct automatic deduction by the bank, how could I have failed to pay

earlier? Confused, I asked the manager whether or not the bank would have to show this deduction separately in my account instead of just subtracting it from my sales? How do I maintain my cash book?

He assured me that he would get back on both the issues and I left the branch satisfied. At the end of the work day, the manager called to say that the uncredited remittance was still a mystery because the "head office" had not found anything but he assured me that he would keep at it.

I reminded him that my credit card issue still remained unresolved and he said someone from that department would follow it through. I did get an email the following day explaining the deductions. One was the rental and another was for "LTC", which apparently is a charge which the bank levies on total credit card transactions lower than ₹5,000 transactions a month. This was surely not the case for my shop.

I know margins are under pressure but have banks begin to stoop so low to enhance their floats or slip in strange charges? As an individual customer, I did what I could. I asked the bank for a form to become an ordinary customer. Being a "priority" customer seems too fraught with risk.

Pet obligations



PEOPLE LIKE US

KISHORE SINGH

Coaxing the dog to leave the air-conditioned room to come for a walk in the heat wasn't working so I thought to attach a leash to his collar and drag him out for his constitutional. Increasingly grumpy in old age, the pooch snapped, sinking his canines into the fleshiest part of my palm. As I attempted to staunch the blood with a pail of iced water and dabbed antiseptics on the wound, the dog continued to slumber on, unmindful of the kerfuffle he had caused. In the evening, with the hand stinging — and swelling — I went to a general practitioner for a tetanus shot and dressing. A painkiller was prescribed.

Two days later, on a family break in

the hills, the wound showed no signs of healing, and the pain became increasingly intolerable. The gathered clan, when it wasn't sarcastic, was mocking. Didn't I have the sense to take anti-rabies shots? What was I thinking not asking for antibiotics? Everyone had a theory and a slew of medicines to prescribe. Clutching at any possibility of relief, I took whatever cocktail of pills and unguents were offered, replaced bandages, daubed creams, but nothing helped. While the rest of the group partied, eating and drinking and making merry, I drew increasingly into myself. Nobody likes misery for company, especially on a holiday, suspecting it might be contagious — and I was anything if not miserable.

Unable to bear the agony, and banned from the consumption of alcohol, I retired to bed early one evening. Somewhere in the distance I could hear the family's revels as their libations increased. Half-dozing, I could barely make out as they dropped in occasionally, in groups or singly, to check on me. Prodding the palm, one would ask, "Is it painful here?" No. "Here?" Yes. "Here?" Yes, yes, yes. "Here too?" Just go. A hot cognac was brought to my room — but not for consumption. It was pressed into the wound to "draw out the poison" but only ended up throbbing some more.

Eyes closed against the ache, I wafted in and out of troubled sleep, disturbed by these encounters. "How are you feeling?" Whisky breath over my face — my son, definitely. "Are you okay?" Onion fumes and charred meat this time — my brother, most likely. "Let him sleep," a symphony of garlic and wine, extremely unpleasant, one of the ladies of the clan. "He'll be fine, let him be" — if only! — someone who had been quaffing gin said. Despite them, blessed sleep followed. But morning brought little relief.

Back home, my ordeal was far from over with diagnosis and information flying fast and furiously amidst the temporary bonhomie of the ex-vacationers. Something had to be done about me. *Done?* I was to be marched off to a doctor. Even though the pet was vaccinated, and it was a week since the bite, I was to be inoculated "just in case". A prescription for five injections spread over 21 days was shared between the group like a trophy, a moral victory of the majority against the lonely sufferer. Instead of sympathy, or empathy, what I was getting was one-upmanship. As I write this, two shots have been administered with three more to go. Blame it on my hallucinations, but I can't help wondering if I can persuade the dog to oblige my wildest fantasies.

WEEKEND RUMINATIONS

T N NINAN

An unreal campaign

India's largest, most acrimonious elections are about to get into their final phase. Most people might have expected that voters would be presented these past few weeks with a record of the Narendra Modi government's term in office, what it promises for the future, and the alternatives that the opposition offers. The campaign did indeed begin that way, with the BJP's slogan of "The impossible is now possible" (*Namumkin ab mumkin hai*), Rahul Gandhi's Nyay hand-out scheme, and arguments about the relative advantages and disadvantages of strong governments and coalition rule. It turns out though that few have heard of Nyay, while opposition coalescence is very partial. In turn the BJP discovered that its development record was not evocative enough and, using the Pulwama-Balakot strike-counterstrike, switched focus to national security. That's when reality and campaign rhetoric began their divergence.

Mr Modi's uncanny ability to turn liability into asset was now in evidence. The *chowkidar's* failure to act on intelligence warnings about a terrorist strike against army convoys, the embarrassment of having a fighter plane shot down and (worse) a helicopter brought down by own-side fire, the discovery that Pakistan's air force with a fraction of the Indian air force's budget can deploy better planes and better missiles and has more secure communications links — all this uncomfortable realisation was buried under a full-throated campaign that focused on two high points: The Balakot strike and getting Masood Azhar declared a terrorist. The Congress' belated bleats that its own track record had surgical strikes and other successes to show were, as usual, pusillanimous.

The national security debate took another curious turn, as though the country is in danger of being broken up by the "tukde-tukde gang" of secessionists. Nationalists should have greater confidence in their country's strengths. If indeed there is danger, what of government strategy? The escalating levels of violence in both Naxal-infested areas and Jammu & Kashmir point to policy failure. And China's security challenge gets no mention even as Beijing's tentacles reach into India's neighbourhood.

Now we have descended to the level of farce, with the campaign veering off into accusations against a prime minister dead for more than a quarter century, and before that the actions of another prime minister dead for more than a half century. Whatever the sins of commission and omission of Nehru and Rajiv Gandhi, are they election issues in 2019? Or are these deliberately escapist diversions?

Note that the economy has been given a convenient by-pass by the BJP, except for the frequent assertion that no development took place for 70 years till Mr Modi came along. The Congress in its usual ineffective way points to slowing growth, flat exports and declining investment, and new revelations about statistical fiction. More has been said on the stump about jobs and rural distress, but Mr Modi is yet to respond.

How much of this matters to the voter? In partisan politics people choose facts to suit bias or belief, more so when there is identification with a strong leader. For millions of voters, Mr Modi's record may not be the best, but he remains the best bet. Or, they have bought into his Hindutva nationalism. Meanwhile, Mr Modi demonstrated yet again his ability to turn the tables on his critics by switching around the charge of tasteless criticism, and listing the multiple terms of abuse hurled at him over the years. Rahul Gandhi's "love dictionary", he called it with typical panache.

If anything has become clear during this campaign, it is this: Mr Modi can bat on almost any wicket and hit the ball over the ropes. He will do it with a selective use of facts, play on emotion, and tropes about *naamdars* and *kaamdars*. Should he lose his party's majority, as the pollsters say, or (more drastically) the chance to govern further, it will be less because of the opposition and more on his own account and because, despite an assiduous image build-up over five years, aggressive social media trolling and impressive histrionics on the stump, voters in the heartland prove to be disappointed with what he has delivered.

ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA



Modi's new 'mandir' project

Modi has boldly ventured to redevelop Varanasi's messy, filthy inner city. It's a restoration project that can delight his large Hindu constituency

Writings on the Wall is metaphor that grew out of my travels, mostly through the poll-bounded regions of India and the neighbourhood over the past 15 years. Because, even more than its big festivals, the subcontinent comes to life during its elections. And what's on people's minds, their aspirations, joys, concerns and fears, you can pretty much understand by reading these writings on the wall. These can be graffiti, advertising, skylines, fences, or, even rubble.

You want to see change in Varanasi, you walk on fresh rubble, a lone bulldozer is labouring on yards away, and look at the walls. Don't read. Because there is nothing to read. Just take a close look at the remnants of what used to be there.

These are remnants of doors, windows, ventilators, cupboards, as if these were pasted on these walls with some adhesive and somebody rudely pulled them out. If you were airdropped here, you might for a moment think you've landed in the middle of some zany art installation. Or, it could also be the setting of another madcap Fevilcol ad: You join two houses with it, knock them with a bulldozer, our joints will survive.

This is precisely what has happened here. About 300 houses, temples and other buildings stood in this area of just 4.6 hectares (11.4 acres), most of them so close to each other that over time they had become conjoined as if constructed together. Beneath these somehow survived Varanasi's famous — or infamous — byzantine "galis" (lanes), some so narrow that not more than two average-sized adults could pass them. It's now history.

Modi critics say that the cloistered neighbourhood that concealed the Kashi Vishwanath temple, among Hinduism's holiest and oldest, has been broken down so the entire Hindu world could now see the temple from the ghats of the Ganga. More important, as they see the relatively modest temple, they will notice the more imposing domes of the Gyanvapi mosque, which Aurangzeb apparently built in 1669 after demolishing

the original Kashi Vishwanath temple. This will be militant Hindutva's eyesore and next target.

I would find it less alarming and not just because officials, including Vishal Singh, 36, chief executive officer (CEO) of the Kashi Vishwanath Development Authority (KVDA), remind me that the mosque is already well-protected with 30-foot-high solid steel pillars and CRPF armed with automatics. Mine is a realistic view that even if the rulers of the day were violent majoritarian malcontents and the institutions had become so malleable that they could no longer protect the Constitution, a building with easy access and view will be harder to harm than one hidden in a maze.

So, just the redevelopment of the area, clearing of the 300 metres to the riverfront for an un hindered view of the temple from the ghats and vice-versa, doesn't add to the threat. Some local Muslims leaders filed a petition in the Supreme Court, expressing these apprehensions on behalf of the Anjuman Intezamia Masjid but it was rejected.

The greater opposition, in fact, comes from Varanasi's Hindu conservatives. Walk down the narrow lane connecting the temple precinct's Neelkanth gate to the holiest Manikarnika Ghat, where cremations take place, and we run into well-known local writer and journalist/intellectual Trilochan Prasad. He's furious. Who can dare to change what was never destined to change? They have destroyed our heritage, everything that was sacred, hundreds of crores have been wasted, a way of life has been destroyed and more.

Like him or not, Narendra Modi is a risk-taker. This — the redevelopment of a mere 4.6 hectares, involving the demolition of 296 buildings — is among the greatest risks he has taken in his constituency. Because this means annoying not just the liberal but the most conservative residents of the Brahmin heartland, which takes pride in being eternal and unchanging. Almost 90 per cent of those shifted are



WRITINGS ON THE WALL

SHEKHAR GUPTA

Testosterone times for sport



VIEWPOINT

DEVANGSHU DATTA

The Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), which is the highest legal body in sport, recently made a judgment that throws women's athletics into chaos. To boil it down, women can compete in any men's event (referred to as "open events" out of political correctness). This includes women who have "transitioned" and become men.

But transgender men are allowed to compete in women's events (notably in races between 400 metres and 1600 metres) only if their levels of testosterone are below a prescribed limit. What's more, women can compete in these events only if their testosterone levels are also below those limits.

The CAS ruling is based on an interpretation of complex and controversial science, and it is an apparent reaction to growing social trends of gender fluidity. It follows upon a two-year-old appeal by the brilliant South African runner, Caster Semenya, who was appealing against a ban from competing in her favourite events.

It used to be an article of faith for the International Olympic Association (IOA) and the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) to gender-segregate events, with few exceptions such as shooting and equestrian events. This segregation was so rigid that chess, snooker and bridge have had trouble winning IOA affiliation! Until the 1970s, women athletes literally had to undergo a nude physical exam before competition. That later changed to hormonal and chromosomal tests. The IOA allowed transgenders to compete after 2016.

Sex and gender are complicated issues, biologically and sociologically. Sex is typically determined by the possession of male or female reproductive organs. But some babies are born with both. It is further determined by the possession of two XX chromosome in females, or paired XY chromosomes in males. However, there are individuals with female reproductive

organs, who possess Y chromosomes.

Gender is determined by even more complex psychological and sociological factors. An individual who is biologically one sex may think of themselves as belonging to the other gender. As medical science has advanced, and social attitudes liberalised, there has been more "transitioning" with people going through the complicated, long-drawn process of changing sex medically via hormone treatment and surgery, to align with their mental gender.

Another determining factor for sex is supposed to be testosterone levels. This hormone is produced naturally by both sexes, but in a much larger volume by males. High levels are linked to more muscle mass, higher libido, more aggressive attitudes, deeper voices, more body hair, and so on. Semenya (and India's Dutee Chand) and many other high-performing women athletes have naturally high levels of testosterone. Many women athletes may possess a Y chromosome, which is linked to high testosterone production. Testosterone production can also be stimulated by doping, or exercise and dietary changes.

Men who transition and become women also have higher levels of testosterone, more muscle mass, etc. This can be a major advantage in a whole range of ath-

letics. By forcing them to cut testosterone levels to 5 nanolitres per litre of blood (lower than typical male levels of 8-30 nl, but higher than typical female levels of 1.8 nl), the IAAF is supposedly trying to level the track. But this punishes Semenya, Chand, and other non-trans women with naturally high levels of the hormone.

"Temporary transitioning" first happened decades ago, when East German women athletes (and some Bulgarians and Russians) were pumped with artificial testosterone and other stimulants. It became rarer after artificial testosterone was banned.

When Semenya started blitzing world records and was banned, she appealed. The CAS asked the IAAF, IOC *et al* to "prove" natural testosterone was a performance-enhancer. A recent study was cited by the IAAF to demonstrate that higher levels gave a 1.8 per cent performance advantage. This is huge, except that the study itself is still disputed.

This is a patchwork and unsatisfactory solution. As more "transitioning" occurs, other disciplines will also be affected. Given the rewards for sports performance, and the cachet that sporting success brings to nations, it would be naïve to imagine that people will not seek workarounds. We might just be entering a new era of "gender-doping".

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What the next government must do



LINE AND LENGTH

T C A SRINIVASA RAGHAVAN

By the end of this month a new government will have been formed. Regardless of which political combination forms it, it will have to deal with three very basic questions because by the time its term ends, a quarter of the 21st century will already have gone by.

The first is what the nature and shape of the Indian state will be in the 21st century. How much more coercive will it be — or have to be to survive as a viable entity?

The second is about the nature and form of the Indian economy. How free will it be of the state? As we shall see, this is closely related to the first question.

The third question is about the overall political arrangement. On the principle

that it is better to hang together than to hang separately, will the BJP and the Congress come together in order to prevent power from passing permanently into the hands of the regional and small parties who are emerging as alternatives to the two national parties? This is not fat-fetched and let's therefore start with the political parties.

The BJP is contesting 437 seats and the Congress 423. This means that by their own reckoning they don't exist as a political force in 120-125 seats. In reality, this number is probably around 220 because remember that in 2004 the BJP and the Congress won only 282 seats between them, leaving the rest for the other parties.

In 2009 the BJP and the Congress won 322, leaving the rest for the others. In 2014 these two parties won 326, leaving the remaining seats to the rest. That's roughly how the cookie has been crumbling.

The question now is whether the anti-BJP and anti-Congress mood has gained more momentum. If it has, the BJP and the Congress may need to come together. This ought to be the biggest political development to watch out for in the next decade. For this to happen, the BJP will have to give up Hindutva and the Congress will have to mothball the Gandhi family.

The economy

But a mere readjustment of the political parties will not help the country. The economy will also have to grow really strong.

Recently a Harvard-trained Indian economist asked why, despite the complete absence of democracy, China has done well economically while India, with its all its democratic credentials, has done so poorly. He attributed the difference to the strong Chinese state and the weak Indian state.

This has been known since 1967. Gunnar Myrdal, the Nobel laureate, politely said India had a "soft" state. Since then we have fatalistically taken it for granted. But the time has come to ask the extent of coercive power the state must arrogate to itself to achieve economic ends. Clearly, what it has is insufficient.

If anything, the state's coercive powers have been hugely reduced, as a result of which all factors of production are either very costly or unavailable or both. To make them cheaper we need to debate if the state has to become more coercive as in other countries, including those of the Western hemisphere.

Given the structural, constitutional and political opposition to this, striking a balance is going to be a very tough challenge. One way of doing it would be to allow far

greater autonomy to the states by deleting the concurrent list of the Constitution and moving many of the items from the Central List to the States List. The states should then pay a fixed amount, revisable upwards every five years to the Centre.

This will not be easy but, then, the 21st century has only just begun. The next decade should be spent addressing these very basic problems.

The state

Reforming the state, as so many other countries have found, is the hardest thing to do because the principle of independence means that only those who need to reform the most can reform themselves. This is the old turf problem between parliament, executive and judiciary.

To abridge this self-defeating interpretation of independence, the other two must reform the third. Without this no reform will be possible.

That is why the next government should figure out a way by which any two of the three can propose reforms for the third. These must be made binding. If this requires an amendment to the Constitution, that is what the next government should work towards. After all it has been amended over a 100 times for far less.

Brahmins. Like its priests, Varanasi also must have the highest per capita population of political pundits. And many would tell you, with the greatest conviction, that this Modi-Yogi "misadventure" will cost them anything between 60,000 and 75,000 votes.

To understand the before-and-after you need to see the charts and plastic models in the office of CEO, who, incidentally, has a master's in administration from the University of Maryland. A sum of ₹600 crore has been sanctioned for the authority and the old buildings acquired after making a law in the UP Assembly. The owners have been given twice the circle rate and they seem happy by and large, with a total of a little over ₹200 crore paid out. Another ₹15 crore has been paid to residents who didn't own the buildings but claimed tenancy rights. Only 12 owners are still holding out, in the vicinity of the temple.

Demolition work is mostly over. Mr Modi performed the *bhumi puja* for the new precinct on March 8 and work should finish in another year or so. By now 43 temples have been discovered, entombed earlier in houses built over them, mostly as encroachment. When it is completed, this temple complex will become what almost nothing in old Varanasi can still claim to be, even after five years of having the prime minister as its MP: Clean, modern, and accessible. The point is, was it a risk worth taking?

Inner city development is one of India's greatest challenges. Most of our leaders have stayed clear of this minefield. The first who attempted it was a reckless tyrant who asked no questions (Sanjay Gandhi, Turkman Gate and Jama Masjid) and the other is the spiritual head of his sect whom nobody would ask a question: The Syedna of the Bohris now leading the ₹4,000 crore rebuilding of Central Mumbai's Bhandi Bazaar. Mr Modi is the third, but the first to try and do this using the laws, persuasion, and a wide open purse.

While we question his commitment to secularism and often enough expose the hollowness of his "sab ka saath, sab ka vikas" slogan, we also need to acknowledge that in some important ways he has challenged Hinduism's social conservatism. The Swachh Bharat and anti-open defecation campaigns are one aspect of it. The other, forgotten by now, was his removal of a large number of temples encroaching public spaces in Gujarat, which put him at odds with his original VHP hatchet-men. The Kashi Vishwanath Corridor is his "panga" with Varanasi's conservative Brahminism.

Many wise and famous men have spoken immortal lines about Varanasi. Probably the most quoted are Mark Twain's: "Benaras is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend and looks twice as old as all of them put together." But must it continue to be twice as messy and filthy as that? Surely, Hinduism deserves better for its holiest, oldest city, supposedly of salvation. Twain would be surprised reading the walls around the new, bulldozed emptiness at the temple today. They speak of change.

Few doubt that Mr Modi will be re-elected in Varanasi. We will also be able to guess on May 23 if it makes Mr Modi lose those tens of thousands of conservative votes pundits of Banaras predict. But in a year, if he completes the project, it could work wonders with his much larger, pan-national Hindu constituency. And you know what, I'm happy to say I am enthused by this project. It will be a great precedent for other old cities, hopefully for the restoration and pedestrianisation of Delhi's Chandni Chowk to its old glory. And if Mr Modi continues growing as a Hindu Hriday Samrat, better that it is done by restoring ancient temples than demolishing medieval mosques.

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Incredible comebacks

EYE CULTURE

SUHIT K SEN

It's literally unprecedented. Four English clubs have entered the finals of the two elite football tournaments in Europe. Liverpool and Tottenham Hotspurs will face off in the Champions League final in Madrid, while Arsenal and Chelsea will sort matters out in the Europa League final in Baku, Azerbaijan. The clubs are currently ranked second, fourth, fifth and third, respectively, in the English Premier League.

League leaders and current champions Manchester City and cross-town rivals Manchester United, lying sixth, miss out on this English party.

A brief look at the history of the tournaments is necessary to bring home the full significance of this amazing situation. Let's begin with the Champions League, which came into existence in 1955-56 as the European Champion Clubs' Cup, or just European Cup. It was renamed the Champions League in 1992 after its format was revamped. Since its inception in 1955, until this year, clubs from the same country have featured in the final only thrice: Real Madrid and Valencia in 1999-2000; Manchester United and Chelsea in 2007-08; and, Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund in 2012-13.

The Europa Cup began life as UEFA Cup in 1971-72. Again, after a change of format, it was renamed the Europa League in 2009-10. It has recorded clubs from the same country contesting the final five times: in 1971-72, the inaugural year, Tottenham Hotspurs played Wolverhampton Wanderers; Eintracht Frankfurt played Borussia Mönchengladbach in 1979-80; Internazionale played Roma in 1990-91; Internazionale played Lazio in 1997-98; and, Sevilla played Espanyol in 2006-07.

As is obvious, no country has sent four clubs to the finals of these elite tournaments in the same year, ever. Since the re-branding of the tournaments and the change in formats, the Champions League has had finalists from the same country thrice, while the Europa League has not yet registered that outcome. In this century, between them, the two tournaments have had clubs from the same country contesting the finals just thrice.

The significance of the 2018-19 finals lineup cannot, thus, be overemphasised. These statistics do not, however, even begin to tell the incredible footballing story that has gone into this achievement. The Europa League results might be seen as par for the course: Chelsea went into the second leg of their semi-final against Frankfurt at Stamford Bridge on the back of a 1-1 away result. Ultimately, they won on penalties, but were generally expected to win. Arsenal went into the second leg

against Valencia away on the back of a 3-1 home win. On the night in Valencia, they registered a credible 4-2 win, but it wasn't that big a deal.

The two second legs of the Champions League semi-finals were, on the other hand, very big deals. Liverpool had played well against Barcelona away in the first leg but had, nevertheless lost 0-3, undone by the kind of magic only one man can conjure. It was in reality Lionel Messi against Liverpool, and Messi won. Nobody other than Liverpool manager Jürgen Klopp really gave Liverpool a chance of overturning that deficit. But Liverpool did it, pumping in four goals against the runaway La Liga champions without their two talismanic strikers, Mohammed Salah and Roberto Firmino. The latter has scored 16 times this season for Liverpool in all competitions, while Salah has scored 23 times for the club.

Despite missing these two "indispensable" members of its potent strike force, Liverpool went into the home game against Barcelona with just one thing on their mind: attack. Klopp's teams always look to attack and seize the initiative; they are not afraid of conceding. With only Sadio Mané available from their first-pick forward line, Liverpool chose to ramp up the pressure. Surprisingly, Mané, who has scored 26 goals for Liverpool this season, did not score as Liverpool won the tie 4-0. The goals were divided between midfielder Georginio Wijnaldum, who came on as a second-half substitute and scored twice, and squad striker Divock Origi, who opened the scoring and finished it off with a late winner.

Spurs' win against Ajax was no less a triumph of the spirit, though it was playing a young side who were making it to a European final after almost a quarter of a century. Nevertheless, Spurs were playing away on the back of a 0-1 home defeat. On the night in Amsterdam, Ajax had scored two goals in the first half to take their lead to 3-0. Spurs had just the second half to mount a challenge. Enter Lucas Moura, the Brazilian who had been off-loaded by Paris Saint-Germain as being surplus to requirements in January last year. He popped up with a second-half hat-trick, the first in a Champions League semi-final, to equalise. Spurs went to the finals via the away-goals rule.

Spurs boss Mauricio Pochettino, like Klopp, believes in playing attacking football. In the second half of the tie, he succeeded in instilling enough self-belief in his team, despite missing their most potent weapon, striker Harry Kane, for his players to go for the kill.

So, the Champions League final will be played between two teams who just don't know when they are beaten. Unfortunately, one of them will have to lose.