

ACROSS THE AISLE



P CHIDAMBARAM

I HAVE before me a copy of *The Indian Express* dated May 1 and I am reading various reports on the on-going elections. There is a story with a prominent headline: 'Modi: Party that can't have Oppn leader in LS dreams of having PM'. It reports in considerable detail the speeches of Mr Narendra Modi in Lucknow and Muzaffarpur.

Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state, is a key battleground for all parties. It is especially important for the BJP in 2019 because it is fighting to retain the 71 (out of 80) seats that it had won in 2014. The 71 seats propelled the BJP to form a government with an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha. If the BJP loses even half of the seats it won in UP, it will not be able to form a government on its own strength. It is, therefore, no surprise, that Mr Modi is devoting a great part of his time to UP.

Nothing wrong with that, except that with every new speech, Mr Modi is making more extraordinary claims and straining credulity. He is challenging the intelligence of the average school- or college-educated voter. He is also testing the limits of the liberty a person may take with truth. Consider Mr Modi's claims:

NO BOMB BLASTS?

After chastising the Congress and others for their inability to fight terrorism, Mr Modi said, 'Do you hear of blasts at temples, markets, railway or bus stations any longer? Have these bomb blasts stopped or not? They have stopped due

to the fear of Modi.'

Earlier, he had claimed repeatedly that there were **no** bomb blasts in his five-year tenure!

The facts, unfortunately, are otherwise. Here is a *partial* list of the *major* bomb blasts in the last five years, including one on the very day Mr Modi made his false claim:

Date	Place	Number of casualties
5-12-2014	Mohra, J&K	10
10-4-2015	Dantewada	5
27-1-2016	Palamu	6
19-7-2016	Aurangabad, Bihar	10
2-2-2017	Koraput, Odisha	7
10-5-2017	Sukma	25
27-10-2018	Awapalli, Chhattisgarh	4
14-2-2019	Pulwama	44
9-4-2019	Dantewada	5*
1-5-2019	Gadchiroli	15

*including a BJP MLA

NEEDS HISTORY LESSONS

Another favourite subject of Mr Modi is that he caused the first 'surgical strike' against Pakistan and that never before had the government of the day authorised the Indian Army to cross the border and enter Pakistan's territory. I wonder if Mr Modi had not heard (or read) of what the Army did in 1965 and 1971! Did the Indian defence forces win the wars, and liberate Bangladesh in 1971, without entering Pakistan's territory? Besides,

Army generals had pointed out that Mr Modi's claim was wrong and asserted that 'this was not the first time and this will not be last'. Here is a table of previous cross-border actions:

21-1-2000:	Nadala Enclave, across Neelam river
18-9-2003:	Baroh sector, Poonch
19-6-2008:	Bhattach sector, Poonch
30-8-2011:	Sharda sector, across Neelam river
6-1-2013:	Sawan Patra check post
27-7-2013:	Nazapir sector
6-8-2013:	Neelam Valley

Mr Narendra Modi is not a mere leader of a political party and campaigner. He is the Prime Minister of India. People wonder why the Prime Minister of the country repeats an untruth many times over. It cannot be a case of memory loss because Mr Modi has been reminded time and again that his claims on bomb blasts and surgical strikes were demonstrably wrong. Nor can it be a clever electoral tactic because people will be angry when they hear an untruth repeated again and again. I think the answers lie deeper in the personality of Mr Modi.

SILENCE ON REAL ISSUES

Recently, Mr Modi claimed that he had never referred to his humble origins (*chawallah*) or to his caste (OBC). I was stunned, and did some research. There are statements made by Mr Modi on sev-

eral dates. The earliest I could find where he referred to himself as *chawallah* was on September 28, 2014, and there have been many after that. Likewise, there are several statements where Mr Modi referred to his backward caste status: two recent examples were on March 25, 2018, and April 18, 2018. It would be embarrassing to record his exact words here because he is the Prime Minister of India and I respect that office. Mr Modi should be happy that there is no one running a fact-check simultaneously like they do on Mr Donald Trump's speeches!

The sad aspect is there are so many real issues on which the Prime Minister can speak and so much the people want to hear from the Prime Minister. But for strange reasons, Mr Modi will not talk about his party's election manifesto; he will not talk about unemployment and jobs; he will not talk about the farmers' distress and debt; he will not talk about declining prices for farm produce or the colossal failure of the crop insurance scheme; and he will not talk about the fears of women, the Dalits, the Scheduled Tribes, academics, scholars, journalists, NGOs etc.

Mr Modi pretends that the *achhe din* that he had promised have arrived. Nothing can be further from the truth. People know there is no *achhe din*. The people are tired and angry hearing the lies and yearn for a few doses of truth.

Website: pchidambaram.in
@Pchidambaram_IN

FIFTH COLUMN



TAVLEEN SINGH

Advice from the Raj

WHEN NARENDRA Modi has made mistakes, this column never hesitated to point them out. There have been big mistakes in the past five years. In my short list, I would put demotisation at the top. His next big mistake was to remain silent when rabid gangs of cow vigilantes attacked and killed Muslims and Dalits. At number three in my list comes his change of economic direction, because he was taunted by Rahul Gandhi with running a government for the suited and booted. This veering off course and returning to the 'socialist' path set by our Imperial Dynasty was probably his biggest mistake. Private investment dried up, as did jobs, and this may have been the objective of the taunt in the first place.

But under Modi, many things have also changed for the better. At the top of this list is Swachh Bharat. It is a formidable achievement that in five years, sanitation in rural India has gone from less than 40 per cent to more than 90 per cent. In this period, he has also dragged India into the digital age. Forcing nearly every Indian to open a bank account is another huge achievement. It is because of this that rural corruption has come down since beneficiaries of government welfare schemes now get money transferred directly into their bank accounts.

There has also been a political upheaval. That tiny group of entitled heirs who once controlled all the levers of power from Lutyens Delhi are now threatened by people who are more representative of the real India. Of course, there is much, much more to be done. But it is important to remember that Modi inherited a country that was in such bad shape that most of India continues to resemble a vast, hideous slum. He should have done more to introduce planned urbanisation, and more to bring sanitary living conditions to our squalid urban settlements. But he cannot be denied credit for drawing attention to these unsightly flaws. If India's impatient, aspirational voters feel that he has not been a good enough prime minister, then he will be voted out in two weeks.

This will happen without *The Economist's* advice to Indians to throw him out because he is 'despicable' and 'dangerous'. This British newspaper endorsed the Congress party in 2014 as well. But what really annoyed me about the leader it published last week was that the writer seemed ignorant of events that happened in India before Modi. If this were not true, he would never have dared suggest that the Congress party deserved India's votes as it did not 'set Indians at each other's throats'. You do not need to delve deep into history books to discover just how many times the Congress party did this. Google will do the job.

The other astonishingly ignorant bit of analysis was of Modi's Kashmir policy. The Valley has been in turmoil for more than three years now. But, it was not because of Modi that the movement for 'azaadi' changed into a movement for the creation of an Islamic state. It was the killing of Burhan Wani that began the turmoil. And Wani had made it clear in all his videotaped messages that his struggle would end only when Islamic law was imposed in the Valley. *The Economist* may believe this to be a worthy cause, but most Indians do not.

One of the reasons for the ugly, beligerent Hindutva we see today in too many parts of India is because of the ugly, warped secularism that parties like the Congress have preached and practised for too long. When an Indian prime minister says that Muslims have the first right to India's resources, it is not just sick but provocative. When a senior Congress leader tries to blame 26/11 on the RSS, it is truly wicked.

As someone who worked for many years for a British newspaper, I need to add that this experience taught me that most foreign correspondents see India through the lens of a Delhi drawing room. It also taught me that foreign correspondents are more comfortable when the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty rules because they can at least talk to them in English. And, also because they are westernised enough for westerners to not think of them as natives.

Modi has brought with him some very nasty Hindutva leaders, and if he wins again, he should get rid of them. But, he has also given a voice to Indians who do not speak a word of English and who have never put a foot in those rarefied spaces where India's levers of political power exist. This is a very good thing for India because it deepens the roots of democracy and weakens the roots of dynastic succession. It may not be a good thing for *The Economist*. The new genre of Indian politicians has probably never heard of this magazine.

Follow Tavleen Singh on Twitter @tavleen_singh

Can we have *sachhe din* please?

There are so many real issues on which the PM can speak and so much the people want to hear from the PM. But for strange reasons, Mr Modi will not talk about his party's manifesto, unemployment and jobs, farmers' distress and debt...

INSIDE TRACK



COOMI KAPOOR

VHP'S CLOUT

The VHP and the RSS have taken total charge of Pragya Thakur's campaign in Bhopal and her campaign headquarters is located in the VHP office. Unlike a section of the BJP, the VHP does not feel the need to be apologetic about Thakur's remarks against late Maharashtra ATS chief Hemant Karkare. Uma Bharati was furious when the inexperienced Thakur was nominated from Bhopal instead of her. Bharati's credentials as a *sadhvi* are far more impressive — she had delivered religious discourses as a young girl and is a veteran of the Babri Masjid movement. As an OBC Lodhi, Bharati was recognised as a major political asset for the party and has won multiple parliamentary elections, including from Bhopal. So Bharati made known her displeasure by remarking sarcastically that no doubt Thakur is a "great *sadhvi*" and she a foolish nobody. But clearly, someone in the Sangh Parivar at the highest level reprimanded Bharati. She subsequently called on Thakur and touched her feet. Similarly, Sumitra Mahajan, who usually weighs her words carefully, and Poonam Mahajan seem to have been instructed to make statements justifying Thakur's remarks. The VHP is focusing on three constituencies to establish the primacy of its views on Hinduism: Bhopal; Begusarai, where Kanhaiya Kumar is contesting; and Pathanamthitta in Kerala, where the Sabarimala temple is located.

WRONG SIDE

Priyanka Gandhi Vadra played an important role in choosing the Congress candidates for Uttar Pradesh. She was helped by Pravin Chakravarty, the party's data head, who provided the breakdown of castes and religions in different constituencies. Priyanka's claim that the first priority is to defeat the BJP has not mollified the BSP's Mayawati and Samajwadi Party leader Akhilesh Yadav. Both are furious, believing that Congress candidates in UP have harmed the *gathbandhan* more than the BJP. The Congress even fielded Muslim candidates in seven to eight seats which are minority-dominated. The bad blood between the *gathbandhan* and the Congress over the UP parliamentary contest could linger on and make the formation of a post-election alliance harder.

OUT OF MY MIND



MEGHNAD DESAI

IT MAY be a great festival of democracy, but it is depressing as well. Forget the bad manners, abusive speeches, intimidation, and violence; not to say the sheer hypocrisy of every kettle calling the pot black (or not black enough). The tendency to rush to the Supreme Court for these trivial issues makes one wonder if the court should punish people rushing to it for just publicity. As it is, the judicial backlog is bad and likely to exceed the

INVISIBLE ALLIANCE

NCP supremo Sharad Pawar and MNS chief Raj Thackeray became close after a programme in Pune six months ago where Thackeray was the interviewer and Pawar the chief guest. Pawar wanted Thackeray's MNS as an ally, but the Congress vetoed the suggestion since Thackeray's campaign against north Indians in Mumbai had alienated its voters. So the two came up with an interesting via media. Thackeray attracted the maximum crowds in the Maharashtra election campaign by targeting Narendra Modi forcefully. Using video presentations, he recalled Modi's 2014 promises and failure to deliver on them. The beneficiary of Thackeray's oratory could be the Congress and NCP since the MNS did not contest the parliamentary polls. Thackeray hopes to formalise his ties with Pawar for the Assembly elections.

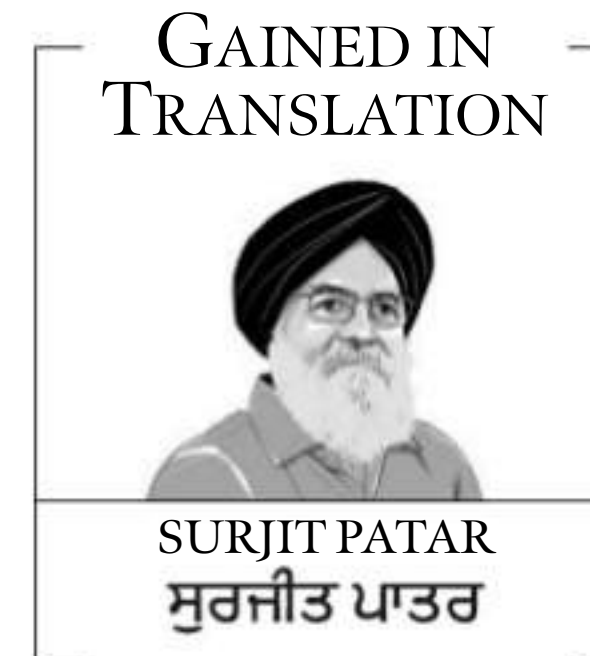
SQUABBLING SIBLINGS

Tejashwi Yadav, who heads the RJD campaign in Bihar, recently cancelled his appearance at two major TV channel programmes in Patna at the last moment. Tejashwi blamed his absence on ill-health, but many suspect he does not want to answer uncomfortable questions about the rift in the family. Elder brother Tej Pratap Yadav is furious with Tejashwi for sidelining him in the campaign and not heeding his demand that his estranged father-in-law Chandrika Rai should not be given a party ticket from Saran. The real worry for Tejashwi is not Tej Pratap, who is known to be a maverick, but his older sister Misa Bharati, who is fighting the election from Pataliputra. Misa is believed to have encouraged Tej Pratap to embarrass Tejashwi, who did not show up to even campaign for his sister, though her Pataliputra contest is said to be tough. Mother Rabri Devi at home and father Lalu Prasad in jail can do little to control the squabbling siblings.

ACTION VIDEO

According to the grapevine in Amethi, it was a pro-Congress photographer who shot the video of BJP candidate Smriti Irani working furiously at a hand pump and shouting at a district magistrate over the phone for not being at the spot when some fields in Purab Dwara, a village in Amethi district, were burning. The lensman presumed that Irani was throwing her weight around during election time, especially when a fire tender had reached the spot. He had hoped the video would work against Irani. A miscalculation, since the video when loaded onto YouTube went viral and BJP sympathisers were quick to add laudatory captions.

Of meetings and separations



IN MY childhood, I heard a folk couplet sung by Punjabi girls performing the folk dance *giddha*. They sang: *Nachaan main Patiala/ Meri dhamak Jalandhar paindi* (I dance in Patiala/Jalandhar can feel the beat).

But only last year I heard the following couplet: *Main Moge nachaan jaago vich/ Meri paindi dhamak Chicago vich* (I am dancing in Moga in a *jaago*) My beat can be felt in Chicago).

It can be vice-versa, Punjabi girls could be dancing in Chicago and their beat would vibrate in Moga. Today Punjabis have migrated to more than 150 countries, but no matter where they live, Punjab lives on in their hearts. Professor Puran Singh, one of the founders of modern Punjabi poetry, rightly described Punjab as a land of great meetings and great separations. Being a frontier province, it has become the melting pot of many races and cultures.

It was the sacred rendezvous of great saints and sufis belonging to different places, faiths and castes. They include Baba Farid, a Muslim Sufi whose grandparents migrated to Punjab from Kabul; Baba Namdev, a Beethal bhagat from Maharashtra; Sant Kabir and Sant Ravidas from Varanasi; Krishan Bhagat Jaidev from Bengal; Dhanna Bhagat from Rajasthan and many others. Coming from different regions, religions and races, they sang along with the Sikh gurus. It was a divine orchestra, a great interfaith festival, going on day and night under the skies. It is in Guru Nanak's cosmic anthem: *Gagan mein taal ravi chand deepak bane/ Taarika mandal janak moti/ Dhoop malianlo pawan chavro kare/ Sagal banrai phoolant jyoti* (Upon the cosmic platter of the sky/ the sun and the moon are the lamps/ the stars and their orbs are the pearls/ the wind coming from the sandalwood of the Malayagiri hills is the incense).

It was a meeting not only of races, religions and castes, but also stars and lamps. The greatest separation occurred in 1947. Cyril John Radcliffe drew on the map



Illustration: CR Sasikumar

a line that began at the borders of Kashmir, cut through the middle of Ravi, severed Amritsar from Lahore, separated villages from their fields, rivers from their canals, Sikhs from their holy places, and ended at the border of Bahawalpur.

The line tore apart not only the land but also the hearts of the men, and the pure bodies of this land's daughters. The water of five rivers can't wash off the cursed marks 1947 left on the heritage of the Punjabis. The bloodthirsty line swallowed 60 lakh Punjabis in a few days. Over 1.2 crore Punjabis lost their homes and had to cross the border. Ten lakh daughters were separated from their families. And then, 1984.

Maatam, hinsa, khauf, bebasi te anyaay/ Eh ne aj kal mere panjaan daryaanva de naam (Mourning, violence, fear, helplessness and injustice) These are the names of my five rivers today).

I am reminded of Dr Noor's love poem: *Tethon vichhar ke/ Main vichhraya hi chala gaya* (After separating from you/ I went on separating again and again).

This short love poem is relevant to Punjab too. The "you" in the poem can be interpreted in many ways. This I leave to the imagination of my readers.

Today's Punjab is suffering so many separations. Not only because its sons and daughters are migrating in thousands to foreign lands but also because custodians of our values relating to religion, politics and education have failed us. We, the intellectuals, are seeking ways of escape: *Panchhi taan udd gaye ne/ Rukh vi salaahaan karan/ Chalon ithon chaliye* (The birds have already flown away/ Now even the trees converse/ Let us go somewhere else).

Another great separation is in the schools built on the land in which the language of the land is being insulted with

impunity. Its young sons and daughters are discouraged and fined if they utter a word in their mother tongue. This attitude is creating anxiety, silences and inferiority complex in the minds of our children. I am not against learning English, but the right way to learn any language other than your mother tongue, as we are told by linguists, psychologists and educationists, is through your mother language. We must adopt the scientific way, it will make our children more creative and confident.

The government is neglecting its own schools so as to give a fillip to private schools.

On August 18, 2015, Sudhir Agarwal, a high court judge, in a ruling, asked the chief secretary of Uttar Pradesh to issue an order to government officials and the representatives of people and judiciary to send their children only to government schools.

Guru Nanak, whose 550th birth anniversary we are celebrating this year, had said: "Neechan andar neech jaat/ Neechi hoo att neech/ Nanak tin ke sang saath/ Wadya seo kya rees/ Jithe neech samaliyan/ Tithhe nadar teri bakhsees" (Nanak seeks the company of the lowest of the low class. Why should he try to compete with the rich. On the lands where the lowly are cared for, God's blessings rain down)."

Punjab, the land of great meetings and separations has suffered too many separations. Now it needs a great meeting.

Hovaan ik din/ Raag, shaayiri, hussan, mohabbat ate nyaay/ Mere panj daryaanva de naam (Let us aspire, pray and strive to make music, poetry, beauty, love and justice the new names of our five rivers).

Patar, a celebrated Punjabi poet, is chairman of Punjab Kala Parishad. Translated from Punjabi by the author

Caste race: A dismal prospect

numbers voting any day soon. Despite that, politicians of all parties treat the court as a publicity vehicle. They should be fined for time-wasting. Enough is enough.

When did it become required to declare your caste on the nomination form? In my teenage years, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru harangued us week after week in the weekly newsreel shown in cinemas. He told us to reject casteism and communalism since independent India had to strive for equality, and while casteism prevailed, equality would be impossible to achieve.

And so it has proved. Who would have thought that the most significant political change in the history of modern democratic India would be initiated by Morarji

Desai? He commissioned the Mandal Report. Another who fell foul of the dynasty, V P Singh, implemented it. I recall that when he announced he was going to implement Mandal, both the Congress and the BJP, solid upper caste parties, were against it. It was the Lohiaite parties, given a new life by the Janata Party's anti-Emergency movement, who welcomed and profited from the Mandalisation of Indian democracy.

The Congress had been coasting successfully on a coalition of upper caste landholders, Dalit sharecroppers and Muslim artisans in the BIMARU belt until Mandal came along. The BJP was stuck with the three upper castes and was not getting far. But then Muslims abandoned the Congress after the Babri Masjid dem-

olition, and the BJP discovered the OBCs. *Jaati* calculus in choice of candidates, as well as canvassing and electoral promises, has become the norm. Any hope that India will overcome the incubus of unequal caste relations is gone.

It was one thing to put SC/ST reservations in the Constitution, though the 15-year limit seemed reasonable to fight centuries of injustice. We thought then that rapid growth and modernisation will remove the need for reservations. That urbanisation will erase the identifying marks of being a Dalit. Alas, no. Not enough growth occurred. Reservations for SC/STs had to be extended. Then the 40 years of economic stagnation made it clear to the OBCs that government jobs were the only ones which were safe and

well-paying. So Mandal made every Indian carry his/her *jaati* status like a pin code at an ATM, except that this was the government doling out jobs if you flashed your *jaati* pin code.

Hence the paradox of equality of one-person-one-vote to elect a government (of any party whatsoever) will cement the inbuilt inequality of the forward and the backward castes. Indeed, as BSP chief Mayawati's criticism of Prime Minister Narendra Modi showed, backwardness is a precious possession. Do not let anyone move you ahead. Stay behind.

Class inequality is also debilitating, but in theory, it is possible to escape the class in which you were born and be upwardly mobile. No such luck in *jaati*. You die the same as you are born.