



Itinerary symbolism

The second Modi government sends a powerful 'neighbourhood first' message

In a reaffirmation of New Delhi's 'Neighbourhood First' policy, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first visit abroad is to the Maldives and Sri Lanka, while S. Jaishankar wraps up his first visit abroad as Foreign Minister to Bhutan. Leaders of several neighbouring countries were invited to Mr. Modi's swearing-in ceremony. This is the first state visit by Mr. Modi to Male, which he had visited briefly for the swearing-in of President Ibu Solih in November 2018. A series of agreements are expected during the visits, including the implementation of an \$800 million Line of Credit to the Maldives. The projects include a cricket stadium, water purification and sewerage systems, as well as a Coastal Surveillance Radar System and a Composite Training Centre for the Maldives National Defence Force. This follows the Indian practice of fulfilling the needs of neighbouring countries that they themselves identify, much as it has done in Afghanistan. The Prime Minister's visit to the Maldives aims to send a three-pronged message: to continue high-level contacts between close neighbours, assist as development partners, and strengthen people-to-people ties. For Sri Lanka, Mr. Modi's message is one of solidarity in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday terror attacks and the communal violence that followed, as well as a commitment to continue bilateral cooperation on joint development projects agreed to in 2017. He will be the first international leader to visit Colombo since the attacks, and his visit sends a powerful message as Sri Lanka tries to recover from the trauma.

The atmospherics today are in contrast to the comparatively trickier relationship with the previous governments in Male and Colombo during Mr. Modi's first tenure. In 2015, Mr. Modi had cancelled a visit to Male at the last minute following concerns over then-President Abdulla Yameen's crackdown on Opposition parties. Similar misgivings had cropped up regarding former Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa's regime. China's inroads into the region had formed a common thread straining ties with both countries. India protested when the Yameen government signed a free trade agreement with Beijing, and granted China land for development. It made its displeasure clear over the many infrastructure projects Mr. Rajapaksa granted to Chinese companies under heavy Chinese loans. Deeper concerns arose from the Chinese naval presence in both Male and Colombo. Now, the situation has turned. Governments in both countries have changed. Besides a charm offensive, India has chosen to mute its opposition to their continued cooperation with China on the Belt and Road Initiative. It also comes from a realisation in Delhi that at a time when factors such as the U.S.-China trade tussles and tensions in West Asia pose uncertainties, strong neighbourhood ties can provide much comfort.

Unconscionable switch

The ease with which 12 Congress MLAs have defected to the TRS raises troubling questions

Telangana Assembly Speaker Pocharam Srinivas Reddy's decision to endorse the merger of a 12-member group of legislators from the Congress with the ruling Telangana Rashtra Samithi may be technically justified under the Tenth Schedule of the Constitution. They constitute the requisite two-thirds of the 18-member Congress Legislature Party. But this orchestrated decimation of the Opposition in the 120-member legislature does not bode well. With this, the TRS's strength has gone up to 103. It had won 88 seats in the 2018 elections, but three MLAs – an Independent and one each from the Telugu Desam Party and the All India Forward Bloc – defected to its fold recently. These actions seem aimed to reduce the Opposition's ability to act as a check. Defections are not uncommon despite the stringent conditions of the anti-defection law. But coming so soon after the Assembly elections, and devoid of a point of principle, they raise disturbing questions about the ideological and programmatic cohesiveness of the Congress. MLAs need not be tied to party *satraps* and should assert their individuality in law-making – but it is dishonesty to switch sides after being elected on a party ticket when the only plausible objective is to grab the loaves of power. That there is no ideological distinctiveness to political representation in States such as Telangana has made it possible for defections to happen rampantly. In an ideology-lite polity, the MLAs seem to see no benefit in meaningfully representing their constituents, and find it rewarding to align with the ruling party for the purposes of patronage.

The anti-defection law, that calls for disqualification unless defecting legislators are part of a group that constitutes at least two-thirds of the legislative strength of a party and that merges with another party, was enacted to prevent such machinations. However, defectors have found ways to work around the law to avoid disqualification. Dramatic shifts in allegiances by elected MLAs have been a concern in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, among other States. In many cases, even if the two-thirds rule has been flouted, the authority given to the Speaker, who is invariably from the ruling dispensation, has enabled dubious calls. This decision-making structure has also allowed blatant defections to be ignored, as seen in Goa and Manipur, among other States. In such cases, the Speaker has acted less as a constitutional authority and more as a partisan party loyalist. It is time to reconsider the anti-defection law's procedural implementation and to vest the power on decisions over mergers of groups and disqualifications of legislators with an institution such as the Election Commission. This could well bring about a more strict and objective implementation of the anti-defection law.

The great Indian celebration

The country's politics has changed, and new analytical tools are required to understand it



SHIV VISVANATHAN

The American sociologist, C. Wright Mills, known for classic works like *The Power Elite*, dubbed the years of the Dwight D. Eisenhower presidency (1953-61) as the great celebration. The United States was celebrating its sense of dominance even as the Cold War and the McCarthy era were gnawing its entrails. Something of the hypocrisy and the complacency of the time haunts the India of today. We seem to belong to the future, yet the more outdated we become as a country. The Narendra Modi government seems to celebrate a series of ironic events as a great victory. The very scale of its electoral score and the punitiveness of the Opposition seem to have unhinged it.

Lost pluralism

We celebrate democracy at the very moment that our majoritarianism has destroyed our sense of pluralism. The dissenting, the marginal, the minority seem to have no place in the juggernaut rolling before us.

We are hailing a nation state where ideas march in uniform, where the jingoism of the masses is labelled as patriotism.

We hail an alliance between corporate power and the nation state dubbed as development without realising that such a theory of growth has no ethical space for the idea of the Anthropocene. We

have confined the challenge of climate change to the dustbin of dissent, indifferent to the vulnerability of our tribals or of our coastlines. Our piety as a Third World nation state has emptied our ethics as a civilisation. The emptiness of our Swadeshim has destroyed the creativity of our Swaraj, our ability to see locality and planet as one whole.

We pretend that we are in pursuit of a knowledge economy, when our sense of knowledge has lost meaning as a culture and become totally instrumental. At the very moment we are being out-thought and outfought by the West and by China, we claim a priority for our ancient civilisation as a knowledge economy. We have a regime which is committed to an ancient past, but is clueless about the problems it confronts in the future.

Yet the drum beat of this election has made us think that India has arrived on the world stage. It is a piece of news our intellectuals are afraid to challenge lest they be seen as anti-national. The question is, how do we challenge such a situation when we celebrate the very things that are driving us to the world of mediocrity?

The general tom-tomming that the Congress has been put in its place, that liberalism is dead, that Marxism is as stale as yesterday's newspaper makes one feel that India was suffering from a deep sense of inferiority. We saw ourselves as victims of history. Where else would politicians spend time rewriting the Battle of Haldighati as if a victory then was more critical than any battle in the future. India today feels as if it has won a victory against the Nehruvian mo-



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del that had haunted it. We feel that we have exorcised ourselves and this victory is the psychological beginning to a new India. It is this psychological state that we need to understand. We seem to think that we have outgrown our past illusions. The electoral score is literally presented as a catharsis, a purging of the past where a renaissance India emerges ready for a global future. An India tired of being a failure.

Reading the popular mind

We face the irony not that Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Bharatiya Janata Party president Amit Shah were successful psephologists, but that they were such brilliant readers of the contemporary Indian mind. For all our talk of our great nationalism movements, our sense of civilisation, Mr. Modi realised the sense of punitiveness that haunted our minds. The Congress of Sardar Patel, Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi was too arrogant to think of such a state. It could have thought of the poverty of the peasant, but not the poverty of philosophy, the little mindsets that haunted us. It is true we were aspirational, yet our sense of being aspirational hid our self doubts.

This election has created a new mindset, whereby we look confi-

The spirit of 1989, from Tiananmen to Prague

It is a reminder that where non-violence is practised, democracy is honoured



RAMIN JAHANBEGLOO

The recent commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the violent suppression of China's Tiananmen Square protests is a good occasion to look back on the year 1989 and the non-violent movements for democracy which changed our world. It is a fact that the non-violent movements in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 ended the confrontation between East and West and strengthened the possibility of a "new international order" based on the extension of democracy around the globe. As a result of the victory of non-violent campaigns in Poland (with the Solidarity movement) and in Czechoslovakia (with the Velvet Revolution), the technique of non-violent transformation of authoritarian and semi-totalitarian regimes into liberal democracies turned into a global cross-cultural phenomenon.

In other words, the self-empowerment strategies of non-violent civic actors of 1989 had a great im-

pact on those around the globe who believed in a genuine process of democratisation. Let us not forget that the past 30 years have witnessed an unprecedented flowering of non-violent experiences. In many areas of the world, such as Latin America, North Africa and West Asia, where armed struggle was once seen as the only path to freedom, non-violent campaigns are now considered institutionalised methods of struggle for democratic invention and democratic governance.

Good governance

One of the important tasks that was set by the non-violent movements of 1989 was the provision of "good governance". For these movements and their leaders like Czechoslovakia's Václav Havel, the real test of democracy was not only in the peaceful process of transition, but also in the non-violent consolidation of democratic institutions. For the advocates of non-violence in 1989, democracy was not just "an institutional arrangement for organising the political society" but a new attitude and approach towards the problem of power. For example, from the point of view of a 1989 leader such as Havel, the concept of power should go hand in hand with res-



BEUTELS

pensibility. As he pointed out, "Politics is an area of human endeavour that places greater stress on moral sensitivity, on the ability to reflect critically on oneself, on genuine responsibility, on taste and tact, on the capacity to empathise with others, on a sense of moderation, on humility."

In a Gandhian manner, the spirit of 1989 affirmed that the challenges and difficulties of democratic governance needed to be confronted through self-rule, self-control and the soul force. Undoubtedly, for all the non-violent actors of 1989, the twin practices of self-discipline and empathetic service seemed necessary in order to control an unjust and inappropriate power.

This is actually what was suggested by the student-led democracy movement in China. For the

dent having acquired the feathers, the plumage of those who conquered us. Before one reacts in ire, remember no regime has been more colonial than the present. It is as if the whole country was waiting for a few certificates from the advanced nations. India has dressed itself in the plumage of nationalism, development and science, pretending that this millenarian arrival was India's first step to the future. In an ironic way India became Modi and Modi became India. We have transformed ourselves into a mimic nation.

Let us face it. The ideas of our elite, our liberals, our Marxists, our celebrations of the plural and civilisational had no sense of those who felt left out. The latter felt they had not joined history, that the bandwagon of the nation state, development had taken them nowhere. Mr. Modi realised the sense of loss and resentment, the need for recognition. It was a cultural envy, a bit like his attempt to take the place next to Gandhi in the KVIC (Khadi and Village Industries Commission) calendar. This sense of being left out haunted us as a nation. Mr. Modi harnessed this envy, found the right epidemic of hate and legitimised it. The Other had to be recreated and defeated, and 2002 became the myth for that inauguration. Riot or mob lynching became a moment of history. Every rioter felt he was conquering history. Violence became the rite of passage by which we recovered our lost sense of masculinity.

But recovering masculinity is not enough. It needs a framework of legitimisation and communalism expanded into patriotism. Majoritarianism became the new nation-

alism.

The electoral analyses presented are antisepic, almost rituals of avoiding analysis. There is a banal sociology which either shows that political parties did not matter or a hosanna to leadership. It fails to confront the collective psyche or the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) ability to convert folk psychology into mass psychology. Attempts to read it like a chartered accountant reading election counts is irrelevant. It was like watching an epidemic or an avalanche. The RSS had a deeper sense of the resentment that was local to India, and it sublimated this violence to the Other with the right categories such as nation, security and patriotism. It understood the power of the irrational and harnessed it. Mr. Shah's sociology of the nukkad had more creative power than the official sociology textbooks. As defeated activists and scholars, we can watch it voyeuristically, sense an India we need to understand.

There is space

Now Mr. Modi is Lutyens' Delhi, and we need to understand the consequence of it. We need a different set of insights to critique him. The challenge of the future will lie in our ability to invent a different democracy, and not get caught in the banality of policy critique or a critique of choices, where law and order displaces democratic inventiveness. Our idea of India is still hospitable to impossible possibilities.

Shiv Visvanathan is an academic associated with the Compost Heap, a group in pursuit of alternative ideas and imagination

Chinese students, the process of democratisation was a way to change the Communist power over society into a power from within it. As another leader of the 1989 movements, Adam Michnik, declares, "The real struggle for us is for the citizen to cease to be the property of the state."

Truly, civic actors and freedom animators such as Adam Michnik and Václav Havel did not learn to love democracy and non-violence blindfolded and with their heads lowered. They believed that democracy can be practised only when we can look at it clearly and critically. Accordingly, it was in their minds that the Berlin Wall began to crumble. As the spirit of 1989 dawned in Beijing, the Polish people, and the Czechs, Slovaks, Romanians, Hungarians, Lithuanians, Estonians, Ukrainians and Russians came to understand that the empowerment of civil society and the collective ability to rule democratically were the essential constituents of non-violent transition to democracy.

Ironically, on the same day (June 4, 1989) that the Polish Communists were defeated for the first time in elections in a Communist state, the Chinese pro-democracy movement was crushed by the tanks in Tiananmen Square. Para-

doxically, both Communist China and post-Communist Poland turned to market economy and a wild rush for wealth. But the lesson of 1989 remained intact and more relevant than ever.

It's still afloat

As a matter of fact, it took shape once again in the spirit of young Egyptians and Tunisians who shook Arab history though the tactics of non-violent resistance. Certainly, the spirit of 1989 was non-violence in the making. And today, we can find the same spirit of 1989, what we can call a Gandhian moment of history, in Algeria, Sudan, Iran, Indonesia, the U.S. and many other countries around the globe. It shows that the dream of 1989 which accompanied the Chinese students of Tiananmen, the workers of Poland and the civic actors of Prague is not over. It shows that where non-violence is practised, democracy is honoured. Moreover, the spirit of 1989, which took shape in the year of all freedoms, is a reminder that democracy is a system based on trust in human action and the fact that the impossible could become possible.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

The language narrative

The natural bonding one has with the mother tongue, and the conditions warranting learning of a language other than one's mother tongue have been juxtaposed with the attempt to impose the three-language formula by the overzealous BJP (Editorial page, "Language, the opening move", June 7). Perhaps the party thought it had successfully fired its first salvo at the States down south. That the BJP has touched a raw nerve has been proved beyond doubt by the enormity of the opposition to the imposition of Hindi, in Tamil Nadu especially. Moves like these will only further widen the divide between the party and the people of Tamil Nadu who have already rejected the illusions of nationalism and Hindutva.

G.B. SIVANANDAM,
Coimbatore

■ If only 30% of India's population speaks Hindi, it is absolutely clear what it is as far as the remainder is concerned. It is the English

language which connects and unites non-Hindi speaking States. At this juncture, the importance of English cannot be ignored. This is an issue that we cannot gloss over especially when the States were formed on the basis of language. The Central government should stop unpleasant surprises such as the draft National Education Policy.

ANTONY C.J.,
Puranattukara, Muthuvara, Kerala

■ The article reminded me of an incident, in 1966, when I had travelled to Chennai, to take part in the All-India National School Games, as the captain of my State TT team (Uttar Pradesh). As soon as the train pulled into Madras Central, the bogies were set upon by anti-Hindi agitators. As a child of 14 years, I was left traumatised. The team manager was able to gather his wits and rush us out to a place near the YMCA. Next day, when travelling in a bus, we were intercepted, asked to get down and caned heavily for no fault of ours. The attackers could not understand our language,

Hindi, nor could we theirs –Tamil. We were in confinement for the rest of the night. I could communicate just a bit in English and gathered that we were being punished because we had been heard talking in Hindi. We were released the next day when we told the police that we had come to participate in the national games that morning to be inaugurated by the leader M. Bakthavatsalam. I feel it should be left to a person to learn Hindi. English is a must as the major language in every State.

AHMAD RAIS SIDDIQI,
New Delhi

Rebooting the Congress

Some of the regional parties are doing a great disservice to the nation by trying to obliterate the Indian National Congress. Unfortunately, the entire political and social space in this country is being overtaken by religion, which is difficult to reverse. The BJP appears to have become a beneficiary of this. It is also unfortunate that the middle class in India, which greatly benefited from the leftist

policies of the Congress party and its liberalisation and globalisation policies since the 1990s, is deserting it and heading for the BJP. The nation has a stake in the revamping of the Congress party as a strong alternative to the BJP in the interests of Indian democracy (OpEd page, 'Parley', "Is this the end of the road for the Congress party?", June 7).

P. PERRAJU SARMA,
Visakhapatnam

■ The Congress can ill afford to be headed by a sulking president at a time when the entire organisational structure is crumbling rapidly. That its leadership could not prevent as many as 12 of its 18 MLAs in Telangana from switching over to the ruling TRS betrays the pathetic state of its leadership. The fissures between the Rajasthan Chief Minister and the State party president too reflect poorly on the leadership's ability to manage internal dissent. Infighting in Karnataka too has shown the party in a bad light. At the same time, this is the opportune moment for a change in leadership

starting from the top.
S.K. CHOUDHURY,
Bengaluru

M.S. Dhoni's gloves

Can we keep politics out of sport and sports bodies? The BCCI is already a victim of external action and now to inject non-existent and unwarranted emotion into the matter of an Army insignia is unnecessary ('Sport' page, 'Dhoni's tribute draws ICC's censure', June 7). The rest of us are as patriotic as the persons breathing fire and venom but following the rules in this case does nothing to affect our dignity. The general election is over and done with. Politicians play games but that is neither sport nor sporting.

T.C. NARAYAN,
Bengaluru

■ Mahendra Singh Dhoni being a part of an international cricket team is under the rules and regulations of the International Cricket Council and is bound to follow those rules. As long as one works for an employer or an organisation, one is bound to

follow its rules and regulations and follow the policies laid down. No one can raise any objection. In the same manner, Dhoni has to obey ICC rules.

THOMAS KOSHY,
Chennai

■ The familiar idiom is 'wearing your patriotism on your sleeve', which M.S. Dhoni seems to have taken to heart.. This is not to undervalue his boundless love for the country and the services in any manner. The furore in India over the issue is hardly surprising as it is being made out to be an emotional issue at a time when nationalist sentiment is running high. Dhoni is on the playing field in his capacity as an international cricket player. An internationalist is supposed to promote internationalism. It should not be forgotten that we are an organic part of the international community and need to act for the permeation of a spirit of goodwill.

G. DAVID MILTON,
Maruthancode, Tamil Nadu

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It is the last Friday of Ramzan and lying on a blue rexine bed that is standard in private nursing homes, with an intravenous tube (IV) and a catheter attached to him, Mohammad Qasim, 29, has the anguished look of a man who is weary of carrying the burden of his name. As his cousins rush out of the nursing home to offer Alvida Juma (jumu'at ul vida) namaz, tears course down Qasim's cheeks. He says, "I cannot even get up to offer my prayers, and this is more painful than the bullet lodged inside me."

Three days after the spectacular verdict of the 2019 general election that gave Prime Minister Narendra Modi a second term, Mohammad Qasim was shot at for being a Muslim in Kumbhi village. It falls under the jurisdiction of Cheria-Bariyarpur police station in Begusarai district, Bihar.

Looking back, it would appear that the atmosphere had already been vitiated by politicians in the run-up to the general election. Hindutva poster boy and Union Minister Giriraj Singh won the Begusarai Lok Sabha seat by defeating CPI candidate Kanhaiya Kumar, a former president of the Jawaharlal Nehru University student union; Rashtriya Janata Dal candidate Tanvir Hussain came a distant third. Campaigning for the polls, Singh repeatedly hit the headlines with controversial statements. "My ancestors died and were cremated... but you need a yard of land even after you die. If you say you cannot chant Vande Mataram, this nation will never forget you," he had said in the course of an election rally. He had also demanded the Election Commission of India impose a ban on the use of green flags. This was not the first time Singh had courted controversy in his attempts to create a wedge between religious communities.

String of violence
The past five years of the Narendra Modi government have seen a spate of lynchings across north India. A potent cocktail of religion, the issue of gau rakshak and intolerance towards other faiths appears to be fuelling the violence. Almost every act is caught on camera and quickly disseminated on social media which amplifies it. Politicians from the ruling dispensation have kept their silence. Just a few days ago one such gruesome act was captured on camera where, in Uttar Pradesh, a group of men are seen beating daily wage labourers for eating meat.

Qasim is a stout man who walks with a pronounced limp. Along with other members of his community, he weaves quilts for a living during the winter and supplements his income by doing odd jobs in the summer. He says, "My younger brother suggested that I sell detergent door-to-door and I agreed. I had to support my family, after all." Borrowing money from friends and relatives, Qasim bought a moped for ₹25,000 and started selling detergent. An additional ₹800 was spent on getting a microphone fitted to the moped. The microphone blared promotional jingles exhorting people to purchase Qasim's 3 kg detergent powder for just ₹100. On a normal day, Qasim's earnings touched ₹300.

Selling detergents for a lark
May 26 was just another usual day with much of the celebrations that followed the verdict of the general election having quietened down. Qasim had left home early to escape the heat and hoping to get some business done, persuading housewives to buy his detergent before they shut their doors for noon. May is a brutal summer month with most people preferring to stay indoors.

Qasim reached Kumbhi village, 10 km from his home. He recounts, "I had just parked my moped outside a paan shop, when suddenly a man [later identified as Rajiv Yadav] ordered me to switch off the mike. I turned it off immediately. He asked my name and upon hearing it, told me to go to Pakistan. 'You should be in Pakistan or...', and he looked up at the sky. In a split second, he whipped out his katta (country revolver) and fired at me."

As Qasim slumped forward, a number of bystanders stood by and watched. None came forward to his aid. Qasim was barely conscious to realise that he was losing blood. The bullet had hit him on the left shoulder and, as doctors would later find out, it had not exited. After what seemed like hours, a woman came forward to dress his wound with a cloth. Someone else came forward with a towel and took him to the village sarpanch's house. The sarpanch, Raja Ram Sahni, offered to take Qasim to the local police.

By this time, news of the shooting had spread like wildfire in the neighbouring villages. Qasim's family members decided to rush him to the government hospital in Begusarai town some 30 km away from Khumbi, only to be told by the doctors to admit him in the State capital, Patna. Says Qasim's cousin, Mohd Mohd Mithun Alam, "It was at that time that some people had come to the government hospital in Begusarai to record Qasim's statement." His younger brother Mohd Javed, who is also physically challenged, adds, "We thought he could die of bleeding, so we requested the doctor to refer him to a local doctor in town. He then referred Qasim to a private nursing home."

The police visited the nursing home at 2 p.m. to record the statement. Says



Ignition point: "A deadly cocktail of religion, the issue of gau rakshak, and intolerance towards other faiths appear to be fuelling the spate of violence across north India." Mohammad Qasim's wife, Rehana Bibi, with their three children at their home at Khanjahanpur village ■RANJEET KUMAR

A thread of fear and hate

Street thugs have taken advantage of the post-election triumphalism to stage attacks on minorities in parts of north India. **Amarnath Tewary and Ashok Kumar** tell the stories of two victims



Qasim, "I apprised the bara babu (in-charge of police station) of all the details of the incident telling him categorically that I was shot at for being a Muslim, but the FIR said I was shot at due to some scuffle." He asks, "How could I have a scuffle with the accused whom I was not acquainted with? I put my thumb impression on the FIR without knowing what was written in it." However, at one place in the FIR (no: 77/19 dated May 26), Qasim's statement that he was shot at for being a Muslim does find a mention. Following the registration of the FIR, a case against the accused, Rajiv Yadav, was lodged under Sections 341 (punishment for wrongful restraint), 342 (punishment for wrongful confinement) and 307 (attempt to murder) of the Indian Penal Code and Section 27 of the Arms Act (punishment for using arms).

The accused was said to have been drunk at the time of the incident – Bihar is a dry State. He was arrested on May 30 and sent to jail. Says Niraj Kumar Singh, in-charge of Cheria-Bariyarpur police station: "He is a local criminal and has also been involved in illegal liquor brewing and selling... he is accused in four other cases as well."

However, the Begusarai Superintendent of Police, Awkash Kumar, expressed ignorance about Qasim's claim that he was shot at for being a Muslim. He said, "I do not know why he says so... we'll investigate this but our investigations show that he was shot following a scuffle over the purchase of his detergent."

But the shooting incident became prime time news and was amplified by social media. Kanhaiya Kumar tweeted, "In Begusarai, a Muslim hawk was shot at saying he should go to Pakistan. In order to promote such crimes, all such leaders are guilty who day and night spread hatred for political virtues. We're not at peace until the perpetrators are punished."

All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen leader Asadudin Owaisi too tweeted, "Qasim almost lost his life for literally just saying his name. But sure, I am 'fear mongering'. Where does Rajiv's brazenness come from? BJP's leadership has constantly demonised us and associated us with Pakistan. We're not human in their eyes, we're target practice."

Giriraj Singh too did not take long to respond. He told a news channel: "Owaisi has a habit of sowing hatred.

The land of Begusarai is peaceful. I urge Owaisi to let the people of Begusarai continue to live in peace. This is Modi-ji's (PM Narendra Modi) raj and here, only peace will prevail." But local Rashtriya Janata Dal leader Imtiyaz Ali, State Communist party leader Arun Mishra and social activist Pushpraj, who visited Qasim in hospital, admitted that "after the Lok Sabha poll, the atmosphere of Begusarai has communally become toxic and people like Rajiv Yadav have started taking advantage of it".

Meanwhile, the doctor treating Qasim says he is "out of danger now" but the bullet is still embedded in his left shoulder. Says Dr. Ashok Kumar, "We'll review his condition after two to three days and take a decision on whether to go for an operation to take out the bullet or to leave it there... it causes no danger if it remains there." Qasim's family has spent ₹1.15 lakh on his treatment. Says Qasim's younger brother, "Ornaments of our wives have been mortgaged and we've also taken a loan from people... villagers and relatives have also donated nearly ₹10,000 but we're in deep debt."

In the distance, Qasim's new moped stands piled with detergent packets waiting to be sold. After the incident, most of the villagers in Khanjahanpur, to which Qasim belongs, have stopped hawking their goods for a living. The village has a substantial Muslim population engaged in petty trade, which appears to have taken a hit.

Another city, another beating
For a few weeks in the run-up to Eid-ul-Fitr every year, Mohammad Murtaza would hire a couple of tailors on daily wages to handle the increased load of work. Working in the narrow confines of a shop which is 10 ft by 5 ft, Murtaza, along with three other tailors, toiled away, furiously pedalling their sewing machines. All of them slept in the shop, which is an illegal unit operating from the basement of a house in the Jacobpura area of Gurugram. Shops such as these are common in this area.

Murtaza had migrated to the Millennium City in 1996, then a sleepy, dusty town on the outskirts of Delhi, in search of a livelihood. He worked with many well-known tailors in the city for over two decades before he could set up his own shop three years ago.

He had called his son Amir, who worked as a mason in Bengaluru, to assist him. Most often, it was the bigger tailors who outsourced their work to him. This year Murtaza called his distant cousin, Mohammad Barkat Alam, 25, from Bihar's Begusarai district to learn the tricks of the trade. He thought the man would also be an extra hand in the festive season.

Looking back at the incident of May 25, Murtaza, who looks much older than his 45 years, with his grey dishevelled hair and stubble – is deeply perturbed by the turn of events over the past few days. Says Murtaza, referring to



Be it the protests against meat shops, mostly run by the Muslims, the offering of Namaz in open spaces or the attack on a Muslim family in Bhondsi recently, the intolerance towards Muslims seems to be on the rise in Gurugram.

HAZI SHAHZAD KHAN, Chairman, Muslim Ekta Manch

Alam, "It has not even been a month and he has already invited so much trouble for himself and all of us. The police and the media have all got involved. I had called him to teach tailoring for a better living, but will now send him back after Eid. That too will not be easy as he is now involved in a legal tangle."

This is what had happened. New to the city, Alam was returning to the shop from the local Jama Masjid, about 100 m away, on May 25 around 10 p.m. through a narrow alley when a few young men on a motorcycle and on foot allegedly accosted him and told him to remove his skull cap. They told him that he was not allowed to wear the skull cap in this area. When Alam protested, one of them slapped him and hit him on the head, displacing the cap. An altercation



Mohammad Qasim being treated at a private nursing home, in Begusarai. His mother, Aklima Bibi, (green saree) and grandmother, Gandoura Bibi, look after him. ■RANJEET KUMAR

broke out. Though there is no evidence to confirm or deny it, Alam claimed that his tormentor asked him to chant "Bharat Mata Ki Jai" and "Jai Shree Ram", and threatened to feed him pork if he didn't obey his command.

Recalls Alam, "It was not too late for a summer night and there were many people around. Some safai karamcharis were also working nearby. But no one intervened. They just laughed. The man punched me and hit me with a stick lying on the road. I tried to push him back and run but he held on to my kurta and tore it. I just started weeping. The men walked away."

Alam is yet to tell his mother about the incident and is not sure how she will take it.

Murtaza, however, feels that things would not have come to such a pass had Alam exhibited a little restraint. "He is young blood and the man was drunk. The man said something and he reacted. Had Alam acquiesced to what the man wanted him to do, there would have been no trouble. He had only threatened to feed him pork, and not actually done so. I have encountered such situations many times, but the matter never reached the police station," he argues.

Millennial city no more
Murtaza, though, concedes that a lot has changed in and around the locality over the past couple of years. A thriving meat market that was a stone's throw from his shop and had been running for decades shut down two years ago following protests by Hindus. It all started some years ago with protests during Navratri by some Hindu outfits and the few shops were forced to down their shutters permanently. Says Murtaza, "The Hindus objected to the presence of shops close to the temple, though the shops and the temple had co-existed for decades." He rues how he has to walk a longer distance now to buy meat from the Jama Masjid market. In fact, the meat shops and dhabas in the Jama Masjid market too were forced to shut down during Navratri in October last for the first time but were reopened a day later after the police intervened, he recounts.

Alam grumbles how despite being a victim, he has been at the receiving end of the law agencies and the media. He breaks down on a couple of occasions in dejection. On fast for around 20 days and beaten up, Alam had to sit in the police station till the early hours of Sunday after the attack while the police completed the legal formalities. He was called to the station the following day to identify the culprits, though none was arrested. Alam says he kept sitting in the station for four hours and was let off only after a community leader intervened.

He is saddened by the narrative now being falsely built by the police and the media to discredit him. A host of reports appeared in a section of media over the past few days, with reference to the

closed-circuit television footage of the incident, and about some insignificant details of the attack. The reports claimed that his skull cap was just touched by the accused and did not fall to the ground and that he was assaulted by one and not two persons. Some reports also claimed that his "kurta" was not torn, though a scuffle is evident in the footage. The police also said Alam could have been tutored to make a false statement with regard to the chants of "Jai Shree Ram" and "Bharat Mata Ki Jai" when there was still no evidence to support it.

The chairman of the Muslim Ekta Manch, Hazi Shahzad Khan, says while the incident has been dissected to disseminate insignificant details, no one seems to be talking about the moot point – that a young man belonging to a minority community has been targeted for his religious identity and prevented from practising his religion with freedom, as guaranteed in the Constitution. Khan says this is not the first time this has happened and that there have been a series of incidents in Gurugram over the past three years or so creating fear in the minds of the minorities.

He says, "Be it the protests against meat shops, mostly run by the Muslims, the offering of Namaz in open spaces, the cutting off of a Muslim man's beard or the attack on a Muslim family in Bhondsi recently, the intolerance towards Muslims seems to be on the rise in Gurugram."

Independent film-maker Rahul Roy, who is a part of the civil society group, Nagrik Ekta Manch, says the emergence of Hindutva vigilante groups in Gurugram is linked to the creation of a new political voice and the building of a constituency of support around issues which are both emotive and offered possibilities of breaking through caste/clan social divisions. For a new set of political actors to break this stranglehold of old networks and claim leadership positions required the setting up of new political projects. Cow protection and anti-Muslim hate amplification are time-tested ingredients that have for long ensured very high success rates in mobilising people.

Says Roy, "The administration has completely failed to address the genuine problems of Muslim and Christian residents when it comes to issues such as places of worship and burial grounds. The campaign by the vigilante groups to stop the Friday Namaz in public spaces was partially successful and the administration provided legitimacy to these groups and their leadership by setting up parallel negotiations with the Muslim community and the vigilante groups."

On his part, Murtaza says his family back in Begusarai have been staunch supporters of the Bharatiya Janata Party and had been voting for the party. He consoles himself that his nephew returned home to tell his story. Alive.