



Eye on the monsoon

States must set up new recharging wells and improve existing ones on a war footing

As India awaits the arrival of the annual summer monsoon, hopes are particularly high for normal rainfall that is so vital for agriculture, the health of forests, rivers and wetlands. The India Meteorological Department has forecast normal rainfall of 96% of the long period average of 89 cm rain, with an onset date in the first week of June in Kerala. It has also signalled a significant possibility of a deficit. The monsoon bounty is crucial for the 60% of gross cropped area in farming that is rain-fed, and represents, in the assessment of the National Commission on Farmers, 45% of agricultural output. Given the erratic patterns of rainfall witnessed over the past few decades and their possible connection to atmospheric changes caused by a variety of pollutants, the distribution of monsoon 2019 will add to the insights. The southwest monsoon is a determinant of India's overall prosperity, and sustained efforts to make the best use of rainfall are absolutely important for farms, cities and industry. Considering that there has been a 52% decline in groundwater levels based on tests conducted last year over the previous decadal average, State governments should have pursued the setting up of new recharging wells and made improvements to existing ones on a war footing. They also have lagged in building structures to harvest surface water and helping farmers raise the efficiency of irrigation. The approach to the farming sector, however, has been influenced more by the imperatives of an election year, and the Centre's biggest intervention was to announce a cash handout to specified categories of small farmers.

A normal summer monsoon over the subcontinent brings widespread prosperity, but does not guarantee a uniform spread. This, as scientists point out, may be due to the effect of particulates released through various industrial and agricultural processes. Some of these aerosols suppress the rainfall and disperse it across the land, causing long breaks in precipitation, while others absorb heat and lead to a convection phenomenon that increases rainfall in some places. Such evidence points to the need for India to clean up its act on rising industrial emissions, and burning of fossil fuels and biomass in order to improve the stability of the monsoon. An equally key area of concern is freshwater availability for households, which, NITI Aayog says, account for 4% of available supplies, besides 12% used by industry. Urbanisation trends and the severe water stress that residents experience underscore the need for mandatory rainwater harvesting policies and augmented efforts by States to preserve surface water by building new reservoirs. Yet, governments are adopting a commodity approach to the vital resource, displaying deplorable indifference to the pollution and loss of rivers, wetlands and lakes that hold precious waters. This is no way to treat a life-giving resource.

Yemen's woes

The Saudi airstrikes on Sanaa risk tipping the country back to pre-ceasefire days

The withdrawal of Houthi rebels from three of Yemen's ports as part of the December 2018 ceasefire agreement should have been the basis for further talks to expand the truce to other parts of the country. But while the withdrawal was under way last week, Houthis, who are reportedly getting support from Iran, carried out a drone attack on a Saudi pipeline, and in retaliation Riyadh launched airstrikes on Sanaa, the capital city controlled by the rebels, killing at least six civilians, including children. Yemen now risks falling back to the pre-ceasefire days of conflict with fighting having broken out in parts of the government-controlled south. What makes the resumption of hostilities more dangerous is the regional angle. Tensions are on the rise in West Asia over the U.S.-Iran standoff. The U.S. had earlier warned against possible attacks by either Iran or Iran-backed militias against American interests or its allies in the region, and has deployed an aircraft carrier and a bomber squad to the Gulf. Immediately after the pipeline was attacked, the Saudis blamed Iran for ordering it, an allegation which both Tehran and the Houthis have refuted. Whether Iran was actually behind the attack or not, the incident and the subsequent Saudi airstrikes show how the Yemeni conflict is entangled with the regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia started its Yemen military campaign in March 2015 with the goal of driving Houthis out of territories they captured. Four years of war have devastated the country. According to the UN, at least 7,000 civilians have been killed. Thousands of others have died due to disease, poor health care and malnutrition. The blockade Saudi Arabia imposed on Yemen steadily worsened the country's hunger problem and health-care crisis. The country is on the brink of a famine. It's a shame that even when the ceasefire was holding, the Saudis did not halt bombing Yemen. Saudi Arabia appears to be frustrated that it is not able to defeat the Houthis even after years of heavy bombing. The Houthis, on their part, continue to provoke the Saudis through cross-border rocket and drone attacks. The Yemenis are stuck in between. The way forward is the Hodeida model. The December ceasefire took effect in the Red Sea port city and both the rebels and government forces stuck to it till the rebels pulled out last week. They should continue talks under international mediation and replicate the Hodeida model elsewhere in Yemen. For this to be achieved, the Houthis should decouple themselves from the regional politics, and stay focused on resolving differences with the government and rebuilding the war-torn country, while Saudi Arabia should get out of Yemen.

Why the BJP is not invincible in Uttar Pradesh

The SP-BSP's social arithmetic signposts Hindutva's failure to subsume identity politics



ZOAYA HASAN

There is little doubt that the final outcome of the 2019 general election will be determined in great part by the vote in Uttar Pradesh. The battleground State is home to 80 of 543 Lok Sabha constituencies, enough to make or break governments. The jury is still out on the final outcome. What is clear is that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is having a hard time replicating its 2014 performance in U.P. in 2019. Anti-incumbency caused by a combination of economic factors and the Opposition on the ground propelled by the mahagathbandhan – alliance of the Samajwadi Party (SP), Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) – has created an unexpected new political dynamic. This alliance has been formed with an explicit anti-BJP focus and is likely to have a significant impact on the outcome of the 2019 election.

Two issues will determine the result in the State. These are: Hindu voter consolidation and caste mobilisation. These issues can also serve as a lens to track the shifts in the State's politics more broadly.

Shaky narrative

The BJP's stunning victory in the 2014 Lok Sabha election relied heavily on U.P. Till a couple of months ago, the BJP had the political momentum in its favour but in the dying phases of the long campaign it was struggling to regain momentum. In 2014, the BJP was an outsider; in 2019, it is the incumbent at both the State and national levels, making an anti-esta-

blishment campaign untenable. Economic issues have played an important role in shifting the ground. The BJP doesn't have a great story to tell the voters of U.P.; hence, it has focussed on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's muscular leadership, national security and Hindu-Muslim divisions.

Travelling through the heart of eastern and central U.P. during the election campaign, it was hard to detect a Modi wave. But it was equally difficult to overlook his popularity among the upper castes, youth and non-Yadav backward castes who want him back as Prime Minister. Mr. Modi had promised much on the development front to U.P. but there is disappointment about how little he has delivered. Big cities such as Lucknow, Varanasi and Allahabad have experienced economic expansion even as the older parts of these cities and peripheries are stagnating. Driven by real estate development, economic expansion basically means widening of roads (it was aptly described as 'Sadak Chaap vikas', or superficial development, by someone in Allahabad), swanky shopping malls and dazzling showrooms signalling changing lifestyles in urban U.P. But nearly 78% of U.P.'s population lives in rural areas, and this sizeable rural majority has not fared well as the Central and State governments have failed to address their needs. The deepening distress in the agricultural sector has hardly been addressed. Nor has the problem of stray cattle, which is damaging crops in the rural areas, been addressed.

There is much talk about government schemes which have benefited some people. However, differential access to government schemes such as toilets, gas connections and loans to build homes was highlighted in several conversations in central U.P., and this has contributed to growing anger, par-



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

ticularly among Dalits and Muslims, who feel that they've been left out. We asked a group of women in Faizabad if they supported Mr. Modi. They said they did, but not with a certainty that withstood further probing. Soon enough they admitted that they said so out of fear and would not vote for him because his government had not delivered on promises, especially employment opportunities essential for their material well-being.

The 2014 singularity

The 2014 election ushered in the era of BJP-dominance in U.P. The party had gained ground in the State after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the campaign to construct a Ram temple in Ayodhya. This helped in the long run to win political power and gave a boost to its majoritarian project. The year 2017 saw the BJP deepen its electoral dominance of U.P. by winning a three-fourths majority in the Assembly elections. Yogi Adityanath's appointment as Chief Minister was a turning point in State politics with disenfranchisement and polarisation being weaponised to strengthen the process of Hindu consolidation. He has played a key part in polarising the electorate by openly speaking about the 80-20 equation (20% being Muslims).

The BJP's rise has been marked by the strong resurgence in the representation of traditional elite groups by virtue of being over-

represented within the BJP. The upper castes harboured strong resentment over their displacement in the post-Mandal era. BJP rule has been the vehicle for their comeback, as upper castes have regained positions of authority and influence. Simultaneously, the BJP has expanded its outreach to lower castes by leveraging social services provided by the government and giving representation to non-Yadav castes, which has enhanced recognition of these castes owing to their proximity to power. Adding them to the core upper caste voters has helped the party in building a formidable coalition in the State.

The rising power of the BJP has also led to a significant change in the behaviour of non-BJP, non-Congress parties. There is a realisation that the canvas of politics has to be much larger and the scope much broader to stall further expansion of the BJP. The success in the Gorakhpur, Phulpur and Kairana by-elections showed the way to the SP and BSP, the two social justice parties, that they must do business together. Bitter rivals for decades, they decided to bury the hatchet and join ranks to form an alliance driven by the overwhelming objective of defeating the BJP. The coming together of these two forces is what makes 2019 different from 2014.

Mandal 2.0

The new coalition of Yadavs, Jatavs and Muslims poses a serious challenge to Mr. Modi as he seeks re-election. The defining feature of Mandal 2.0, the second avatar of identity politics, is political power and social arithmetic, and not social justice, leave alone combining social justice and secularism. Even so, the counter-polemic has shaken the foundations of the BJP's caste politics as it signposts Hindutva's failure to subsume identity politics. The party's caste dilem-

ma persists because its own electoral success is predicated on caste-based social engineering. The role of Muslims in Mandal 2.0 is critical. It is clear that they are determined to vote out the BJP and are likely to have voted strategically and largely in favour of the mahagathbandhan. The numerical heft of Muslims in the mahagathbandhan underlines their relevance in U.P. politics, but it also underlines the limits of the BJP strategy of keeping them out.

There's a stark gap between the BJP's rhetoric of caste inclusion and the reality. It has consistently over-represented upper castes in its highest ranks in U.P. In the State Assembly, the overall representation of upper castes increased from 32.7% in 2012 to 44.4% in 2017. This contradicts the claim that the BJP has become an inclusive social platform. In spite of the five-year rule of a party ostensibly committed to vikas (development) for everyone, U.P. remains unequal and poor. In fact, even talk of vikas is off the table as the BJP is pushing voters to look beyond their material well-being.

Original battleground

The U.P. model has been central to the Sangh's Hindutva agenda much before the Gujarat model gained prominence. U.P. is still the key to the BJP's electoral fortunes and to the future creation of a Hindu state. Whatever the 2019 verdict, we must place the BJP's recent advances within the longer history of U.P. politics, which has witnessed momentous changes in the last hundred years. In the shifting sands of U.P. politics, Hindu nationalism has certainly gained primacy in recent decades but this too will change.

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Moral ambiguity on the Rohingya

India must break its silence on the gross human rights violations by Myanmar



ANGSHUMAN CHOUDHURY

India's abstention from voting on a UN Human Rights Council draft resolution, in March this year, on the "situation of human rights in Myanmar" needs closer examination. Co-sponsored by the European Union (EU) and Bangladesh, the resolution "expresses grave concern at continuing reports of serious human rights violations and abuses in Myanmar", particularly in Rakhine, Kachin and Shan States, and calls for a full inquiry into these by the Council's own mechanism and the International Criminal Court (ICC).

In its follow-up explanatory statement, India's permanent representative to the UN in Geneva, Rajiv Kumar Chander, said that it would "only be counter-productive" to support "extensive recommendations regarding legislative and policy actions" and "threatening Myanmar with punitive action, including at the ICC, to which that state is not a signatory".

It is understandable that as a non-signatory of the Rome Statute, New Delhi would register its dissent against any punitive interventions by the ICC on another non-signatory country (Myanmar).

However, what is deeply unfortunate is India's continued diplomatic and moral passivity on the Rohingya crisis.

Despite the Myanmar Army facing charges of serious war crimes, including genocide – according to a UN Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) and several other international human rights organisations – India refuses to take a strong moral stand for the sake of maintaining cordial bilateral relations with Naypyidaw.

A deference

India continues to toe Myanmar's line on the issue, which harps on the "complexity" of the whole situation, lays emphasis on economic development rather than political rights for the Rohingya, lays stress on internal inquiries instead of international mechanisms, and even refuses to call the Rohingya community by its name.

In fact, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has not even publicly condemned the horrible atrocities that the Rohingya have faced at the hands of Myanmar's security forces. On his last visit to Myanmar in September 2017, he simply expressed concern at the "loss of lives of security forces and innocent people due to the extremist violence in Rakhine State". There was no reference to the excessive and arbitrary force used by security forces on Rohingya civilians in response to the "extremist violence".

Radhika Coomaraswamy, who



was a part of the three-member UN FFM, during a recent briefing, said, "Acknowledging that human rights violations have been committed, holding people accountable and reforming the Tatmadaw is the only way forward." India, for its part, continues to maintain ties with the Myanmar armed forces (Tatmadaw), supplying them with combat hardware and imparting UN peacekeeping training. An edition of the India-Myanmar bilateral army exercise, IMBEX 2018-19, took place this January at Chandimandir.

Arms and business ties

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), India is one of Myanmar's top arms suppliers, and weapons sales includes military aircraft, artillery, naval vessels and reconnaissance equipment, armoured vehicles, anti-submarine torpedoes and missiles.

One analysis by the Dutch advocacy group, Stop Wapenhandel

(Stop Arms Trade), claims that India transferred combat equipment in violation of international embargoes.

India's core logic here is to "modernise" the Tatmadaw with the intent of securing its 1,640-km plus border with Myanmar and forge a sustainable strategic partnership at China's doorstep. But, in this inflexible realpolitik approach, there is little space for end-user accountability and human rights. Whether Myanmar is using some of its India-supplied weapons to maim non-combatant civilians in Rakhine State and other ethnic regions is a question that New Delhi has not asked so far. Further, Indian companies continue to invest in Myanmar, with several having direct links with Tatmadaw-owned businesses.

Through Dhaka's lens

India has so far refused to exert any pressure on Myanmar, instead choosing to balance ties with Dhaka and Naypyidaw by sending humanitarian aid to both. But India's soft, backfoot approach is being increasingly seen by Bangladesh, which is hosting nearly a million Rohingya refugees, to be tilted in Myanmar's favour.

Bangladeshi journalist Humayun Kabir Bhuiyan argues that "Indian policy regarding the Rohingya crisis has always favoured Myanmar." He also flagged India's recent abstention as another sign of New Delhi's no-support for Dhaka on the Rohingya issue. It is clear

that if India continues to tacitly favour Myanmar at international forums, its much-valued bilateral ties with Bangladesh may suffer greatly.

Instead of just pushing one-time economic aid into Bangladesh and Myanmar, India could have forged a regional 'compact', much like the Jordan Compact on Syria, to ensure sustained humanitarian assistance in addressing the short- and long-term needs of the displaced Rohingya population. This would have ensured uniform donor interest and better monitoring of where aid is going to. Instead, India has deported (or refouled) more than a dozen Rohingya refugees from its own territory back to Myanmar, in violation of international and domestic legal norms.

Using the geo-economic leverage that it enjoys with Myanmar, India could compel Myanmar to bring the alleged perpetrators of war crimes to book or at least get a guarantee that such conduct would not be repeated in the future. But New Delhi does not want to corner Aung San Suu Kyi, whose own relations with the Generals remain dicey.

For now, India is happy to be in a stable, but morally tenuous, friends-with-benefit relationship with Myanmar. The victims continue to be the stateless Rohingya.

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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.

Wave or retreat?

The telecast and analysis of various exit polls at the conclusion of the seven-phase general election seem to have had much of India glued to the TV as if they were the actual results (Page 1, "Exit polls predict second term for Modi", May 20). The difference in numbers predicted by the various psephological groups is unconvincing. In one instance the difference is 94 seats as far as the NDA's grand total is concerned. The track record of exit polls in general is hardly glowing. The most common argument to justify their failure is the sample size and the kind of people interviewed. While the sample size can always be

enhanced, the behaviour of people is always difficult to judge. Predicting an election in the world's largest democracy has to take into account several factors ranging from caste, religion, region, money power to voting percentage. There needs to be fresh methodology and techniques as the results of every election redefine the rules of psephology.

N. SADHASIVA REDDY, Bengaluru

■ If the predictions are true, they show that Mr. Modi's election campaigns have been successful only because of his personal popularity rather than his government's performance. The Opposition may have tried to pin him down but,

surprisingly, the issues they raised may not have struck a chord. Does this mean the BJP employed an election strategy that was more clever and tactful than the Opposition's? The partisan attitude of the Election Commission of India and the prolonged election process seem to have helped the ruling party. In the end, I hope the new Prime Minister will take the country to newer heights, according importance to secularism.

D. SETHURAMAN, Chennai

What mattered in 2019

Some of the findings of the post-poll survey even with reference to the pre-poll survey are astonishing ("The issues that mattered in an issue-less election", 'The

Hindu-CSDS Lokniti post-poll survey 2019'). Scant concern for corruption is surprising as it was the focal point in 2014. What is equally disturbing is the lack of interest in farming related issues.

N. VIJAI, Coimbatore

After May 23

One is happy that the election is over and the final result will be known shortly (Editorial, May 20). In the end, it is disappointing that institutions which should have been the guardrails of democracy have not lived up to their mandate. We need strong, solid institutions, people committed to putting the interests of their fellow citizens above party and personal interests and also

respect for the rules and laws of the land. We need to set dignified standards of civility and decorum in public life.

H.N. RAMAKRISHNA, Bengaluru

Promoting coffee

A report ('Business' page, "India to launch coffee consumption drive", April 14) said the India Coffee Trust in collaboration with the International Coffee Organisation is planning to launch a 'catch them young' campaign to promote the coffee drinking habit among

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS

The graphic titled "NDA redux?" that accompanied the front-page story on exit polls (May 20, 2019) had the figures corresponding to the exit polls conducted by ABP Nielsen wrong. It had said: NDA - 267; UPA - 127; and Others - 148. It should have said: NDA - 277; UPA - 130; and Others - 135.

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The case against war on Iran

U.S. military action could trigger multiple conflicts in the Gulf



STANLY JOHNY

U.S. President Donald Trump has repeatedly spoken out against America's costly wars. Last year, for instance, he called the 2003 Iraq war "the single worst decision ever made". During the presidential campaign, he had promised to bring U.S. troops home. But two and a half years into his own presidency, the U.S. is on the brink of another major war in West Asia, this time with Iran.

Claiming to have intelligence that Iran could target its interests or the interests of its allies in the region, the U.S. has already sent an aircraft carrier group and a bomber squadron to the Gulf, which U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton called "a clear and unmistakable message to the Iranian regime". When asked if the U.S. is going to war with Iran, Mr. Trump replied, "I hope not." But the growing clamour for war both in Washington and in West Asia is hard to miss. Mr. Bolton, who is currently driving the Iran policy, is a well-known Iran hawk and has repeatedly called for regime change in Tehran.

It is Israel that provided the intelligence inputs that set off the latest flare-up. A Saudi newspaper owned by Turki bin Salman, brother of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, carried an editorial last week calling for "surgical strikes" on Iran. A mysterious attack on four oil tankers off the UAE coast, and a drone attack on a Saudi pipeline that was claimed by the Iran-backed Houthi rebels of Yemen, worsened the crisis. The situation in the Gulf is so dangerous now that a mere spark could trigger a full-blown conflict.

Morally wrong

If the U.S. goes to another war in a region still struggling to recover from its past interventions, it will be morally calamitous and strategically ludicrous. First, Iran does not deserve this treatment. The country signed an international agreement in 2015 to limit its nuclear programme in return for sanctions relief. It fully complied with the deal until Tehran



"If U.S. President Donald Trump truly wants to change the course, he should start with de-escalation." People protest in Tehran after Mr. Trump threatened to destroy Iran if it attacked American interests. ■ AP

announced this month that it would suspend some commitments made under the deal in protest against U.S. sanctions. It was Mr. Trump who violated the deal first by pulling the U.S. out of it last year and reimposing sanctions on Iran. In a better world, Iran's adherence to the agreement would have been appreciated and the country allowed to reap the promised benefits of the deal. Instead, the Trump administration punished it.

Second, if the U.S. goes to war, it will be a unilateral military action. It won't get the approval of the United Nations Security Council as Russia and China remain steadfastly opposed to military action. Even the U.S.'s European allies, including the U.K. which supported the Iraq war, remain committed to the nuclear deal. The U.S. might get the support of Saudi Arabia and Israel, but it is not certain whether even these countries would like to get dragged into a full-blown war. A unilateral military action would further weaken international institutions and create more fissures in the Atlantic alliance.

Iran is not Iraq

Third, Iran is not Iraq. Nor is it Libya. The U.S. went to Iraq after a decade of crippling sanctions that it imposed battered the country's economy and

military. Iraq was totally isolated. Arab countries had turned against Baghdad after the first Gulf war, Iran was its enemy, and Russia was still in retreat mode. The U.S., the U.K. and their allies marched to Iraq and toppled the Saddam Hussein regime in just a few weeks.

Iran, on the other hand, is a country that lives in a state of permanent insecurity. It has always been battle-ready. While Iran is not a strong conventional military force and is crippled by sanctions as well, Iranian policymakers were aware of these challenges. That is why they adopted a 'forward defence' doctrine of expanding Iranian influence across West Asia through non-state militia groups. Iran has Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shia militias in Iraq and Syria, the Houthis in Yemen, and the Islamic Jihad in Gaza. In the event of a war, Iran could activate these groups, triggering multiple conflicts, drawing in several other countries. This possibility makes even "a limited strike" on Iran dangerous. Besides, Iran could block the Strait of Hormuz, which lies between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, through which one-third of the world's LNG and 20% of total oil production flows. That would be a drastic measure that could trigger a massive response from the U.S. But war itself is a dras-

tic measure and could cause extreme retaliatory action.

Fourth, the U.S.'s war record is not as great as is often presented to be. It is the world's pre-eminent military power not because of the results of the wars it has fought but because of its military might. It is ironic that the U.S. is escalating tensions in the Gulf at a time when it is negotiating with the Taliban to find a face-saving exit from Afghanistan.

When the War on Terror began, the U.S. promised to go after every terrorist in the world. Seventeen years later, al-Qaeda is still alive, the Islamic State and other terror organisations are operating across the world, and the Taliban controls almost half the territory in Afghanistan. In Iraq, the U.S. could easily topple the Saddam regime, but it failed to quell the post-Saddam unrest. The country slipped into a sectarian civil war. It was from the mayhem in Iraq that the Islamic State rose. In Libya, the promise was liberation from Muammar Gaddafi's dictatorship when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (i.e., the U.S., France and the U.K.) intervened in 2011. Gaddafi was killed, but the country sank into chaos and is still to recover from it. In Syria, the U.S. made an indirect intervention and demanded President Bashar al-Assad's ouster until it was outwitted by the Russians. It failed to get the desired outcome in all these countries. How will Iran be any different?

Using diplomacy

As U.S. President, Barack Obama seemed to have realised the challenges in Iran. That is why he attempted to curtail Iran's nuclear programme through diplomatic means. And he succeeded, until Mr. Trump came along and sabotaged it. President Trump says he wants talks with the Iranians, but he doesn't have a realistic programme for the same. If talks were his primary objective, the U.S. should not have withdrawn from the nuclear deal. Mr. Trump should have used the bonhomie created by the deal to expand ties and address concerns such as Iran's regional activism. If he truly wants to change the course, he should start with de-escalation and rein in his bellicose advisers.

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A jibe that marked a new low in electoral politics

Public discourse has reached its nadir, and the Prime Minister symbolises it



KAPIL SIBAL

Even as we eagerly await the verdict of the people on May 23, it is time to reflect on the nature of the political discourse this election season. We witnessed a new low in the campaign: the Prime Minister's desperate fulminations against not just his political opponents, but also the late Rajiv Gandhi, who left us in tragic circumstances.

On May 21, 1991, tragedy struck the nation when former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was campaigning in Sriperumbudur on the outskirts of Chennai, trying to turn around the political fortunes of the Congress party. He was brutally assassinated by militants of the LTTE in a suicide bomb attack. In the course of his campaign trail, he had dreamt of a new India driven by technology.

The nation mourned the death of a leader whose patriotic fervour could never have been questioned. Rajiv Gandhi was critical of the bureaucracy for having failed to deliver services to the last man in the queue. He carried the hopes of young India on his shoulders. We lost him in the midst of our nation's journey, but he left behind his vision, which brought about a revolution of ideas, laying the foundation of a modern, effervescent India.

Stooping low

Twenty-eight years later, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, while speaking at a rally in Uttar Pradesh's Pratapgarh constituency, addressed Congress president Rahul Gandhi and said, "Your father was termed 'Mr. Clean' by his courtiers, but his life ended as 'Bhrashtachari No. 1 (Corrupt No.1)'. His statement surprised millions of sane voices. Very few expected him to stoop so low.

The Bofors issue is dead. The alleged charge against Rajiv Gandhi was given a quietus by a judgment of the Delhi High Court, against which the then National Democratic Alliance government chose not to appeal. The court did not find an iota of evidence to support the alleged charge. I happened to have argued the case. Yet, the Prime Minister raked up the issue and taunted Rajiv Gandhi's son, alleging that his father ended his life as "Bhrashtachari No. 1". That may be so in the jaundiced eyes of the Prime Minister, but

not in the eyes of the law. Such a statement is antithetical to the cultural ethos of India. Mr. Modi should have at least respected the sentiments of Sonia Gandhi, who dealt with this personal tragedy with stoic dignity.

Rajiv Gandhi was Mr. Clean. The Prime Minister is aware of the tainted people surrounding him, including those who consider Nathuram Godse a 'deshbhakt' (patriot). Hinduism has always espoused the path of truth, which is perhaps inconsistent with Hindutva, of which the Prime Minister considers himself to be an icon. Not the courtiers, but the nation recognised Rajiv Gandhi as Mr. Clean. All attempts to sully his name failed despite a premier investigating agency's Herculean efforts to do so at the instance of the Bharatiya Janata Party. Surprisingly, in Uttar Pradesh in 1989, Bofors did not even figure in the campaign in Amethi, from where Rajiv Gandhi contested. But this time, Mr. Modi tried to make it an issue.

A reluctant politician

Rajiv Gandhi was destiny's child. It was Sanjay Gandhi who claimed to be the natural heir to former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, but his tragic death in an accident pushed Rajiv Gandhi to the centre stage. He was a passionate pilot and a reluctant politician. Rajiv Gandhi took up the mantle to lead the country after he lost his mother to tragic circumstances. No sensitive, thoughtful, cultured human being, certainly not one who holds the office of the Prime Minister, should have made such a statement.

Responding to Mr. Modi's remarks in the course of an interaction during the Uttar Pradesh campaign trail, Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra said, "The Prime Minister, who is seeking votes in the name of martyrs, yesterday disrespected the martyrdom of a noble man. People in Amethi will give a befitting reply." Rahul Gandhi turned philosophical when dealing with Mr. Modi's taunt. He tweeted, "Modi ji, the battle is over. Your Karma awaits you. Projecting your inner beliefs about yourself onto my father won't protect you. All my love and a huge hug. Rahul." This was a dignified response, the response of a true gentleman.

Respective of who wins in 2019, Mr. Modi's jibe will be remembered as a new low, not just in electoral politics but in public life. The example set by Mr. Modi shows that public discourse has reached its nadir, and Mr. Modi symbolises it.

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SINGLE FILE

The purpose of art

If art does not facilitate new thoughts and be a constant reminder of historical time, it isn't art at all

KUNAL RAY



Can art be devoid of social consciousness? Often, social consciousness defines the very credo of an artist's practice because artists don't exist in a socio-political vacuum. Their work and aesthetics are shaped by the times they live in and the reality that surrounds them. Therefore, they find a multitude of ways of engaging with socio-political or cultural factors – repeatedly, and across generations and genres.

An artist who does so also risks labels such as 'activist artist'. But this is a facile way of thinking and branding art and artists. Artists are not propagandists, but their art is a constant reminder of historical time. I often argue that history is perhaps best recorded in fiction; the greater truths are to be found in works of art resisting linear readings and interpretations of history.

The social concerns of artists could differ, as they always have, but an ivory tower artist is a menacing creature. Art ought to see and show people not as objects of anthropological inquiry, but repositories of a moment in history, living archives even.

I was assailed by a plethora of such thoughts on a recent visit to the National Gallery of Modern Art in Mumbai, where I encountered the works of a renowned painter at a special exhibition dedicated to showcasing his works. His work was influenced by the Kerala mural tradition. Natural motifs such as flowers, birds, flora and fauna predominantly featured in his paintings. In the gallery, I wondered whether a reflection on contemporary time was missing in his work.

Women from the Bhil tribe in Rajasthan were sometimes the objects of his paintings, and he referred to them as a 'medium'. Should the artist have attempted to see them as something beyond beautiful and brooding village women? The artist was devoted to capturing and recreating a notion of the beautiful in an idyllic setting. Yet, while the purpose of a painting can be to capture and reproduce, shouldn't it also comment?

It appeared to me that the women in the paintings had no identity other than being part of a community. I wondered what the painter's humanist concerns were. I reflected that perhaps he was interested in capturing a certain aspect of his subjects and remained immune to the rest, maybe because it didn't resonate with his artistic agenda.

Stepping back from this example, what is the relevance of art in 2019 when the world is being ravaged by the clash of identities? Can there be any idea of artistic beauty that remains untouched by these forces? If art becomes all about creating escapist paradigms, we must then ask who that serves. Unless art facilitates new thoughts – and that can often come from holding up a mirror to broader society – it isn't art at all.

The writer teaches literary and cultural studies at FLAME University, Pune



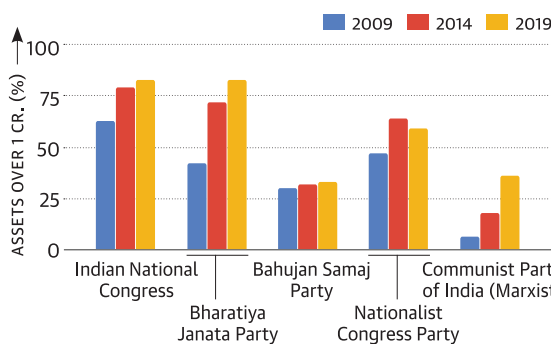
DATA POINT

Wealth effect

The total assets of all candidates in the 2019 Lok Sabha election exceeded ₹27,000 crore. The Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party fielded the highest number of wealthy candidates. The net assets of most parties and re-contesting candidates was substantially higher than the past few elections. By **Sumant Sen**

The rise over the years

The party-wise proportion of candidates with assets more than ₹1 crore has increased consistently since the 2009 Lok Sabha election. The chart shows the party-wise split of such candidates since the 2009 Lok Sabha election. The BJP's share of such candidates increased by 41% points. Ramesh Kumar Sharma was the richest, with net assets of over ₹1,107 crore



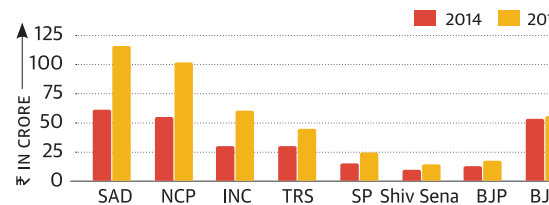
Candidate	Constituency	Party	Net assets (in ₹)
Ramesh Kumar Sharma	Pataliputra, Bihar	IND	1,107 crore
Konda Vishweshwar Reddy	Chevella, Telangana	INC	895 crore
Nakul Nath	Chhindwara, M.P.	INC	660 crore

INC: Indian National Congress | BJP: Bharatiya Janata Party
SAD: Shiromani Akali Dal | NCP: Nationalist Congress Party
TRS: Telangana Rashtra Samiti | SP: Samajwadi Party
BJD: Biju Janata Dal | KA: Karnataka | IND: Independent

Source: Association of Democratic Reforms

Re-contesting candidates

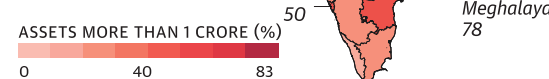
The graph shows party-wise increase in assets of re-contesting candidates. The net assets of the Akali Dal's candidates increased by over ₹54 crore, the highest among all parties. The Congress's Jyotiraditya Scindia's total wealth rose by 1,032%



Candidate	Constituency	Party	Percentage rise in assets
Jyotiraditya Scindia	Guna, M.P.	INC	1,032
Jigajinagi Ramesh Chandappa	Bijapur, Karnataka	BJP	464
D.K. Suresh	Bangalore Rural, KA	INC	295

State-wise split

Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, and Mizoram had the highest proportion of candidates whose net assets were more than ₹1 crore. Telangana, Gujarat, and Kerala had the lowest. The map shows the % of contestants with net assets more than ₹1 crore



FROM The Hindu ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO MAY 21, 1969

U.K.'s vital role in European Union

To a British Government worried by too many domestic troubles, the West German Finance Minister, Herr Franz-Josef Strauss, brought words of cheer yesterday [May 19, London]. He said that a united Europe was inconceivable without Britain and that the admission of Britain to the Common Market was a matter of procedure only and not of opinion. He assured that the Bundesbank would be willing to consider favourably a line of credit to the Bank of England if the latter asked for it. He underlined that Britain's partnership with France in nuclear arms was essential for an effective defence of Europe. Herr Strauss was on a visit to Britain primarily to address the European Atlantic Group. He took the occasion to reiterate, perhaps more forcefully than hitherto, his views on Britain's position in Europe and these attracted attention not only because they were expressed on British soil but because Herr Strauss is regarded as a possible successor to Dr. Keisinger as Chancellor.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MAY 21, 1919.

Tampering with the Evidence.

Their lordships Mr. Justice Walsh and Mr. Justice Stuart disposed of the appeal of Asghar against the sentence of death passed on him by the Sessions Judge of Budaun on a charge of having murdered an old man named Chiddo. It was alleged that the accused decoyed the deceased into the house of Amirulla under the pretext of getting him a goat for sale, and throttled him to death. Amirulla was alleged to have abetted the crime by holding the deceased's legs. The motive of the murder was suggested to have been the greed of taking possession of Rs. 75 which the deceased had with him on selling his house. Their Lordships said it was quite clear that the evidence of the daughter of Amirulla, as the Sessions Judge had found, was tampered with by the Sub-Inspector himself or through his instrumentality apparently with the insidious and thoroughly unjust motive of persuading her to give the best evidence against Asghar and to say as little as she could against her father who was tried with him.

POLL CALL

Voter apathy

Voter apathy is perceived apathy among those eligible to vote in an election. This can happen when voters are disillusioned with the electoral process, political parties and candidates, or when they don't think their vote will count, or when they don't care much for the issues around them. In India, voter turnout has been going up in the past decade largely due to the Election Commission's efforts to enhance voter participation in the country, the media's efforts to raise public interest in elections, and an increase in the number of women coming out to vote.

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