

Opinion

SUNDAY, MAY 19, 2019

IT HAS BEEN a long, tiresome and sometimes depressing 10 weeks from the date of the notification to the last date of polling — which is today. We have seen an abundance of everything except debates on policies. There has been an abundance of political parties, candidates, rallies and roadshows, money spent, abuses hurled, violence, failure of the vaunted EVMs and VVPATs, and clean chits by the Election Commission (EC). Yet, at the end of the day, a democratic exercise of an enormous scale has been completed.

The EC has got only 'average' on its report card. What intrigued me was the different standards that were applied in different states. For example, in Tamil Nadu, road shows, convoys of cars and hoardings were not allowed; posters and wall writings were banned in towns and cities; expenditure observers were intrusive and arbitrary; and the concept of 'notional expenditure' was carried to ridiculous lengths. On the other hand, Delhi and constituencies in the north, west and east of India were awash with hoardings and posters. Roadshows and l-o-n-g convoys appeared to be the rule. Mind-boggling expenditure was visible, the expenditure observers were not. I wonder how the EC can justify such patently discriminatory regulations.

Media: which one?

The print and visual media took sides. Most were on the side of the government out of either love or fear — more likely the latter. Some became fellow-travellers of the BJP. None seemed to remember that a national election to the Lok Sabha was an examination on the five-year record of the government. Few newspapers and fewer channels dared criticise or expose the record of the BJP government. Thanks to the online media and social media, there was a lively debate in the country. It is the impact of that vibrant debate — what is vaguely described as the 'undercurrent' — that will decide the outcome of the elections.

All manifestos, except one, were ignored, even by the authors! The Prime Minister was not willing to campaign on the BJP's manifesto. Mr Rahul Gandhi repeated the Congress's promises, especially on NYAY, farmers' issues and jobs, at every meeting.

Economy was missing

The BJP shifted gears early in the campaign. *Achhe din* was never mentioned. The 2014 promises were an embarrassment to the BJP. Mr Narendra Modi took refuge under 'surgical strike', Pulwama-Balakot and nationalism. 'Surgical strike' was just another cross-border action that did not deter Pakistan. Pulwama was a massive intelligence failure. Balakot is shrouded in mystery. Mr Modi's 'nationalism' argument divided the country into 'Are you with me or are you against me?', and if you were against Mr Modi's policies, you were anti-national. By that standard, all those who voted against the BJP in 2019 will be anti-national and we may well become a nation of predominantly anti-nationals!

The Economy was forgotten. There were tremors when credible reports and official data surfaced and punched huge holes in the false narrative of the government. While the Prime Minister was campaigning and the finance min-

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



At last, the end, with bitterness



Poling officials checking EVMs and VVPATs before leaving their polling booth at a distribution centre ahead of the seventh and last phase of Lok Sabha polls in Kolkata

ister was writing blogs, the economy tanked (see 'Economy has entered danger zone', *The Sunday Express*, May 12, 2019). There has been more bad news in the last week. Manufacturing growth turned negative in February 2019 and remained negative in March 2019. The Sensex and Nifty recorded nine straight days of fall in the index. The dollar-rupee exchange rate touched ₹70.26. Newspapers carried unflattering stories in the outcomes of Swachh Bharat, Ujjwala and PMAY. After the US tightened the screws on Iran, India scrambled to get oil, even as oil prices rose. The tariff war between the US and China intensified, raising fears of collateral damage to India's external trade.

The level of public discourse declined sharply. There is no denying that abuses and epithets were hurled across the net but, in the melee, even sarcasm and allusion were labelled

unparliamentary! 'Slap of democracy' was taken literally as a threat to slap the Prime Minister. An allusion to a *Mahabharata* character was interpreted as name-calling. Mr Narendra Modi took offence to everything that was said about him and played victim, ignoring the fact that he had left behind a long trail of victims.

Many sides to Mr Modi

Towards the end of the campaign, like an unexpected cloudburst in mid-summer, there was a shower of unbridled humour. We owe a debt of gratitude to the Prime Minister. He lightened the bitter campaign with remarkable revelations about his encounters with science and technology. The first was on the Balakot air strike. Mr Modi said, "Experts were rethinking the air strike due to bad weather, but then I said so much cloud

cover and rains could be beneficial, we can escape their radar. This was my raw wisdom. Then I said, there's cloud cover, please go ahead."

Recalling his association with Mr L K Advani, Mr Modi said, "Around 1987-88, I used digital camera for the first time... I took a photo of Advaniji and transmitted it to Delhi. Advaniji was surprised and asked, 'How did my colour photo appear today?'"

Mr Modi's surreal experiences with science must be God's blessings. I was reminded of another story told by Mr Modi in 2014. "God has gifted me the sense of mixing and matching colours. Since I am God-gifted, I fit well in everything."

God is watching India's elections.



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INSIDE TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR

Khan Market Gang

PM Narendra Modi's mocking reference to the "Khan Market Gang" in his interview with *The Indian Express* has made the posh south Delhi market the focus of attention. Modi suggests that shoppers at the market represent the views of a small elite, opposed to him. Khan Market named after Pashtun leader Ghaffar Khan's brother, Jabbar Khan, was originally a modest refugee colony with shops below and apartments above. But over the decades, because of its central location, it transformed into a ritzy shopping centre with expensive boutiques, trendy eateries and high-priced imported edibles. The original inhabitants have mostly sold out since real estate prices are today among the most expensive in India. The term "Khan Market Gang" was originally coined by FM Arun Jaitley as a jocular reference to a group of young MPs from entitled backgrounds who often ate at Khan Market restaurants during Parliament lunch breaks. The original Khan Market gang included second-generation politicians such as Milind Deora, Jitin Prasad, Manvendra Singh and Supriya Sule. By 2014, the only one from the original set left was Sule. Later entrants to the club include Kanimozhi and K Kavitha. Incidentally, Rahul Gandhi also frequents a popular Khan Market restaurant. Some believe that Modi used the term "Khan Market Gang" because he felt it would resonate more with his voters than the expression "Lutyens elite". The shopkeepers in Khan Market are, however, most upset over its sudden prominence. They fear that the civic authorities could come down heavily on them for unauthorised and unsafe renovations.

Modi team player

In an interview with a Hindi TV channel in Punjab, Modi pointed out that he had a rich experience of working with coalition governments. Modi's detractors read his remark as an indication of his nervousness about the poll outcome and that he wanted to clarify that he was capable of running a coalition government. Modi mentioned that he had worked with coalition governments headed by Bansi Lal and Om Prakash Chautala in Haryana, Farooq Abdullah and Mufti Mohammed Sayeed in Kashmir, and Chimanbhai Patel in Gujarat. Some were puzzled by the comment since Modi as PM and CM always ran majority governments. In fact, Modi was alluding to the time when he was BJP general secretary in charge of Haryana, J&K and Gujarat

and liaised with minority governments in which the BJP was an alliance partner.

Close encounter

Maneka Gandhi was upset that her niece Priyanka Gandhi Vadra campaigned for Congress candidate Sanjay Singh in Sultanpur, from where she is contesting. Out of family loyalty, she herself has always refrained from campaigning in the nearby Gandhi family constituencies of Amethi and Rae Bareilly, despite pressure from the BJP. Sonia Gandhi's family had in the past kept away from Sultanpur, when Varun Gandhi was the candidate. Last week, Maneka was returning from an Amit Shah rally and her car suddenly drove past the truck in which Priyanka was standing as part of a road show. Maneka noticed Priyanka first and smiled. Priyanka turned around to see why people were staring and then waved to her aunt.

Campaigning since 13

A biography on Amit Shah has just been released. The book's co-author is Anirban Ganguly, the director of Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation, a BJP think tank. The book is not just about Shah's life but also how he single-handedly transformed the BJP's organisational structure and changed its fortunes from 2014 onwards. On the biographical side, Ganguly provides some unfamiliar insights into a politician who is generally reticent about his personal life. Shah has often boasted that he started in the BJP from the bottom rung, writing slogans on the walls and sticking posters. But not many are aware that his first campaign was at the age of 13 when he worked for Maniben Patel, Sardar Patel's daughter, who was the Janata Party candidate in Mehsana, Gujarat, in 1977.

Belated attack

Modi campaigned in MP last week and mocked Digvijaya Singh for not casting his vote. Singh could not vote in his home town Raghogarh since he was tied down in Bhopal in a tough contest. Modi also claimed that Singh had attended one of wanted Islamic preacher Zakir Naik's lectures. Some are intrigued why the PM waited till after the polls in Bhopal to launch his broadside against Singh. In fact, most of the local BJP leaders stayed away from Pragma Thakur's campaign and left it to the VHP to campaign for her. Pragma's aides requested film stars Dharmendra and Sunny Deol to campaign for her. But a lawyer close to Digvijaya Singh who has also been legal counsel for both Dharmendra and his son in a case in Indore, persuaded them to stay away.

The Power of Chi

The Buddha's image casts a benevolent eye on golfers at the Chee Chan GC in Pattaya

OVER THE TOP

Meraj Shah



THE FIRST, AND most important lesson, for itinerant golfers teeing it up at the latest addition to Pattaya's golfing firmament—the Chee Chan GC—is not to swear. Come to think of it, that would probably hold true anywhere in Thailand—the Thais are gentle folk who don't talk loudly in public, let alone cuss—but it's especially true at this gorgeous new layout in Pattaya's Silverlake suburb. Dominating the otherwise flat skyline in this region, is the magnificent Chee Chan Mountain, that, on its rocky north face, has been inscribed with a larger-than-life image of the Buddha. Officially known as the Phra Phuttha Maha Wachira Uttamopat Satsada, the image was created back in 1996 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of late King Bhumibol Adulyadej's accession on the throne. Carved out of the rock using lasers and inlaid with golf leaf that glis-

tens in the sun, the 130-metre high and 70-metre wide image is one of the largest Buddha images in the world.

Subliminally, the image, omnipresent, and visible from very nearly every hole at the newly-opened Chee Chan GC, exerts a calming influence as you take to the course—a feeling that's accentuated by a cool breeze that blows in from bays on either side of the course that sits like an amphitheatre in the middle. On its periphery Chee Chan GC is ringed by tall limestone karsts (cliffs); the holes that play towards the perimeter rise up to the base of these cliffs and are followed by holes that play back down to the middle.

It's a well-balanced layout, with no overwhelming artificial features, or over-contoured fairways, with the Buddha image taking centre stage. Perhaps the most crucial innovation has to do with the grass on the fairways: the hardy, yet carpet-like Zoysia has been used on the fairways across the layout to great effect while the greens are sod with the more traditional Tifdwarf.

This happens to be the first course designed by Golfplan—Dale & Ramsey Golf Course Architects—that I've had



the opportunity to play. I was reminded, on more than one occasion of Ronald Fream, the well-regarded course designer, and in particular two of his layouts—the New Kuta GC in Bali and the Sentosa GC in Singapore. Not so surprising when you consider that Fream, David Dale and Kevin Ramsey

worked together for many years. The visual aesthetic—grand and imposing without being intimidating—and the lack of say, one outstanding signature hole—is very Fream-like. And that's a good thing, because Chee Chan GC has a collection of spectacular holes, rather than a couple of superlative ones. On

the very first hole, facing the Buddha, you take a call on whether to hit a safe drive to the lower landing area on the right, and follow it up with a long approach over deep bunkers, or alternatively, take up the challenge to fly the bunkers off the tee to attack an unguarded pin on the second. Holes five, six, 11, 14 and 17 play towards the mountain; the 11th and 17th holes also give a glimpse of a Wat (temple) on an adjoining hillside. It can be a bit distracting, all the prettiness, and there's no doubt that awareness of the image of the Buddha, makes you bite your tongue every time you flub a shot or miss a gimme.

Speaking only for myself though, a self-enforced moratorium on profanity seemed to work wonders for the temperament. I didn't quite make the right choices when it came to course strategy at the Chee Chan GC, and paid for that by shooting very nearly twice my handicap. And yet, I felt no angst, or the coming on of a dark mood (as is wont to be the case after a bad scoring round). For that, I think I would give credit to the Buddha at Chee Chan, under whose watchful eye, I discovered something akin to the 'Middle Path',—a level-headedness, that has eluded me in the past.

Chee Chan GC is at the upper end of the premium spectrum of golf courses in Thailand, putting it in the same league as, say, the Black Mountain GC in Hua Hin, or the Suwan GC outside

Bangkok. Expect to pay THB 4000 on weekdays and THB 5000 on weekends, and another THB 1200 for the caddy and cart. It's always a good idea to carry your own clubs, but in case you're not, then rental clubs (TaylorMade M4s) can be hired for THB 2000 per set. Your columnist flew a new budget carrier: Noks-koot's business class tickets are about as dear as premium economy seats of full-service airlines, and the extra baggage allowance usually translates into no extra cartage costs for clubs. In any case, as far as I'm concerned, Thailand is by far my favourite golf destination in this part of the world, and is probably the only place that I would not mind warming the cheap seats for a golf trip.

That was last week; as you read this I'm probably poring over last night's third-round coverage of the on-going PGA Championship—the second Major of 2019. As I write this, Tiger Woods has missed the cut, and Brooks Koepka looks like he's poised to dominate the men's game much like Woods did back in the day. At 12-under-par, Koepka, has set the 36-hole record for Major Championships and leads the trailing duo of Jordan Spieth and Adam Scott by no less than seven strokes. Koepka won this event last year quite convincingly, and, I for one won't be betting against him defending his title in 2019.

A golfer, Meraj Shah also writes about the game