

10 IDEA EXCHANGE

NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

We travelled across Bengal, both clockwise and anti-clockwise. So we were able to take two rounds of a district in one cycle in two months. This led to large-scale mobilisation, workers gained confidence”



WHY KAILASH VIJAYVARGIYA

Since winning two seats in West Bengal in the 2014 Lok Sabha polls, the BJP has been working to increase its footprint in the state. Kailash Vijayvargiya was appointed the party’s state in-charge four years ago and has since been travelling across Bengal to strengthen the BJP’s organisation on the ground. In the general elections this year,

the BJP emerged as the main challenger to the Trinamool, and won 18 of the state’s 42 seats. The party’s vote share also increased to 40.25 per cent from 16.8 per cent in 2014. Vijayvargiya, who was appointed national general secretary in 2015, was also in charge of Haryana polls, and has served as a minister in the Madhya Pradesh government



“If there is a BJP government in Bengal, we will conduct the NRC drive. Over a crore intruders will be identified. These people are taking away the resources and jobs of Bengal’s people”

LIZ MATHEW: What were some of the challenges that you faced in Bengal?

After three decades of Left rule, Mamata Banerjee rose to power in Bengal after a big struggle. People expected things to change, they wanted democracy to be reinstated, they wanted an end to dictatorship and violence, they wanted peace and development... Unfortunately, nothing changed. An era of atrocities and murders began. At first, Congress workers were killed, then BJP and CPM workers. In the last four-and-a-half years that I have been the BJP in-charge of the state, 103 BJP workers have been killed, including a few after the election results were announced.

There is ‘syndicate raj’ in the state. While the government runs the state, syndicates control the districts. People affiliated to the ruling party in the state are part of this syndicate. One cannot even build a house in Bengal without the involvement of the syndicate.

There was an apprehension among people about which way to go, especially since the Congress doesn’t have any presence there and the Left is almost over. When I was made in-charge, our party president Amit Shahji told me that two states, Kerala and West Bengal, were tough to win and that I should take charge of West Bengal. When I first went to Bengal, I thought it would take us at least 15 years to be in a position to challenge the ruling party. After doing a tour of the state twice, I met the party president again. He said, ‘I have sent you for five years, not 15. I am standing behind you, just tell me what you need.’ Then, I got a flat in Bengal and began to visit districts to understand the problems of the people. I, along with Suresh Pujari, a party worker from Odisha, and Shiv Prakashji, our national sangathan mantri, travelled across the length and breadth of the state, both clockwise and anti-clockwise. By doing so, we were able to take two rounds of a district in one cycle within two-to-two-and-a-half months. This led to large-scale mobilisation and our party workers gained confidence.

Subsequently, attacks on our workers also increased. No one was spared. Even the Trinamool and the syndicate in the state have two-three different groups. They fought amongst themselves, and in the last three years of Mamataji’s tenure, 65 Trinamool workers have been murdered by fellow workers. I think West Bengal is the only state where workers of the ruling party kill each other, and then blame the Opposition. More than 150 BJP workers, who haven’t even killed a mosquito, have been booked under Section 302 (murder).

Amid all these atrocities by the ruling party, it was an uphill task to strengthen our party base in the state. I think it is because of the leadership of the Prime Minister, political strategies of our party chief, and our efforts on the ground that we have been able to build and strengthen our network in every district of Bengal. We kept a low profile, didn’t do any publicity and just worked to strengthen the organisation.

Everyone thought since we had two (Lok Sabha) seats in Bengal, we would probably get four to six seats this time. I had set a target of 25 seats. People would laugh at it. But I told everyone it will be an astonishing result. We would have won 25 seats had there not been violence during the elections, because of which many people did not step out to vote. But even then, the people helped us win 18 seats.

LIZ MATHEW: Why were you chosen to handle the elections in Bengal?

You should ask Amit Shahji that (laughs). I think I have the most amount of experience among all party general secretaries. I have been a councillor, a mayor and an MLA for six terms. Besides, I have seen violence very closely. In the ‘80s and ‘90s, Indore had many textile mills and trade unions. My father was a mill worker there. I lived in the *mazdoor basti* (workers’ colony). I have seen fights closely... In those days firearms or explosives were not as common, it was mostly swords and sticks. Amitbhai knew all about me and so he probably thought I could work in Bengal as I have seen it all.

RAVISH TIWARI: Your opponents say communal politics has helped your performance in Bengal.

We are not responsible for the situation in Bengal; Mamataji is. When I went to Kolkata for the first time, I saw big hoardings of people offering namaaz in the Salt Lake area. When I looked closely, I realised that the hoardings had Mamataji’s face on them. I was told that she often visited the area and offered namaaz. I have never seen a Hindu leader offer namaaz like this anywhere in the country. There is always a reaction when things are stretched too far.

Durga Puja is the biggest festival in Bengal. When a Durga *visarjan* procession

‘Shattered belief that TMC can’t be defeated... When we create that mood in Kerala, BJP will win’

BJP’s general secretary in charge of West Bengal, Kailash Vijayvargiya, says Bengal’s vote for the party was a “reaction” to the violence in the state, claims BJP got not just Left’s, but also TMC and Congress votes, and talks about “change of demography” in Bengal districts



BJP’s national general secretary Kailash Vijayvargiya with Associate Editor Liz Mathew in *The Indian Express* newsroom. Abhinav Saha

is stopped because of Muharram, it will evoke a reaction. People had to go to the court and get permission for the procession. This also led to more than 10,000 people assembling at Durga Puja pandals, which otherwise would not have had more than a thousand people. That reaction was not ours, it was the people’s reaction.

(In 2016), the police station in Kaliachak area of Malda district was torched. Most of the Hindu families there were thrown out of the area. None of the media houses initially reported the incident, till a senior reporter from a big television channel went to cover the incident. That story showed how AK-47 rifles were used in the violence, and how so many people had to leave.

Therefore, despite the fact that we did not have workers to assist us in the election process, people still voted for us. This shows their sentiment towards the ruling party. In villages, despite bomb blasts at night, women gathered to vote in the morning. They called police and voted under their protection. It was all a reaction. Not a single BJP worker was involved in any of it (the violence). So, when they say that we did it (communal politics)... we did not. We might have benefited from it, but we are not responsible for it. The responsibility lies with the state government.

LIZ MATHEW: You say that there is fear among the people in the state. In that case, why didn’t all the Hindu votes come to your party?

That is why I am saying that the allegation that there was polarisation is baseless. Had that been the case, we would have got all the Hindu votes. We did not polarise. We put forward Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s face and spoke about jobs for the youth, women empowerment, quality education and healthcare services... That is why we did not get 100 per cent of the Hindu votes.

ABANTIKA GHOSH: Did the Vidyasagar College incident harm the BJP in the seventh phase of the polls?

It is a matter of research for us. There were nine Lok Sabha seats (in the phase) and they were all very difficult for us. The Trinamool has more influence in the region, and above that, there was *gundagardi* (hooliganism).

RAVISH TIWARI: In the Lok Sabha elections, you sought votes in Narendra Modi’s name. The BJP does

not have a face in Bengal. Will that affect the results in the state polls?

Before the Assembly election, there is the local body election. We might only get 10 per cent of the votes in the local body election. It is not an election. The state election commissioner, the police, the Trinamool and its goons, together fight the local body elections. You must have seen the last panchayat elections. The situation there is very bad. The demographic of eight districts has changed entirely. When we visited some villages in these parts, it appeared that we were not in our country. To save Bengal, it is necessary to stop the entry of infiltrators and illegal operations.

KRISHN KAUSHIK: You claim that you don’t polarise, but then you say that certain areas in Bengal don’t look like our country. Your party didn’t give tickets to Muslims, you don’t talk about Muslim voters...

We had Muslim candidates. Our candidate came second in Murshidabad. We have also received Muslim votes. I never said that we didn’t receive Muslim votes. We have got Muslim votes, though less in numbers, but we have got them.

ABANTIKA GHOSH: In its campaign, the BJP spoke out against dynasts. But now you have Arjun Singh and his son, Mukul Roy and his son, in the party.

We had no other option. We had no candidate from Arjun Singh’s constituency (Barrackpore). I am not ashamed to say that Arjun Singh is very powerful there and our

party didn’t have a *sangathan* in the region. We made our party’s office in his area, but his men captured it. We still had the office but with their party flag. (Arjun Singh defected from the Trinamool to the BJP in March.) In a democracy, the end result of an election is not a gold, silver or bronze medal. You either win or lose. In order to win, you need a good candidate.

LIZ MATHEW: Did you get all the CPM cadre votes in Bengal?

Remember the slogan Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave: ‘*Chup chap, kamal chaap*’ (Quietly vote for the lotus). It is interesting to see how intelligent the voters have become. In villages, people knew they wouldn’t be allowed to vote if they said they wanted to vote for the BJP. So they put on the Trinamool’s tag and went to vote. But, at the polling booth, they secretly pressed the lotus button (the BJP’s party symbol). The political violence and undemocratic activities are causing problems for the Trinamool in the state. We have got the Trinamool’s votes. We have also received the Congress’s and the CPM’s votes.

RAVISH TIWARI: On one hand you say that Muslims voted for you, on the other you claim that in certain parts of the state, which have a larger Muslim population, it doesn’t feel like your own country. These are contrary viewpoints.

When we talked to the people there, it felt like this was not a part of our country. Their behaviour, mannerisms, implied that

they are not a part of this country.

VANDITA MISHRA: What kind of behaviour?

If you go to any part of the country, people have a welcoming attitude. In any village, if you ask people for directions, they will first ask you if you have had any food or water. This is the culture of our country, *atithi devo bhava* (the guest is god). But when we went to some of the places in Bengal, it felt like we were a burden on them. It’s a mindset. I go to a lot of Muslim areas where I get a lot of love from the people. I attend many Muslim events in Indore. I have also got Muslim votes in Indore. It’s not like we don’t go to Muslim areas, but in that particular area, we felt unwelcome.

RAVISH TIWARI: You have worked in Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and now West Bengal for the BJP. The political violence aside, what difference do you see in the politics of these states?

In Uttar Pradesh, there is a politician in every second house. If you talk to a Jat in UP, he will tell you the entire history of the community. A Yadav will tell you how they have been oppressed for ages. The voter in UP is very politically aware. Haryana’s voters are the most honest. I went to Haryana for an event of transporters. They gave me buttermilk and looked after me well. When I asked them whether they will vote for the BJP, they said we are Chautala’s men (laughs). I have never met such honest people anywhere else in the country. In West Bengal, people read a lot of newspapers. They read and they think. It is tough to talk to a Bengali because they don’t open up easily. They are very proud of their culture and language and are very emotional. Women in West Bengal are very concerned about their children’s education and how the quality of education is falling.

RAVISH TIWARI: Why did the BJP lose the Madhya Pradesh polls?

There are two reasons. Firstly, we were in power in the state for 15 years. In this time period, we built roads and infrastructure. We had nothing new to show this time. Someone who was four-five years old when we started in Madhya Pradesh, could now vote. He didn’t know what the BJP had done in these 15 years. Rahul Gandhi said he will waive off farm loans in eight days, but nothing happened. He said he will give pension to the unemployed. No money

was given. The Lok Sabha results were an answer to this politics of cheating.

ABANTIKA GHOSH: Ram Navami celebrations are now held with much more fervour in Bengal. Some Bengalis have stopped eating non-vegetarian food on Tuesdays because they worship Hanuman. People from West Bengal have always been Durga worshippers. How did this happen and how did it affect the voting?

Every action has a reaction. Ram Navami and Hanuman Jayanti were not celebrated in West Bengal till four years ago. The celebrations were curbed. Children who wore Hanuman costumes and went around with *gadas* (maces) were slapped with cases under the Arms Act. People holding Ram Navami processions without permission were thrown into jails. So there was a reaction from society. If people said *Jai Shri Ram*, they were slapped and arrested. (In these elections), a whole village voted while chanting *Jai Shri Ram*. This is Newton’s law, every action has an equal and opposite reaction.

ANANT GOENKA: How do you think the social fabric of Bengal will change in the next 10 years?

If there is a BJP government, we will conduct the National Register of Citizens drive. Over a crore intruders will be identified. These people are taking away the resources and jobs of Bengal’s people. Strict action will be taken against them.

ANANT GOENKA: And if Mamata Banerjee continues to be CM, how will the Centre-state relations play out?


The Prime Minister recently said that we are with the people who trusted us, and those who didn’t, we will strive to win their trust. We go by his motto of ‘*Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas*’. The PM called Mamataji after the cyclone, she didn’t pick up his call and then said that she doesn’t consider him the Prime Minister. That’s her prerogative. The PM did his duty.

KRISHN KAUSHIK: Why didn’t the BJP perform well in Kerala?

We have shattered the belief that the Trinamool cannot be defeated. Once that happens in Kerala, when people start believing that the BJP can win, we will get their votes. We haven’t been able to create that environment in the state yet. The day it is created, the BJP will win in Kerala too.



ACROSS THE AISLE



P CHIDAMBARAM

The key idea — and the one that will be most disruptive — is decentralisation. The short-term results may be unsatisfactory but in the medium to long term, better governed states will deliver better outcomes than at present and that will make the people demand better governance at the state level. Areas that will immensely benefit from decentralisation are primary and secondary healthcare, drinking water, sanitation, renewable energy, distribution of electricity, etc

How it can be sabka vikas

AN OVERwhelming mandate is not always a blessing, a weakened Opposition makes governance more onerous and a successive second term deprives the rulers of any excuse. I am sure Prime Minister Narendra Modi is fully aware of the enormous expectations of the people and the huge burden placed on his Council of Ministers. Observing his first term, I am certain he will make every effort to rise to the challenge. There are two problems in the way. The first is the time-honoured way of doing things in India. The second is the competing claims of different sections of the people in which, invariably, the voices of the poorest, the weakest, the most deprived and the exploited are drowned. Our experience has been that at the end of the term (1) the time-honoured ways have only accumulated more time and honour and (2) the poorest, weakest, deprived and exploited remain poor, weak, deprived and exploited.

TIME-TESTED & FAILED

In his second term, Mr Modi must start by dismantling the time-honoured ways. Mr Arvind Panagariya, a friend of Mr Modi, and Mr Venkatesh Kumar (a professor at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences) have described those ways as follows:

'A key element in his (Mr Modi's) governance model was the appointment of a number of groups of secretaries with each group assigned the task of preparing presentations on projects, programmes and

policies to be implemented the following year in key sectors of the economy... Once finalized, these presentations became the road maps of the following year for the major sectors.'

Then, the authors caution:

'But when it comes to radical reforms, this approach has a downside. By nature, bureaucrats are cautious and lean heavily in favour of projects and programmes. Even when they propose policy changes, they are piecemeal and rarely go beyond tinkering.'

I agree with them entirely. However, I do not agree with their alternative method. Examined closely, it is no different. In the alternative model, the Mission Head will replace the minister, the Adviser will replace the secretary and young professionals will replace the joint secretary and her team!

DISRUPTION IS THE KEY

The results will be no different than the outcomes of Swachh Bharat and Ujjwala. In the case of Swachh Bharat, the bitter truth is no large state of India (except Gujarat) has been declared Open Defecation Free. What percentage of the toilets that were built are unused or unusable? In the case of Ujjwala, the proof of success or failure is the average number of replacement cylinders purchased by a beneficiary in a year: is it a disappointing 3 or an optimum 8? You know the answers as well as I do.

Radical reforms can be effected only through radical policies and disruption.

In 1991-96, we made a bonfire of the Red Book and foreign trade was radically transformed. We threw away the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act and foreign exchange reserves soared. We scrapped industrial licensing and a new generation of entrepreneurs emerged. Mr Modi must try something like that in education, healthcare, and rural roads and transport. In school education he could borrow from the Congress manifesto and transfer the subject to the State List, give money to the states and set them free to innovate and compete. The people will demand results from their state government and, in course of time, get results.

The key idea — and the one that will be most disruptive — is decentralisation. The short-term results may be unsatisfactory but in the medium to long term, better governed states will deliver better outcomes than at present and that will make the people demand better governance at the state level. Areas that will immensely benefit from decentralisation are primary and secondary healthcare, drinking water, sanitation, renewable energy, distribution of electricity, etc.

RECALL DR SUBRAMANIAN


The second formidable challenge is the 'poorest of the poor'. Since they are the poorest, they are also at the bottom of the ladder in literacy, health indicators, housing, sanitation, consumption of food and water, and access to public

goods and services. In a village, you will find them on the edges of the village. In poorer states, you will find whole villages populated by them. Let's admit it, under successive governments, the development process has by-passed the poorest 20 per cent of India. Ministers and officials who visit villages, and programmes, stop — or are stopped — at the main street. The only way to reach the poorest is help them help themselves: start the fire of aspiration, let it rage in their hearts and homes, let them break out of the grip of poverty and lift themselves up. PM-KISAN will not help them because very few own a patch of land, most are agricultural labour or other labour, and a significant number lives in towns and cities. The disruptive policy change will be a basic income through direct transfer of money. Mr Modi can attribute the idea to Dr Arvind Subramanian and recall him to head a department to design and implement the scheme.

Not much will change if we trudge along at 6-7 per cent rate of annual growth. Nothing will change if we tweak current policies or tinker with administrative systems. More damage will be done by vesting officials with extraordinary powers or threatening people with prosecution and imprisonment. The single most effective instrument of transformative change is empowering the people and placing faith in their wisdom, industry and capacity.

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INSIDE TRACK



COOMI KAPOOR

ADVANI SYNDROME

THE IMPORTANCE of Amit Shah, not just in party affairs but also in government, was evident even before he was formally sworn in as a minister. Ever since the poll results, Shah has been continuously by Narendra Modi's side, whether in Delhi, Varanasi or Ahmedabad. Before the swearing-in, the Prime Minister and Shah spent marathon sessions confabulating over the names for the Cabinet. Shah wanted a Cabinet post to demonstrate his administrative capabilities. He wants to be perceived as not just a wizard organisation man, but as Modi's eventual successor. This is similar to the LK Advani syndrome, where for years Advani was the backroom boy and Atal Bihari Vajpayee the face of the BJP. Finally, Advani decided he wanted to share the glory of the centrestage. Despite being Home Minister, Shah is expected to continue to devote considerable time to party affairs, particularly with Maharashtra and Haryana Assembly elections due shortly.

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FINANCIAL ASSET

Nirmala Sitharaman was selected to head the Finance Ministry since, apart from some familiarity with the ministry, Modi wanted a person he considered not close to any business lobby. Earlier, Arun Jaitley, Sitharaman's mentor, was one of the few who fitted the bill. The ministry controls all the powerful economic regulatory bodies. A scholarly understanding of finance is not essential since, in the Modi regime, senior officials and technocrats, selected and vetted by the PMO, play an important role in key ministries.

PEACOCK COLOURS

At the 2014 swearing-in, Smriti Irani stood out in terms of sartorial style for her bright red, yellow and black sari emblazoned with huge lotuses. This time the male ministers stole the limelight. Many wore Modi jackets featuring all the colours of the rainbow, including jaundice yellow, shocking pink, sky blue and bottle green. A few like Modi, Shah and Rajnath Singh settled for more formal greys and browns. Women ministers Nirmala Sitharaman and Harsimrat Kaur Badal wore pastel pinks. Smriti was dressed in a smart and subdued orange ikkat silk.

OUT OF MY MIND



MEGHNAD DESAI

Dear Rahul Gandhi,

You may not recall but I wrote you an open letter in this column some months ago. I requested you then to give up your presidency. I said that would be your greatest sacrifice for the nation and a credit for the family known for many such sacrifices since the days of your great great grandfather Motilal Nehru.

Many will tell you to desist. They will cry

MAMATA'S RETREAT

For three days after the election results, Mamata Banerjee remained shut at her Kalighat residence. She spent her time reading, playing music on a keyboard and introspecting. A string of Trinamool members close to her, including Indranil Sen, Dola Sen and Indrani Halder, could not get an audience. Her nephew Abhishek Banerjee was one of the few permitted entry, but after 10 pm. By Monday though, Banerjee was back at office, intent to fight fiercely for her turf. Her strategy is focusing on Bengali pride and painting the BJP as outsiders. Party members are too timid to tell her that her habit of getting out of her car and screaming at bystanders shouting *Jai Shri Ram* lost her votes, since the videos went viral.

DOUBLE TROUBLE

The poll defeats have exacerbated trouble in both H D Deve Gowda and Lalu Prasad's families. Only Gowda's grandson Prajwal Revanna won, since he was gifted his grandfather's pocketborough of Hassan. Gowda himself and his other grandson, Nikhil Kumaraswamy, son of Chief Minister H D Kumaraswamy, lost. A Karnataka periodical claimed that a drunk Nikhil berated his 86-year-old grandfather charging that the family had let him down. The Karnataka Police registered an FIR against the periodical. Prajwal, meanwhile, offered to resign to accommodate his grandfather, but Gowda declined.


In Bihar, many RJD leaders blame the feud between Lalu's sons Tej Pratap Yadav and Tejashwi Yadav for the party's disastrous showing. The RJD did not win a single seat. Even Patliputra where Lalu's daughter Misa Bharti was the candidate and Saran, Lalu's old constituency, from where Tej Pratap's estranged father-in-law Chandrika Rai stood, were lost. Small wonder that Lalu convalescing in a Ranchi hospital refused to eat for two days after the results. Tej Pratap's post-defeat letter backing his brother for party leadership was too little too late.

MASTER OF GAME

No one can doubt Amit Shah's abilities as a master campaign strategist. Shah knew exactly which disgruntled elements from opposing camps to cultivate and which to ignore. For instance, Mukul Roy was propped up since Shah was aware that Roy had intimate knowledge of the Trinamool's organisation and its money and muscle power. In UP, through intermediaries he encouraged the Samajwadi Party's key organisation man, Shivalpal Yadav, to float a separate party. Shivalpal damaged the SP in half a dozen seats. Similarly, the Prakash Ambedkar and Asaduddin Owaisi alliance in Maharashtra lost the Congress-NCP several seats.

Why Left lost

GAINED IN TRANSLATION



J DEVIKA

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THE CPM leadership's assessment of the UDF victory in the general elections has been largely dismissive. They claim that it is temporary though unexpected; they believe that the position they took on the entry of menstruating women into Sabarimala resulted in a backlash that cost them votes. They point out that even their supporters chose to vote for the UDF in the hope that a resurgent Congress may take on the BJP more forcefully at the Centre.

I cannot help but think that the CPM leadership is capable of seeing only conservative Malayali Hindus when they think of 'people' misled by them. This is, of course, not the case. Almost every other substantial issue raised against them in the name of the 'people' was raised not by the conservative Hindus but by sections of the critical public who, despite all their criticism, do not wish the end of the mainstream Left. That the Left cannot see them even in these trying times is saddening. If the *savarna* party apparatchiks continue to believe that these voices can all be ignored because there is no alternative, they are mistaken.

I wish to make four observations about the CPM leadership's inability to see this.

First, did the minorities vote for the UDF because it offered them a semblance of protection, or created such an impression? The latter was surely not evident during the campaign. But then, was the mainstream Left any better? 2017 is not distant — and the echoes of the Hadiya case have not yet died down. In this atrocious violation of an Indian citizen's fundamental rights, Hadiya Ashokan was stripped of her rights by the judiciary and placed in confinement by her father, aided and abetted by Hindutva elements. Hadiya lived in a panchayat ruled by the LDF; the MLA and MP of the district were from the LDF. All this was to no avail, as the mainstream Left indulged in the most shocking Islamophobic indifference to her plight. The matter dragged on, allowing the most vicious and venomous diatribes to poison public debate.

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CONGRESS VICTORY IN THE POLLS. BUT WHY IS IT THAT THEY DID NOT FEEL THE PRESENCE OF THE CPM AT THE CENTRE WAS VITAL TO MAKING THE CONGRESS STICK TO A SECULAR LINE? IT IS IMPORTANT TO RECOGNISE THAT YOU CAN'T BE ISLAMOPHOBIC IN 2017 AND THEN HOPE TO MAKE UP FOR IT BY TRYING TO HOLD OFF RITUAL-OBSSESSED CONSERVATIVE HINDUS IN 2018.

Secondly, in those seats in which the Hindutva candidates seemed to have a chance, and in others where the CPM's candidates were complete disappointments, CPM supporters openly voted for the UDF — there was anger about the CPM candidate selection which the leadership ignored. What most supporters desired was an alliance between all forces that value the Constitution, which could take on the Hindutva assault. Since this was impossible because of pig-headedness on both sides, supporters chose the next best option. Instead of blaming voters, the CPM ought to be less combative and be more open to convivial exchanges between different faiths, and the revival of a strong anti-caste imagination of the Hindu community through Sreenarayana's thought.

Thirdly, the failings of the CPM leadership's handling of the Sabarimala controversy have to be acknowledged. There are whispers that the CM's folly was to listen to the feminists. Now, that is an exaggeration — leave alone the present, there is little in the past that indicates that women are taken seriously by the CPM leadership! At the start of the Hindutva madness over Sabarimala, many feminists had indicated that this was not an issue prioritised by them in Kerala, and that the wise thing would be to cool the growing frenzy by ori-

Illustration: C R Sasikumar

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Secondly, in those seats in which the Hindutva candidates seemed to have a chance, and in others where the CPM's candidates were complete disappointments, CPM supporters openly voted for the UDF — there was anger about the CPM candidate selection which the leadership ignored. What most supporters desired was an alliance between all forces that value the Constitution, which could take on the Hindutva assault. Since this was impossible because of pig-headedness on both sides, supporters chose the next best option. Instead of blaming voters, the CPM ought to be less combative and be more open to convivial exchanges between different faiths, and the revival of a strong anti-caste imagination of the Hindu community through Sreenarayana's thought.

Thirdly, the failings of the CPM leadership's handling of the Sabarimala controversy have to be acknowledged. There are whispers that the CM's folly was to listen to the feminists. Now, that is an exaggeration — leave alone the present, there is little in the past that indicates that women are taken seriously by the CPM leadership! At the start of the Hindutva madness over Sabarimala, many feminists had indicated that this was not an issue prioritised by them in Kerala, and that the wise thing would be to cool the growing frenzy by ori-

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FIFTH COLUMN



TAVLEEN SINGH

Advice for the Congress

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NEVER DID I think that a day would come when I would hope the Congress party regains some of its former glory. There are reasons why I do not like the Congress. I got my first job as a reporter a month before Mrs Gandhi declared the Emergency and enforced the most brutal press censorship. I was witness to how she used the suspension of democracy to hand the Congress party and the Government of India to her younger son. He had never even contested an election. In my view Mrs Gandhi's 'socialist', statist economic policies were an unmitigated disaster. I believe that her son and daughter-in-law's adherence to these policies is the reason why millions of Indians continue to live in extreme poverty.

The Congress party's ruling family has an arrogance and sense of entitlement that I despise. Last year, when Sonia Gandhi was the star speaker at the India Today conclave in Mumbai, I saw her exhibit this in full measure. She said two things that remain imprinted in my brain. She said she would not 'allow' Narendra Modi to become prime minister again. What made her believe that she had the power to allow or disallow Modi from becoming prime minister mystifies me. When asked the reasons for the humiliating defeat in 2014 of the party she led for two decades, she said it was only because Modi was better at 'marketing' himself.

This is now being repeated by senior Congress leaders as the reason for the drubbing the party got this time. If they really believe this then what I have to say will mean nothing. But, if there is anyone left in the party of our freedom movement who wants to see it return to its days of glory, then here is some free advice from a detractor.

I offer it only because I believe that democracy without a strong opposition party causes more harm than good. Narendra Modi may truly have a spiritual strength that will prevent absolute power from going to his head, but it is too risky to bet on this. There is not one regional party that is showing the smallest signs of becoming a national party, so it is in India's interest for the Congress party to go back to being a real political party again.

Under the leadership of Sonia Gandhi it became a private limited company with sycophants and family members as the only directors on its board. Since there was nobody to challenge her decisions there was nobody to point out that the party was slowly dying. As a veteran hack I remember a time when you could find Congress party volunteers in almost every village. I remember that these volunteers were usually from the Seva Dal and wore their white Gandhi caps with pride. In times of need it was always these volunteers who came to the help of the needy. They were decent, selfless people with a real desire for public service and with no greed for high office. They liked telling you that they had fought for India's freedom and taught their children that there was nothing better they could do in life than serve India to their last breath.

In recent election campaigns I have gone looking for this genre of Congress volunteer and can report that they have totally disappeared. They have often been replaced by RSS volunteers who are motivated by Hindutva and an aggressive, nasty kind of nationalism. Had the old kind of Congress volunteer still been around, they would have risked their lives to prevent Muslims and Dalits from being attacked and lynched by vigilantes. So where did they disappear? Why did they disappear?

If the Congress party does some serious analysis of why they have now lost two general elections to a man they believe will destroy the 'soul of India', they may find that it is because the Congress party changed its character. This started to happen when the practice of dynastic democracy began. The kind of person who got a ticket to the Lok Sabha changed. Those motivated by private gain got precedence. Ninety per cent of the Congress MPs now fall into this category. Rahul Gandhi was right when he pointed out that two of the party's chief ministers had shown more interest in getting tickets for their sons than in winning the elections in their states.

He did not notice that he was in no position to criticise since his Mummy had done the same for him. Nor did he notice that when the going seemed to get tough during this campaign the only solution he came up with was to bring his sister into politics. It is not going to be easy to change the Congress into a real political party again, but someone must try doing it. India needs a strong opposition party today more than ever.

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