

21st century castes?



TICKER

MIHIR SHARMA

One line in particular stood out in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's victory speech on the evening of counting day, May 23. The prime minister, who was speaking of his vision for 21st century India, said there would be only two castes: Those who are poor, and those who work for the upliftment of the poor. There are several ways to look at this statement. The first is, perhaps, that it represents the essential ideals of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the organisation that groomed Modi and formed him ideologically. Another is that it is oddly Marxist, reflecting a desire to erase caste distinctions, even if they exist, and replace them with those of class — except with the notion of class conflict replaced with that of "upliftment". Yet another is to contrast it with other forms of the poverty discourse in this country — in some sense, Modi is talking essentially here of charity instead of empowerment. He did not say the two castes were the rich and those who will soon be rich.

After a mandate in which Modi and his vision won a plurality of votes from every class and caste in this country with the exception of religious minorities, it is worth thinking through the relationship between the social transformation he is leading and the old hierarchies of caste. Modi himself has made a big deal of his OBC background, which has served him well in, first, the caste politics of Uttar Pradesh where the Samajwadi Party can be decimated by the defection of non-Yadav OBCs, and, second, in distancing himself from the Brahminical leadership and traditions of the Sangh itself. In the past, he reportedly made some startling — in retrospect — claims about manual scavenging and Dalits, in particular the Balmiki caste, saying that manual scavenging was not their (forced) livelihood, but a "spiritual activity" adopted by choice over generations. That line, close to the Sangh's own, has perhaps evolved in recent years. Certainly, he has now called for an end to the practice of manual scavenging.

Yet in its essentials, a post-caste worldview such as Modi claims is, in a country still ridden with caste divisions, more an erasure than an aspiration. On Twitter, Dalit writer and intellectual Chandra Bhan Prasad has usefully framed the Modi movement and mandate as a "Savarna uprising", a "counter-revolution, if January 26 [the date of adoption of the Constitution in 1950] was a revolution." Prasad believes — in my view, accurately — that even as Dalits of all economic backgrounds could speak as victims, upper caste individuals in India today also speak in the same manner, as victims, hoping that "the India of the past might be revived". In eastern Uttar Pradesh, he recalled "new generation Savarnas are reminded by their elders of past glory, identifying villains — Ambedkar for the Constitution, Nehru for zamindari abolition", giving rise to a shared upper-caste consciousness that sought their "reign restored".

In Prasad's telling, the wiping out of "parties that identified with Dalits/Tribals/Muslims" was the ultimate act of counter-revolutionary consolidation. Religion and nationalism were tools, not just to create and unify an upper-caste Hindu votebank for the BJP, but also to disguise its true ends and to lure away vital components of other coalitions, such as "extreme backward classes" — poorer OBCs — and, though Prasad did not mention it, young non-Jatav Dalit men. A unified Hindu votebank, consisting of upper castes with this new shared consciousness born of past grievances as well as these new defectors seeking social mobility through Hindutva and Sanskritisation, is an unbeatable electoral coalition. This is the real political achievement of Modi and Amit Shah — the creation of the largest and most reliable votebank in Indian politics, ever. And it follows an old, old method: The denial of social divisions, the pretension they no longer exist, in order to maintain them in another guise. After all, "post-caste" UP under Chief Minister Adityanath is run mainly by Thakurs.

Counter-revolutions run by an old elite with a grievance are a potent force. In the United States, Donald Trump was elected essentially thanks to a white backlash following the Obama years. Modi has done the same thing on a much larger scale, and with far greater efficiency. Muslims are obviously excluded — the point behind "sab ka saath, sab ka Vikas" ("with everyone, development for everyone") was to claim that earlier dispensations had privileged some groups and thus had deprived "meritorious" upper caste Hindus. A similar process, but less visible, might well take place with Dalits and tribals. The old caste-based parties — the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Lohia-ite socialists in particular — seem unable to take this on. Partly because they had begun to operate around the politics of patronage more than that of ideology and consciousness-raising. I am not in a position to offer advice to those parties or their putative successors. However, it is and always has been true that an ideological battle is underway, and their side is losing their own.

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Whose Bengal is it anyway?

As the BJP raced neck and neck with the TMC, Mamata must have regretted the cosmopolitan liberalism that allows Bengal to embrace outsiders as favourite sons



WHERE MONEY TALKS

SUNANDA K DATTA RAY

It was a sign of things to come. Dilip Ghosh, Bengal's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) chief, chattered away in Hindi on national television to an interviewer who was as much a home-grown fish-eating Bengali as he. She opened in English but since she needed her story, and Ghosh was clearly determined to establish what I can only call his cow-belt credentials, she tamely followed suit in such Hindi as she could muster.

In another age and at another level, Tagore responded with "a volley of Sanskrit" to

Oxford's Latin citation when it honoured him with an honorary doctorate. Perhaps he was influenced by the first Lord Sinha, Britain's only non-white hereditary peer, who must have caused eyebrows to rise way back in 1919 when he introduced Sanskrit (his motto *Jata Dharma Stata Jaya*) to the College of Heralds and House of Lords. It was the first BJP prime minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who established Hindi's international status in the UN.

Bengalis don't usually speak Hindi, and do it badly when forced to. The underlying principle of Zhou Enlai's comment after his education in Japan that language is an instrument of colonialism finds resonance in the state. West Bengal did not respond with angry protests to what Tamils called "Hindi imperialism" but East Bengal more than made up for it with a war of liberation in which India intervened. In fact, Bangladeshis were contemptuous that Indian Bengalis left it to the Tamils to resist Hindi.

But despite the outward calm, Bengal's last Congress chief minister, Siddhartha Shankar Ray, was criticised for "surrendering" to Sanjay Gandhi's Hindi imperialism. Two ironies can't however be overlooked. First, Bengali resistance to Hindi was never seriously extended to the English language. Second, although Kolkata is the citadel of Bengali nationalism,

not everyone regards it as a Bengali city.

Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, undivided Bengal's last premier, wasn't of Bengali origin. He traced his name to Suhraward in Iraq and his lineage to the Prophet as he dreamt of an independent Bengal governed from Calcutta. He called it a city that had been "built up largely by the resources of foreigners, inhabited largely by people from other provinces who have no roots in the soil and who come here to earn their livelihood, designated in another context as exploitation". For Lord Curzon, Kolkata was "a European city set down upon Asiatic soil". A local newspaper, *The Englishman*, declared more bluntly, "Calcutta is a purely English city. The city belongs and has always belonged to the English, and the native community in it is simply a foreign and parasitical community that would cease to exist if the English were to abandon it."

It was gratifying that Kumbakonam-born Sir Henry Cotton, a Civilian from 1867 to 1902, and the son, grandson and father of ICS officers, did all his work except correspondence in Bengali "and for weeks and months together spoke no other language while in office." But Bengalis weren't put out because Michael Carritt, also of the ICS, who served just before the Second World War, "could speak or under-

stand no Bengali at all". He had another string to his bow. Apart from the heaven-born service, he was the Communist Party of Great Britain's secret emissary to the Communist Party of India and hobnobbed with the likes of PC Joshi.

The Brits have gone; Marwaris are the new Brits. Drawn by lucrative trading opportunities, the Bania influx from Rajasthan spiralled by 400 per cent between 1890 and 1920. Two local grandees, Maharajadhiraja Bijay Khwaja Mahtab of Burdwan and Nawab Khwaja Salimullah of Dacca, joked that "Marwari" was "More-worry". They probably meant the great 1917 scandal of adulterated ghee, a trade Marwaris monopolised. As frenzied rumours swept Bengal, tests showed that only seven out of 67 samples were pure cow's milk ghee. One sample had only 5 per cent ghee, another not a drop. Much of it was untraceable fat that would horrify any self-respecting *gaur-rakshak*. Pundits from Benares prescribed costly and elaborate purification ceremonies, and Lord Ronaldshay, Bengal's governor, noted the "electrifying" spectacle of nearly 5,000 Brahmins desperately cleansing themselves by the Hooghly.

Despite their jest, neither Bijay Chand nor Khwaja Salimullah was Bengali. The first Mahtab was a Punjabi Hindu. Dacca's nawabs were Kashmiri Muslim. R.P. Goenka, the leading Marwari industrialist, claimed to be an indigene: he wore a *dhoti* and spoke Bengali but his consciousness remained Marwari. As the BJP raced neck and neck with the Trinamool Congress, Mamata Banerjee must have regretted the cosmopolitan liberalism that allows Bengal to embrace outsiders as favourite sons.

LUNCH WITH BS ► CYRIL SHROFF | MANAGING PARTNER | CYRIL AMARCHAND MANGALDAS

The making of a fast tortoise

Shroff talks to Sudipto Dey about the early days of split from his brother and the lessons he learnt from that episode

On a Saturday afternoon, a few minutes past 1 pm, we are sitting with our guest, Cyril Shroff, in Café Prato & Bar, next to the lobby of Four Seasons Hotel at Worli. Our guest looks relaxed in an informal outfit, comfortable with the surrounding. To me, sitting face to face with Cyril Shroff is a bit surreal.

We have been chasing him for his time for almost a year. One reason he has agreed to this lunch — I tell myself — has to do with the timing of the meeting. In May 2015, the Shroff brothers, Shardul and Cyril, formally split their then 97-year old family law firm Amarchand Mangaldas. That was, of course, after a few months of headline-grabbing slugfest for the family estate. Cyril kicked off his second inning with his eponymous law firm Cyril Amarchand Mangaldas (CAM) the same month (May 2015).

As we settle down at a corner table, Shroff says, "I want to talk about our journey over the last four years", perhaps reading my thoughts. We decide to get the ordering bit out of the way. Shroff, with an air of firm familiarity, orders a truffle cheese *naan* along with a quinoa salad as a starter. I settle for a Greek salad. For the main course, he orders an Alfredo pasta and I opt for mamma rosa pasta. Shroff suggests we share a grilled asparagus and truffle mash.

Shroff is a third-generation legal practitioner from a family with roots in the port city of Surat. His great grandfather was in the pearl trade. The family firm was founded by his grandfather Amarchand Shroff and his partner Mangaldas Mehta in 1917. An out and out Mumbai boy, Shroff studied in Bombay Scottish School, then went to Sydenham College. He completed his law degree from the Government Law College, Mumbai, in 1982. Soon after, he joined the family law firm to train as a litigator. The years following the economic liberalisation were the busiest in terms of building up the

family practice. While he focussed on the markets in the west, largely operating from Mumbai, his elder brother Shardul built up the practice in the north. Post the split in 2015, the two went out to build their individual footprints across key cities in the country. "The split was a hugely liberating experience," says Shroff. CAM's progress over the last four years has surpassed his own expectations by a significant margin, he says.

CAM is arguably the largest law firm in the country in terms of the number of lawyers — 750 and growing (apart from a support staff of another 750-odd). It started off with around 400 lawyers in 2015. Over the years the firm has become more thoughtful and less impulsive, far more strategic in its thinking. "Profitable growth is a key parameter for us, not just growth," he says.

Veterans in the legal fraternity say law firms that are in the growth stage are usually insecure about losing work. Shroff says he took an early call not to compromise on the price it attaches to the service it offers. "We have walked away from situations where the transaction is not commercially reasonable," he says.

The challenge in the early days was to build faith among clients in the quality of work that the firm delivered and the value it generated for them. "We have now developed a reputation and institutional capacity to take on elephant mandates," says Shroff. The firm has been involved in many of the recent big-ticket legal deals, including those involving IL&FS, Jet Airways, the Blackstone-Embassy REIT.

What has evolved in the last four years is a great sense of legacy and purpose, says Shroff. "My biggest contribution, I feel, over the last two and a half decade is the creation of the first 'modern Indian law firm' in the combined entity and now," he says.

The use of the apprenticeship model of hiring students off cam-

pus, giving them structured training, offering a career progression track, the use of technology in the work place and the compensation are some of the salient features of "the modern Indian law firm" that were all tried and tested in the erstwhile

Amarchand Mangaldas under Shroff's guidance. "We invented the notion of the 'modern Indian law firm'," he emphasises. The journey continues with a focus on innovation — in the hiring and training methods, in the use of technology. "I have learnt from many different models. And that helped in evolving my own model," he says.

Shroff believes that the professional services model does not respond well to the command and control structure — which is most visible in a corporate set-up. "One needs to have a consultative, democratic and transparent style," he says. "We run on the same philosophy as a BCG or a Bain or a McKinsey, but we offer only one product — legal services," explains Shroff putting his views in perspective.

Surely, there would have been some misses in his four-year journey. He concedes there was turbulence in the first 18 months. A no-poach agreement with his brother forced the firm to hire laterally through acquisitions. "Though the people were good, they somehow did not fit in with our culture. So quite a few people came and left in the first 18 months," he says. "The culture of the firm is organic and that phase was something akin to tissue rejection. It was a great learning experience — now we are far more astute about hiring," says Shroff.

Cracking the Delhi market turned out to be more difficult than he and his team had anticipated. "Delhi was a difficult market for the first two and a half years, but not anymore," he says.

Shroff concedes that he underestimated the need for internal communication as the firm expanded its

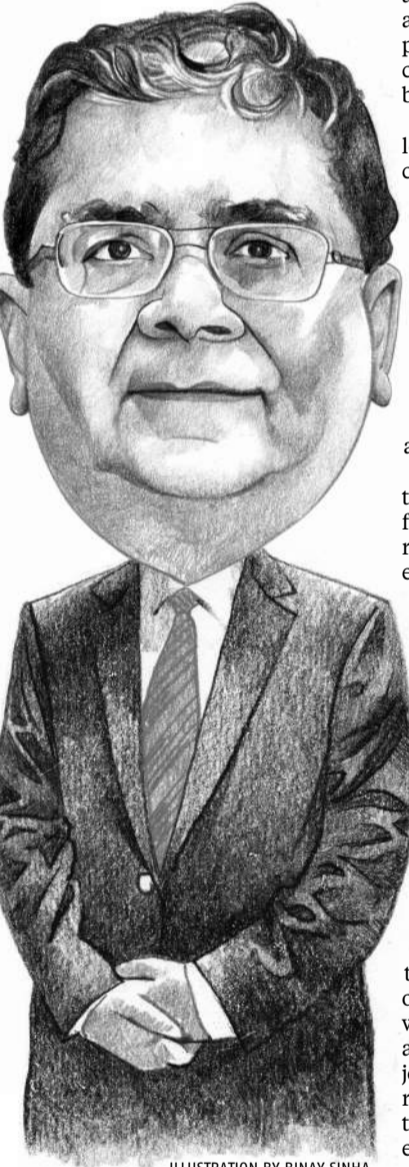


ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

operations across geographies. "We course corrected on that front within a year," he adds.

There were times when rogue clients put the firm in difficult situations. "We have learnt from the hard experiences and become significantly more careful in our risk assessment," says Shroff. "In turn, the process of client intake has become quite bureaucratic," he says. We have been talking for about

an hour and our main course is almost over. We decide to share a plate of mango with vanilla ice cream for dessert, followed by a double espresso for Shroff.

The family split also had a few lessons for him, which Shroff feels could be useful to corporate India in handling conflict. "At that point, I was at a crossroads — money was not important for me, what was important was the firm and peace of mind. I took the call to walk away," he says. Shroff says he walked away from the conflict "with his head held high". "I am sure that would have made my father very proud," he adds a tad emotionally.

The big lesson for him is that the ability to walk away from a conflict is a huge first step in conflict resolution. He often uses his own example while advising other families going through turbulence. "In the game of the hare and the tortoise, we have been a bit like a fast tortoise," says Shroff. His family will play a big role in the firm's onward journey. Both his kids — Rishabh and Paridhi — work in his firm. "I am letting them come through the ranks. No parachuting. You have to grow tall on your own," he says.

He discovered an interest in painting quite late in the day. He started off with charcoal painting about a decade or so back and plans to move to oil and acrylic. A series of sketches, which were part of the wedding invitation of his daughter and son, has been a highlight of this journey. "I find painting incredibly relaxing," he says. While giving credit to his wife who encourages him to explore his "soft skills", Shroff says about a year back he started taking guitar lessons. Of late, he has taken a liking to books on aging as he steps into his 60s and is particularly appreciative of Roman statesman Cicero's take on how to grow old.

Bollywood is the other stress buster for the Shroff family. Together they watch at least one new Bollywood release every week. And who decides which movie the family would watch? "Madam," Shroff says with a twinkle in his eyes.

Let's get the men talking. Period. Modi again. What next?



PEOPLE LIKE THEM

GEETANJALI KRISHNA

On May 28, the whole world will observe International Menstrual Hygiene Day. It's the perfect time for me to tell the story of Sachin Gupta (14) of Sonva village in Bakshi Ka Talab block of Lucknow district. This young boy has given his sisters Juhi (18), Mansi (16), Sanjana (15) and Jaya (14) a thoughtful but highly unusual gift, a sanitary napkin incinerator that he has built with his own hands. To me, Sachin's story highlights the crucial male voice that is often missing from the public discourse on what's considered an essentially feminine subject — menstruation.

Last year, the young schoolboy underwent training to become a peer educator

on sanitation in his village. "That was the first time I learnt about menstruation and what my mother and sisters undergo every month," he recalled. He was gobsmacked that an uncomfortable but normal biological event happened to his beloved sisters every single month and yet he was unaware. "When I tried to talk to them, they laughed in embarrassment and sent me packing," he said. However, Sachin was determined to show he cared. "Since there is no chemist nearby, I realised my sisters had to walk a distance to buy sanitary pads. So I started getting them for my sisters to save them the trouble," he added. During his training with WaterAid India, he realised that sanitary waste disposal was also critical to his sisters' welfare. "I realised that if my sisters also had an incinerator at home, they won't have to throw their waste in the fields. So I built them one from clay I collected from the local pond," said Sachin.

Today, thanks to this young boy's efforts, the Gupta household has been transformed. Not only are his sisters comfortable talking about periods with him as well as their mother Suman, they even joke about them with their feisty grandmother Lakshmi Devi. While I was there, the old granny regaled us with stories of her own childhood, when in the absence

of any other option, she would wrap ash from the kitchen hearth inside a long piece of cloth and tie it between her legs when she was on her period. The girls dissolved into giggles when she dramatically rolled out a sample for us using an old *dupatta*, but sobered when she said how uncomfortable they were. "We used to get cuts, infections, itching and worse because of them," the old lady said.

Lakshmi Devi is happy that the atmosphere in their house is different now. She told us that in her younger days, menstruation was something they didn't even speak about among friends. "This crushing silence and embarrassment is the reason why so many women have such a hard time, fall ill even, during those days," said she adding, "which is why I feel so happy when I see the change that Sachin has brought in our house."

Sachin told me that his friends often laughed at him for getting involved in "women's matters". "I tell them it's men like them who need to change their mindsets, not I," he said.

He's so right. We need to bring the men into menstruation dialogues urgently. This might be the most efficient way to bring this important issue into the mainstream and tear away the shroud of silence that envelops it even today.



PEOPLE LIKE US

KISHORE SINGH

Now that the elections are over, Modi is back as prime minister, the *laddoos* have been eaten by supporters (and non-supporters in a show of magnanimity), can we get back to what life was like before it all began? "We haven't had a proper party for so long," Sarla sighs. I empathise with her. While enough alcohol had been glugged in the capital's drawing rooms, the conversation had been overwhelmingly about politics. Who was one to vote for? What was the alternative? Theories abounded about whether Modi "could", "would" or "should" win/lose. Ditto Rahul Gandhi. Everyone dished the state of the nation. "Look at the businessmen

who've become NRIs," pointed out an industrialist, pouring himself a peg of single malt. "I'm thinking of sending my children out of the country," chimed in his "partner" — spouses are no longer appropriate accessory for an evening out.

When acquaintances weren't discussing policymaking, they were watching the season's IPL. For those of us disinterested in either, staying at home with the TV on offered poor relief. Nor could one lock the bedroom and head off for a holiday because one had to vote — for Instagram's sake. Having shrugged off its earlier apathy, urban India had discovered the ultimate status symbol was no longer the Birkin or designer watch but the mark of electoral ink. Not wearing it was the equivalent of social hara-kiri.

But we're not done and dusted with the elections — yet. Already, invitations for "analysis" parties are dribbling in. Did we vote right — or wrong? Was the arithmetic wrong — or right? Did constituencies vote for presidential Modi or some pathetic partypooper? Now that the verdict is in, everyone swears to have known the result beforehand. Hadn't they predicted the Modi tsunami? Er, no. "Nonsense," admonishes a school pal, "I knew he was going to gain a majority." "Me, it was me," insists a neighbour four houses away. "I'd said he'd get a land-

slide." The room demurs — the neighbour had predicted a loss. "But I knew he was going to win," he insists. Time for a drink.

Already, though, the social *satta* is vocal about ministerships on offer. The pick of the pack, of course, is Amit Shah, with a future foretold, but the bets are on which ministers the PM will hold, which he'll let go. Now that he seems to have much of India in his sway, performance rather than regional and caste balances may influence his choices — or not. Does he have any more shocks to administer? "He'll rename Lutyens's Delhi Gandhinagar," mutters a disconsolate hack. "Khan Market will become Kalyan Market," giggles a housewife.

But this too shall pass. "Let's make the most of the remaining summer," says Sarla. Holiday plans are shared. The Rais are off to Italy. The Dhillions don't know where to go, they've been around the world twice. "The English have ruined London," a friend mutters something about Brexit. "Where are we going?" my wife wants to know. "I don't honestly know," I say. I'd like to get away some place far from the elections, but when I wrote for a booking yesterday, some bright spark emailed back, "Modi won, congratulations." "If one can't get away from the hustings hoopla, we might as well stay here," I tell my wife. I know I don't have her vote.

Borrowed money

We have heard these last few years about the twin-debt problem faced by companies and banks. We've read reports like Credit Suisse's "House of Debt", on companies that don't have the earnings to pay interest on debt, let alone the principal. And of course we have read more than we would wish to about how banks have been writing off record sums of bad loans. So far, though, no one seems to have looked at the extent of money that is being borrowed by individuals, and the rising levels of household debt. Time to look at it when the consumption engine that has kept the economy going through a multi-year investment slowdown has stopped firing as before.

Individual or household financial stress is usually the result of lost jobs or livelihoods, and there is some of that. Look at depressed farm incomes, the fate of Jet Airways, or the effects of demonetisation. But there seems to be a deeper problem building up, one that is not linked to economic downswings or disruptions. Personal debt has been climbing and we must ask whether the burden of repayment is eating into disposable incomes — especially if loans taken for housing have to be repaid even when the housing project is stuck. Take a look at the numbers.

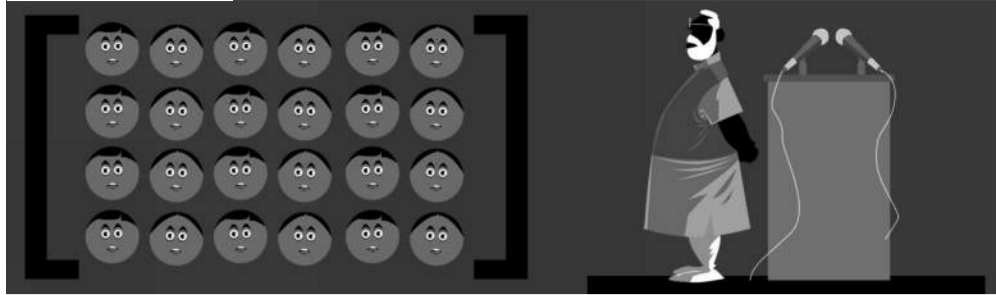
Between 2013-14 and 2017-18, according to the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI's) "Handbook of Statistics on the Indian Economy", personal loans given by banks went up in by 89 per cent to ₹19.1 trillion. This, when private consumption increased by only 53 per cent, and overall non-food credit went up by an even more sedate 39 per cent. There was an increase of 82 per cent in borrowing for housing, 54 per cent for consumer durables, and 78 per cent for vehicles. The most striking was a 154 per cent increase in "other personal loans" even as credit card outstanding went up by an even bigger 176 per cent. The only modest increase was for education loans (up about 16 per cent).

These numbers on borrowings are compelling when placed against the figures for household savings, which in the three years to 2016-17 went up by just 18 per cent, while physical household savings actually declined, though fractionally. The household figure for savings includes unincorporated enterprises, so the numbers are not strictly comparable. Nevertheless, the growing tendency to borrow more to consume is clear: The ratio between borrowings and overall consumption (including of the daily necessities) moved up in four years from 15.6 per cent to 19.3 per cent.

That's just bank credit. There is then the money that people borrow from non-banking financial companies (NBFCs), usually for housing and cars but also for consumer durables and spending occasions like weddings. RBI numbers suggest that banks account for only about two-thirds of household financing, and the overall financial liabilities of households went up by ₹6.7 trillion in 2017-18. This was an astonishing 80 per cent step up from the increase in (not total) liabilities of a year earlier.

India's household debt in relation to its GDP is low — barely 11 per cent — compared to the other Brics countries: 17 per cent in Russia, 26 per cent in Brazil and 48 per cent in China. But loans have to be repaid out of disposable income. This will be lower in India, where most people still live hand to mouth, than in the rest of Brics, which has per capita income about five times India's. For that reason, straight comparisons with such countries on the levels of personal debt can be misleading. That apart, at their present rates of growth, personal loans in India could well become the largest category of bank credit in just two or three years, replacing large industry and services which lead the tables now. Bank credit to all of industry, for instance, grew just 7.3 per cent in the four years to 2017-18. The financing of households is fine if incomes keep growing. If not, high debt levels could begin to bite, and we will have a double whammy.

ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA



Mandal, Mandir make way for Modi

BJP's Mandir politics has subsumed Mandal under Modi-Shah and created a pan-Hindu vote. Modi's challenger has to invent a new politics

An epoch has ended in Indian politics exactly after three decades. A new one has begun. We are certainly not talking about the decline of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty and the rise of Narendra Modi as the solitary new pole of Indian politics. That would be too narrow a focus to understand the profound political transformation in India. We are marking the end of the Mandal-Mandir politics and the unfolding of the Modi epoch.

It was exactly around this time of the year in 1989 that the BJP, reduced to two in the Lok Sabha by Rajiv Gandhi in 1984, had begun to see a chance for a comeback in the last year of his prime ministership. Rajiv confidant and defence minister V P Singh had rebelled, and looked the natural leader for an alliance to replace Rajiv. But he could not have done it without the BJP's numbers. And L K Advani, the BJP's sharpest mind, wasn't willing to accept having to share power forever.

He wanted the BJP to win power on its own. For this, the BJP needed an agenda going beyond the day's flavour: Defeating "corrupt" Rajiv. He picked up Ayodhya, combining aggressive nationalism with Hindu revival. This was his Mandir doctrine.

Mr Advani helped the opposition stop Rajiv well short later that year. V P Singh, whose Janata Dal won 143 seats, most of these in the heartland, was sworn in as prime minister of a newly-formed National Front coalition. It was still way short of 272. The numbers were made up by two unlikely outside supporters — the Left and the BJP. It wasn't actually the first or the last time the two sworn ideological enemies cynically made common cause.

The bulk of the Janata Dal and its smaller allies' numbers came from old Socialists and Congress rebels. Generally, they detested the BJP. Mutual unease worsened with differences over the handling of a new insurgency in Kashmir, especially after Rubaiya Sayeed, the daughter of Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, the Kashmiri politician serving as home minister in V P Singh's cabinet, was kidnapped for ransom by Kashmiri separatists and the government capitulated.

Singh and his mostly Socialist/Lohiaite think-tank knew the arrangement was unsustainable and worked to build a new politics opposed to both the BJP and the Congress. An almost decade-old report of the Mandal Commission, recommending reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBCs), was pulled out and implemented in a jiffy.

The upper castes, already resentful of the 22.5 per cent reservations for scheduled castes and tribes, declared war on V P Singh, leading to violent disturbances. In these, 159 upper-caste students tried to commit suicide and, unfortunately, 63 succeeded. A caste war had begun within the Hindu mass. In the process, V P Singh and his socialists built a new OBC vote bank. It threatened the BJP by dividing the Hindu vote it coveted, the last thing Mr Advani wanted when he was trying to polarise that entire population on a Hindu-Muslim basis.

V P Singh's "Mandal" strategy ran headlong into Advani's "Mandir". The Mandal versus Mandir politics resulted in a tussle that's defined Indian politics since then: Can you re-unite by faith what caste divided?

When it worked, which was less often, the BJP came to power. But mostly, bonds of caste prevailed, particularly as many old heartland leaders built and reinforced vote banks of their own castes. Kanshi Ram and Mayawati joined the mix too, taking away the Dalits. Muslims were these caste groups' force multipliers, and vice versa. Together, they often beat the BJP in the heartland. And nationally, these joined hands with the Congress to build unlikely coalitions to keep the BJP out of power.

The 2019 verdict has ended that. To say that Mandir has triumphed Mandal will miss the point. It is more like Mandir, under Narendra Modi and Amit Shah, has subsumed Mandal. Helped along by Mr Modi's rise as India's first full-term, full-majority OBC prime minister winning a second term, the Mandalite vote banks are broken. Mr Modi has taken the mantle from both Mandal and Mandir.

In terms of political geology, this isn't just a tectonic



NATIONAL INTEREST

SHEKHAR GUPTA

The awful, unchanging binary of elections



VIEWPOINT

DEVANGSHU DATTA

I voted for the first time in the 1984 elections when Rajiv Gandhi rode the sympathy wave following his mother's assassination. As a 22-year-old casting a paper ballot in what was then the Calcutta South constituency, I had an awful binary to consider. I could vote for the Left Front, which ran the state very badly, and regularly indulged in violence and murder. Or, I could vote for the Congress, which had just carried out a monstrous genocide.

Every election since then has presented similarly terrible choices. My ideal political party would combine an ideology of being socially liberal and inclusive,

with a near-libertarian perspective on the economy. It would guarantee wide-ranging personal freedoms; it would delete vast chunks of the tax codes and abolish the licensing system; and it would abjure corruption and political violence.

No such animal exists. Indeed, such an animal cannot exist. You cannot win an election without putting together a massive war chest. It is impossible to put a war chest together, without giving and taking favours from India Inc, with a large dose of extortion thrown in. You cannot win elections without muscle-power. So every party has corruption and the capacity for violence embedded in its DNA.

Nor would a socially liberal agenda make sense as a political plank. People would not vote for it, even if they did not actively oppose it. Yet, India remains a place where many personal freedoms are trammelled by bizarre laws.

The Indian Constitution is a wonderful document in many ways. Unfortunately, it was pasted on top of a codex of colonial-era laws designed to keep the lid on the population. Over time, in the name of religious sensitivity, even more regressive provisions have been added on.

Provisions such as criminal defamation and sedition were designed to crush

challenges to the Raj. They have never been softened by any government that has been in power in the eight decades since Independence. Indeed they have been used recently by politicians as well as business groups, to counter everything from satirical memes and cartoons to allegations of sexual harassment and corruption.

While those laws exist in their current forms, freedom of speech is constrained. Freedom of speech is further constrained by the sections of the Indian Penal Code, which makes it impossible to criticise religion, even on legitimate grounds. Those laws are applied selectively, depending on the proclivities of the government of the day. Nonetheless, they exist and no government has diluted either Section 295A or Section 153 of the IPC and no government appears likely to touch these provisions. That's a further constraint on freedom of speech, and arguably, on the freedom to practice a lack of religion.

Other limits on personal freedom also exist. There is still no privacy law. That is not going to be a priority for legislators, given that the government has argued strenuously against the right to privacy. In large parts of the country, there are fur-

ther constraints on personal habits. It is illegal to consume alcohol or eat beef, in many states, for instance.

Those proscriptions are driven largely by religious considerations and again, no political party is willing to push for the abolition of such regressive laws. Even in states where prohibition has been repealed, it has been done quietly and justified on the utilitarian grounds of raising revenue. (That is, by the way, an excellent reason for not imposing prohibition).

Even an avowedly majoritarian Hindu party has not considered pulling cannabis out of the purview of the Narcotic and Psychotropic Substances Act. This makes it look like an outlier in a world, where many major nations have legalised cannabis in the last five years.

So who does one vote for, when no political agenda comes within touching distance of the ideal? I've always cast my vote on the principle of doing least harm: I give it to the party that might cause the least harm on the social, economic, or personal liberties front. My constituency remains Kolkata South. The choices remained binary in 2019 and it's gotten no easier to choose in the last 35 years.

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Theresa May meets her lonely end



JENNI RUSSELL

In the final season of *Game of Thrones*, a once-powerful and arrogant queen stands almost alone at the top of her castle, abandoned by the multitudes who once feared and followed her, her strategies in ruins, watching with dulled horror as her enemy swoops closer, burning her city down. At the last, as she flees down a staircase, even her most trusted champion deserts her, leaving her to fight a battle of his own. Only the man who loves her is by her side at the end.

That was how Theresa May's premier-

ship ended this week. All her Brexit proposals ended in failure. Hard-line backbenchers were denouncing her, newspaper headlines read "desperate, deluded, doomed" and the Conservative Party's grass roots around the country were believed to be pushing to change their party's rules in order to get her out. Only her fiercely loyal husband still believed that the problem lay solely with the conniving and sniping of other politicians, not his wife.

It would be understandable to feel sympathy for anyone so isolated and vilified. I don't. Mrs May has been destroyed by her own fatal decisions.

Delivering Brexit was always going to be difficult, because it had been sold on a lie — that leaving would be simple and the future prosperous. The exact nature of any Brexit had been kept deliberately vague by the leading Brexiters.

Mrs May, as the first prime minister after the 2016 Brexit referendum, could have minimised those difficulties by exposing that lie, and by seeking a Brexit that kept Britain's economy close to Europe's while honouring the decision

to leave. Tragically she chose instead to pander to the her party's right wing and its backers in the news media, promising to quit both the European Union's single market and its customs union, and ceaselessly repeating the disastrous idea that "no deal is better than a bad deal." Her decisions in those first months were calamitous; they framed Brexit as a sharp break from Europe and turned it from a problem to a disaster.

For a few months she basked in the short-lived political rewards. The Tory press offered calculated adoration, praising the new Iron Lady and admiring her steel, ambition, boldness and leadership. Carried away by their sycophancy, revelling in her novel popularity and buoyed by a healthy lead in opinion polls, Mrs May called an election to bolster the tiny parliamentary majority she had inherited. Instead of expanding her majority in Parliament, she lost it and was forced to beg support from a small, far-right Northern Irish party. Mrs May went from being the blank screen onto

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which every Tory or Brexiteer could project their hopes, to the humiliated and compromised leader of a minority administration.

From this every subsequent disaster followed. Mrs May stubbornly pursued a hard Brexit though she had neither the mandate nor the votes to back it. Even last November, when the deal she had finally negotiated with the European Union was defeated in the House of Commons by the largest margin in British history, she refused to explore the possibility of seeking consensus in Parliament. "The trouble with Theresa is that she only recognises reality when it hits her in the face," one exasperated ex-cabinet minister told me. Unlike the Queen of Westeros, she is not a wicked woman; but her serial stubborn stupidity is unforgivable. The legacy she leaves, the curdled, purist view of Brexit she has helped to shape, is a poisonous one.

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Testing the limits

EYE CULTURE

ROBERT D MCFADDEN

Niki Lauda, the Austrian racecar driver who won three world championships in Formula One, the sport's highest level of international competition, and was regarded as one of the greatest racing drivers of all time, died on Monday in Zurich. He was 70.

The scion of an industrial family that opposed his daredevil driving career, Lauda (pronounced LAO-da) was a road warrior who dazzled motoring experts and crowds that lined the twisting, turning Grand Prix courses of Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas for gruelling all-weather races. For a driver, it took guts, focus and precision moves among the shifting packs roaring at high speeds.

"Formula One is simply about controlling these cars and testing your limits," Lauda told *The Telegraph* of London in 2015. "This is why people race — to feel the speed, the car and the control. If in my time you pushed too far, you would have killed yourself. You had to balance on that thin line to stay alive."

In his 17-year career (1969-85) in the open cockpit of Porsches, Ferraris, McLarens and other high-tech torpedoes on wheels, mostly in Formula One competition, Lauda won 25 Grand Prix races. Points were awarded to the top six finishers in a race (today it is the top 10), and by amassing the highest point total in 16 authorised races, Lauda won the Formula One world driving championships in 1975, 1977, and 1984.

Since the crowns were first awarded, in 1950, only five drivers have surpassed Lauda's three titles. After winning his first world driving championship, Lauda seemed destined to repeat in 1976. He won five early events and came in second in two more. But in his next race, the German Grand Prix at Nürburgring, a 14-mile, 76-curve course, things went drastically wrong for him and his 1,300-pound blood-red Ferrari.

It had rained, and he hit a slippery patch at 140 miles per hour. He spun out, broke through a restraining fence, which snagged and tore away his helmet, then hit an embankment and bounced back onto the track, where he was hit by several following cars. His ruptured fuel tank burst into flames, which engulfed him in the cockpit.

By the time three other drivers pulled him from the wreckage, he had severe burns on the face, head and hands, a concussion, a broken collarbone and

shift, it is a continental collision. How has it come about? What are its consequences? And what will it take to contest it, and invent a new pole in Indian politics?

Cut to Mr Modi's spirited speech to his party men in the evening of the results. Two points he made stand out. One, he said that there were only two castes in India now: The poor, and those able to generate the resources to help the poor. Second, that those who wore the "secular mask" have been defeated. The political message is that the time when leaders could divide Hindus on the basis of caste, combine with Muslim voters and stay in power is now over.

Mr Modi is the solitary factor that made this possible. There is no point blaming the opposition. Pre-poll coalitions work when you are fighting an ideology or a party. They will be easily rolled over when fighting a personality, particularly one as popular as Mr Modi today, or Indira Gandhi in 1971.

Mr Modi and Mr Shah have dared to take the BJP where Mr Advani and his generation had not dreamed. Their Mandir polarisation was read by the heartland voters with their evident sympathy with the upper-caste anti-Mandal suicide-burners. Mr Modi and Mr Shah have actively reached out to the OBCs and Dalits. In Uttar Pradesh, they've been breaching both Mayawati and Mulayam's vote banks, diminishing them essentially to single-caste leaders, Jatavs and Yadavs, respectively.

The rest are gravitating towards the BJP. Since it already has a Hindu nationalist upper caste vote-bank, these additional numbers give it devastating power. Bihar has been handed over to a non-BJP OBC leader (Nitish Kumar), the leader of a large and powerful Dalit group, Ram Vilas Paswan, has been accommodated. The challenge of Mandal, which kept the BJP out of power for almost two decades of the past three, was put to flames in 2019.

Mr Modi now has the opportunity to design his own playbook. Here is one likelihood. Because he can take the upper-caste loyalty for granted for now, he could empower many more OBC and Dalit leaders at the Centre and in the states. In Bihar, he is already building a strong set of Yadav leaders, notably Sanjay Paswan, and some will be mentored in UP too. And Hindus feel sufficiently empowered under him so he could reach out to Muslims too. The message: The time when all of you could combine your vote shares to win power is over. The politics that gave you your electoral clout has ended. So come under my tent. After all, as I said, there are only two castes in my India, the poor and the wealth-creators. Most Muslims may still not walk in. But some might just.

Do not read this as the end of politics in India. It is just that, with the Mandal-Mandir epoch over, Mr Modi's next challenger/s will need to invent a new politics. Of course, some would still hope that caste would once again divide what faith reunited. But I'd believe that half the life of that idea ended in 2014, and the rest now.

How would that new politics be built, and possibly by whom? Look one level below the surface in this election result. Under the BJP's 303 and 52 of the Congress are two important numbers. The BJP's votes have risen to 226 million now from 171 million in 2014. The Congress vote has also risen to 118.6 million from 106.9 million. The combined 2014 tally of 277.9 million between them has now risen to 344.6 million. In percentage terms, this is 57 per cent of the total vote compared to 50.3 in 2014. The vote Mandalite and other regional forces took away is gravitating back to national parties. That's why you may take the Congress lightly, Mr Modi and Mr Shah won't.

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other fractures. His right ear was badly burned. Noxious smoke and gases from the car's burning interior seared his lungs. He was taken to a hospital in a coma, then to a burn centre, seemingly near death.

On Lauda's third day in intensive care, a Roman Catholic priest gave him the last rites of the church. Lauda was conscious, and the rites only made him angry. "I kept telling myself, if he wants to do that, O.K., but I'm not quitting," Lauda told *Newsday* after he began a remarkable recovery. He had a series of operations and skin grafts that left permanent scarring on his head. He lost part of his right ear, the hair on the right side of his head, his eyebrows and both eyelids. He chose to limit reconstructive surgery to the eyelids, and thereafter wore a red baseball cap to cover the worst disfigurements. But he began talking, walking and making plans for his return to racing.

Six weeks after his devastating crash, Lauda returned to competition in the Italian Grand Prix at Monza, near Milan. He finished fourth. Against all odds, he began winning again, and finished as runner-up to the 1976 world champion, his British friend James Hunt.

Sustaining his comeback a year later, Lauda again won the world championship, beating Jody Scheckter. Seven years later, after a series of poor racing seasons and a two-year "retirement," Lauda won his final Formula One championship. He retired from racing in 1985.

For many years, Lauda championed safer racecar and track designs, and urged tighter controls over driving conditions and rules governing race organisers. "Racing on standard tracks or in unsafe weather doesn't test courage," Lauda told *The Boston Globe* in 1977.

Over the years, in response to deadly crashes and the increasing power of engines, sanctioning organisations have mandated many changes in safety regulations and technology, including electronic driver aids and grooved tires, to improve the road grip and cornering controls of cars, as well as rules limiting racing in extreme weather conditions to minimise dangers of aquaplaning. Tracks have been redesigned and stronger barriers built to increase the safety of spectators. Major accidents in Formula One racing have steadily declined.

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Every week, Eye Culture features writers with an entertaining critical take on art, music, dance, film and sport