



Alternative dreams

K. Chandrashekar Rao's outreach to regional parties sets the ball rolling on a 'third front'

There are two more phases of polling in the Lok Sabha election and results are not due until May 23. But Telangana Chief Minister K. Chandrashekar Rao, who heads the Telangana Rashtra Samithi, has sought meetings with his counterparts in other southern States as well as with Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam president M.K. Stalin in what is a clear attempt to prepare the ground for a 'federal front' of non-Congress, non-BJP parties after the elections. Mr. Rao had attempted to bring together such a formation earlier as well. Last year, a pre-election federal front did not quite take off due to the varying positioning of the regional parties. Some such as the DMK, the Rashtriya Janata Dal and the Janata Dal (S) favoured a direct alliance with the Congress and were not part of the TRS's plans. While others such as the Trinamool Congress did not fully rule out a post-poll alliance with the Congress, the Biju Janata Dal has not ruled out any such alliance with either the BJP or the Congress. For the TRS, the idea of a federal front is rooted in the political contest in its own State. The Congress is the primary rival in Telangana for the TRS, and so its antipathy to a Congress-led coalition. In fact, the TRS had late last year abstained in the trust vote called by the Opposition in Parliament, signalling equidistance with the BJP and the Congress.

However, by now seeking to meet Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan of the CPI(M), Karnataka Chief Minister H.D. Kumaraswamy of the JD(S) and Mr. Stalin, Mr. Rao seems to be indicating a reorientation of sorts. Some of these parties are the Congress's coalition partners – the JD(S) in Karnataka and the DMK in Tamil Nadu – and the Left has an unequivocal position against the BJP. Mr. Rao's outreach has raised speculation that his party would be willing to be part of a regional front that is clearly more antithetical to the BJP and that could be supported by the Congress if the need arises. It may not be so simple, as there are other forces that the TRS is politically opposed to, such as the Telugu Desam Party, which are likely to be part of a post-poll anti-BJP coalition. The idea of a third front in which the Congress and the BJP do not play a part has always been attractive to the regional parties, and the Left in particular. But despite the continued relevance of regional parties, the resilience of the two main national parties has prevented this from happening. The fact that the TRS could not work out a pre-poll, pan-India coalition to delineate itself from the Congress and the BJP is in itself a signal of this. In the larger scheme of things, all this manoeuvring by the TRS chief might yield little more than some additional leverage for his party in a post-poll situation.

Circle of life

Biodiversity assessments must be factored into all economic activity

The overwhelming message from the global assessment report of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) is that human beings have so rapaciously exploited nature, and that species belonging to a quarter of all studied animal and plant groups on earth are gravely threatened. If the world continues to pursue the current model of economic growth without factoring in environmental costs, one million species could go extinct, many in a matter of decades. Catastrophic erosion of ecosystems is being driven by unsustainable use of land and water, direct harvesting of species, climate change, pollution and release of alien plants and animals in new habitats. While ecosystem losses have accelerated over the past five decades universally, there is particular worry over the devastation occurring in tropical areas, which are endowed with greater biodiversity than others; only a quarter of the land worldwide now retains its ecological and evolutionary integrity, largely spared of human impact. Nature provides ecosystem services, but these are often not included in productivity estimates: they are vital for food production, for clean air and water, provision of fuel for millions, absorption of carbon in the atmosphere, and climate moderation. The result of such skewed policies, as the IPBES estimates, is that the global rate of species extinction is at least tens of hundreds of times higher today than the average rate over the past 10 million years, and it is accelerating alarmingly.

Ecological economists have for years pointed to the extreme harm that humanity as a whole is courting by modifying terrestrial, marine and freshwater ecosystems to suit immediate needs, such as raising agricultural and food output and extracting materials that aid ever-increasing consumption. Expanding agriculture by cutting down forests has raised food volumes, and mining feeds many industries, but these have severely affected other functions such as water availability, pollution, maintenance of wild variants of domesticated plants and climate regulation. Losses from pollution are usually not factored into claims of economic progress made by countries, but as the IPBES assessment points out, marine plastic pollution has increased tenfold since 1980, affecting at least 267 species, including 86% of marine turtles, 44% of seabirds and 43% of marine mammals. At the same time, about 9% of 6,190 domesticated breeds of mammals used for food and agriculture had gone extinct by 2016, and another 1,000 may disappear permanently. Viewed against a shrinking base of wild varieties of farmed plants and animals, all countries have cause for alarm. They are rapidly emptying their genetic resource kit. Reversing course is a dire necessity to stave off disaster. This can be done by incorporating biodiversity impacts into all economic activity, recognising that irreparably breaking the web of life will impoverish and endanger people everywhere.

Begusarai, metaphor of a secular crisis

For the minorities secularism is a survival tool, for the elite it is an ideology. In caste competition, it could be a tactic



VARGHESE K. GEORGE

Begusarai, in the Gangetic plains of Bihar, has long been a stronghold of the Communist Party of India (CPI). Kanhaiya Kumar, the firebrand young leader and former president of Jawaharlal Nehru University Students Union, is the CPI candidate from the Begusarai Lok Sabha constituency. Over the past five years, he has become a national icon of resistance against Hindutva. His candidacy has so inspired opponents of Hindutva that they raised all the money that he could legally spend in campaign through crowdfunding – ₹70 lakh. Actors, academics and activists, an array of people from India's secular, liberal universe campaigned for Mr. Kumar. So did enthusiastic youngsters from all over the country. If Prime Minister Narendra Modi personifies the march of Hindutva in India, Mr. Kumar personifies the resistance to it. And the fight for Begusarai has larger messages than the fortunes of the candidates in the fray.

Collapse of binaries

However, this binary world as imagined by the elite was processed differently in Begusarai, which went to the polls on April 29. "We want Narendra Modi as Prime Minister and Kanhaiya Kumar as MP," said Binod Singh, a 26-year-old belonging to the same upper caste Bhumihar community as the candidate. This view is broadly representative of a significant section of Mr. Kumar's Bhumihar supporters, though the BJP's candidate is also a Bhumihar.

In the triangular contest of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the CPI and the Rashtriya Janata Dal

(RJD) in Begusarai, the latter two are avowedly opposed to the BJP's Hindutva politics. The RJD is in alliance with the Congress and some other small outfits representing Dalit and backward communities. Its candidate, Tanveer Hasan, is a respectable modernist leader who lost in 2014 but stayed active in the constituency since.

How the principles of secularism and social justice, both components of progressive politics, interacted in electoral politics could be understood in terms of the intense competition among caste-based interests groups for political power over the decades. In the era of Congress dominance in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the upper castes that controlled the party roped in Dalits and Muslims with the rhetoric of justice and secularism, but excluded the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) from power. The rise of Hindutva changed this dynamic, as the upper castes were the first to abandon the Congress for the BJP. The emergent OBC politics, with Lalu Prasad and Mulayam Singh Yadav at the helm in Bihar and U.P., respectively, offered an alternative to Muslims as the Congress collapsed. With the support of Muslims, the OBCs realised their decades long yearning for political power.

The Muslim-OBC social combination, with the Yadavs at its core, not merely ended the upper caste hegemony, but also crushed its vehicle, the Congress party. There is no normative exposition or pursuit of secularism in this context, but social justice parties were against Hindutva for its Manuwaad, or upper caste dominance.

From the social justice perspective, the opposition to Hindutva can be summarised thus: upper castes allied with Muslims to exclude OBCs initially; when they abandoned Muslims for Hindutva, OBCs challenged Hindutva, made a social coalition with Muslims that proved enduring, and won power. Muslims were unwitting



participants in this caste competition.

Progressive, oppressive

The elite, vernacular and English, articulated the standards of secularism, but remained disconnected from the dynamics of caste aspirations at play in the electoral arena. The ideologues and leaders of this elite, the Nehruvian and the Marxist streams, have been primarily upper caste. It would be unfair to question their intentions or commitment but the accident of their birth limited their appeal among the subalterns. The role of Bhumihars in Bihar politics is instructive. Several dozens of the Communist movement were from the community, which also had the progressive poet Dinkar among its ranks. But the landowning community also mobilised a private army called the Ranveer Sena, which launched murderous attacks on Dalits in waves of violence in the 1990s, simultaneous with the Muslim-OBC political partnership, and as a reaction to it. If Brahminism denotes hegemony, Bhumiharism represents violent oppression.

That being said, the CPI's Bhumihar candidate won nearly two lakh votes in Begusarai in 2014, which evidently included votes of Dalits and OBCs, for the politics it represents. This wider appeal has been significantly strengthened by

Kanhaiya Kumar's candidacy, notwithstanding the presence of 'Modi-Kanhaiya' voters among his supporters. But the nearly exclusive control of the CPI by a single caste makes it suspect in the eyes of subalterns whose politics it professes to advance. Of the five seats that the CPI wanted to contest as part of the RJD-led alliance, four were for Bhumihars, according to Shivanand Tiwari, RJD leader.

The Muslim elites could bargain with the upper caste-controlled Congress and the backward caste RJD and Samajwadi Party for favours and representation, but their power to do so is in decline with the rise of Hindutva. In any case, the material condition of average Muslims is the lowest compared to other social groups, though the Hindutva narrative portrays them as undeserving recipients of secular appeasement. Even for Muslims who do not subscribe to secularism as a principle, it is a survival strategy in a Hindu majority country. The rise of Hindutva has correspondingly meant a decline in Muslim representation in politics. Security has increasingly become the sole expectation of Muslims from secularism. But the RJD and the SP continue to field Muslim candidates, and in Bihar and U.P., there are constituencies where Muslims can win.

Begusarai is one such, but the contest between the CPI and the RJD put the community in dilemma. An upper caste communist's vantage to take on Hindutva is evidently more than a vulnerable Muslim could achieve, and the community supported Mr. Kumar in significant numbers. For security, Muslims are willing to surrender their claim of representation – which, ironically, is the implied demand that Hindutva makes to the community in exchange for security. If Muslims abandon a Muslim RJD candidate, the OBCs and Dalits would rethink their attitude towards Muslims – and the secularism-social justice axis, which has

been a speed-breaker for Hindutva, could collapse.

Politically ambitious OBCs and Dalits prefer Hindutva in which they have representation to a secular nationalistic project that is thoughtless of those ambitions at best and exclusive at worst. Lower caste politics is broadly indifferent to the rhetoric of secularism and their opposition to Hindutva is primarily from a social justice perspective. Many champions of lower caste interests would even grudge that Muslims are indifferent to their struggles against Manuwaad. Hindutva 2.0 under Mr. Modi has cleverly used this dynamic for its rise, by offering them representation though no significant political power.

A progressive politics, of which secularism is a part, and agnostic of all considerations of caste and religion, may be an ideal worth pursuing, but questions of representation for different social groups within it is extremely critical.

The road ahead

In the arena of caste competition, secularism could be an effective tactic; for the minorities it is a survival tool, and for the elite it is an ideology. Reconciling these differing, though not necessarily contesting, perspectives, is essential but difficult as the contest between the RJD and the CPI shows. For secular politics to be sustainable as a winnable electoral platform, it must merge with social justice politics. That requires a negotiation between the self-interests of different social groups as they subjectively perceive them with the normative claims of that politics articulated by the elite. Though they have overlapping traits, their accents are different, and there is even a subterranean hostility with one another. Begusarai is a metaphor of that crisis of Indian secularism.

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A travesty of justice

Judges must not reduce the institution to a private club, whereby they are the last word on their own colleague



THULASI K. RAJ

On May 6, the "in-house" panel of the Supreme Court gave a clean sheet to the Chief Justice of India (CJI), Ranjan Gogoi, after an allegation of sexual harassment was levelled against him by a former female staffer of the court.

Let us assume, for example, that an average employee in a government department is accused of sexual harassment at the workplace. If at the outset reasonable material is found in favour of the complaint, the accused is suspended from employment pending an inquiry. This is considered necessary in administrative law to ensure that the accused does not tamper with evidence or intimidate or influence witnesses. Usually, an independent inquiry will follow which will give both parties an opportunity to present evidence and arguments and to examine and cross-examine witnesses. If

the allegations are found to be true and grave, the accused's employment is terminated; if not, other forms of departmental penalties are imposed.

So why does the entire body of procedural safeguards and legal principles disappear when the accused is the CJI? It was on April 19 that the complainant sent affidavits to the judges of the Supreme Court accusing Justice Gogoi of sexual harassment. The complaint is specific, detailed and supported by documentary and other forms of evidence. The account seems, prima facie, consistent, warranting an inquiry.

Series of flaws

The first reaction was by the court's Secretary General quickly discarding the complaint as one by "mischievous forces". The second was unprecedented in the constitutional history of India. The CJI himself constituted an extraordinary hearing in the Supreme Court, along with two other judges, on a non-working day in a case titled "Matter of great public importance touching upon the independence of the judiciary". The complainant, in her absence, was defamed and her motives ques-



tioned. The highest law officers of the country, the Attorney General and the Solicitor General, joined this judicial proceeding. Within no time, an allegation of sexual harassment turned into a matter of judicial independence.

The third development was the constitution of an "in-house" panel comprising three judges of the Supreme Court. It did not seem to be of concern that to ensure independence of the inquiry and check for bias, members other than judges should have constituted the committee. How can judges inquire into allegations against a colleague, no less the CJI, who is the "master of roster" assigning cases to fellow judges and, most significantly, the highest judicial authority in the country, wielding an enormous amount of power and influence?

The constitution of the "in-house" panel was not in compliance with the provisions of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, a special legislation to curb harassment. Nor was not in accordance with any requirements under the existing framework of law. Thereafter, the complainant was forced to abstain from the panel, citing various reasons such as the refusal of the panel to allow the presence of her lawyer, refusal to record the proceedings or to inform her of the procedure followed and prohibition on conveying the details of the proceedings to anybody else, including her lawyer. The panel continued the proceedings in her absence and then met the CJI. Now, the panel has concluded that the allegations are without "substance".

The public have been kept in the dark, having no access to and no knowledge of what transpired in the proceedings. This has happened at a time when the Right to Information Act, 2005 has revolutionised access to information by the public.

Opaque report

The finding of the panel that the allegations are baseless is the final blow in a process that has violated all principles of fairness, due process and impartiality. The panel's report is not available to the public on reasons of confidentiality. What grounds did the panel cover to reach its conclusion? What evidence did it examine and rely on?

The institution of the judiciary has a strong counter-majoritarian character. It is considered neutral – free from self-interests. It is supposed to protect individual rights and adjudicate freely and fairly. But the current episode points to a larger problem in Indian democracy: the emergence of judicial oligarchy. An allegation against a sitting judge is inquired into by three other judges of the court, the accused is exonerated, the panel report is made available only to the CJI and the seniormost judge of the court, and this secrecy is justified by relying on a judgment of the Supreme Court itself. The judges must not reduce the institution to a private club where certain interests are privileged at the cost of judicial integrity.

The Chief Justice of India is not above the law.

Thulasi K. Raj is a lawyer at the Kerala High Court

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.

No review

The decision of the Supreme Court to dismiss a plea by 21 Opposition parties to review its judgment rejecting 50% random physical verification of EVMs must be seen objectively (Page 1, "SC turns down Opposition plea for increased VVPAT verification", May 8). The Opposition's demand was unreasonable and politically motivated even when it has been established beyond reasonable doubt that EVMs are tamperproof. In fact the petition should have been rejected outright. However, the villain of the piece is the VVPAT and simultaneous printing of ballots. With technological advances, it is possible to eliminate the VVPAT altogether. It should be easy to have a screen on the EVM to show the image of the party symbol and simultaneously save it on a

memory chip within the EVM. This can be downloaded to a printer later whenever a candidate challenges the result. This will not only be economical but will also eliminate simultaneous printing leading to a breakdown of VVPATs and the election process. The Election Commission of India (EC) can seek the Supreme Court's approval for the new process.

MADHAVA M. KOTIAN,
Bengaluru

■ The Opposition's sustained campaign, led by Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu, is retrograde. The tech-savvy Mr. Naidu is one among very few politicians in the country to have adopted e-governance and extensive application of technology in day-to-day administrative functions. It's bizarre that now he leads the campaign against EVM use alone. EVM

use has proved to be more transparent and efficient when compared to ballot papers, which could be misused and manipulated. It's hypocrisy on the part of the Opposition to vilify the EVM as every party that has won elections earlier used the same EVM. The Opposition's increased thrust and propaganda over the issue in the midst of the general election is only to explain away possible electoral losses.

N. SADHASIVA REDDY,
Bengaluru

■ The decision is disappointing. With instances of EVM malfunction on the rise, increasing the number of verifications was the least that could have been done. The stock answer of spokespersons of the ruling party, 'that we should not hamper technological advancements and that we should have faith in the

Election Commission', is not convincing. It is baffling how increasing the number of VVPAT verifications holds back technological advancement. If anything, it will contribute to enhancing the credibility of the process. A few additional counting days is a small price to pay for an assurance of transparency.

RATHEESH CHANDRAN,
Thiruvalla, Kerala

■ I recollect what happened in Goa when EVMs and VVPATs faltered on polling day on April 23. One of the most precious rights – the right to vote in a free and fair election, free of fraud and intimidation – was denied to many voters. There was "bragging" for over a month earlier that meticulous steps had been taken to ensure that the election process would be flawless. On the contrary, voters went home frustrated and upset. The judiciary needs to step in and

find out how EVMs and VVPATs have weighed down the election process. If EVMs are not 100% secure, we should return to the ballot paper.

AIRES RODRIGUES,
Ribandar, Goa

The true poll picture

The general election of 2019 will go down in history as one of the most acrimonious ever; the name calling, unwarranted and uncharitable references to the dead, gross violations of the Model Code of Conduct are some examples which have been glossed over by an ineffective EC (Page 1, "PM's comments obscene: Cong", May 8). The desperation to win a decisive mandate is clearly manifest in the low-level diatribes, lies and half-truths being uttered by lead campaigners, unmindful of their stature and position. The EC, which woke up from its slumber, has then proceeded to hand

out "clean chits". With their partisan coverage, large sections of the media too have covered themselves with shame by failing to portray the correct picture of the election.

C.V. ARAVINDE,
Bengaluru

Afghan link

That Indian dairy giant Amul will be the official team sponsor of the Afghanistan cricket team at the upcoming ICC World Cup is a matter of pride. Amul is a symbol of rural uplift and empowerment and its association with the fastest growing cricket team is sure to give them a new life. History has it that Frontier Gandhi Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan visited Amul in 1969. Milk producers from Afghanistan have also made industrial visits to Amul.

M. PRADYU,
Kannur, Kerala

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A wake-up call on proprietary seeds

How India can shift its agriculture from a high-yield ideal to a high-value one



MRINALINI KOCHUPILLAI & GREGORY RADICK



"Where farmers could be using genetically distinctive seeds adapted to local conditions, they are adapting local conditions to use genetically standardised seeds, to ruinous effect." A farmer in Jammu. ■ REUTERS

When the news broke that PepsiCo was suing small farmers in India for growing a potato variety that is used in its Lay's chips, popular sympathies immediately went, of course, to the farmers. National and international pressure swiftly mounted, and in short order a humbled PepsiCo backtracked, announcing its withdrawal of the lawsuit. There was global schadenfreude at Goliath's PR disaster and, in India, pride at being on the side of the righteous Davids.

What should not be a source of pride, however, is the fact that so many small farmers are, like the ones targeted by PepsiCo, reliant, directly or indirectly, on proprietary seeds. Typically these seeds are grown in high input (fertilizer-pesticide-irrigation) environments that, over time, erode local biodiversity. Between the expense of buying these seeds and inputs, and the loss of the skills and social relationships needed to do otherwise (through the saving and exchange of seeds of indigenous varieties), small-scale farming looks set to continue on its downward spiral of lower income, status and dignity.

It's time for a paradigm shift

No one can blame farmers for thinking that proprietary seeds are better. Since the days of the Green Revolution, agricultural extension officers – the field representatives of agricultural modernity – have taught farmers to buy ever-higher-yielding seeds. Taking this science-and-industry-know-best stance on seed quality a little further, efforts have been ongoing, albeit unsuccessfully due to pressures from farmers and NGOs, to pass a new seed law in India permitting the sale of certified seeds only.

In the current Indian law regulating intellectual property rights in seeds, the Plant Variety Protection law, this same official preference for the proprietary takes a different form. The law permits farmers not only to save and resow (multiply) seeds, but also to sell them to other farmers, no matter what the original

source of the seeds is. This broad permission (called farmers' privilege) is considered indispensable for so-called seed sovereignty, which has become synonymous with permitting farmers to save, sow, multiply and use proprietary seeds, as well as proprietary vegetative propagation materials such as what are used for the cultivation of potatoes. Despite the shift away from seed replacement to the right to save seeds, the emphasis remains on proprietary seeds that have narrow, uniform and non-variable genetic builds. Where farmers could be using genetically distinctive seeds adapted to local conditions and farming traditions, they are instead adapting local conditions and traditions in order to use genetically standardised seeds, to ruinous effect.

It is time for a paradigm shift. To get a sense of what can be done, it may be useful to take a peep into recent regulatory efforts in Europe. The EU Regulation on Organic Production and Labelling of Organic Products, adopted in 2018, for the first time permits and encourages, inter alia, the use and marketing for organic agriculture, of "plant reproductive material of organic heterogeneous material" without having to comply with most of the arduous registration and certification requirements under various EU laws. Heterogeneous materials, unlike current proprietary seeds, need not be uniform or stable. Indeed, the regulation clearly acknowledges based on "Research in the Union on plant re-

productive material that does not fulfil the variety definition... that there could be benefits of using such diverse material... to reduce the spread of diseases, to improve resilience and to increase biodiversity." Accordingly, the regulation removes the legal bar on marketing of "heterogeneous materials" and encourages its sale for organic agriculture, thus clearing the way to much more extensive use of indigenous varieties.

Once the delegated acts under the EU regulation are formulated, they will support the creation of markets, especially markets and marketplaces facilitating trade of heterogeneous seeds, including by small farmers who are currently the most active in maintaining and improving such seeds in situ. Indeed, multimillion-Euro research and innovation projects being invited and funded by the EU already aim to make this diversity a more integral part of farming in Europe. And here they are talking only of the diversity within Europe.

Minimise harm, maximise gain

How can a biodiversity-rich nation like India shift its agriculture from a high-yield ideal to a high-value one, where the 'values' include striving to minimise environmental harm while maximising nutritional gains and farmer welfare?

First, small farmers must be educated and encouraged with proper incentive structures, to engage with agriculture that conserves and improves traditional/desi (heterogeneous) seeds in situ, rather than with

"improved", proprietary varieties. Currently, in the garb of protecting this diversity against biopiracy, India is preventing its effective use, management and monetisation for the benefit of its farmers.

Second, an immutable record-keeping system, perhaps blockchain or DLT, is needed to break the link between the profitable and the proprietary. Such a system would allow India and its rural communities to keep proper track of where and how their seeds/propagation materials and the genetic resources contained therein are being transferred and traded. It would also ensure, through smart-contract facilitated micropayments, that monetary returns come in from users and buyers of these seeds, from around the globe. These monetary returns would effectively incentivise continuous cultivation and improvement of indigenous seeds on the one hand, and ensure sustainable growth of agriculture and of rural communities on the other.

Third, and as a key pre-requisite to the execution of the first two plans, India's invaluable traditional ecological knowledge systems need to be revived and made a part of mainstream agricultural research, education and extension services. Know-how contained in ancient Indian treatises like the *Vrikshayurveda* and the *Krishhi Parashar* falls within the scope of what international conventions such as the Convention on Biological Diversity refer to as 'indigenous and traditional technologies'. The revival of these technologies is central to promoting sustainable 'high value' agriculture, not least because of the growing global demand for organic and Ayurvedic products.

The withdrawal of the lawsuit by PepsiCo may be a welcome relief to several farmers who can neither afford to defend themselves in court, nor to abandon the cultivation of proprietary varieties. It must, however, be a wake-up call to the government and policymakers who need to do much more to secure sustainable rural societies, protect soil health and promote seed sovereignty for the economic development of Indian farmers and of the entire nation.

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The anatomy of a marginalised region

With a high percentage of Muslims, Bihar's Seemanchal region frames issues of representation and welfare



SHAHANA MUNAZIR

In the ongoing general election, Seemanchal, a historically neglected and yet socially and politically significant region in Bihar, has once again registered a high voting percentage. Comprising four districts – Purnea, Katihar, Kishanganj and Araria – Seemanchal has a population of about 1 crore. It assumes sociopolitical significance owing to the large proportion of Muslims in its population. On average, these districts have 47% Muslims as against Bihar's Statewide average of 17% and the all-India average of 14%. In this election, of the nine Muslim candidates who have been chosen by different parties in Bihar, five are contesting from constituencies in Seemanchal. The region is a fertile ground for political parties that pit Hindus against Muslims.

Continued neglect

It may have political and symbolic value, but Seemanchal fares poorly on welfare indices. It is an example of political apathy towards the minorities. According to Census data, the average literacy rate of the four districts is 54% as against Bihar's average of 64%. The average per capita district GDP of the region is ₹10,000, while it is ₹14,574 for the State. In districts with a higher density of Muslims, the situation is worse. For example, in Kishanganj, with a 68% Muslim population, nearly 50% live below the poverty line.

The socioeconomic indicators may be woeful, but there has been remarkable enthusiasm in electoral participation, seen in the last six general elections. This year, Seemanchal saw a voter turnout of 64.8%, which was much higher than Bihar's average of 58.6%. In the last five general elections, the average voter turnout in Seemanchal was around five percentage points more than the average turnout for the State. Clearly, the voters in the region care about exercising their franchise. They believe that their electoral participation can make a difference to their dismal socioeconomic situation. But why is an electorate with such a dominating presence helpless in this region? What explains their continued neglect despite having elected influential leaders in the past, such as M.J. Akbar, Tariq Anwar and Pappu Yadav?

Both Muslim vote bank politics and the

political ghettoisation of Muslims have given rise to identity politics in Bihar. In recent years, polarisation has demonstrated that a party can secure majority votes without accommodating Muslims. Such political non-mobilisation of Muslims has resulted in two things. One, it has led to the idea that Muslims are a homogenised community who root their politics in religion. Two, it has led to Muslims relegating themselves to the background of active politics.

A welfarist agenda

This should stop with Seemanchal. Despite constituting a high percentage of the voting population in the region, Muslims have not been able to assert themselves. As a result, parties have used them as bait to get parachute candidates elected. These candidates secure votes in the name of protecting a misunderstood and universal idea of 'Muslim identity' and not to improve their welfare in the region. For example, Asaduddin Owaisi's All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) contested in the region in the 2015 Assembly election, but it failed to win even a single seat. Yet, again the AIMIM has pinned its hopes on Akhtarul Iman from Kishanganj this time. These Muslim parties have failed to gain a stronghold in the region because Muslim voters have opted for a welfarist agenda and not one that is centred on their religious identity alone.

Further, even within the Muslim community, there is marginalisation of backward Muslims such as the Pasmandas who are represented not by their own but by the upper caste Ashrafs. Since the 1990s, the assertion of rights by groups such as the Pasmanda Muslims paved the way for inclusivism and social justice. In this context, Seemanchal can be a fertile ground for the emergence of rights-based politics. The struggle of Pasmandas and their under-representation in politics have been largely ignored. In Seemanchal, though Pasmandas constitute two-thirds of the Muslim population, there is no Pasmanda candidate for the elections. Late-ly, Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and the BJP have espoused concerns about backward and Dalit Muslims, but more in rhetoric than in action.

Contrary to popular perception, Muslims do not always prefer en bloc voting along religious lines. In Seemanchal, specifically, they are divided by caste, class and language, and vote for leaders they think will address their deprivations. It is high time our concerns move beyond politics and religion.

Shahana Munazir is a Delhi-based scholar

SINGLE FILE

Taking tensions seriously

A true strategic partnership between India and the U.S. remains elusive

MICHAEL KUGELMAN



The U.S.'s decision to not extend Iran sanctions waivers, including the one provided to India, has notable implications for India-U.S. relations, given the importance of New Delhi's energy relationship with Tehran. It comes on the heels of many other deleterious developments for bilateral ties

including the U.S.'s decision to withdraw GSP benefits for Indian exports (in retaliation for Indian tariffs that the U.S. deemed to be prohibitively high) and the Trump administration's discontent deepening over India's policies on e-commerce, intellectual property rights and data localisation.

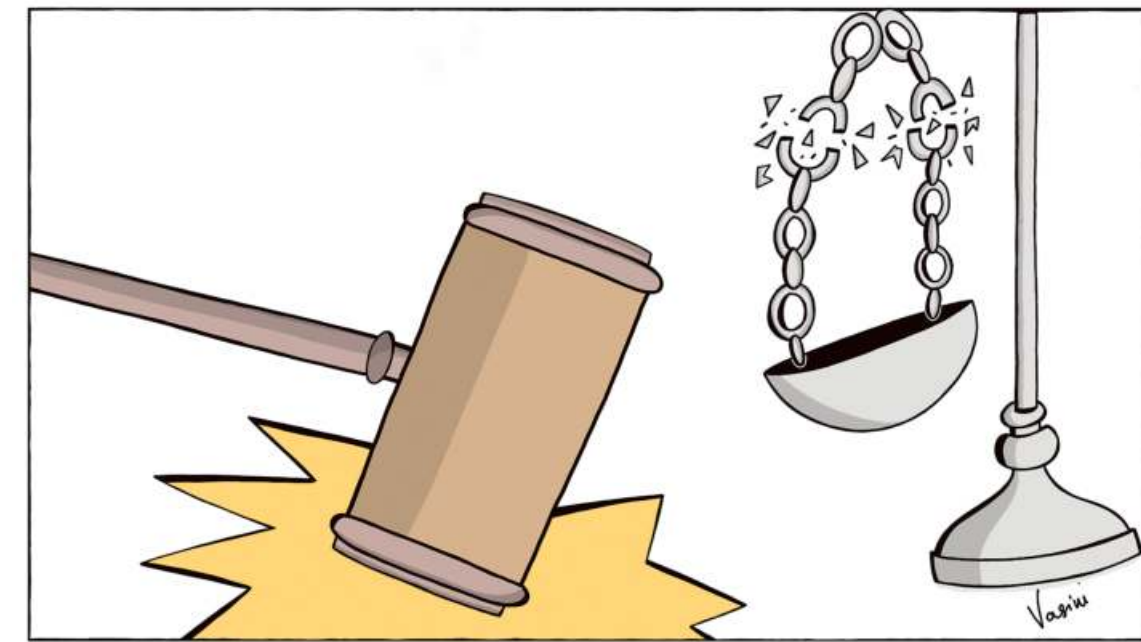
These India-U.S. trade and economic tensions aren't new; the non-security dimension of the relationship has long lagged behind the fast-growing defence side. Still, the complaints and perceived grievances, especially from the U.S., have seemingly intensified in the Trump era.

Both sides have played down these differences and offered reassuring data points: India will scale up oil imports from other top producers; the GSP withdrawal will have minimal impact on India's economy; the two capitals are working actively on high levels, most recently through the U.S.-India CEO Forum and the India-U.S. Commercial Dialogue, to ease tensions; and above all the strength of the bilateral relationship can easily withstand all these headaches.

This is all true. But let's be clear. A full-fledged strategic partnership, which both countries endorse, will be difficult to achieve amid such multiple and long-standing disconnects on the trade and economic side. Indeed, if bilateral ties are largely driven by technology transfers, arms sales, joint exercises, and foundational agreements on defence, this amounts to a deep but one-sided security relationship, and not a robust and multifaceted strategic partnership.

To be sure, India-U.S. relations extend well beyond security. Recent joint statements have dwelt on the potential for cooperation on initiatives ranging from clean energy to innovation. And despite the problems, bilateral trade in goods and services has increased over the last decade. Still, so long as the non-security nuisances affect the bilateral relationship, the shift from a strong security relationship to a bonafide strategic partnership will be difficult. After all, one rarely hears complaints or concerns about trade and economic matters in the U.S.'s relations with the U.K., Australia, or Israel, some of its other strategic partners. The U.S. and India have long struggled to agree on what a strategic partnership should look like. Still, no matter how it is defined, any strategic partnership must be broad-based, with trust and cooperation present across a wide spectrum of issues and not just limited to close collaborations in the guns-and-bombs category. In this regard, a true strategic partnership remains, at least for now, elusive between India and the U.S.

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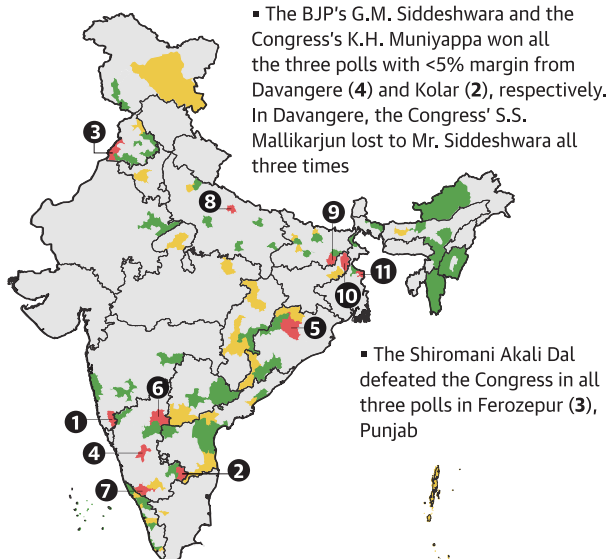
DATA POINT

Cliffhanger seats

In 2014, 96 Lok Sabha seats had a win margin of less than (<) 5%. Of the 96, in 32 seats, the win margin was <5% in 2009 too. Of those 32, in 11 seats, the win margin was <5% in 2004 too. The southern States, especially Karnataka, saw a high share of these close calls. By **The Hindu data team**

Mapping the thrillers

Seats in red saw a win margin of <5% in 2014, 2009 and 2004. Seats in yellow saw a <5% win margin in 2014 and 2009 but not in 2004. Seats in green saw a <5% win margin in 2014 but not in 2009 (the win margin of these seats in 2004 was not considered for analysis)



- 1) Kolhapur, Maharashtra 5) Sambalpur, Odisha 6) Raichur, Karnataka
7) Mysuru, Karnataka 8) Sitapur, Uttar Pradesh 9) Banka, Bihar
10) Rajmahal, Jharkhand 11) Murshidabad, West Bengal

* Data sourced from Richie Lionell who works at Gramener Inc

On the fence

The table lists the seats where win margins were less than 5% in the last three elections. For instance, in A.P., a win margin of <5% was seen in 15 seats in 2014. In 6 of those, the win margin was <5% in 2009 as well. This was not the case in 2004 in those seats

State	Seats with <5% winning margin			
	2014	Only 2014	'09 & '04	2014, '09 & '04
A.P.	15	9	6	0
Karnataka	8	3	1	4
Kerala	13	8	5	0
T.N.	1	0	1	0
U.P.	7	5	1	1
J&K	5	1	3	1
Punjab	6	4	1	1
Haryana	1	0	1	0
Arunachal	1	1	0	0
Assam	4	3	1	0
Manipur	1	1	0	0
Mizoram	1	1	0	0
Maharashtra	4	3	0	1
Rajasthan	2	2	0	0
M.P.	2	0	2	0
Chhattisgarh	4	1	3	0
W.B.	4	3	0	1
Odisha	5	2	2	1
Bihar	9	5	3	1
Total	96	53	32	11

FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO MAY 9, 1969

Russia may give more aid to India

The Defence and Foreign Affairs Committees of the Union Cabinet will meet soon to assess the wider political and military implications of the current Soviet approach to Indo-Pakistan and Sino-Indian problems as enunciated by the Soviet Premier, Mr. Kosygin, in his talks with Mrs. Indira Gandhi here [New Delhi] this week. Mr. Kosygin is reported to have stressed once again that, while the Soviet Union did not foresee the possibility of another Indo-Pakistan conflict, it was not ruling out the danger of renewed Sino-Indian border clashes so long as China persisted in its militant policy of territorial claims backed by threats of force. The Soviet Defence Minister, Marshal Grechko, said the same thing during his recent visit to India which coincided with the Sino-Soviet border incidents in the Ussuri river region. He, too, had emphasised the need for continued vigilance on India's northern borders to meet the Chinese threat.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MAY 9, 1919.

The Malabar Conference.

(From an Editorial)

The addresses delivered and the Resolutions passed at the fourth session of the Malabar District Conference point as much to the fact that such functions may be conducted with success and in a satisfactory manner in spite of some differences of opinion on the part of some of the leaders as to the real trend of public opinion in the country. The Chairman of the Reception Committee, a leader of the aristocracy, as well as the President of the Conference laid emphasis on the pernicious manner in which the Rowlatt blunder has been committed, its possible consequences in the light of our experience of the way in which executive discretion, wherever allowed, has been exercised, the need for the reversal of the present repressive policy and its replacement by a liberal one.

POLL CALL

Model Code of Conduct

The Model Code of Conduct refers to a set of norms laid down by the Election Commission with the consensus of political parties in order to ensure free and fair elections. Parties and candidates are expected to follow the model code in their election manifestos, speeches and general conduct. The model code is not statutory. It comes into force on the announcement of the poll schedule and remains operational till the election process is concluded. In case parties/ candidates violate the model code by making hate speeches, intimidating voters, providing inducements to voters, etc., the Election Commission is expected to take action against them.

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