

ACROSS  
THE AISLE

P CHIDAMBARAM

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

## At last, the end, with bitterness

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 I-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 NAY, 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-Balakat and nationalism. 'Surgical strike' was just another cross-border action that did not deter Pakistan. Pulwama was a massive intelligence failure. Balakat 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 stan-

dard, 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 Minister 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 Rs 70.26. Newspapers carried unflattering stories on 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 unintended 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 Balakat air strike. Mr Modi said, "Experts were re-thinking 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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## FIFTH COLUMN



TAVLEEN SINGH

## Democracy is hard work

AN ELECTION that has seemed unending ends today. Mercifully. One more week of angry rhetoric and voters may have begun to organise protests against democracy. Next time dear Election Commission find a way to identify trouble spots and make special arrangements. But, let the rest of India vote on a single day. And, please pay heed to the Prime Minister's suggestion that we begin holding elections for Parliament and the state legislatures at the same time. It is an idea whose time has come.

So what choices did this election offer? From my travels I learned that in the eyes of most voters this was a choice between Modi and a return to the way things were. A choice between the promise of change and someone who has to some degree delivered on this promise, and those who promise nothing new at all. The Congress party's campaign has made a lot of drama about NAY with much deliberate emphasis on how the acronym means justice in Hindi. But, from my travels I gleaned that most voters see this promise of minimum basic income as just another scrap from the high table of political power. They know better than the economists who devised this new scheme to redistribute poverty, that in pursuit of this noble objective, it is usually the poverty of officials that gets alleviated.

What I also discovered this time was that the average rural voter is no longer happy to vote for political heirs or political parties that are family heirlooms. More than once I heard people say that they wanted a more inclusive political system in which people who did not come from 'big political families' had some small chance of getting past the closed doors of the Lok Sabha. In view of this, for the Congress president to offer India his sister, as what would be called his running mate in a presidential election, was a bad idea. He would have been able to take Modi on much more effectively had he spent the past five years rebuilding our oldest political party up again from the ashes of its worst electoral defeat. He would have done better to build on the vaunted values of the Congress party than emulate the Prime Minister's temple tours by making a few himself.

Modi is a formidable opponent because he is seen by most Indians as a man who has dedicated himself to public service without seeking personal gain. But he comes with some horrible Hindu fanatics in his retinue. The way to take him on is to bring back real secularism and people who do not see assassins and vigilante killer squads as patriots.

Instead his opponents chose to charge him with 'destroying democracy'. This charge has lost all meaning because it has been hurled at him daily almost from the day he became Prime Minister. I have attended conclaves in the environs of the Prime Minister's house in which this charge has been made loudly. So democracy has clearly been alive and well.

The other problem with the gaggle of regional satraps that constitutes what Modi correctly describes as the 'mahamilavat' (mighty mingling) is that like the Congress they have nothing new to offer. Led by the Chief Minister of West Bengal, they have concentrated mostly on abusing Modi and then used 'secularism' as a shield to hide behind. It has been a dishonest strategy and in Bengal dissolved into real ugliness.

If it worked at all, it was mostly to get under Modi's skin deeply enough for him to have reverted to supporting Hindutva crazies like Sadhvi Pragna. It was a very bad idea to give her a ticket in the first place, and she has gone beyond everyone's worst expectations by declaring that Mahatma Gandhi's killer was a patriot and will always be one. This was not the only ugliness in this campaign. We also had Sam Pitroda declare disdainfully that the evil, calculated massacre of more than 3,000 Sikhs in 1984 deserved to be dismissed with "hua to hua". This translates as "So it happened, so what?". Not a good thing for a man who is seen as the favorite guru of the man who seeks to save India from wicked Mr Modi.

Ordinary Indian voters do not see Modi as wicked. They believe it is because of him that such things as toilets, gas connections and loans to build homes have become available to them. Muslims and Dalits mostly constitute the category of voters who will not be voting for him because cov vigilantisism affected their lives directly. Ironically, upper caste Hindu farmers are now suffering as well because herds of hungry, abandoned cows have become a serious threat to their crops. If Modi becomes prime minister again this week, he might find it necessary to abandon the Hindutva project.

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## INSIDE TRACK



COOMI KAPOOR

## KHAN MARKET GANG

Prime Minister 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 Finance Minister 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, Narendra 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 Bansilal 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 chief

## OUT OF MY MIND



MEGHNAD DESAI

ONE MORE woman denied justice. Obviously there are two classes of citizens. The elite who are immune to punishment, but who can easily take offence and inflict punishment. Then there are those who patiently wait in unbearable heat, queuing to vote, sometimes risking life and limb, facing attacks by hoodlums of competing parties, often spied upon by political

minister 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.

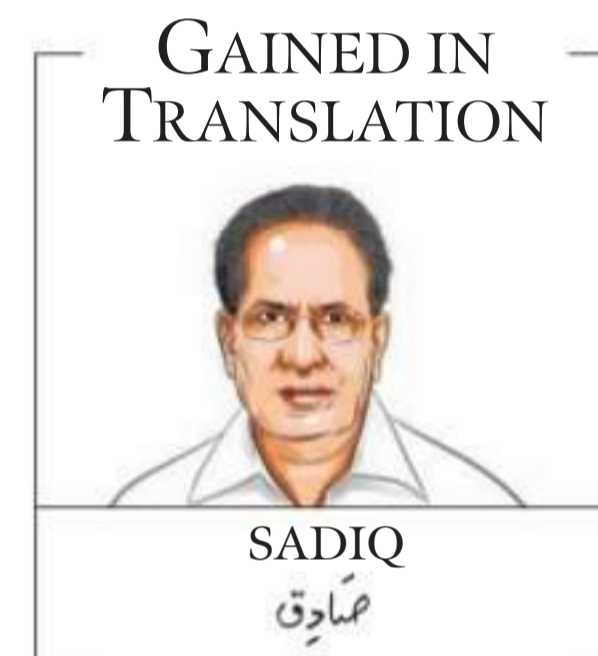
## CAMPAIGNING SINCE 13

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

Narendra Modi campaigned in Madhya Pradesh 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 Pragya Thakur's campaign and left it to the VHP to campaign for her. Pragya'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.

## Ghalib in Banaras

GAINED IN TRANSLATION  
SADIQ  
سَدِيق

BANARAS IS counted among the world's most ancient cities. It is a city imbued with religion, culture, history and faith, and it dwells in our hearts with its sanctified, hallowed imagination.

These days, due to the Lok Sabha elections, frenzied political discussions centre around Banaras. This is partly due to the fact that Prime Minister Narendra Modi is contesting from here, and also because a soldier, and many farmers, came in the forefront to challenge him.

It is interesting to observe that even here, education, employment, public health, etc have failed to emerge as big poll issues. Even the drinking water crisis could not become the rallying point. Anyway, these are transient political machinations which we are getting used to listening to and watching. Banaras, however, is not a battleground of politics; it's a town bristling with belief and spirituality. It has had this status for centuries. And every age has accepted its hallowed character and accorded the city its due. Nearly 200 years ago, the great poet Mirza Ghalib (1797-1869) wrote an extraordinary poem on Banaras in Persian, titled *Masnavi Charagh-e-Dair* (Lamp of the Temple). In the poem, Banaras has been described as "Hama na Kaaba-e-Hindustan ast (Hindustan's Kaaba)".

In August 1826, Mirza Ghalib travelled to Calcutta from Delhi to file a lawsuit against the injustice meted out to him in a case involving his family pension. During this period, he also stayed in Banaras for some time. During the journey, he fell sick and grew weak. In the letter that he wrote to a close friend, Rai Chhajmal, after he reached Banaras, he penned a *qata* (couplets written on a theme) in Persian. It read: "A melancholy man, Ghalib, who was so weak it seemed there was little life left in him, has reached Banaras alive. I had not expected this feat from that twig."

In a letter to another friend, he wrote that when he reached Banaras in a state of critical illness, the city's cool and pleasant weather energised him and lent him a fresh lease of life. All praise be to Banaras:



Illustration: C R Sasikumar

It will be appropriate if I call it the core of world's heart out of the happiness coursing in my own heart. Because of the exuberance of its lush greenery and flowers, if I call it a paradise on earth, it's only a fair comparison. The city's breeze reanimates the bodies of even the dead.

The first couplet of the *masnawi* (extensive poem) Ghalib wrote on Banaras reads: *Tallila Banaras chashme baddoor/ bahishte khurram-o-firadaus mamoor* (From the evil eye, may God in his greatness/ save Banaras as it is a grove in paradise).

Needless to say, Ghalib used grove in paradise to mean *Anand Kanan* (forest of bliss), which Banaras is popularly called. In the same first draft of the *masnawi*, Ghalib wrote that Banaras was held in high esteem, and that the pinnacle of its prestige was difficult to reach for the human imagination.

Nearly 200 years ago, when Ghalib arrived in Banaras, the city was like a garden in full bloom. Ghalib lavished praise on the city's climate, its natural landscape, its gardens and beautiful edifices.

Ghalib was not beckoned to Banaras by Maa Ganga, but whatever he wrote about Banaras reveals his deep regard for the city and the Ganga. The Ganga in his time was not so polluted that a budget of crores of rupees was needed to clean it, and even that has left no trace on the river.

In the *Masnavi Charagh-e-Dair*, Ghalib also recorded an anecdote. Though that anecdote is a sample of his poetic imagination, it demonstrates how sacred he held Banaras in his heart of hearts. He writes that one day he asked a conscientious holy man, "Do you see that virtue has vanished from the world? There is no trace of love, empathy and affection... A father thirsts for the blood of his son who, in turn, bays for the former's blood... Warmth and cordiality have bid the world adieu. There are tell-tale signs

already, yet why doesn't *qayamat* (Day of Judgment) arrive?"

Upon hearing this, the holy man smiled and, pointing a finger towards Kashi, said, "This city has stopped the arrival of *qayamat*. The truth is that the creator of the universe doesn't seem willing to let this beautiful and effervescent city be reduced to ruin and devastation."

During his stay in Banaras, in one of the personal letters he wrote to a friend, Maulvi Mohammad Ali Khan, Ghalib gave expression to a true emotion lodged in his heart, stating in no uncertain terms that if he did not fear the reprimand or criticism of his enemies, he would have willingly "abandoned religion, broken the rosary", worn *tilak* on his forehead and *janu* (sacred thread) across his chest. And, in that avatar, he would have sat meditating on the banks of the Ganga for so long that he himself would have washed away the dirt and impurities of his life and, like a drop in the ocean, would have disappeared into the ocean. This letter is an unparalleled sample of the spirituality Banaras is steeped in as well as Ghalib's mystical conduct.

Last year, I saw a film, *Mukti Bhawan* (*Hotel Salvation*, 2016), that artistically portrays the lives, beliefs and relationships of the common people staying in a *serai* (inn) on the banks of the Ganga, waiting to attain *moksha* (salvation). While watching the film, I acutely remembered Ghalib. And, with him, Banaras, too. What Ghalib saw, felt and reflected during the short span of his stay in the city, its ordinary mortals can't do even if we spend an entire lifetime there.

*Sadiq, translator of Ghalib's Masnavi Charagh-e-Dair into Hindi, taught Urdu at Delhi University*

Translated from Urdu by Nawaid Anjum

## Waiting for freedom

agents of parties lurking inside the voting booth. They will elect a government. Life will continue but not change as far as the inequality is concerned. Franchise confers political equality, each adult has one vote. But social equality — equality of status of each with all — remains elusive.

When India became independent, Indians did not win freedom. The ruling class changed colour but the accents remained *pukka*. The punitive laws passed by the British were preserved just in case the natives revolt. From their feudal, albeit secular socialist, perch, as far as the rulers were concerned, the mob had to be kept under control. The Indian Penal Code fashioned by Macaulay continues to rule.

So do all the more punitive measures enacted by the British with only a mild change in the title. Remember the Emergency was perfectly constitutional. Firmly founded on old British laws, warmed up for independent India.

Hence, the problem that even while a shiny package of Anglo American Freedom was gifted to the people in the Constitution, every Right bestowed is qualified in favour of the rulers and not the ruled. The people cannot be trusted with freedom. The elite can abuse each other but no outsider can. Even the abuse has to be traditional verbal one. For a millennial, a meme may be a natural way to express an opinion rather like a cartoon in a newspaper. But the guardians

of the people do not have to catch up with technology. Hence the umbrage taken by the Chief Minister of West Bengal. (I would have thought to have an expensive hairstyle for the Met Gala chosen by a star mounted around your face would bring joy and mirth, but then I am not a people's leader).

The Supreme Court's judgment in the case of Priyanka Sharma is a classic example of the half loaf (perhaps just a dried crust) of freedom. Yes you have freedom of expression but not with respect to your Leader. Every Article in Part IV of the Constitution begins by conferring a Right but then follow the qualifications in subsequent sections. It is the American Bill of Rights with post-colonial restrictions. So Sharma

was free to do what she liked but had to say she was sorry for exercising her freedom.

Compare that with the case of X who complained about sexual harassment by the CJI. An internal procedure was used to examine the complaint. The in-house procedure would not have passed muster in a court had it been used by a private firm. But the elite are the elite. Case closed. She is only a citizen.

The State distrusts the citizen. She has to prove her identity at every stage, show a card, prove her residence, show her birth certificate, give father's, husband's name to get what should be hers by Right. It may change someday, who knows. Enjoy the final day of the festival of democracy!