



External woes

Given the widening trade deficit, urgent measures are needed to boost exports

The estimates for foreign trade showing a sharp slowdown in merchandise export growth in April, to 0.64% from a year earlier, ought to add to concerns about the economy. If one were to strip away the 31% surge in shipments of petroleum products to overseas markets, India's export of goods actually contracted by over 3% in dollar terms last month. In contrast, overall merchandise exports had expanded 11% year-on-year in March, with the growth in shipments excluding petroleum products exceeding that pace by about 50 basis points. The slump in exports was fairly widespread, with 16 of the 30 major product groups listed by the Commerce Ministry reflecting contractions, compared with the 10 categories that had shrunk in March. Worryingly, shipments of engineering goods declined by over 7% after having expanded by 16.3% in March, while the traditionally strong export sectors – gem and jewellery, leather and leather products, textiles and garments and drugs and pharmaceuticals – all weakened. These are all key providers of jobs and any protracted pain across these industries will impact jobs, wages and consumption demand in the domestic market. While the contraction in gem and jewellery exports widened to 13.4% in April, from 0.4% in March, the slump in the leather segment broadened to 15.3% from 6.4%. And the pace of growth of garment exports decelerated to 4.4% from 15.1% in March.

Imports grew by 4.5% to \$41.4 billion in April, accelerating from March's 1.4% pace as purchases of crude oil and gold continued to increase. While the 9.3% jump in the oil import bill, from March's 5.6%, can partly be explained by the rise in international crude prices (Brent crude futures, for instance, advanced 6.4% in April), India's insatiable appetite for gold, as reflected in the 54% surge in imports last month, must give policymakers cause for reflection. Excluding oil and gold, however, imports shrank by more than 2% last month, signalling that import demand in the real productive sectors is largely becalmed. As a result of merchandise imports outpacing exports, the trade deficit widened to a five-month high of \$15.3 billion. The widening trade shortfall will add pressure on India's burgeoning current account deficit, which at a provisional \$51.9 billion in the first nine months of fiscal 2018-19 had already surpassed the preceding financial year's 12-month shortfall of \$48.7 billion. With stronger headwinds ahead in the form of an escalating trade war between the U.S. and China, and its knock-on impact on global growth, the outlook for export demand is far from reassuring. Add the rising military tensions in West Asia and its potential to further push up oil prices, and the scope to contain the trade and current account deficits seems significantly challenging. Clearly, this would be one more pressing concern for the new government to address.

Holding the centre

Europe's mainstream parties must not take fright at the perceived appeal of populism

On May 23, as the results of the Indian elections emerge, in Europe the world's second largest democratic electoral process will get under way. More than 425 million voters are eligible to participate in elections that will take place over a four-day period to select 751 members of the European Parliament for a five-year term. There would have been 705, but for the delays to Brexit, which means Britain will participate too. Thousands of candidates from hundreds of parties as well as independents will seek votes, and the winners will form cross-national groupings in the House based on their political ideology. With turnout usually low (43% in 2014), predictions can be tricky, but expectations are that far-right and Eurosceptic parties will make gains. Last month, Italy's Deputy Prime Minister and figurehead for the far right in Europe, Matteo Salvini, launched the campaign for the European Alliance of People and Nations, alongside allies from Germany to Denmark, on a platform invoking tougher immigration rules and in some cases Euroscepticism, uniting parties that had once been split between groupings. In Britain, the appeal of anti-European sentiment has manifested itself in the success of the Brexit Party, formed in January by former UK Independence Party head Nigel Farage – it is projected to win a 34% share of the vote. In Germany, the right-wing Alternative für Deutschland is expected to make gains, while in France the right-wing National Rally (former National Front) could do better than President Emmanuel Macron's En Marche.

There is a risk that centre-right and centre-left coalitions will fail to command a joint majority. The temptation will be for centrist parties to see these elections as yet another sign that populism is on the rise, and a cause they must in one way or another pander to. In Britain, this has certainly been the case with the rightward lunge of the Conservative Party, while in Germany the centre-left SPD has toughened its stance on asylum-seekers. Yet, this would be the wrong message to take. What is under way is vastly more complex. It is certain that people are seeking alternatives amid stagnating wages and living standards, with many shunning mainstream parties in their quest – but to infer that all see populism as the route ahead would be naive. Green parties, for example, are expected to make their best showing yet across the continent, as public support for an agenda that encompasses progressive climate change policies and social justice has grown. European parliamentary elections should certainly trigger alarm bells for the mainstream parties, but should also motivate them to look imaginatively for fresh answers, rather than attempting to rehash decades-old illiberal ones.

A referendum on the Prime Minister?

Hindutva nationalism as embodied by Narendra Modi has remained the dominant narrative of the Lok Sabha polls



VARGHESE K. GEORGE

Ramesh and Rajesh, two brothers in Atari Khejra, around 50 km from the Madhya Pradesh capital Bhopal, could be counted among the so-called aspirational generation that supported Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014. In their mid-20s and wiser by five years now, they laboured to explain their continuing support for Mr. Modi, who they want in office for a second term. The brothers run a tea shop by the highway and their backward caste Kurmi family owns some land. Their farm incomes remain non-remunerative, material life remains as tough as ever, and they are not beneficiaries of the several welfare schemes launched by the Modi government. But finally they came up with one reason that they sounded fully convinced about: "India has become number 1 in the world under Mr. Modi."

Jettisoning economic issues

A widely popular explanation for Mr. Modi's 2014 success was that he had jettisoned Hindutva for reforms/development. There was no evidence to support this theory – in fact, evidence suggested the opposite, as he declared himself a "Hindu nationalist" ahead of the campaign and repeatedly raised cow slaughter, "infiltrators", etc. through the 2014 campaign. But this had become justification for a segment of his elite supporters. Mr. Modi never promised a list of reforms, though he did promise

jobs. So the difference between 2014 and 2019 has not been that Mr. Modi has returned to Hindutva, but the complete removal of jobs and development from the agenda by systematically blocking or contaminating official data on these topics. If 2014 was about seeking economic progress through Hindu consolidation, in 2019 national glory was itself the end.

Core Modi voters are convinced that India is a superpower, that his strident rhetoric has scared Pakistan and China. In a particularly jaw-dropping moment of adulation for Mr. Modi, a young tourist guide in Agra, a Jat, who by conventional wisdom should be a supporter of the anti-BJP coalition of the Samajwadi Party, Bahujan Samaj Party and Rashtriya Lok Dal in Uttar Pradesh, said: "Who in the world knew Manmohan Singh? Donald Trump stands up when he meets Narendra Modi." His financial situation is worse than it was in 2014, but he believes that demonetisation has done a world of good for the nation. To ask about the promises of 2014 itself has become an anti-national act. "To talk about jobs, we need to have a country first, right?" Mr. Modi's supporters retort. This suspension of logic and rational thinking and the intangible abstract of national glory can be found across the Hindi heartland. This is not to deny the existence of a cohort of transactional voters who rooted for Mr. Modi – the recipients of the subsidised cooking gas and houses, for instance.

This euphoria disconnected from self-admitted reality is borne out in the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies' pre-poll survey, in which more people thought employment opportuni-



SANDEEP SAXENA

ties had reduced, prices had gone up, welfare had shrunk, social disharmony had risen and corruption had spiked, but still wanted a second term for Mr. Modi. Only on one question, more people thought Mr. Modi has done well: 'India's image in the world'.

This kind of support for Mr. Modi cuts across caste, though upper castes are its fulcrum. But this support could be mobilised only when the question was specifically framed whether they want a second term for Mr. Modi, sidestepping all local questions and daily experience. Mr. Modi's attempt has been to make the entire election into a referendum on him, and his success will depend on whether or not he managed to push a critical mass of the voters to look beyond their material well-being.

The Congress challenge

The Congress under Rahul Gandhi challenged this delusional populism by questioning the militarism and ultra-nationalism underlying it and promising a minimum income guarantee for all under a scheme called NYAY (Nyuntam Aay Yojana). While this fuelled some hope for the party's resurgence, its impact as a pan-India alternative to Hindutva has been limited. This is primarily due to the patronising tone of the party's

messaging, as opposed to the empowering tone of Hindutva.

Therefore, the Congress's performance will depend largely on its ability to amplify local factors, the performance of its governments where they exist, and better management of elections compared to 2014. In Chhattisgarh, the Congress has achieved this objective in significant measure. "Mr. Modi's campaign in 2014 was economy plus emotions, but this time he was only emotions. Our campaign was only economy and lacked emotions," a Congress functionary summed it up. "In 2004 we beat the BJP when we both talked about material aspects."

The U.P., Bihar narrative

The Hindutva narrative has been challenged the most in U.P., followed by Bihar, and among two communities everywhere: Muslims and tribals, who were not vocal. West Bengal is in a different category as the BJP is still trying to expand its footprint. Bihar and U.P. are extremely critical in 2019: 93 of the BJP's 282 seats in 2014 came from these two States. The critical mass of the Muslim electorate and the deep-rooted history of social justice politics that has offered a counter-polemic to the Hindutva agenda make these States distinct. This unique combination of demographic and historical factors makes the Gujarat model of Hindutva – to reduce to irrelevance Muslims and tribals, and win an overwhelming majority among the rest – difficult in these States.

The BJP achieved that feat in 2014, and hopes to repeat it in 2019. A shared existential threat from the BJP united Yadavs, Dalits and Muslims in U.P. and Bihar and

their numerical heft offers the strongest pushback to Hindutva in 2019. The BJP has the solid backing of the upper castes and non-Yadav backwards, and a section of Dalits in Bihar. That may not be good enough to match the 2014 figures in U.P., but Bihar offers better prospects for the party. The BJP's performance therefore will depend on whether and to what extent it has lured Yadavs, and in U.P. non-Jatav Dalits and Jats. That will depend on the extent to which Mr. Modi could make it a referendum on himself in U.P. and Bihar. Unlike the Congress, the BJP has been relentlessly reaching out to all backward castes and tribals.

Traders, the traditional social base of the BJP, expressed resentment over demonetisation. Muslims and tribals offered but did not as much vocalise their opposition to Hindutva. There were no fatwas calling on the Muslims to vote in any particular direction in 2019. BSP chief Mayawati, representing Ambedkarite Dalits, mobilised her supporters on a staunchly political platform, but her refusal to accommodate the Congress in the U.P. alliance may have cost the alliance. Trinamool Congress chief and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has fought the Hindutva plans for West Bengal in the streets. All told, in regions where the BJP is strong, Hindutva nationalism personified in Mr. Modi remained the dominant political force in 2019. Any public desire for his removal from his office, if it exists, has not been an outcry. The Congress's gains will be proportional to the impact of local factors, and not on account of any national alternative that it has put forward.

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Charting a clear course in the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific wing in the Ministry of External Affairs gives strategic coherence to India's Look East policy



HARSH V. PANT & PREMESHA SAHA

Though the term Indo-Pacific has been gaining traction in Indian policy circles for some time now, it achieved operational clarity after the Indian vision was presented by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his keynote address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2018. His speech underscored that for India the geography of the Indo-Pacific stretches from the eastern coast of Africa to Oceania (from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas) which also includes in its fold the Pacific Island countries.

Many mechanisms

India's Act East policy remains the bedrock of the national Indo-Pacific vision and the centrality of ASEAN is embedded in the Indian narrative. India has been an active participant in mechanisms like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), in ASEAN-led frameworks like the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus, the ASEAN Regional Forum as well as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation and the Mekong-Ganga Economic Corridor. India has also been convening the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium,

in which the navies of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) participate. India has boosted its engagements with Australia and New Zealand and has deepened its cooperation with the Republic of Korea. Through the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation, India is stepping up its interactions with the Pacific Island countries. India's growing partnership with Africa can be seen through the convening of mechanisms like the India-Africa Forum Summits. India's multi-layered engagement with China as well as strategic partnership with Russia underlines its commitment to ensuring a stable, open, secure, inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific.

India views the Indo-Pacific as a geographic and strategic expanse, with the 10 ASEAN countries connecting the two great oceans. Inclusiveness, openness, and ASEAN centrality and unity, therefore, lie at the heart of the Indian notion of Indo-Pacific. Security in the region must be maintained through dialogue, a common rules-based order, freedom of navigation, unimpeded commerce and settlement of disputes in accordance with international law. More connectivity initiatives impinging on respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, consultation, good governance, transparency, viability and sustainability should be promoted.

A natural corollary

The setting up of the Indo-Pacific wing in the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) in April 2019 is a natural corollary to this vision. Given



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how the term Indo-Pacific has been gaining currency and how major regional actors such as the U.S., Japan and Australia are articulating their regional visions – including this term in their official policy statements – it was becoming imperative for India to operationalise its Indo-Pacific policy. The renaming of the U.S. Pacific Command to U.S. Indo-Pacific Command as well as the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act in December 2018 showcase Washington's more serious engagement with the Indo-Pacific. The Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept was unveiled by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2016, and Australia released its Foreign Policy White Paper in 2017, which details Australia's Indo-Pacific vision centred around security, openness and prosperity.

Given the huge geography that the Indian definition of Indo-Pacific covers, there was a need for a bureaucratic re-alignment to create a division that can imbibe in its fold the various territorial divisions in the MEA that look after the policies of the countries which are

part of the Indo-Pacific discourse. This wing provides a strategic coherence to the Prime Minister's Indo-Pacific vision, integrating the IORA, the ASEAN region and the Quad to the Indo-Pacific dynamic.

The integration of the IORA means that attention will continue to be focused on the IOR. This can be a result of the growing Chinese footprint in the Indian Ocean and Chinese diplomacy in the region. The Ministry of Defence and the Indian Navy also are also taking note of the developments in this region and this wing can work in coordination with these two organs as well. Given New Delhi's stakes in its immediate neighbourhood, a more focused and integrated approach is needed.

Additionally, ASEAN forms the cornerstone of India's Act East policy and Indo-Pacific vision. As ASEAN now enters into deliberations to carve out its own Indo-Pacific policy, it underscores a shift in the stand of the sub-regional organisation towards the Indo-Pacific concept. Initially there was a lurking fear within the grouping that the Indo-Pacific concept might just overshadow ASEAN's centrality and importance. Visualising the ASEAN region as a part of the wider Indo-Pacific shows an evolution in the region's thinking, opening new possibilities for India's engagement with the grouping.

Challenges ahead

India's bureaucratic shift is an important move to articulate its regional policy more cogently, cohe-

rently and with a renewed sense of purpose. There are still challenges for India, especially how it will integrate the Quadrilateral initiative which got revived in 2017 with its larger Indo-Pacific approach. It will also be important for the new MEA division to move beyond security and political issues and articulate a more comprehensive policy towards the region. Commerce and connectivity in particular will have to be prioritised if India is to take advantage of a new opening for its regional engagement.

While India has been consistently emphasising "inclusiveness" in the Indo-Pacific framework, it will be challenging to maintain a balance between the interests of all stakeholders. There are differences between India's vision and the U.S.'s strategy for the Indo-Pacific even as countries like China and Russia view the Indo-Pacific with suspicion. As geopolitical tensions rise between China and the U.S., the MEA's new division will have its task cut out if India's long-term political and economic interests in the region are to be preserved. A bureaucratic change was indeed needed, but going forward the challenge would be to see how effectively this change manifests itself in managing India's growing diplomatic footprint in the Indo-Pacific.

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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.

A wise decision

The Congress's decision points to the importance of regional parties in forming coalition governments ("Congress will not insist on Prime Minister's post: Azad", May 17). Actually, announcing the prime ministerial candidate ahead of an election is to rely on the charisma of an individual rather than bank on the policies and manifesto of the party. The Prime Minister should be appointed by the party holding a majority in the Lok Sabha, not be elected by the voters directly. Personality cults are harmful to nations. KSHIRASAGARA BALAJI RAO, Hyderabad

A shameful remark

The BJP, which nominated the terror accused Pragna Singh Thakur to contest the Bhopal seat as if there was no other worthy person in the party to be fielded, should hang its head in shame for the encomium paid by its 'sadhvi' nominee to a murderer ("Pragna calls Godse 'patriot', whips up storm", May 17). If the saffron party is truly 'national' and respects the Father of the Nation, it should not allow her to contest the election. She has lost all moral right to be a Member of Parliament. SHALINI GERALD, Chennai

revered leaders not just in India but in the world. He is the symbol of our nation. It is deeply upsetting that the assassin of Gandhi has been called a patriot. I also can't understand why politicians are talking about past events when there are so many issues in the country today to debate.

VIDHYA B. RAGUNATHI, Thanjavur

A partisan Commission
The Election Commission's actions are partisan ("West Bengal tango", May 17). All its recent one-sided decisions show that the EC has a lot to answer for. The 10 p.m. deadline to end campaigning in West Bengal was clearly intended

to allow the Prime Minister's rallies there. How can anyone believe in democracy when a constitutional body entrusted with ensuring the largest democratic exercise loses credibility?

V. PADMANABHAN, Bengaluru

Liberal talk
The concern of liberals about the erosion of institutions and the change in the 'idea of India' in contrast to the immediate concerns of the people is a topic that is woefully under-examined ("Is the future of Indian democracy secure?", May 17). World over, the trend of 'strong leaders' grasping power

and riding populist waves points to the alarming erosion of the liberal consensus that had once dominated the post-war world order. However, discussions in the English media focus mainly on these 'liberal issues'. Instead, there is a need for closer examination of whether the institutions of the liberal project have delivered equity and social justice in India.

HARIKRISHNA VARMA, Ernakulam

Principles of coalition
There are three factors which determine the effectiveness of coalition governments in India ("Is coalition government worse

than single-party rule?", May 17). One, the alliance should be of like-minded parties, at least on critical issues. Two, it should be led by a leader who has wide appeal across the nation. Three, post-election alliances are not only detrimental to the proper functioning of a government, but are a mockery of democracy as parties that fight against one another come together to form the government later. If the coalition is formed on a pre-election agenda, it would add to its strength and longevity.

Y.G. CHOUKSEY, Pune

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The foot soldiers of Hindutva in West Bengal

As ideological barriers give way and political activists switch sides, the BJP is relying on its tried and tested ways of getting into the mainstream on the strength of a host of communal organisations. **Suvojit Bagchi** reports on the rise of the BJP as tensions flare up and rumours abound in election time

On an oppressively hot day in Baruipur, 50 km south of Kolkata, in South 24 Parganas district, Swarup Dutta sits in a shop crammed with stabilisers and inverters. He slowly sips his morning tea while chatting with three middle-aged men. Outside, banners of the Trinamool Congress showing the grim visage of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee are erected. But that doesn't reflect the political leanings of the four men inside. Dutta is one of the founders of the Hindu Jagran Manch, an organisation affiliated to the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), in Baruipur. The Hindu Jagran Manch, according to its website, aims to "enable social harmony and Hindu unity, propagate in public interest Hindu myths, and rehabilitate the victims of love jihad," among other things.

The four men discuss the ongoing general election, which has been marred by violence in West Bengal. Much has changed in the eastern State in just a decade. The West Bengal political landscape underwent a transformation in 2011 when the Trinamool rode to power, bringing to an end the Left Front's 34-year rule. Eight years from then, the contest is not between the Trinamool and the Left, or even the Trinamool and the Congress. A new national player is making inroads everywhere. The Bharatiya Janata Party's steady rise is not necessarily because of the party's activities; it is supported by a host of organisations in West Bengal and has deep coffers. Established over the last three decades, these organisations have multiplied since the Trinamool came to power. Their rise has forced the Trinamool to change its election strategy and adapt to the new challenge in ways dictated by its competitor. This is a story of the work done by some of the agencies that lend their support to the BJP.

Jumping ship

Samir Naskar, 40, who has dropped in for a chat, is a member of the Hindu Jagran Manch, which is still unregistered here. He is a former member of the Sonarpur Zonal Committee and Panchayat of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Now, he is a committed foot soldier of the BJP.

"What to do? Dilip-da wanted me," he explains. "Dilip-da" is the BJP State president Dilip Ghosh, who was particularly keen on roping in Naskar because of his ability to manage elections. Naskar says he switched recently from the Hindu Jagran Manch to the BJP. The reason is "understandable," says Dutta. "Naskar has worked with Dilip-da in the Manch. They share a bond." It is against the blurring of boundaries between ideologically inimical parties that the 2019 election is playing out.

Naskar used to be in charge of booth management for the CPI(M) — his task was to gather together boys in his Panchayat, Pratapnagar, which is adjacent to Baruipur, to mobilise voters to reach the booths and vote, he says. Now, he is the poll manager of the BJP in four Panchayats, which together have about 67,000 voters.

"Today, Hindus are supporting the BJP because of Mamata's policy to appease the Muslims," says Naskar. His grouse with the CPI(M) and the Trinamool is that they are "reluctant to protect the interests of Hindus". He adds: "Last month, Muslims planned a *jalsha* in Sangur village in Pratapnagar. We stopped them from organising it. The police arrested me."

With the participation of activists like Naskar from across the State, the Hindu Jagran Manch's main programme, Ram Navami, has witnessed a massive surge in participation. In 2014, Ram Navami celebrations got a big boost when the Manch provided logistical support. "We felt that the youth needed an icon in Bengal. We decided to give the Ram Navami celebrations a push. We formed celebration committees and Naskar played a key role in that," Dutta says. He reads from a yellow diary: "Last year, 20,61,000 people participated in the Ram Navami rally. Among them, 3,89,135 were *matrishakti* (women). Till about a few years ago, there were only a few thousand who attended the celebrations."

Soon after BJP leaders participated in armed Ram Navami rallies, this year the Trinamool, not to be left behind, also organised processions, with participants beating drums and shouting 'Jai Shri Ram!' Trinamool leaders admit that they were — and still are — unsure about their strategy "to counter the Hindutva brigade". The district president of the Trinamool in Malda, Moazzem Hossain, who is contesting this time, says, "We do not have cadres who are informed and educated to monitor the Sangh Parivar. They [Hindutva organisations] are operating at many levels." One such 'operation' involves taking candidates to local and lesser-known shrines in the evenings, have them perform an *aarti*, and take the blessings of the temple priest. When a priest endorses a candidate in front of 200-500 people, it makes a difference.



"The Trinamool's bigger challenge beyond May 23 will be Hindutva outfits which are not clearly visible on ground, unlike the BJP." A religious procession marking the Ram Navami festival in Siliguri in April, 2019. (Below): An Ekal Vidyalaya in a tiny hamlet, Kalitala, in the Habibpur developmental block of Malda district, West Bengal. ■ AFP/SUBHAM DUTTA



Neither does the Left Front have a strategy. In the Kolkata office of the Party of Democratic Socialism, founded by the CPI(M)'s rebels in 2001, Samir Puttand, one of the founders, says they "never monitored the RSS [Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh] outfits over the years, as neither the BJP nor the RSS was perceived as a threat." With the Left now floundering in West Bengal, and with the Trinamool still its main adversary in the State, more and more of its supporters are moving to the opposite ideological camp, the BJP.

A new icon in Bengal

The VHP office is located in a nondescript four-storey building on which is painted the emblem of the organisation, a giant banyan tree. Inside the office, located in central Kolkata, is a poster of Lord Krishna and two cows on the door. It reads, "Only those who protect cows will get our votes". Elderly Bengali women in white saris run around offering *prasad* in the office, someone is cooking *bhog*, and there is a strong fragrance of flowers.

The organisation secretary of the VHP, Sachindranath Sinha, does not deny that the VHP has been working with temple priests for a long time. "It is called Dharmacharya Samparka Bibhag [the blessings of priests are sought for every activity of the VHP]. There are half a dozen other departments of the VHP doing various kinds of work such as empowering women [through Durga Vahini], skill development, etc.," Sinha says. The VHP liaises with sadhus and arranges free pilgrimages for them to the Maha Kumbh Mela and places of religious significance.

The organisation has only been growing, Sinha says. "The Bajrang Dal is the youth wing of the VHP. Four years ago, we had 5,000-7,000 members. Now we have 70,000." He credits the rise of the Bajrang Dal to Lord Ram and the general growth of Hindutva in the State. "A few years ago, after the government

change, we began noticing how the minorities were growing from strength to strength. The majority community was complaining and the BJP was failing to take advantage of the situation," he says. "We decided then to act and began promoting Ram Navami to engage the youth."

There was some apprehension in putting the spotlight on Lord Ram in a State where Durga, Kali, local gods celebrated in Bengal's literature such as Manasha and Itu, and other godmen are celebrated, he says. "But we felt we should select only that icon, which has helped us grow elsewhere, to mobilise people. This year we have had rallies in all the 512 of the VHP's own blocks."

Sinha agrees that their programmes have helped "the BJP increase its vote share," but insists that the VHP is not "connected to elections". "We are a religious-social organisation," he says firmly. Sinha smiles while talking of the Trinamool adopting the same strategy to garner votes. "They've realised that the Hindu votes are consolidating behind the BJP."

Changing strategy

At the Ram Navami celebrations in April, thousands of people could be seen brandishing hefty metal swords and rocket launchers made of thermocol. Ratna De Nag, the incumbent MP of Hooghly, stood at the tail end of the rally, following the sword-wielding men and "monitoring the situation", according to her associates.

"The ruling party is adopting the narrative of the Opposition. And that is the victory of the Sangh Parivar," says Sanjeeb Mukherjee, retired Professor of Political Science, Calcutta University. "Owing to a lack of ideology, the Trinamool is borrowing the narrative of its rivals from time to time. Earlier it had a pro-peasant narrative, which it had borrowed from the Left. Now it has a pro-Hindutva narrative, which it has borrowed from the Right."



But the Trinamool could also turn this into an advantage, he says. "An important characteristic of Mamata is that she is a quick learner. Not having a strong ideology helps her to continuously improvise. This is a kind of *jugaad* in the world of politics." But while the Trinamool "adapts", there is no way to tell which direction its flock will turn.

Biswanath Das (name changed) is a reasonably affluent political activist. He lives on the bank of the river Padma in Murshidabad's Jalangi block. "We are officially Trinamool and unofficially BJP," says Das. Das, a Trinamool Panchayat Samiti member, was denied a ticket when internal infighting broke out within the Trinamool. He was also attacked by members of a faction of the Trinamool. He still has a neatly spread Trinamool flag on the roof of his house. "The Hindus here are all with the BJP, but the flag is for protection," he says.

Nation-building

Seemanta Chetana Mancha (SCM), a platform to increase awareness about borders and commit to the nation-building process, is another success story of the Hindutva brigade in Bengal. Standing in a floodplain of the Padma, the SCM's State Committee member, Tapash Biswas, says the organisation, which "closely coordinates with the Border Security Force", has grown dramatically. "Our job is to ensure that people like Biswanath Das are aware of their rights as citizens living on the border to her associates."

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SANJEEB MUKHERJEE
Retired Professor of Political Science, Calcutta University

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MOAZZEM HOSSAIN
District president of the Trinamool in Malda

der. They report cases of cow theft, smuggling and atrocities by the 'majority' in Murshidabad," says Biswas, a *swayamsevak*. Muslims, who constitute about 70% of Murshidabad's population, are the majority in the district.

Colonel Dipak Bhattacharya, the South Bengal president of the SCM, says the organisation was launched in Bengal decades ago, but began to grow only from 2017. "In the last four years, from very few volunteers we are now having about 30,000 in the State, of which 20,000 are in South Bengal," he says. The Colonel became a full-time *swayamsevak* after retirement, he says.

The SCM is popular in border States like Rajasthan and Gujarat. One of the key programmes that popularised the SCM in the border towns and villages of Bengal was "stopping land transfer to Muslims". Many Hindu families, especially aged couples whose children live in Kolkata, were selling their property to Muslims and leaving the border areas to be with their children, the SCM members say. "So, we undertook a programme to reach out to those couples. We told them that if every Hindu family leaves the area, then the border will be completely dominated by Muslims. The programme gave a major boost to our membership," Bhattacharya says. Other programmes such as providing protection to cows and ensuring jobs have attracted more people.

Skill development

Along the banks of the river is a giant and partly rusted gate covered with bougainvillea. This is the Bhalukbona Gramothan Prashikshan Kendra. The organisation was founded in Kolkata in the late 1980s and is credited for the BJP's growth in the tribal areas of central India by national leaders of the party.

As the gate opens, visible on a plaque are words by Prime Minister Narendra Modi: "Our mission should be skill development to take the country forward." The Bhalukbona centre, located deep in Malda's Habibpur block which has a 50% Scheduled Caste and 30% Scheduled Tribe population, is running the Prime Minister's skill development programme on a huge campus.

"Since 2001, the Ekal Vidyalaya has been in operation, but from 2011, we developed the Gramothan project to ensure jobs for the villagers in the area," says Kanai Pande, the man in charge of the Bhalukbona project. Pande, a *swayamsevak*, takes us on a guided tour

of the campus which has a Ram Mandir, a *goshala*, a computer-training school and various skill development programmes to impart training to courier boys or automobile mechanics. But the real success story is the 85,000 Ekal schools in India. "Bengal has about 3,600 of such schools, of which 250 are in Malda," says Pande.

It is early morning. Dalit and Adivasi children chant the *Gayatri Mantra* in Kalitala village in Habibpur. The school has one teacher, Jolly Mondal, who is pursuing a Master's degree. She gets ₹1,000 as honorarium per month and "enjoys teaching". The children under her watch recite a series of poems recounting the greatness of Sita and Savitri. The children say that their favourite hymn is the *Bijaya Mahamantra*, in praise of Lord Ram.

Pande insists that Ekals are "both non-religious and non-formal schools" and that they follow the government-approved syllabus for children up to the fourth grade. These schools, some of which are residential, impart education in sports, language, culture and patriotism. "We teach children to love their country through songs. There are 90 such schools in Habibpur block, besides many run by the RSS," says Pande. Both Ekal and Gramothan are funded by "well-wishers in many countries, especially the United States."

On way to the city, Pande says that the good work of the Ekal should "benefit the BJP" in the elections. How? "We run the finest Ekal school in Balurghat and it has an impact in the area," he says. Sinha says there are "50 families connected to each Ekal", and the teacher is asked to reach out to each family to talk "about religion and the country". The teachers do not talk about the elections necessarily, he says. But come elections, the parents carry forward the message of voting for the country first, an oft-repeated comment of BJP leaders.

The bigger challenge

The heady mix of nationalism and religion has clearly found a resonance in the once Marxist State of West Bengal. Bengal now slips into the last phase of what has turned out to be a violent battle for the ballot. With educationist Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's marble bust smashed into smithereens following a clash between the BJP and the TMC a few days ago, and both blaming each other for the episode, the tension in the State has only increased. Messages about religious communities are being forwarded by organisations, many of which were founded in post-Independence Bengal, managed to survive during the Communist era, and are now consolidated in Trinamool's Bengal. The Trinamool's bigger challenge beyond May 23 will be these Hindutva outfits which are not clearly visible on ground, unlike the BJP.