





## REFLECTIONS

INCIDENTALLY

Gopalkrishna Gandhi



## Ink that protects the sanctity of elections

How Salimuzzaman Siddiqui developed "Siddiquink" that protects against impersonation in the voting process

On the eve of elections to the Lok Sabha, it is natural — and desirable — to think of the first general elections that took place in India, between October 1951 and February 1952. That election year for the country's 360 million people was the first such in independent India professing no single religion, no single doctrine whether political or ideological. The only qualification for an Indian citizen to vote was age — the person, man or woman, of any or no religious denomination, of any or no caste, educated or not, propertied or not, should be above 21 years of age.

By this calculation, 173 million Indian men and women became entitled to vote and elect their governments and their Opposition. A bigger election had not been held anywhere in the world. India could, and did, take pride in — a global pride — the fact that its suffrage was going to be universal, free and fair.

The year 1951 needs to be remembered by and for, and as many things as one can in the context of that election but also very specially, as the year of an ink — the indelible ink used to mark voters' left forefingers to prevent multiple voting by impersonation. We have moved now from the paper ballot to the EVM but the inking of fingers remains in place. Because the risk of impersonation remains in place!

The inking had to be done before being given the ballot paper. This column today is about the making of that ink, which is a story in itself. And it is wrapped around the younger of two brothers from Mirzapur, Khaliqzaman (1889-1973) and Salimuzzaman Siddiqui (1897-1994). The first of them was a politician, a leading light of the Muslim League, who knew well India's political leadership in both the Congress and Muslim League, and the second, in a very different field — chemistry and chemistry research. Salimuzzaman, who, unlike his brother, kept his family name of Siddiqui, is indelibly linked to the evolution of a feat in chemistry and Indian public life — indelible election ink.

Siddiqui, working as a chemist in the Indian Council for Scientific and Industrial Research in the mid-1940s, was contacted by its director general Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar (1894-1955), who asked him to help with the formulation of an indelible ink which could be used in the elections that were due to the new Constituent Assembly. Bhatnagar, a distinguished chemist himself, sent to Siddiqui a solution of silver chloride to see if that could be developed into the required ink for use by the Election Commission of India (ECI). I am no chemist and am using these names mechanically,

without understanding their chemical properties, only their salience to our elections.

Siddiqui found the silver chloride did not stain well. So, he added silver bromide to it and, I am told, there was an immediate improvement in the staining power. Working on that combination, Siddiqui was able to start the manufacture of the indelible ink for use in the 1951-52 elections.

An unsubstantiated story has it that Quink, the famous Parker pen ink owes its name to a Filipino, Francisco Quisumbing, who had made and was propagating an ink called Quisumbing Ink which became Quink. Be that as it may, the ink that Siddiqui developed should really have been unofficially called Siddiquink. The ink was introduced for the 1951-1952 elections and irrespective of who won and who lost in that election, Siddiqui's indelible ink was a winner in what it was seeking to win — indelibility and impersonation stalling.

I was six years old at the time and the memory I have of that election — and it is indelible — is of my parents coming back from the polling station and chatting about the new experience of having their fingers marked by voters' indelible ink. We, their children at home, crowded around them to examine this new curiosity, when an old friend of the family walked in just then, also having just voted. He said to my father that he had heard — typical of our sceptical minds — that the ink was not all that indelible and that impersonation could take place by people removing it with a moist-



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ened matchstick tip. What, really! And pronto, a matchbox was obtained from the kitchen, two matchstick-tips dipped in water, followed by both gentlemen trying with great seriousness to do the little cosmetic act. But — kudos to Siddiqui and the Election Commission the ink stain would not go. It became fainter, yes, but disappear it would not. Their fingertip skins smarting under the "attack", the two gentlemen complimented ECI and started talking about other things which did not interest me.

There is a sequel to this that is of interest.

The Partition of India was only four years old and the newly born country was setting up its political and institutional systems. The first Prime Minister of Pakistan, Nawabzada Liaquat Ali Khan, is believed to have contacted Salimuzzaman Siddiqui

and invited him to migrate to Pakistan and help its chemical enterprises. The story is that Salimuzzaman, the younger brother of the Muslim League politician Chaudhuri Khaliqzaman, was known to Nehru, and went to him for advice. Contrary to what one may imagine, Nehru said to him he could go. And he did, to rise to some status as a pharmacological chemist, becoming the founder and chairman of the National Science Council of Pakistan. But his ink remained in India, indelibly, on millions of forefingers, resurrecting itself, in election after election, safeguarding the peoples' mandates.

I would like to end this column by saying our elections are, above everything else, a great equaliser, a great leveller. From the President of India down to the most humble voter, all vote equally and are inked by the same ink, exactly like each other.

Could anyone have dared impersonate the President of India?

Of course not.

But President KR Narayanan, in the 1999 elections, exercised his franchise. He was what he liked to think himself to be, a citizen President and gladly had his forefinger inked exactly like the voter who went just before him and the one who went just after him, did.

And his vote joined the millions of other votes in the great churn of ballots that make India's electoral democracy what it is — a matter of pride, if also of concern about its "bio-chemistry" that requires great vigilance against subversions, of which voter-impersonation is but one.

Gopalkrishna Gandhi, a former administrator and diplomat, is a student of modern Indian history. The views expressed are personal

SUNDAY SENTIMENTS

Karan Thapar



## Manifesto promises to make Parliament work

Normally I would not write about political manifestos. Most of the time neither the party nor the voter takes them seriously. But there's a clause in the Congress's manifesto concerning the functioning of Parliament that merits attention.

Under "Defending the Constitution", clause 9 makes three specific and important promises. First, it says: "We promise that the two Houses of Parliament will each meet for 100 days in a year." This would give real substance to the functioning of our democracy. To explain, let me cite examples from earlier and not the last Lok Sabha, which was affected by Covid-19.

The 16th Lok Sabha worked for only 1,615 hours, 40% lower than the average of all full-term Lok Sabhas. In the 15th

House, as much as 26% of legislation was passed in under 30 minutes. That figure may have gone up in the next, but only 25% of Bills were referred to committees, compared to 71% and 60% in the 14th and 15th Lok Sabhas. Clearly, legislation was not getting the scrutiny it deserves. Sitting for 100 days a year should go a long way to remedy that.

The second promise is: "We promise that one day in a week will be devoted to discussing the agenda suggested by the Opposition benches in each House." This would mean subjects like GST and price rise, Pegasus and Rafale, Chinese incursions and electoral bonds, which the government has declined to discuss, will be debated. This is a badly needed route around the government's obstinate reluctance. It will make parliamentary debates

both complete and meaningful.

The third promise reads: "We promise that the presiding officers of the two Houses will be required to sever their connection with any political party." At present, the Speaker of the Lok Sabha remains a member of his party even after assuming the Chair. That has to be unacceptable. It makes him partisan and his decisions questionable. If that applies to the Chairman of the Rajya Sabha, it's equally intolerable.

I would add one further measure. If a sitting Speaker stands for re-election he should be uncontested. That is the practice in Britain and it guarantees the incumbent's neutrality. Why on earth did the Congress not think of this?

However, I wish the Congress manifesto had gone one critical step further. It should have promised to institute the House of Commons's practice of Prime Minister (PM)'s Question Time, a dedicated half hour, on a fixed day, when the PM answers questions from the opposite benches including, at least, half a dozen put by the Leader of the Opposition (LoP). This not only ensures accountability at the highest level but it also gives the Opposition a chance to question the most important person in the land.

PMQs, as it's called in the UK, is often a moment of drama. It reveals both the PM

and the LoP at their best. But it can also show them up. It's, therefore, a window for the country to see their leaders perform, judge them, acknowledge their weaknesses and praise their strengths. In short, it's democracy at work. It's badly needed in the world's largest.

So why did Congress shy away from promising this? Could it be because neither Mallikarjun Kharge nor Rahul Gandhi can stand up to an onslaught by Narendra Modi? I suspect this has something to do with the answer because I can't believe they never thought of it or they dismissed it as impractical.

But even what the Congress has promised needs to be delivered. For the good of our Parliament, our democracy and, beyond that, good governance. This is, therefore, a test for Narendra Modi and the BJP. If they really believe India is the mother of democracy how can they possibly say no? In fact, I would hope every thoughtful serious political party would endorse these proposals.

Alas, there's a sad and deeper truth. If questioned, I'm sure every party will say aye. But if elected and in a position to act, will they? That's where doubts creep in.

Karan Thapar is the author of *Devil's Advocate: The Untold Story*. The views expressed are personal

## The atheist scientist who discovered God particle

In the zoo of elementary particles which make up our universe, there is only one particle named after a person. Peter Higgs, after whom the eponymous Higgs boson is named, passed away recently at age 94 in Edinburgh.

Almost exactly 60 years ago, Higgs proposed a mechanism which could give elementary particles like electrons and quarks a mass. This was essential since the underlying theory which explained the interaction of particles had no consistent mechanism to generate masses for particles. Independently, several others including Brout, Englert and Kibble had also stumbled upon a similar mechanism. The idea, which had also been proposed earlier by Philip Anderson in the context of superconductivity, was built upon the work of the Nobel Laureate Y Nambu and J Goldstone.

The theory proposed by Higgs and others did not find favour with the particle physics community at first. However, by the early 1970s, it had been refined and became an essential part of the so-called Standard Model of Particle Physics that we believe explains the sub-microscopic reality.

Although theoretically, the model was consistent and predictive, the missing link was still the Higgs particle. The mechanism which was thought to give masses to all massive particles also predicted the existence of this unusual particle which had not been detected. The clinching evidence for the validity of the theory could only come from the actual detection of this elusive particle. But this was difficult given the state of the accelerator technology in the 1970-80s.

The search for the Holy Grail of particle physics, as the Higgs search came to be known, took more than three decades, billions of dollars, a multinational collaboration with thousands of scientists and some clever technology. In 2008, the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) at CERN in Geneva, the most powerful particle accelerator in the world, was finally commissioned. On July 4, 2012, a new particle which could be the Higgs boson was discovered at the LHC. It took another few months before it could be definitely said that this was indeed the

Higgs boson. Higgs and Englert were given the Nobel Prize in 2013 for their theoretical prediction of this particle (Brout had died in 2011 and Nobel Prizes are not given posthumously).

Peter Higgs, who was an emeritus professor at the University of Edinburgh at the time of his death, was not just a brilliant scientist but also a great teacher with a flair for explaining very complex concepts in a simple, yet profound way. Despite his fame and recognition, he was an exceptionally modest person. He was also notoriously shy of any publicity and, on the day the Nobel Prize was announced, went to a seafood bar to escape media attention. He apparently did not possess a mobile phone.

Even though the name Higgs boson is widely accepted now, it did lead to some controversy in the particle physics community. This was simply because the idea not only had a longer history but also because several groups had independently proposed something similar. Some particle physicists thought that it was unfair to the others who had contributed to the theory.

In 1993, another Nobel Laureate Leon Lederman wrote a popular science book called *The God Particle: If the Universe Is the Answer, What Is the Question?* Incidentally, Lederman reportedly wanted the title to be "The Goddamn particle", but the publishers, understandably, rejected the idea! However, when the Higgs particle was discovered, the press dubbed it the "God Particle", a moniker which still raises hackles among particle physicists. This is also ironic given that Peter Higgs was an atheist!

More than a decade after its discovery, there are still many unanswered questions about the properties of the Higgs boson and its interactions. There are plans to build an accelerator, colloquially called the "Higgs factory", which will hopefully shed some light on the still mysterious particle which Peter Higgs in his characteristic modest fashion would refer to as "the boson that is named after me!"

Shobhit Mahajan teaches physics at Delhi University. The views expressed are personal



Shobhit Mahajan

## Is there an Indian approach to ageing?

When I read the recently released *Lancet* study that says we are all going to live longer, my first thought was, "Now what?" Sure, we are trying our best to stave off the ills of ageing, but the point is that there is no guarantee that we will succeed. There is no single blueprint for ageing well. There are whacko schemes like tech entrepreneur Bryan Johnson touting his "longevity mix" (also called Blueprint) as being second only to mother's milk. Nice line, but do you really have the discipline, not to mention the money to take the 100 or so supplements he consumes every day? Maybe I should go back to drinking that Kerala red rice congee my Dad loved.

The quest for longevity is most extravagantly displayed in America among rich, white men. Some like Peter Attia and David Sinclair are medical experts who write books on how to "outlive" death and improve your "lifespan". Some like Tim Ferriss and Andrew Huberman host hugely successful podcasts. Huberman's shine has waned since a *New York Magazine* profile accused him of being in a relationship with five women simultaneously and lying to all of them. Here then is the paradox. All of these "wellness bros" as they are called, blather on about journaling, meditation, and the importance of relationships. Yet, most of them are single, divorced, and have dysfunctional relationships. They may swallow supplements but don't want to do the hard work of maintaining connections with and taking care of parents, children



Shoba Narayan

and spouses. Instead, they obsess about their health on a scale that would make Narcissus jealous. Consider Ari Emanuel, Hollywood super agent and brother of politician Rahm Emanuel. As he recounted on the *Freakonomics* podcast, his fitness regimen includes wearing a mask that simulates being at 22,000 feet while sprinting and doing HYPOXI training that demands specialised expensive equipment. How many folks can afford this?

The *Lancet* study says that Indians are living eight years longer than we did three decades ago. The next frontier is to put off the precipitous decline that comes with ageing. Ten years ago, Ezekiel Emanuel — Ari's brother — wrote an essay in *The Atlantic* called, "Why I hope to die at 75". It talked about the burdens that ageing folks place on their family and on society at large. This article has stayed with me as I watch the elders around my age.

Today, by virtue of luck or location, I am in the position of watching not just my mother (age 86) and mother-in-law (age 90) age, but also watch uncles and aunts in their eighties and nineties at close quarters mostly because their children live elsewhere. Each of them has aged differently with variations of dementia, deafness, pain, imbalance and frailty striking in varying proportions. How then to live well and die quickly?

India may have an answer. Our approach to ageing is through *samadhi* or merging with the divine. All the faiths that populate this land are suffused by devotion or *bhakti* that subjugates the



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SHUTTERSTOCK

ego and sublimates the self in favour of union with something bigger. We don't seek to conquer death; we seek to dissolve into it. It is a very different mindset.

My mother chants the *sankalpa mantra* every day — the same one that priests chant before a *havan* or *homam* as we call it in South India. Basically, you situate yourself in space and time and ask for blessings including *ayur* (longevity), *arogya* (health), *aiswarya* (prosperity) and more. You also ask that dangers and evil be warded off. But here is the interesting thing. The line used to banish obstacles, dangers and evil is peculiar. It says, "Let all dangers be pacified (become peaceful)". "Let them become *shanti*-fied," is the translation. This is not an active, aggressive approach. We don't seek to conquer, outlast, outlive, vanquish. We accept and pacify the dangers. We offer them peace so they don't mess with us.

My father had Lewy body dementia for the last three years of his life. He developed hallucinations, speech slurred, and his body grew rigid. He wanted to die. When he was in his sixties, he often said that euthanasia ought to be an option for the old. "If we can force birth by C-section, why can't we force death through euthanasia?" he would say. I think about this too, particularly since it is legal in some European countries. It seems like something I would want, depending on the illness I develop. It seems like something I would put in my living will — which if you haven't written, you should. Euthanasia may be a pipe dream but at least I can cultivate our Indian idea of accepting and pacifying all the bad energies that come my way. That's my blueprint for ageing.

Shoba Narayan is a writer and journalist. The views expressed are personal

SUNDAY LETTERS

## Recognise the value of Indian art

This is with reference to "Why Indian art is a blip on the big global canvas" by Pavan K Varma (Apr 7). Manish Pushkale's story opened my eyes to the contemporary artists toiling away, waiting for recognition of their art. As a society, we must actively work towards patronising Indian art.

Ranjit C

## A touching tribute

This is with reference to "Up and Close: Ashok, the idol of my youth" by Karan Thapar (Apr 7). Thapar's obituary note on the death of his cousin stands out from standard condolence messages! And it was also a reminder of Sir Walter Scott's stark saying: "Blood is thicker than water."

PM Gopalan

## Our constitutional responsibility to vote

This is with reference to "At the core of elections is the idea of the public" by Sundar Sarukkai (Apr 7). India's democratic underpinnings are based on poll results. As every vote counts, the duty lies with each individual.

Sanjay Chopra

Write to us at: [letters@hindustantimes.com](mailto:letters@hindustantimes.com)

## Top-down politics

The BJP under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership has undergone a significant transformation, reminiscent of the era when Indira Gandhi wielded unparalleled influence within the Congress party. The parallels drawn between Mr Modi's ascendancy and Mrs Gandhi's dominance raise pertinent questions about the consequences of such concentrated power. Mr Modi's overwhelming popularity has eclipsed that of his own party, with slogans of "Modi, Modi, Modi..." reverberating through rallies and gatherings. This cult of personality mirrors the aura that once surrounded Mrs Gandhi, emphasising the shift towards leader-centric politics within the BJP. Unlike the era of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, where unease simmered within the party ranks over the emergence of a personality cult, Mr Modi's supremacy is largely unchallenged. The RSS, which traditionally held sway over the BJP's ideological direction, now finds itself sidelined, unable to dictate terms to a leader who commands unwavering loyalty from the masses.

However, this consolidation of power around Mr Modi raises questions about the BJP's long-term trajectory. The erosion of internal dissent and the centralisation of decision-making within the hands of a few individuals risk stifling the diversity of voices within the party. Furthermore, the rise of a centralised power dynamic under Mr Modi's leadership may alienate grassroots workers and regional leaders who have long been the backbone of the BJP's electoral machinery. The sidelining of these key stakeholders in favour of top-down decision-making could lead to disillusionment and resentment within the party ranks, potentially fracturing the cohesive fabric that has propelled the BJP to electoral success in the past two decades. Furthermore, the BJP's ideological coherence appears to be wavering in the face of opportunistic alliances and ideological inconsistencies. While Mr Modi maintains a cautious stance on contentious issues, such as the treatment of minorities, outspoken leaders within the party often espouse polarising rhetoric, blurring the lines of the BJP's true ideology.

The influx of defectors from other parties, some of whom bring with them questionable moral and ethical baggage, challenges the BJP's longstanding claim to ideological purity and integrity. The prioritisation of political expediency threatens to undermine the party's core values and alienate its supporters. In the short term, Mr Modi's popularity may overshadow these internal fissures, as evidenced by the BJP's electoral successes. History serves as a cautionary tale, with the parallels between Mr Modi and Indira Gandhi offering valuable insights into the potential pitfalls of personality-driven politics. While Mr Modi may navigate the present challenges with astuteness, the true test lies in his ability to safeguard the BJP's distinctive characteristics and navigate the party through turbulent waters without compromising its soul. So far, he seems to be doing fine, with the ranks of those offering him muscular support in the public space swelling by the day. But it is the future that his well-wishers, and those of the party, should be concerned about.

## Wake-Up Call

In an era marked by a perpetual struggle for democracy, the recent findings of a comprehensive study shed light on a disquieting reality: global scepticism regarding the fairness of elections and a disturbing inclination towards strong, undemocratic leadership. This revelation, while unsettling, serves as a clarion call for introspection and action. At the heart of this disconcerting narrative lies a fundamental question: are democratic institutions fulfilling their mandate? The answer, according to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, is a sobering "no." The study, spanning 19 countries and encompassing diverse socio-political landscapes, underscores a pervasive sentiment of disillusionment among citizens regarding the integrity of electoral processes. From the bustling streets of Brazil to the vibrant democracies of India and the United States, doubts linger like an ominous cloud over the sanctity of the ballot box. What drives this scepticism? It is a multifaceted confluence of factors ranging from allegations of electoral malpractice to the erosion of trust in political institutions. In an age where disinformation proliferates unchecked across digital platforms and where populist rhetoric often eclipses substantive debate, the bedrock of democracy trembles under the weight of doubt. Furthermore, the allure of a "strong leader," unencumbered by the constraints of parliamentary democracy, poses a grave threat to the very essence of democratic governance.

But amidst this gloom, there exists a glimmer of hope - a beacon of resilience embodied by the collective will of citizens yearning for a more just and equitable society. The study serves as a wake-up call, compelling us to re-evaluate the foundations of our democratic systems and to fortify them against the encroaching tide of authoritarianism. It is incumbent upon policymakers, civil society, and ordinary citizens alike to heed this call to action - to champion transparency, accountability, and inclusivity in our electoral processes. Furthermore, the study underscores the imperative of economic prosperity as a linchpin of democratic stability. In a stark indictment of current economic paradigms, only a minority of citizens across surveyed nations believe they are faring better economically than their parents. This economic disillusionment, coupled with political disenchantment, creates fertile ground for the proliferation of authoritarian ideologies. The study is a reminder that democracy is not a static entity but a living, breathing organism that requires constant nurturing and vigilance.

The findings serve as a sobering reminder of the fragility of democracy in the face of global challenges. They underscore the imperative of collective action in safeguarding the principles of transparency, accountability, and inclusivity upon which democracy rests. As we navigate an uncertain future, let us heed the lessons of the past and stand united in defence of democracy, for it is not merely a political system but a beacon of hope for a better tomorrow.

## Setback for Yoon

With Yoon's reputation having nosedived because of a perceived faulty governance style, coinciding with the opposition's brute majority in the Assembly, South Korea's politics is likely to plunge into a period of extreme uncertainty. It is imperative for all the political parties to adopt a cooperative and accommodative approach irrespective of political differences and join hands to make concerted efforts for national unity



The heated race for the 10 April general elections in South Korea ended with a landslide victory of the opposition bloc against President Yoon Suk Yeol's governing People Power Party (PPP). The election outcome is a setback for Yoon as it would significantly impact his remaining three years in office. With his PPP securing only 108 out of 300 seats in the National Assembly, Yoon is poised to be relegated to the status of a lame-duck president.

The main opposition Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) clinched a landslide victory in significantly outperforming its rival, the conservative ruling PPP. The victory solidifies the position of the liberal party and establishes an even larger opposition-dominated Assembly for the next four years. The DPK managed to win 175 seats out of 300. Broken down, this works out as 161 constituency wins plus 14 proportional representation seats secured by its satellite party, the Democratic United Party (DUP).

The PPP obtained a total of 108 seats, including 18 gained through proportional representation by its satellite party, the People Future Party (PFP). This marks the third consecutive victory for the main opposition DPK, following the general elections held in 2016 when it was the main opposition and 2020 when it was the ruling party.

The Rebuilding Korea Party (RKP) is a minor progressive party launched in March. Led by former Justice Minister Cho Kuk, it secured 12 seats through the proportional representation system. This marked a successful debut in its first election. Among other minor parties, the Reform Party led by former PPP leader Lee Jun-seok obtained three seats, the Saemirae Party, headed by former DPK Chairman Lee Nak-yeon, and the Jinbo Party, secured one seat each.

The opposition parties collectively secured over 190 seats. It was close to the exit poll forecast of 200 seats for the opposition bloc. The voter turnout this time hit a 32-year high at 67 per cent.

Had the exit poll forecast of 200 seats come true, President Yoon's power would have been substantially clipped as it would have neutralised his veto power. Yet 190 is not a small number as the broader opposition bloc can still exert collective power over Yoon through concerted legislative action.

The opposition still shall have the ability to fast-track bills, shortening the deliberation process, thereby making plenary voting faster than that of other bills. For this, they would need support from at least three-fifths of the total Assembly members. With the support of 180 lawmakers, they can halt a filibuster, a procedural delaying tactic often used by politicians.

What does this resounding victory by the opposition bloc mean for Yoon's political future? Not only does it hint at a bleak future for Yoon, the win also boosts prospects of the DPK chief's next presidential bid.

The elections this time were considered as a critical referendum for Yoon, who is approaching his two-year mark in office in May 2024. With this defeat, Yoon becomes the first-ever President in Korea's current presidential system, established in 1987, to face an opposition-controlled Assembly throughout his entire five-year term which began in May 2022.

There could also be more risks of legislative setbacks to

the government's budgetary and policy agendas. The RKP by securing 12 seats at its debut and openly speaking against Yoon government's "prosecutorial tyranny" now could play a critical role in legislative matters and parliamentary votes.

Taking responsibility for his party's loss, the PPP's interim leader Han Dong-hoon announced his resignation. As a political novice, Han had assumed the role of the PPP's interim leader in December 2023 after stepping down from the post of justice minister. He had no option than to apologize to the people for falling short of public expectations. His plans remain unknown at the moment, though he remains committed to the promises made to the public. The Yoon government's diminished standing coinciding with the birth of an unprecedentedly massive opposition bloc signals a resounding message. Yoon needs to have the grace to accept the election outcome as a stern judgment and referendum on both himself and the PPP. Hereafter, he needs to redouble efforts towards meaningful change. As an immediate measure, Yoon pledged to initiate sweeping reforms within the presidential office by announcing a significant reshuffle of his staff. However, Yoon himself should start first to change people's perception that his approach to governance is unilateral and rooted in an authoritarian style of leadership.

People feel that he is an uncommunicative leader. After this defeat, Yoon needs to learn the lesson and embrace collaboration with opposition parties to

garner their support in addressing the challenges facing the country.

With the PPP chairman Han Dong-hoon already having resigned, assuming responsibility for the election defeat, Prime Minister Han Duck-soo and presidential secretaries also expressed their intentions to resign. This will escalate an in-house standoff between pro-Yoon members and those on the other side.

With Yoon's reputation having nosedived because of a perceived faulty governance style, coinciding with the opposition's brute majority in the Assembly, South Korea's politics is likely to plunge into a period of extreme uncertainty. It is imperative for all the political parties to adopt a cooperative and accommodative approach irrespective of political differences and join hands to make concerted efforts for national unity. Besides serious foreign policy issues, there are many domestic issues that need to be addressed and resolved. Concerted efforts are needed to find proper solutions to the economic issues that transcend the political and ideological stand-off. Other critical issues are solutions to a low birth rate and an aging society. Medical, education and pension reforms also need urgent attention. To ensure sustainable growth of the nation and address all such issues, what is needed is inter-party cooperation in a harmonious manner. Yoon has another three years in office. He needs to make an extra effort to change his own style of governance and thereby bring in change in peoples' perception, while humbly accepting the election defeat. Yoon needs to keep in mind that he and his party will surely face the same fate in the forthcoming presidential and general elections unless they usher dramatic change in the approach.



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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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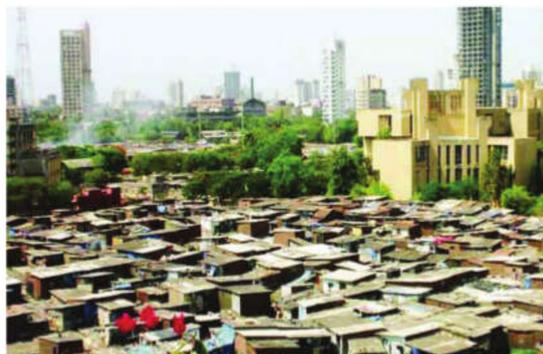
## Yawning gap

SIR, The latest World Inequality Lab report says that India's top one per cent of the population holds 40.1 per cent of the nation's wealth.

The Billionaire Raj headed by India's wealthiest few is now more unequal than the British Raj headed by the colonial forces.

Such a huge and wide gap in economic wealth in India is likely to facilitate disproportionate influence on society and government.

Rising inequality will lead to slower poverty reduction, undermine the sustainability of economic growth, compound the



inequalities between men and women, and drive inequalities in health, education and life chances. The continued rise of economic inequality in India is a clear result of policy choices.

Governments can start to reduce inequality by rejecting market fundamentalism, opposing the special interests of powerful elites, and changing the rules and systems that have led to where we are today.

Robust reforms must be implemented in such a way that money and power are redistributed to level the playing field.

There are two main areas where changes to policy could boost economic equality - taxation and social spending. India has committed to attaining the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 and to ending extreme poverty by that year.

But, unless we make an effort to first contain and then bridge the gap between levels of extreme inequality, ending extreme poverty will remain a pipe-dream.

Yours, etc.,  
Ranganathan Sivakumar,  
Chennai, 10 April.

## STIFLED

SIR, As a long term reader of *The Statesman*, there are three features in the newspaper that I always look forward to. The "100 Years Ago" column presents fascinating snippets from the past. Then there are *The Statesman's* editorials which are balanced, informative and elegant.

And last but definitely not the least, is the "Letters to the Editor" section, containing as it does a cross-section of diverse viewpoints that enable us to access the perspectives of fellow readers.

However, the space given to the Letters sections has been shrinking of late. Quite often I find just a single letter printed on a particular day. I hope *The Statesman* will extend the space assigned to the Letters section as this the only platform for your readers to voice their views, concerns and complaints.

Yours, etc., L Gopalakrishnan, Kolkata, 11 April.

## JALLIANWALA

SIR, As another *Baisakhi* festival approaches on 13 April, Indians in general and Punjabis in particular will feel pained as the day coincides with the tragic Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar a century ago.

The Government of India must press upon the British government to tender an official and formal apology for this worst-ever

## ASIAN VOICES

## No barbarism without poetry

When the basic pact that holds society together is crumbling - which appears to be happening worldwide - wild rumours and conspiracy theories proliferate. Even, or especially, when the message is obviously nonsensical, it can evoke deep-seated fears and prejudices.

A perfect example of this, which I have noted previously, occurred in late August 2023, when a priest known as "Father Anthony" ceremoniously doused holy water on a 26-foot-tall statue of Stalin in Russia's Pskov region. Though the church had suffered during the Stalin era, he explained, "Thanks to this we have lots of new Russian martyrs and confessors to whom we now pray and are helping us in our motherland's resurgence." This logic is just a step away from claiming that Jews should thank Hitler for creating the conditions that allowed for the state of Israel. If that sounds hyperbolic, or like a bad joke, consider that some Zionist extremists close to the Israeli government openly advocate exactly this position.

To understand the success of such perverted argumentation, we should first note that, in developed countries, unrest and revolts tend to explode when poverty has ebbed. The protests of the 1960s - from the sixties-huitards in France to the hippies and Yippies in the United States - unfolded during the golden age of the welfare state. When people are living well, they come to desire even more.

## The Daily Star

One must also account for the surplus enjoyment that social and moral perversion can bring. Consider the Islamic State's recent attack on Crocus City Hall in Moscow, in which 144 people were killed. What some call a terrorist attack, others call an act of armed resistance in response to the massive destruction wrought by the Russian military in Syria. But whatever the case, something notable happened after the attack: Russian security forces not only admitted to torturing the suspects whom they had arrested; they publicly displayed it.

"In a graphic video posted on Telegram," writes Julia Davis of the Center for European Policy Analysis, "one of the detained had his ear cut off and was then forced to eat it by one of his interrogators." No wonder some Israeli hardliners look to Russia as a model for dealing with arrested Hamas members. Russian officials did it not just to deter potential future attackers, but also to give pleasure to fellow members of the tribe. "I never expected this from myself," writes Margarita Simonyan, a Russian propagandist who heads the state-owned media outlet RT, "but when I see how they are brought into the court crooked, and even this ear, I feel extremely satisfied." Nor is this phenomenon confined to Russia. In Tennessee, some lawmakers want to restore public hangings (from trees, no less) for those who receive the death penalty.

Where do such acts end? Why not just bring back the premodern practice of publicly torturing alleged criminals to death? More to the point, how can "normal" people be brought to the point where they would enjoy such sadistic spectacles? The short answer is that it requires the unique power of some kind of mythic discourse, religion, or poetry. As the reluctant Nazi fellow-traveller Ernst Jünger explained, "Any power struggle is preceded by a verification of images and iconoclasm. This is why we need poets - they initiate the overthrow, even that of titans."

incident which involved killing of thousands of innocents in a closed compound.

Although this gruesome killing of thousands by the British has been condemned the world over, there has never been an official apology from the British government. An official apology will act as a salve to the old wound of Indians.

Yours, etc., Vandana,  
Chandigarh, 12 April.

# Embassy violations cast a long shadow

JORGE HEINE

It has long been held that embassies should be treated as "off-limits" to other nations. Yet in a single week, two governments – both long-established democracies – stand accused of violating, in different ways, the laws surrounding foreign diplomatic missions. First, on 1 April 2024, Iran's embassy in Damascus was bombed, presumably by Israel, killing several high-ranking commanders of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Then, on April 5, Ecuadorian police forced their way into the Mexican Embassy in Quito to arrest a former vice president of Ecuador who was seeking political asylum. Both actions have led to claims of international law violations and accusations that the Vienna Convention, which establishes the immunity of diplomatic missions, was contravened. As someone with a fair amount of knowledge of embassy life – I have served as Chile's head of mission in China, India and South Africa and co-edited The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy – I believe the two incidents are of greater concern than much of the international community appears to be viewing them. Contrary to the famous quip from late businessman and presidential candidate Ross Perot, embassies are not just "relics of the days of sailing ships." Rather, in an increasingly complex world where geopolitical conflict, mass migrations, pandemics and climate change require careful and stable diplomatic management, any incidents that erode the sanctity of embassy rules could have serious negative conse-

quences. In short, they make for a more dangerous world. Of the two recent incidents, the Iranian embassy bombing is the more serious, as it involved the loss of life and resulted in warnings of retaliatory attacks. Yet, Western countries, leaders of which often voice concern over upholding the so-called "rules-based order," have been reluctant to condemn the act. It was notable that the three liberal democracies on the U.N. Security Council – the United States, the United Kingdom and France – all refused to condemn the strike on Iran's embassy when the issue came up before them. Israel, while not officially acknowledging responsibility, argued that the Iranian ambassador's residence was not really a diplomatic venue but "a military building... disguised as a civilian building." As such, to Israel it was a perfectly legitimate target. But by this logic, nearly all embassies would be seen as fair game. Almost by definition, the vast majority of embassies – particularly of the larger countries – are populated with significant numbers of military and intelligence personnel. To suggest that for that reason embassies should lose their diplomatic immunity and become legitimate targets for armed attacks would bring the whole edifice of the Vienna Convention crashing down. And with it would come the structure on which worldwide formal diplomatic interactions are based. The case of Ecuador, though less serious because it did not involve loss of life, is a bit more complex and demands some unpacking. At the centre of the diplomatic spat between Ecuador and Mexico is

former Ecuadorian Vice President Jorge Glas, who served four years behind bars following a 2017 conviction on corruption charges. Glas is now facing trial on different charges, prompting his December 2023 application for asylum at the Mexican Embassy. Mexico accepted the request and conveyed this to the Ecuadorian government. The latter justified its decision to send police into the Mexican embassy on the grounds that it believes Glas cannot be granted political asylum as he is a convicted felon. There is some basis to this claim: Under the Organization of American States' Convention on the Right to Asylum of 1954, political asylum cannot be given to convicted felons unless the charges behind such conviction are of a political nature. But at the same time, Article 21 of the Vienna Convention states that diplomatic missions enjoy full immunity and extraterritoriality, meaning the host government does not have the right to enter an embassy without the authorization of the head of mission. Ecuador argues that Mexico abused its diplomatic immunity, leaving it no option other than to send police in. Yet, here a crucial distinction needs to be made. Diplomatic immunity and the extraterritoriality of foreign missions are bedrock principles of the Vienna Convention. Political asylum is a separate matter that should be handled on its own. As such, if the Ecuadorian government considered Glas not to qualify for political asylum, it could have attempted to legally block the move or refuse safe passage for the asylum-seeker to exit the embassy and leave the country. Mexico would have

strong grounds to counter such measures, however, as according to the Convention on the Right to Asylum of 1954, it is up to the asylum-granting state to decide whether the case is politically motivated. Regardless of the merits of the asylum case, sending in the equivalent of a SWAT team to storm the embassy represents a deliberate violation of diplomatic norms. There is a long history of Latin America politicians seeking asylum who spent many years holed up in embassy buildings because governments would not grant them safe passage – the most notable being Peruvian leader Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre, who spent five years at the Colombian Embassy in Lima. Yet, with a few exceptions, not even in the darkest hour of Latin America's military dictatorships in the 1960s and 1970s were police permitted to storm into embassy buildings to arrest asylum-seekers. And this highlights what makes Ecuador's actions especially worrisome. Precisely because of Latin America's problems with political instability and a tradition of military coup, the laws surrounding political asylum and diplomatic immunity are necessary. Undermining the Vienna Convention in the way Ecuador has risks setting a precedent that other governments might be tempted to follow. Political asylum in Latin America has traditionally worked as a safety valve, allowing deposed leaders to get themselves out of harm's way. Weakening the diplomatic structures in place supporting asylum will make the handling of democratic breakdowns more difficult. It also risks exacerbating regional disagree-

ments. We are already seeing this with Mexico breaking relations with Ecuador as a result of the embassy raid. Of course, embassy violations are not unprecedented. Guatemala's dictatorship attacked the Spanish Embassy in Guatemala City in 1980, killing several asylum-seekers, including a former vice president. And Uruguay's military government sent security forces into the Venezuelan Embassy in Montevideo in 1976 to arrest a left-wing militant who had sought asylum, leading to the breakdown of diplomatic relations between the two countries. But those events in the relatively distant past were widely and rightly condemned at the time as the product of authoritarian regimes with little regard for international conventions. The comparatively relaxed international attitude to the embassy violations by Israel and Ecuador reflects, I believe, a failure to grasp the significance of eroding diplomatic immunity and norms. As global challenges increase, embassies and their representatives become more important, not less so. If the takeaway from the two latest embassy incidents is that the protection of diplomatic premises can be secondary to whatever is politically expedient on any given day, then it will be of great detriment to the management of international relations. Diplomacy will become much more difficult. And given the enormity of the challenges the world faces today, that is the last thing any country needs.

(The writer is Interim Director of the Frederick S. Pardee Center for the Study of the Longer-Range Future, Boston University. This article was published on www.theconversation.com)

NOW AND AGAIN

Women and the vote

DEVENDRA SAKSENA

The present elections, with their underhand machinations, din, cacophony and unrestricted use of hate speech, and where women are often the targets or perpetrators of such speech, brings to mind my mother's experience with elections in the 1940s. My father had just been posted as a young munsif at a small town in eastern United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh). My mother, a young bride, had come to her husband's place for the first time. For a girl brought up in a cloistered atmosphere, coming to grips with what was expected of an officer's wife was not easy. For example, she had to call on the District Judge's wife, an Englishwoman. Timidly, my mother went to the Judge's place. To her relief, my mother found that the English lady was a motherly woman, quite proficient in Urdu, the lingua franca of United Provinces. Soon it was time for tea, a moment my mother, a strict vegetarian, dreaded. As my mother was looking for an excuse to wriggle out, the Englishwoman took my mother to her vegetarian kitchen, operated by a high caste cook – meant specially for guests like my mother. The high point of my mother's stay were the elections to the Provincial and Central Assemblies. Recently, women had been allowed to vote, but the small town where my father was posted had no women officials, and hardly any educated women. In these circumstances, the collector made my mother, wife of the junior-most officer, in-charge of the women's voting booth. Voting rights were restricted, only educated and propertied persons were allowed to vote. So, my mother's booth had only six or nine voters. On Election Day, some peons from my father's office set up the voting booth. After some time, the voters, wives of officers or local notables, arrived – on buggies and palanquins. All voters and the election in-charge were well known to each other. So, a leisurely picnic lunch and much talk preceded the casting of votes. After voting for the Congress, and promising to meet again soon, the ladies dispersed, for more mundane pursuits. Since all votes had been cast, the election booth was wound-up, and my mother also headed home. One sincerely wonders why present-day elections cannot be held in the same spirit of goodwill and bonhomie.

POLITICAL DIARY KALYANI SHANKAR

## High-stakes contests in Karnataka

The southern State of Karnataka is preparing for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections, a momentous event. It will unfold in 28 constituencies over two phases on April 26 and May 7. The ruling Congress and the BJP-JD(S) are in a fierce battle. Past elections have left an indelible mark on Karnataka's political landscape, and this election has the potential to do the same, marking a pivotal moment in the state's history. The election is a high-stakes contest between the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party-Janata Dal (Secular) alliance. While it is symbolic for BJP's re-entry, the Congress aims for a significant win, targeting 20 out of 28 seats. The Modi-led NDA is eyeing a clean sweep. The election's outcome carries significant implications, potentially shaping the future of ministers and their families. More importantly, it has the power to shape the lives of the people of Karnataka directly, influencing the policies and governance that will impact them. The polls hold significant stakes for all three parties. The BJP is striving to snatch Karnataka, a key part of its strategy to consolidate its regional power. On the other hand, Congress is fighting to safeguard the future of its government. The JD(S) views this election as a battle for survival. The BJP's campaign centres around Prime Minister Modi and his decade of achievements while highlighting the Congress's perceived failures. It is also promoting its pan-India agenda. On the other hand, the Congress is focusing on



leading among SCs, STs, and Muslims. It has implemented five essential poll guarantees to address specific issues or concerns of the region's voters, demonstrating its commitment to their welfare. The BJP is trying to win the support of the Lingayats and Vokkaligas, two influential communities in Karnataka politics. The Lingayats are influential in northern Karnataka, while the Vokkaligas have more control over the Old Mysore regions. Congress, a centrist-left party, is focusing on getting votes from Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Muslims. SCs and STs live throughout the State, with a higher concentration in the Kalyana-Karnataka region.

With its rich political history, Karnataka has been a stronghold of the Congress party for many years, even when other states did not support it. This historical significance is evident from the victories of Indira Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi, who both won seats in Karnataka. It has produced influential leaders such as Veerendra Patil, Devaraj Urs, and R Gundu Rao who have shaped Indian politics. To win Karnataka voters, the Congress government implemented five key poll guarantees that were promised last year. These promises, made during the election campaign, were designed to address specific con-

cerns of voters. They included initiatives such as free bus rides for women, increased funding for education, and job creation. The BJP faces this election based on Modi's ten years of achievement. The PM has toured the State several times and campaigned for BJP candidates. The party has also kept former chief minister Yediyurappa on its side by humouring him. Three pre-poll surveys predict conflicting results for Karnataka's upcoming elections. Edina predicts Congress will win 17 seats, and the BJP-JDS alliance will bag 11. News 18 forecasts NDA will win 25 seats, Congress only 3. India Today Group pre-

dicts NDA will win 24 seats with a 53 per cent vote share. The INDIA alliance is expected to secure only four seats with a 42 per cent vote share. The BJP and Congress are taking every step in Karnataka to win maximum seats. This is a strategic shift from the 2019 polls when Congress and JD(S) were allies. The BJP's move aims to secure the Vokkaliga vote in Old Mysore and tilt the election in its favour. The BJP has fielded a top cardiologist, a member of the Mysuru royal family, and an ex-chief Minister among its candidates. The Congress has many ministers' relatives, and these candidates can impact the result. It has taken a risk by fielding family members of mighty politicians, thus playing into the narrative of dynastic politics. Rebel candidates from both parties could upset the overall outcome. For instance, senior leaders like former chief Minister Veerappa Moily needed to be given the seats they sought. The 2024 election is crucial for both parties. Since the BJP formed its first government in 2008, the toppling game has been ongoing, with money playing a significant role in luring legislators to shift loyalties. The voters must decide whether to vote for the Congress, as they did in the Assembly polls, or promote the BJP, which previously ruled the State. Undoubtedly, the disenfranchised people who previously voted for the BJP might prefer the Congress, but the BJP has its own set of loyalists.

100 YEARS AGO

PITIFUL WIVES

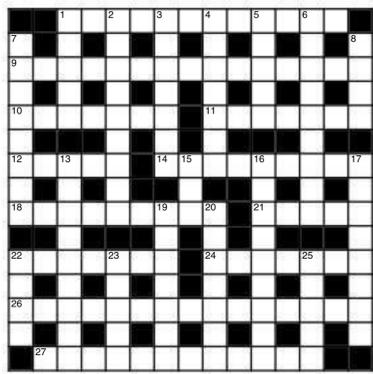
Occasionally, it comes home to me that living is a very dreary business for some women. One realizes that, all through England, there are hordes of women who are trying to amuse themselves, and pass away the days that seem, to some of us, to go with such alarming swiftness. I am not alluding, in priggish fashion, to the women who fill the theatres and the fashionable restaurants, and rush from night club to night club, and lead, in general, the idle and luxurious life. Moralists are always telling us that these are not true amusements, and that no one really enjoys them. But I am quite sure that no one would so fatigue themselves unless they really liked to do so. And, after all, enjoyment is not a concrete thing; if you believe you are enjoying yourself you are doing so, however foolish your occupation may be. But the women I speak of are - like Queen Victoria - "not amused," but unlike the august lady, they wish to be so. And yet they lack the inner forces that would help some to find diversion on a desert island. All this passed, through my mind the other day, when a woman, casually met at a party, spoke in this wise: "Some men," she pronounced, "are so selfish. I always feel so sorry for the poor things whose husbands are given up to golf. Golf widows, I always call them!" (she really said it!) "I know lots of women whose husbands play golf every week-end, and just leave them to themselves, never think of asking what they would like to do; just consider themselves." And more in the same strain, so that I was made to picture the poor little wife, sitting forlorn at home, house-bound, just because her cruel husband liked knocking a silly little white ball into bunkers and things. When I suggested that, surely, most women have some friends and occupations of their own, and were not entirely dependent on the good-will of husbands, the dear lady said solemnly, "Many of them are taking up Bridge, to pass the time."

LORD WOOLAVINGTON'S HORSE TO RUN

LONDON, APRIL 11 FRED DARLING, trainer of the Derby favourite, Lord Woolavington's "Tom Pinch," to-day said that the report that the horse would not run, owing to foot trouble, was without foundation. Rumours concerning the condition of "Tom Pinch," which have been in circulation recently, were brought to a head this morning, when it was reported in some quarters that he would not run owing to foot trouble. Darling, when shown the report, issued the above denial.

CROSSWORD

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YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

TRICKS PATIENCE  
UHUOAOO  
AMBITION MOUSSE  
MMTTBIT  
NYMPH SOLO THUG  
LLOUAM  
STUBBORN RUBBER  
WLSITLR  
SEXIST NONSENSE  
NNCOE  
STUDANTE FLUSH  
YUNURHAE  
JOKERS UNAFRAID  
NSEMNVZ  
TEINSEISUP DEALIER

ACROSS

- 1 Original form of Covid-19 not yet found (12)
- 9 He's good at balancing Telegraph puzzles with IT work (9,6)
- 10 The other half of Dutch budget (7)
- 11 Not a drunken follower of Falstaff but the opposite (7)
- 12 Wally's clothing for golf hotel after dark (5)
- 14 For good measure, not married with new partner (9)

DOWN

- 1 Eggs swell with sulphur settling to the bottom (5)
- 2 Critic to ban mechanisation in farming? (9)
- 3 'Special One' recruits Doherty's left and Bale's right foot (7)
- 4 Meet a reporter to describe upcoming work in theatre (7)
- 5 Heartlessly xenophobic about a parting alien? Just so (5)
- 6 Family bathed in almost continuous lights (9)
- 7 You might be asked to come up and see these electronic items around college (8)
- 8 Short acting lesson made shorter (4)
- 13 New church to accommodate singers of Jerusalem, where East meets West? (9)
- 15 Tree as regularly picked (3)
- 16 Young hare makes for dead trees? (9)
- 17 With joyous heart, Middle-easterner is climbing Mecca (8)
- 19 Deer getting frisky with sun bears (7)
- 20 Polish alternative government to deliver alternative speech (7)
- 22 Saul of Tarsus reveals place of conversion? (4)
- 23 It gives instruction to stop parliament ignoring children (5)
- 25 Plant having branches pollarded (5)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)

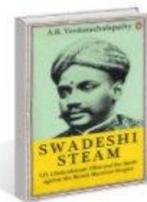
# Swadeshi venture that challenged British

SALLI MISRA

INDIAN people's struggle against the British was truly multi-faceted. Indians fought through non-cooperation, open defiance, underground violence and by courting imprisonment. There are also some notable examples where people fought the British by challenging their might in business. They started their own companies and competed with the British in order to undermine the British monopoly in business. Their business was not entirely motivated by profit-making and was completely at the service of anti-imperialist Indian nationalism.

VO Chidambaram Pillai (VOC), the hero of the book under review, was one such character. He set up his own business primarily in order to challenge and oppose the British. His is a story of great courage and heroism. In many ways, it is also a tragic story. The story of his life has been told most admirably by AR Venkatachalapathy in his book.

Shipping business in India was monopolised by the British. They had the resources, the technology and the necessary support from the state. VOC decided to challenge it by starting a small shipping company to ferry goods and passengers from Tuticorin on the eastern coast in South India to Colombo in 1906. This was the time of the Swadeshi movement. The idea of Swadeshi, which



**SWADESHI STEAM: VO CHIDAMBARAM PILLAI AND THE BATTLE AGAINST THE BRITISH MARITIME EMPIRE**

by AR Venkatachalapathy.  
Penguin Random House.  
Pages 495.  
₹999

Story of VO Chidambaram Pillai's life is of great courage and heroism. In many ways, it is also a tragic story

germinated in Bengal, had reached many parts of the country. VOC was a firm believer in Swadeshi and decided to bring this idea to the field of business.

It was not an easy task to float an Indian shipping company in those times. Almost everything went against this venture. The planters, who would use shipping to transport labour, were all Europeans. The necessary capital for the business venture was not easily available. There were all the risks in competing with the big fish, the British India Steam Navigation Company. Many Indians readily acquiesced in the British idea that Indian business lacked character and enterprise, and that Indian capital, being 'shy' in nature, would not easily enter the industry. In short, there were many political, social and psychological barriers in starting a purely Indian business venture.

It was thus against all odds that VOC decided to float an Indian shipping company. The main idea was to fight the British, not just in the political field but also in the field of business. Quite unsurprisingly, the preparations for the shipping business were very similar to starting a political campaign. All Indians were invited as shareholders in the joint stock company. The price of each share was kept as low as ₹25 to enable common people to become shareholders. Europeans were not allowed to buy shares. VOC toured many areas, gave speeches, made appeals and asked people to support the Swadeshi venture. His campaign

was very successful and nearly 1,700 shareholders bought 20,000 shares in the Swadeshi venture. His company was called Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company (SSNCo).

However, the venture flopped. The business, which was essentially politics in disguise, also floundered at the altar of politics. This was the time of the Swadeshi movement and the differences between moderate and extremist factions of the Congress had become very pronounced. The two actually clashed at the Surat session of Congress in 1907, leading to a split. VOC was a follower of Bal Gangadhar Tilak and a fierce votary of extremist politics. His radical and anti-British positions antagonised his moderate partners in the SSNCo, who conspired to remove him from all the important positions in the company. The founder of the company was reduced to the position of an outsider. This was just the opportunity the British were waiting for: The bureaucratic machinery of the British government swung into action, slapped charges of sedition against VOC and put him in jail for life. His sentence was later reduced to six years. By the time he was released in 1912, the SSNCo venture had wound up. This was also the end of VOC's political career.

However, when many years later, in 1946, a Swadeshi steamship company was set up in Tuticorin, the main ship of the company was given the name of Chidambaram, after VOC. This was a fitting tribute to the man who had dared to implement his

Swadeshi dream against all odds.

'Swadeshi Steam' narrates the story of a man who failed. The failure notwithstanding, it is an extremely important story not just in itself, but also because it opens into many larger themes. The story of the Swadeshi movement was confined largely to Bengal and Maharashtra. The book has enriched our understanding of the struggle by bringing important inputs from South India. It has also opened new vistas for an understanding of the politics of anti-imperialism.

The struggle against the British was carried out also in the field of commerce and business. Above all, the book highlights the truly federal character of Indian nationalism. VOC's politics exemplifies a vision of nationalism in which the Tamil and Indian identities complemented each other instead of being at odds with each other. VOC wore his regional patriotism on his sleeve. And his Tamil patriotism created openings for his uncompromising commitment to Indian nationalism. One facilitated and enriched the other. VOC's life illustrates this extremely crucial facet of Indian nationalism, as it developed during the course of the freedom struggle.

Recorded history has generally focused on accounts of successful ventures, not failed ones. However, it is important to realise, as the book demonstrates, that history can be equally, if not more, instructive in telling the stories of failures.

## For curious minds

PUBLISHING house Aleph's latest bouquet of books for the young ones has four very different offerings. One is the classic tale of 'Kabuliwala' by Rabindranath Tagore, the other is 'The Hoopoe on the Lawn' by children's favourite author Ruskin Bond. The third book is 'ABC of Hinduism for Kids', Devdutt Pattanaik's reimagining of alphabets the Hindu way. The surprise here, however, is Kalki's 'The Tiger King', a satire on those in power.

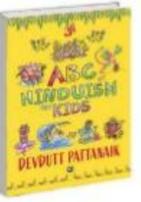
Kalki was a Tamil author known for his humorous and satirical articles. It tells the tale of the Maharaja of Pratibandapuram. As soon as he was born, astrologers foretold that he would be killed by a tiger one day. As the child grew up and took the reins of his kingdom in his hand, his entire being became involved in hunting tigers. He moved the earth to kill 100 of them. But wait, wasn't the 100th tiger supposed to kill him? Even though the book has been marked as 'children's book', young adults would relish the humour equally!

In Pattanaik's 'ABC of Hinduism for Kids', A stands for *atma* — unafraid of death, always at peace; B is for Brahma whom no one worships; C is for caste and how despite the law banning discrimination, some are still afraid to give up the old, even cruel, caste rules. And so we move on, meandering through F for forest where kings spent life in exile, flowing along with the serene waters of G for Ganga; various (Q for) quarters in Hinduism — four goals of human existence, four phases of life... ending it at X as Romans wrote 10, thus wrapping up this short journey into Hinduism on Aryabhata's



**THE TIGER KING**

by Kalki.  
Translated by Gowri Ramnarayan.  
Aleph.  
Pages 35.  
₹199



**ABC OF HINDUISM FOR KIDS**

by Devdutt Pattanaik.  
Illustrated by the author.  
Aleph.  
Pages 65.  
₹399

math-defining discovery!

This reimagined retelling of Hinduism and a Hindu way of life is colourful and fun, a welcome addition to Pattanaik's out-of-the-league children's literature.

'The Hoopoe on the Lawn' is the newest story from Bond, the master storyteller. It's an ode to the joys of childhood, bounties of nature and the magic of relationships. Arunava Sinha's translation of Tagore's 'Kabuliwala' has been richly illustrated, giving it a fresh look. — TNS

## Social autopsy of a murder

MANINDER SIDHU

ANJALI DESHPANDE'S translation of her Hindi novella, 'Hatya' (2019), evocatively titled 'Nobody Lights a Candle', is a pacy 'touchable tale' of deep-rooted structural prejudices in Indian society. It is a crime story that boldly delves into biases of caste, class and gender as they impinge upon the lives of the underprivileged. The linear, third-person, straight-forward narrative is, in particular, a "testimony to the loss of faith in life and people" amongst the thrice-'othered' poor Dalit women.

Adhirath, a suspended Station House Officer of a sleepy police station on the outskirts of Delhi, gets drawn in an unofficial capacity into the heart-wrenching murder of a young Dalit girl in a farmhouse. He laments the callous and sexist attitude of a deeply caste-ridden society: "The girl with the yellow dupatta? Pross? Randi? Beauty parlour girl? Amirpurwali? The dead body in the farmhouse? How many ways to describe her and not one clue to her personality." He is disturbed that Suryabala's mother, Ramvati, is the only moaner of the 'murder most foul', and proceeds to uncover the truth with an honesty and compassion habitually forsaken by his peers.

The stigma of caste is reinforced by Adhirath's personal story as well, wherein patriarchy raises its loathsome head validating the formidability of the institutionalised malaise. His wife, Pushpa, a fellow cop from a 'lower caste', is spared no abuse by her foul-mouthed father-in-law, a firm believer of endogamic practices. Despite Adhirath's best efforts, there are times when she is convinced that "home is designed as a highly sophisticated weapon to kill human beings". The parallel stories of Suryabala and Pushpa unfold in contrasting labyrinths of alleged prostitution and

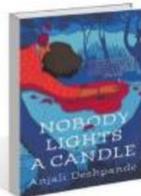
domestication respectively; if physical violation is the fate of the girl who plays "parlour-parlour", mental stress is the bane of the "havaladami".

Tactfully, the decibel of caste is lowered after the exposition, allowing the crime investigation to take over, and raised back towards the end to forcefully challenge crimes committed in the name of propriety and virtuosity. The language used is alive to the rhythms of local dialects and words like *faram*, *toobwells*, *property*, *biskey*, *Kilopetra*, *cushtumbers*, *munnayger*, and several others are used without explanation or apology; thus, firmly embedding the tale in local reality. Barring a few typos, the book reads well.

Since the novel realistically echoes the pain arising from upper-caste crime against women — as reported in the Hathras (2020), Lakhimpur Kheri (2022) and several other rape-murder cases — it leans towards the genre of 'non-fiction', better expressed through the portmanteau word 'faction': fact plus fiction. Also, like Nalini Jameela's 'The Autobiography of a Sex Worker', and the award-winning film 'Gangubai Kathiawadi', the novel draws attention to the dignity due to professional compulsions and choices of a woman.

The narrative is consistent in its bitter tone and the brevity with which grave complexities and inequalities are worded cuts deep; for instance, Adhirath's fleeting thought as he rides to the crime scene: "There are farmhouses on both sides of the road. Wonder where the fields of the villagers are?" The rich have it easy as their "misconduct is concealed behind the curtain of wealth... behind the customs and traditions they have so carefully nurtured".

The succinct story not only exposes the uncouth underbelly of law, but also debunks the selective outrage for justice of an internally sliced society.

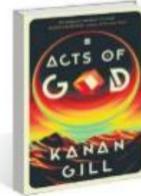


**NOBODY LIGHTS A CANDLE**

by Anjali Deshpande.  
Speaking Tiger.  
Pages 232.  
₹399



**BACKFLAP**



**ACTS OF GOD**  
by Kanan Gill.  
HarperCollins.  
Pages 364. ₹399

Weaving humour with philosophy is comedian Kannan Gill's debut novel. Detective P Manjunath and his assistant wrestle with an inscrutable mystery, but are pitted against the self-disgraced scientist Dr Krishna. The book blends storytelling with an interrogation of the very nature of existence.



**THE LONG STRIDER IN JEHANGIR'S HINDUSTAN**

by Dom Moraes & Saryu Srivatsa.  
Speaking Tiger.  
Pages 384. ₹499

Part-biography, part-history and part-travelogue, it was first published in 2003, a year before Dom Moraes passed away. The authors trace the journey of Thomas Coryate, who travelled across the Arabian desert and the Hindukush to reach Mughal India.

## Unpeeling layers of Souza's provocative art

RAJNISH WATTAS

IT'S mostly the rebel who transforms the established canons of art in any era. He challenges the existing norms to pursue his own inner calling, notwithstanding the opposition and suffering that come along with the new unsettling vision. In the western painting, Impressionists like Claude Monet, Cubists like Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dali, the creator of Surrealism, among others, broke shackles of previous styles to carve out new visions.

In architecture, too, Modernism — predominantly ushered in by Le Corbusier in Europe and Frank Lloyd Wright in America (the latter inspiring Howard Roark, the protagonist of the cult novel 'Fountainhead' by Ayn Rand) — initially faced opposition to the radical new ideas.

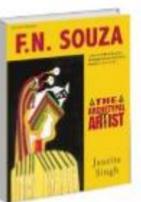
As the birth centenary of post-Independence India's most controversial painter, Francisco Victor Newton de Souza, is commemorated, a renewed interest has been generated worldwide. A retrospective of his work — 'Reminiscing Souza: An Iconoclastic Vision' — is on display at Dhoomi-

mal Gallery, Delhi, curated by renowned art historian Yashodara Dalmia.

At a Christie's auction held last month, his work 'The Lovers' (1949), considered among the artist's most important figurative paintings, set a new record by going for nearly ₹40 crore. Previously, 'Birth' (1955), depicting his mistress posing naked while she was pregnant, set a world auction record in 2015, fetching around ₹34 crore. But the value of artwork far transcends its commercial price.

Janeita Singh's magisterial treatise on his work and life, titled 'FN Souza: The Archetypal Artist', is timely and epic in its research. The enfant terrible of modern Indian painting challenged the aesthetic and moral sensibilities of the art establishment at that time. "FN Souza has always been a discomfiting if adulated presence in Indian modernist art. Through his life, buyers were reluctant to collect or display his paintings, which disturb conventional norms of propriety and trouble social comfort by its transgression of taboos, bordering on the pornographic and the monstrous," says Dalmia.

Souza was a born rebel. A Goan



**FN SOUZA: THE ARCHETYPAL ARTIST**

by Janeita Singh.  
Nyog Books.  
Pages 320. ₹4,500



FN Souza (front row, first from L) with other members of Progressive Artists Group.

Catholic, he attended St Xavier's College in Bombay, but was expelled in 1939 for drawing obscene graffiti in the toilets and later from the Sir JJ School of Art in 1945 for pulling down the Union Jack during a school ceremony. The fiery young artist soon co-founded the Bombay Progressive Artists Group (PAG), along with SH Raza, KH Ara, MF Husain, SK Bakre and HA Gade. "They saw the importance of looking back at India's classical, artistic past and at the West for innovations in technique and style, to create a new language for modern art in India," explains Nishad Avari.

The book is divided into five sections with a total of 21 essays — unpeeling the various palimpsests of Souza's provocative art. Janeita sees his work as hugely courageous, liberating and pioneering for Indian womanhood. She brings to focus his core ideology that the so-called 'obscenity' is in the eye of the beholder and not in the human body, which itself is a work of God and a divine art form.

To reconstruct sources of Souza's inspirations, Janeita draws upon Indian miniature paintings, primitivism and

ancient treatises of Kamasutra and the philosophy of Carl Jung. Her comparison of Souza's 'Bathers' (1946), with its ease of female figures at home with their bodies, completely devoid of self-consciousness, when contrasted with the Indian miniature paintings of Krishna and demure gopis and the nudes of the western classical art, usually depicting vulnerable, supine women, or the impressionist figures of Paul Cezanne and Henri Matisse, illustrates the point.

This highly erudite and definitive work on FN Souza, brought out in an elegantly published volume with high quality reproductions of the paintings, is a befitting tribute to the art and life of India's pioneering modernist painter. In the end, he, like the proverbial tragic hero consumed by alcoholism and a life of a Lothario, died in 2002 in Mumbai, with a very small number of mourners to bid farewell. Alas, India did not value its own 'Picasso' when he was alive.

In a moving tribute, the legendary MF Husain said: "Souza was my mentor... he is the most significant painter, almost a genius."

# Real people, real lives



**TOUCHSTONES**  
IRA PANDE

THE fact that four major religious groups in India — Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Sikhs — had their most holy celebrations this fortnight or in the one gone by is reason to ponder and mark. Easter, Chaitra Navratras, Eid-ul-Fitr and Baisakhi are being celebrated by all Indians now. What does this say about us as a country? This should give us a reason to discredit all those political leaders who try and corral us into religious ghettos and hand them a lesson to learn. I hope that the coming time will teach some of them a vital fact they need to remember.

It is ironic that while all political parties talk of the syncretic nature of our civil society with pride, they also sow the seeds of doubt that makes one the other. However, the wise Indian voter can see this devious game for what it's worth and will, as ever, vote with the usual sense of collective responsibility to keep this country together. In fact, I place more faith in the village and non-elitist voter than I do on the urban city slicker. I hope I am right.

Every gathering of family, friends and neighbours today is a cacophony of divergent political views. People have stopped meeting friends who go back several years because they support a different political party. These deep cleavages have entered individual homes and siblings and married couples are now reduced to avoiding the banter and good-hearted leg-pulling that was the usual way to deal with such differences. But please keep in mind, as a wise friend's post

pointed out, that it is not the government that will come to your aid when you most need it, but your friends and family. Also, that governments may change every five years, but your social ties remain constant.

That said, let us move to more pleasant matters. Less than a week ago, I had a cataract surgery performed on one of my eyes. Decades ago, I had stood with my mother when she had hers done and was so impressed with the quantum leaps that have been made since then. For one, there is an option to go for a completely digitally-aided laser surgery, which means that no human surgical cuts are needed. The procedure takes less than half an hour and before you know it, you are discharged. Now that I have one new eye and an old one, let me tell you how bright the colours appear from my new eye. It's as if a dirty window pane has been gently wiped clean of all the dust and muck covering it.

Since I've been confined to the house this last week and asked to limit staring into a mobile screen, I listen to podcasts and read books. And while we are on the subject of books, I must say that my fascination for English language fiction is almost over. The genres of magic realism, urban anxieties, existentialism and alienation, the immigrant's experience of exile and longing — all these are now as dead as the dodo. The real discovery is the strong sense of identity and social reality available now only in our *bhasha* writing. Some excellent translators have made it possible to access those books that are written in languages I am not familiar with, and the

**While all political parties talk of the syncretic nature of our civil society, they also sow the seeds of doubt**

discovery has been such an eye-opener. So that's another old cataract excised, I think.

Most publishing houses in India have seen a huge decline in retail book trade. Fewer people are now reading printed books as many download titles on their devices. Others listen to audio books. The hardest hit are the niche publishers, run by a dedicated editor/publisher who has to rely on the marketing wings of the multinational publishing houses as their budget for publicity is severely cut. The result is that a new genre of writing has cropped up: these are the super-ambitious young writers, often either a woke activist or someone with pockets deep enough to pay the publicists, freelance editors, agents and other such enablers to ensure that books are seen, talked about and reviewed. Believe me, most deserve to be trashed, for many are the literary version of an entitled bunch of brats.

Naturally, they prefer to write on self-help, motivational yakety-yaks, health and self care, food and issues related to that. With such a limited experiential arc and an ever-shrinking vocabulary, they are like a flash in the pan, and quickly disappear. If you have visited a lit-fest recently, you can spot them from a mile, stalking a famous writer, a well-known publisher or a promoter. I run a mile away when someone says, 'Ma'am, I want to be a writer. Please can you help?' If such a person does not have a book that is bursting to come out, then a Caesarean operation is not the answer.

On the other hand, the freshness and depth of the writing that is coming out of the non-English writers is astounding. In languages such as Marathi, Malayalam, Tamil, Maithili, Urdu and Hindi — to name just a few — the energy pulls you in instantly. Gender, poverty, the suffocating lives of those stuck in remote areas, social invisibility, sexual exploitation, Dalit tales that are raw experiences and not imagined angst — all these need no props or lessons from anyone.

They are stories of real people with real lives.

# When a psychologist won economics Nobel



AUNINDYO CHAKRAVARTY

THERE was something odd about the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2002. It was given to the psychologist, Daniel Kahneman. Perhaps, this would never have happened had Kahneman and his comrade-in-arms, Amos Tversky, chosen to publish their most significant theory on how people take decisions — they called it 'prospect theory' — in *Psychological Review*, the most respected journal for psychologists. Instead, they chose to send it to *Econometrica*, perhaps the most name-drop-worthy journal for economists to be published in. It is now considered to be the most cited paper ever in the history of economics.

What Kahneman and Tversky showed in their theory was that when human beings make choices, they do it on the basis of how these choices are represented to them, not how they actually exist in the objective, external world. For example, imagine there's a deadly virus ravaging your town, which could kill 60,000 people. You are the mayor and you have to choose between two vaccines — one which is guaranteed to save only 20,000 people, and another which has a one-third chance of saving everybody, but a two-thirds chance of not saving anyone. Most people choose the first option, even though it would kill 40,000. On the other hand, if the same choice is reversed and they are told that the first choice is guaranteed to kill 40,000 people, and the second has a 1/3rd chance of saving everyone, they are likely to choose the second. The two choices are exactly the same, but they have been represented differently.

Kahneman gave another example of how human beings are driven more by their aversion to avoiding losses, than by rational calculations of how much things would actually cost them. It goes something like this — imagine a situation in which you have bought movie tickets for ₹300 and when you reach the theatre, you find you have lost them. Chances are, you will simply go home because you don't want to pay twice for the same thing. On the other hand, imagine that you didn't have tickets when you reached the cinema, but realised that ₹300 had fallen out of your pocket. There is a high likelihood that you will buy the movie ticket and watch it, even though the monetary loss is exactly the same. The rational consumer should have recognised that it would make no difference to their overall consumption to buy the tickets again, but the real consumer would only buy when the loss of ₹300 has been "charged to general revenue".

Economists, who had been dissatisfied with the complete absurdity of rational choice, embraced Kahneman's insights into how consumers actually make choices. On the other hand, the orthodoxy, which wanted to protect the theoretical validity of *Homo Economicus*, attacked and rejected Kahneman. One young economist who took to Kahneman's ideas was Richard Thaler, who would later go on to win the Nobel in economics for his contributions to 'behavioural economics'. Thaler had been pointing to 'anomalies' in the supposedly 'rational' behaviour of economic agents, in his popular series in

the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*. Collaborating with Thaler helped Kahneman dig deeper into the discipline of economics and also helped further establish his credentials amongst economists.

Kahneman's contribution to the theory of decision-making has had many more applications outside the discipline of economics, most importantly in public policy. It gave rise to the concept of 'nudges' (popularised by Thaler) to push people to make the choices that policymakers want, without depriving them of the freedom of choice. For instance, it was found that consumers can be 'nudged' into choosing to buy more fruits if these were displayed close to the payment counter. Similarly, people can be oriented towards choosing environment-friendly options if that is the default option. This is based on the work of behavioural economists, like Kahneman, that people often tend to use their intuition and habitual ways of thinking when they make decisions, instead of thinking things through. Nudge theory attempts to utilise this tendency to offer 'good' options that people will intuitively choose.

**Kahneman showed how people make choices. His work has had many more applications outside the discipline of economics, in public policy most importantly**

Kahneman popularised this concept in his bestselling book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. Fast thinking, or System 1 thinking, involves heuristics, or mental shortcuts, that people use to make decisions. Kahneman showed that these are based on past experiences, the availability of past examples, the framing of choices, and our tendency to avoid losses. Slow thinking, or System 2 thinking, is more deliberate, dispassionate and logical. While fast thinking is useful in taking quick decisions, slow thinking helps in avoiding the biases associated with the former.

The question that might be asked is, why did mainstream economics accept Kahneman's disruptive ideas, which, if taken to the extreme, could entirely derail the project of neoclassical economics? The answer to that is probably that Kahneman's critique of the rational 'subject' of economics lent itself to being defanged and incorporated into the wider model of free-market economics. Kahneman based his theses on statistical studies of real-life consumers, which could be understood as the basics of 'human nature'.

Stronger challenges to the idea of the human subject, leave alone a rational one, that came from European post-structuralist theories were entirely incompatible with the project of neoliberalism. Those would perforce question the fundamental validity of the 'invisible hand' of the market, and any economic arguments that are based on the idea of free markets.

Kahneman wrote that we make decisions based on how we remember experiences, and not the real experiences themselves. Indeed, we are 'our remembered selves'. One would be tempted to say that Daniel Kahneman's legacy is equally how it is remembered after his death. Not how his ideas have actually been experienced by people, whose lives have been changed by four decades of neoliberal economic policies.

# 'Punjabi cinema uninspiring, plays safe'

'*Kohraa*' has been described as a milestone for a multi-layered understanding of Punjab. Gunjit Chopra, its co-creator and co-writer, talks to *Nomika Singh* about his perceptions on what ails and distinguishes the state, especially its hinterland, which he has toured extensively. Excerpts:

■ Ever since *Kohraa* was streamed, it's being hailed as a ray of sunshine. How do you respond to such praise?

It's overwhelming and also encouraging, especially when you are creating a different milieu, a different kind of Punjab and you are motivated to create more of such content.

■ Drugs, homosexuality, NRI angle, complexity of human relationships... did you at any point feel you were biting into more than one can chew?

We were not trying to be the flag-bearers of these issues. We ourselves were trying to look through the fog. We should be true to our stories, which should have the DNA of the state we are talking about. Issues should be hidden in the story. 'Out there' things don't work in the world of entertainment.

■ What exactly was the trigger for *Kohraa*?

When I travelled, I realised how we are so different from the way we are being perceived. There is no *dhol batasha*, there is no *giddha* happening. Punjab has its own issues and its own beauty which lies beyond the mustard

fields. We have not tapped into its history, culture and literature. Punjab is under and misrepresented. It is because people in Bollywood were not coming from Punjab. They were Punjabis alright, but came from west Punjab.

■ What do you think ails Punjab today? The problem goes back to Partition; everything is connected, it's like an arithmetic progression. Right now, it's becoming impossible to make people stay in Punjab. First we need to accept it as home.

■ How do you look at immigration, which is likely to be the subject of your future project?

Immigrants' life is complex and often they get lost in the duality of where they belong. Why are Punjabis so fascinated by the idea of moving abroad when they know there are not enough opportunities? We have forgotten the prejudices we faced there. I hope immigration will phase out.

■ Now that Imtiaz Ali's *Chamkila* is out, will you still go ahead with your documentary on the singer?

Yes, that is my passion project. A documentary is a difficult thing, it calls for so much research.

■ Why are artists so fascinated by *Chamkila*? One is the times of *Chamkila*. Whether you like his songs or not, he talked a lot about the times he lived in. Maybe artists see them-

selves in him. Be it helpless artists who are not allowed to say what they want, or artists who can tell the truth, or those bound by the politics of the country, all feel connected to him.

■ What is your take on Punjabi cinema?

It's not inspiring, to say the least. We are playing too safe. Should this kind of cinema exist? Yes, but it should not be the only kind. Punjab must look beyond the obvious. There has to be a new branch of arts and aesthetics. Punjab is such a fascinating state. We are born entrepreneurs. Rural Punjab has seen the world. But if we are the first ones to fight on the border, we are also the first to try a new drug. It's tragic that Punjab is on a drug route.

■ To be associated with two path-breaking shows, *Paatal Lok* and *Kohraa*, does it put pressure?

The moment you start taking the burden, it plays on your mind. You do get influenced by all the attention. But the beauty lies in forgetting and getting back to the drawing board.

■ Your association with Sudip Sharma goes back to *Paatal Lok*. What are the lessons you learnt from the acclaimed maker?

You need ethical people you can follow beyond imbibing the art and craft. One should have good mentors. What I have learnt from him is how to be secure in your own thing.

■ What is your message to Punjabis?

Appreciate and support all kinds of arts. Punjab has so much undiscovered talent. We should not ape others, but make our own cinema about our own people.



Gunjit Chopra

# Take to task food business operators playing with lives



**CONSUMER RIGHTS**  
PUSHPA GIRIMAJI

THE tragic death of a 10-year-old girl in Patiala from food poisoning believed to have been caused by a chocolate cake bought from Kanha Bakery through delivery app Zomato underscores the need for stringent enforcement of food safety laws.

This is not the first time that a birthday celebration has been marred by a cake rendered toxic on account of unsafe ingredients or unhygienic conditions during the baking and decorating process, or during handling or storing, leading to food poisoning. While in most cases, the victims have recovered, in the Patiala case, the young girl succumbed

In October last year, three persons, including a four-year-old girl, had to be admitted to a hospital in Erode, Tamil Nadu, with very serious symptoms of food poisoning following consumption of a cake and egg puffs from a local bakery. Two months prior to that, the food safety officials in Tamil Nadu's Villupuram district seized 65 kg of sub-standard bread and cake from a manufacturing unit, following a complaint of four single tooth dentures found in a cake! On December 31, 2022, food safety authorities in Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, seized hundreds of cakes from bakeries for using prohibited colours and banned additives.

On December 29 last year, a District Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission in Emakulam, Kerala, directed KN Bhaskaran of Susheela Bakery to pay ₹30,000 as compensation and ₹20,000 as costs to Santosh Mathew for the food poisoning suffered by him and his family following consumption of puffs bought from the bakery.

On August 31, the Additional District Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission held a south Bengaluru bakery liable for selling

black forest cake in a rotten state and asked Vinayaka Cake Shop to refund the cost of the cake (₹3,500) and pay ₹3,000 as compensation and ₹3,000 as costs of litigation to Pooja Shankar, whose son's birthday party was ruined because of the substandard cake.

On August 11, the District Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission in Ludhiana directed Nova Bakery to pay ₹20,000 as compensation to Rajinder Kumar for delivering a cake infested with ants. The cake had been bought by Kumar for his son Kartik's birthday and following consumption of the cake, the boy as well as some guests fell ill.

In all such cases, the biggest problem is to

**Regular reports of food poisoning, such as in Patiala, call for better surveillance of baking industry**

get the food tested to prove its toxicity or the presence of microorganisms that caused food poisoning, because by the time people start getting sick, the food would have already been consumed. Even if there is a left-over piece and is adequate to satisfy the requirements of the law and is preserved, not every consumer knows the food safety law and her/his right to get the food independently tested in a government laboratory.

So, consumer courts have kept this practical difficulty faced by consumers in mind and based their orders on the investigation of the food safety officer in response to the complaint, the doctor's certificate of food poisoning and the proof of purchase. In fact, in *Yum Restaurants (India) Pvt Ltd vs Kishan Hegde* (February 5, 2020), the apex consumer court agreed with the restaurant that the initial onus of proving that the food served was defective would be on the complainant. "However, the burden of proof cannot be so high that an ordinary customer visiting a restaurant is unable to discharge the same. If a customer files an affidavit stating therein that the food served was rotten/stale/inferior

in quality, such an affidavit will be sufficient to discharge the initial onus placed upon the customer, unless it is shown that the complaint is motivated or actuated by extraneous considerations," the Commission said.

Coming back to the Patiala case, the food safety authorities must complete the investigations quickly and ensure maximum punishment under the law to the perpetrators. Equally important, the food regulator should use the compensation provision (Section 65) in the Food Safety and Standards Act to ensure that the guilty pay the compensation amount provided under the law.

Compensation for non-grievous injury can go up to ₹1 lakh and for grievous injury, up to ₹3 lakh. In case of death, it shall not be less than ₹5 lakh and can go up to any amount, depending on the case. The parents should also seek a steep compensation under the Consumer Protection Act. Of course, no amount of money can compensate for the loss of their child, but imprisonment and stiff penalties would send out a warning to all those food business operators who play with the lives of consumers.



PM Modi would have to lead the BJP to a better showing than 2019 in phase one to achieve the goals of 50% vote share & 400-plus seats.

The anti-BJP Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance has an uphill task on its hands as it fights to halt a saffron surge. PT/VANI

# First phase test for BJP, Oppn

April 19 crucial for NDA's 400+ ambitions, INDIA challenge as 102 constituencies across 21 states/UTs go to polls

ADITI TANDON

**O**N April 19, the world's largest electoral exercise will kick off in India as 96.8 crore people begin voting through seven phases until June 1 to elect a new Parliament. Over 10 per cent of the global population will participate in what Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar describes as the biggest festival of democracy.

The staggering scale of the Indian General Election 2024 shines in one statistic — 69 per cent people in the world's most populous country have enrolled themselves to vote in this election as against 49 per cent in the first Lok Sabha poll of 1952, when a fledgling nation was just beginning to experiment with the democratic electoral process.

As is the case today, global interest in Indian elections was at its prime even in 1952.

The Election Commission of India records reveal that Chester Bowles, the US ambassador to India (1951-53) who arrived here on the eve of the 1952 General Election, was convinced that the best solution for Asian countries would be a benevolent dictatorship like that of Kemal Ataturk in Turkey.

"However, after seeing the world's largest elections in India from close quarters, Bowles felt it was time to revise the pessimistic, somewhat arrogant, assumption that democracy is practical only for highly developed, educated people," an ECI compendium on India's electoral journey notes. The fact that the size of the national electorate has grown a phenomenal 5.62 times — from 17.32 crore in the first Lok Sabha poll to 96.8 crore in the 18th — is a sign of the Indian voters' abiding faith in democracy.

With the marathon poll season rolling out, all eyes are on the crucial first phase on April 19, as the BJP strongman and two-term Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led National Democratic Alliance faces off with the Congress-led INDIA bloc that will fight to halt a saffron surge. For the BJP, seeking a third term, this poll is all about Modi, his schemes covering 60-crore beneficiaries, his promise of making India the third largest global economy, and his stress on cultural revival through the Ram Mandir consecration.

For the Congress, the party that ruled India for 54 of the 76 years since Independence, this election is a test of survival. In 2014 and 2019, the Congress was restricted to 44 and 52 seats in the 'House of the People', which did not have a Leader of Opposition for two straight terms (to get the Leader of Opposition position, a party must have 10 per cent strength of the Lok Sabha. The current Lok Sabha has 543 MPs, and 10 per cent is 54).

**BANKING ON PRE-POLL ALLIANCES**  
The highest number of constituencies — 102 — across 21 states/UTs will see voting in phase one on April 19. This is 19 per cent of the entire Lok Sabha strength of 543.

Key battleground states across the North, South, West, East and the Northeast will vote during this phase and witness a significantly distinct election, its defining feature being the dominance of allies in the electoral strategies of both the ruling BJP and the Opposition Congress. Both parties, in a bid to outdo one another, have stitched sizeable pre-poll alliances with state partners.

For the first time in its history, the Congress, India's principal Opposition party, will majorly contest in pre-poll pacts with members of the anti-BJP INDIA (Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance) grouping.

Of the 102 seats in the first phase, Congress nominees will fight 56 and allies 46 — a move the party explains with the adage: "We must stoop to conquer."

The Congress is reconciled to contesting



A file picture of voting underway during the first General Election in the country in 1952. PHOTO COURTESY: ECI ARCHIVES

**17.32 CR**  
Number of voters in first Lok Sabha poll in 1952

**96.8 CR**  
Voters in 18th Lok Sabha poll in 2024

**49%**  
of population enrolled as voters in 1952

**69%**  
of population enrolled as voters in 2024

**1.8 cr**  
first-time voters can cast vote in 2024

## ISSUES BEING HIGHLIGHTED

### BJP & NDA

- BJP claims all core promises fulfilled: Article 370 abrogated in J&K; idol of Ram Lalla consecrated in Ayodhya; Uniform Civil Code enacted in BJP-ruled Uttarakhand; Citizenship Amendment Act rules notified.
- Modi 'guarantees' include schemes targeting 60-crore beneficiaries; making India the world's third largest economy; focus on women, youth, farmers and the poor.
- BJP promises an anti-corruption, decisive government ensuring security of the country; assures greater transformative reforms if reelected.

### CONGRESS & OPPOSITION

- To hold caste-based census, if elected.
- Allege misuse of Central agencies against Opposition leaders and erosion of democratic institutions.
- Have been raking up the arrest of Opposition Chief Ministers Arvind Kejriwal (Delhi) and Hemant Soren (Jharkhand).
- Promise of raising reservation cap beyond 50 per cent.
- If elected, will repeal UCC, CAA, restore full statehood to J&K.
- Massive sops for women (Rs 1 lakh a year to poorest women) and youth; anti-BJP pitch around price rise, unemployment.

## VOTING ON APRIL 19

102 Lok Sabha segments in 21 states/UTs and 92 Assembly constituencies in Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim will go to polls.

### 'MAKE OR BREAK' POLL

SOUTH		NORTHEAST	
Tamil Nadu: All 39 seats		Arunachal Pradesh	2
		Assam	5
		Manipur	2
		Meghalaya	2
		Mizoram	1
		Nagaland	1
		Sikkim	1
		Tripura	1
		WEST	
		Maharashtra	5
		UTs: Andaman & Nicobar, Lakshadweep, Puducherry (1 each)	
NORTH			
Rajasthan	12		
UP	8		
Uttarakhand	All 5		
J&K	1		
MP	6		
Bihar	4		
Chhattisgarh	1		
EAST			
West Bengal	3		

**1,625** candidates are in fray in phase one. **252** of them have criminal cases and 450 are crorepatis. **134** candidates are women, making up 8% of the total number of nominees.

somewhere near 350 constituencies in the 2024 General Election — a massive drop from 423 it contested in 2019, the same year when the BJP not only contested more seats (437) than the Congress for the first time, but also the highest ever seats since its inception in 1980.

"We need to stop the BJP and that's the goal," a Congress leader explains.

On allies, even the BJP, driven by the goal of crossing 370 seats on its own and 400 with the NDA, is contesting in alliance with new-found partners — RLD in Uttar Pradesh; JD(U) in Bihar; Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena and Ajit Pawar-led NCP in Maharashtra; PMK in Tamil Nadu and regional partners across the Northeast.

The PM would have to lead the BJP to a better show than 2019 in phase one if he has to achieve the party's major goals — 50 per cent vote share in the 2024 polls (never attained by any party in the past) and 400-plus seats (the Congress won the highest-ever seats, 404, in 1984).

### STAKES IN SOUTH

While the first phase is a proverbial 'make or break' for the Opposition alliance, it is equally important for PM Modi's poll target of 400-plus seats for the ruling NDA.

Out of 102 seats going to polls in the first phase, non-BJP parties hold 60 in the outgoing Lok Sabha, and the BJP 42.

The second highest seat holder in this phase is Tamil Nadu's ruling DMK, with 23 segments in the 17th Lok Sabha. The Congress has 15 seats; BSP, SP and others in the Northeast have the rest.

All 39 seats of Tamil Nadu will vote on April 19. While the INDIA bloc (Congress, DMK and allies) faces the challenge of offsetting anti-incumbency to repeat their spectacular 2019 showing in Tamil Nadu, the BJP will seek a dignified entry into the state's electoral space.

In 2019, the DMK-led alliance had swept Tamil Nadu winning 38 of 39 seats (DMK won 23 and the Congress 8). The AIADMK won one and the BJP drew a blank.

Tamil Nadu will test the PM's poll acumen, with saffron forces eyeing a double-digit vote share and some seats.

The INDIA alliance, on the other hand, claims a comfortable edge.

For the BJP the PM has led a spate of rallies in the state, building poll narratives around the Congress and DMK's act of gifting Katchatheevu island to Sri Lanka; DMK's anti-Sanatana remarks; Ram Mandir outreach ahead of the consecration in Ayodhya; emotional appeals around the Chola dynasty Sengol and repeated invocation of the historic links between the North and the South through Kashi and Tamil Nadu.

The DMK and the Congress have countered Modi's aggressive pitch with prom-

ises of a caste census every five years, allegations of misuse of Central agencies against the Union government, claims of discrimination in fund flow to non-BJP-ruled states and accusations of bias against the state Governor.

The DMK manifesto has gone far enough to assure appointment of Governors with Chief Ministers' consent and repealing Article 356, which permits dissolution of state assemblies. Revocation of the Citizenship Amendment Act, National Education Policy, Uniform Civil Code, one nation-one election plan, the Agnipath scheme and restoration of statehood for J&K are the other Opposition planks for the voters.

To the Congress' comfort, seat sharing with INDIA ally DMK was largely amicable, unlike with the Trinamool Congress (TMC) in West Bengal. The allies agreed to the following division of seats — 21 DMK, 9 Congress and the rest allies.

In the NDA, the BJP is contesting 23 seats, PMK 10 and allies the rest. The AIADMK (which did not ally with BJP) will fight 32 seats in alliance with DMDK (5 seats) and other smaller parties.

Tamil Nadu will be keenly watched for BJP's performance. The party needs to do better in the South to push up LS numbers. Out of 129 seats in five southern states, BJP has 29 (25 out of Karnataka's 28 seats and four out of Telangana's 17). It

has no MP in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala.

### BJP MAINSTAY

Like the INDIA alliance hitting saturation limits in Tamil Nadu in 2019, the BJP swept the Hindi belt, bagging more than 50 per cent votes in 11 states and UTs, mostly across the north.

Many of these seats will go to polls in the first phase — Bihar (4), MP (6), Rajasthan (12), UP (8) and Uttarakhand (5). Of these 35 seats, the BJP and allies hold 30. The only first-phase Hindi belt seats the non-BJP parties hold are MP's Chhindwara and west UP's Saharanpur, Bijnor, Nagina (BSP) and Moradabad (SP).

The Congress would need a strategic campaign to gain from BJP's 2019 saturation across the Hindi heartland.

The BJP, conscious of the challenge, has dropped many sitting MPs in these states to beat anti-incumbency trends.

Among 429 candidates declared so far, the BJP has dropped 109 of its 303 sitting MPs in the 17th Lok Sabha. In Rajasthan alone, it has benched 11 of the 25 sitting MPs and in west UP, it has denied a re-nomination to Varun Gandhi, the late PM Indira Gandhi's grandson, from Pilibhit.

In Uttarakhand, the BJP has replaced two of its five sitting MPs, including a former CM.

West UP remains a deep focus area for the BJP as the majority of 14 seats it lost in the state in 2019 fall here. The BJP has spoilt Opposition equations in the region, having brought RLD to its side and conferring the Bharat Ratna on the late PM Choudhary Charan Singh, the grandfather of RLD chief Jayant. In 2019, the SP, BSP and RLD contested as a bloc. BSP has gone alone this time, with both the BJP and the Congress hoping for Mayawati to play a spoiler for the other.

### NORTHEAST SEGMENTS

Of the 25 Lok Sabha seats across eight northeastern states, 15 will see voting in the first phase, with the BJP holding seven in the outgoing Lok Sabha and the Congress and regional parties the rest. Here, too, INDIA allies are harbouring high hopes of defeating the BJP.

### NORTH BENGAL

Cooch Behar, Alipurduar and Jalpaiguri will vote in phase one. All are located in the northern belt, which gave the BJP seven of its 18 seats in West Bengal in 2019, close behind the ruling TMC's overall tally of 22.

The BJP has renominated sitting MPs from Cooch Behar (Nishith Pramanik) and Jalpaiguri (Jayant Roy), replacing Alipurduar MP and Union Minister John Barla with Assembly chief whip Manoj Tigga.

The saffron forces hope to retain all three seats, having gone an extra mile to woo the dominant Rajbanshis, who are nearly 39-lakh-strong across north Bengal. The BJP recently nominated erstwhile Rajbanshi royal Anant Rai to the Rajya Sabha, with TMC countering the move by sending tea garden worker Prakash Baraik to the House of Elders.

While the TMC is labouring to halt the BJP in its tracks, saffron forces are aggressively pitched against the ruling party, weaving a new campaign narrative around women's alleged victimisation by TMC strongman Sheikh Shah-jahan in Sandeshkhali.

But, observers say, TMC chief Mamata Banerjee is not one to be overwhelmed easily. "She did not think twice before parting with the INDIA bloc and going it alone," points out an analyst.

The Congress and the Left, fighting together, are seen as marginal players in West Bengal, where they respectively won two and zero seats in 2019.

**82 lakh**  
Voters above 85 years can vote in 2024

**2.18 lakh**  
centenarians registered as voters

**19.74 cr**  
Voters in the age group of 20-29 years