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COVER STORY
BATTLEGROUND
2019

A close-up portrait of actor Allu Arjun, looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. He has dark hair styled back and a light beard. He is wearing a black collared shirt.

ALLU ARJUN THE STYLISH STAR OF THE MILLENNIUM

With the swiftly changing political equations across the country, how the biggest battle will play out



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Allu Arjun is modesty personalized superstar

Big names of South India cinema namely MGR, NTR, Rajnikant, Kamal Hassan, Chiranjivee, Mohan Babu are household names with global Indian community. The rise of Allu Arjun is likely to script similar success story. Allu rose up the ladder since his debut in Tollywood and has never looked back.



Allu Arjun soon began riding the wave of success and landed blockbuster films such as 'Arya', 'Bunny', 'Happy', 'Arya 2', 'Race Gurram', 'S/O Satyamurthy', 'Sarrainodu', 'DJ' and many others. On the surface, his road to superstardom has been enviably easy marking to be the next superstar in the industry. He burns up the screen with his energy that spikes out in all direction, sweeping you up with its force even in casual encounter.

He is the only South Indian actor whose movies have reached the Rs 100 crore club thrice. His Hindi dubbed movies have collectively surpassed 530 million views on YouTube and have a huge crossover appeal across India especially in Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and among other states. Today, his fan following is increasing by every minute and so is the number of filmmakers wanting to sign him. What's more he has hit a beautiful equation in his personal life as well. Riding the crest of his huge fans followers of 12.7 million in Facebook alone making him the highest among any South Indian actor and many Bollywood stars. Opinion Express is experimenting with a shift from political to entertainment cover story.

Secondly we are reporting in depth assessment of Modi wave in the country: How has the Republic fared with Prime Minister Narendra Modi steering the country towards the general election of 2019? It has been a mixed record, with the willingness to take decisions trumped by ideological blinkers and a propensity to think of the virtues of Ram Rajya. The Sangh Parivar leadership has not quite reconciled itself regarding how far to take the concept of Hindutva in ruling a heterogeneous and multi-ethnic country. Two major decisions merit attention — the sudden move for demonetisation of a huge chunk of our currency and the hasty introduction of the Goods and Services Tax. The first decision was Mr Modi's own prescription for the evils of black money and it has badly misfired, slowing down the economy, while the GST, an essential measure that earlier Congress governments had failed to bring in, was imposed somewhat post-haste. The demonetisation scheme was essentially Mr Modi's idea, and although he talked it up as a kind of poor man's revenge against the rich, the poor suffered the most. There has been no suggestion of apology on Mr Modi's behalf on slowing down the economy and its numerous other consequences.

In the field of foreign policy, Mr Modi has built on the country's record, considerably enhancing ties with Israel and becoming the first Indian PM to unreservedly welcome Israel into the hall of nations. Mr Modi has decided that India's defence and geopolitical links with the Jewish state are important enough to be concentrated and the risks minimal as the Sunni monarchies are also reaching out to it. Does Mr Modi have a roadmap beyond the victory post-2019? Judging by his exertions in Davos and elsewhere, he is rustling up plans for a major internal manufacturing spree on the basis of abundant foreign investment. But circumstances have to be propitious for such investment because men with money and resources have options. The country will enter a new phase after the 2019 polls, and it will be an entirely new ballgame.

—Prashant Tewari,
Editor-in-Chief

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THE ICONIC STAR



SAFFRON SURGE IN NORTH EAST

Modi juggernaut expands Pan India courtesy RSS

Chandan Mitra

BJP spectacular show in Tripura and Nagaland has opened a door for the party ambitious plan to start GE 2019 campaign. The look east political strategy of BJP to garner over 100 lok sabha seats in order to ensure the repeat of 282+ seats in GE 2019 is well in place. With exception of Mamta Banerjee in West Bengal and Navin Patnaik in Odisha, the entire east is looking saffron. The credit of the tremendous victories must go to Modi Amit Shah duo, RSS organization, BJP clinical planning and off course access of tremendous funding.

Right from the day Modi government took over the centre: the tremendous focus on North-East has transformed the entire eco system of India's

most backward region. Gradually, the BJP is expanding in North-East state by state leading to the integration of seven sister states with the main land.

To say the BJP's victories in the North-east, especially in Tripura, are historic seems almost like an understatement. Routing the CPM in Tripura after 25 years is an unprecedented achievement comparable only to Mamata Banerjee's feat in dislodging the Left Front from power in Bengal after 34 years in 2011. Considering the BJP failed to win a single seat in the last assembly poll in Tripura, its tally of 40 out of 60 this time is truly spectacular. With Nagaland and probably Meghalaya also in its kitty, the BJP can now credibly claim to be a pan-India party, barring some states in the South although it hopes to wrest Karnataka from the Congress later this year.

In this context, the BJP's success in Tripura suggests that the state's Bengali-majority voters switched their allegiance to the BJP while the party's sustained efforts to win over the tribal vote also paid off. The Bengali-speaking people of West Bengal and Tripura have traditionally aligned with the Communists and looked only to the Congress as a possible alternative so far. The collapse of the Congress across the country has obviously impacted voters in the East too. If the Bengalis in their homeland start to accept the BJP as their preferred option, it may bring bad tidings for Mamata Banerjee. The ascendant BJP will henceforth be vastly emboldened to mount a feisty challenge to Trinamool, first in the Lok Sabha and then the assembly polls of 2021.

What is it that the BJP had to offer to voters in Tripura? Essentially it was



the assurance of change encapsulated in its election winning slogan - "Chalo Paltai" (let's change). After 25 years, the CPM looked jaded with nothing new to offer. Impoverished voters of underdeveloped Tripura were not impressed by the fact that the otherwise popular Chief Minister Manik Sarkar was recently "crowned" the poorest Chief Minister of India. The aspirational urge gripped Tripura voters this time. And Prime Minister Narendra Modi's image as change-maker swung the polls for his party although the BJP had no local leader of Sarkar's stature. Indeed the CPM's empty rhetoric of ushering an egalitarian revolution sounded pathetically hollow to the new generation of voters who thought Modi was the man of the hour.

The BJP's critics ensconced in New Delhi failed to gauge the political mood in remote Tripura and thought the cadres would yet again ensure the status quo continued. For the CPM, its decimation is now almost complete. Though it managed to trump a demoralised Con-

gress in Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram is probably the last capital where the red flag will fly proudly. Bolstered by the BJP's resounding victory in Tripura, the BJP will redouble its effort to first replace the Congress as the only opposition to the Left and eventually march to power in the next poll.

Beyond Tripura too, today's poll results have made the BJP and its allies the dominant party in the North-East. With 26 seats between its seven states, which were the near monopoly of the Congress, the BJP can be expected to lap them up in 2019. This is further bad news for the Congress as it had hopes that the absence of a marked Hindu vote in these States should enable the Congress to retain its erstwhile base.

Clearly the elections in three small states of the North-East have signalled a turning point in India's electoral map. While Amit Shah's strategies have triumphed once more, Rahul Gandhi's inability to work on strategies and tactics has resulted in further erosion of the party's support base. The loss of Assam

strategist Himanta Biswa Sarma has been more damaging than the Congress president could have imagined. If the Congress also loses Karnataka in the next few months, the idea of a "Congress-mukt Bharat" would be almost fully achieved, barring the odd Punjab, saved by a strong local leader.

RSS is the backbone of BJP stupendous success in North East

A disciplined cadre and abundance of resources is a must for any political party to succeed in democracy. A well oiled party machine is the basic requirement for attaining any electoral success. The hard work done by RSS in the civil society continues to pay dividends to BJP across the country. The best example of it is the marriage of civil society interests and political ambition in North East where RSS has been working from the 1970s.

It is because of this investment of time with civil society issues by RSS, that BJP has been able to build a political network in areas which is culturally and socially different to the ideological thinking of the RSS.

It is the confluence of social and cultural networking of RSS with BJP's political and electoral machine which explains the rise of BJP as an important party in the North East.

A similar investment was made by the Congress Party during the freedom struggle. The political action was only one part of the Congress activity, the party was involved in hundreds of other civil society issues. From nation building to character building, the Congress worked on a myriad of issues, almost crafting the mindset of the Indians. It is this mental world which has been challenged by the RSS-BJP combine in the last 50 years.

To understand the success, it is important to understand the work done by the RSS in North East. To start with Arunachal Pradesh, RSS runs Arunachal Vikas Parishad in Arunachal Pradesh which in other states is known as Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram. It runs schools and maintains hostels for the students. There are thousands of RSS affiliated schools in the state alone.

The RSS runs National Integration programmes which allow students from the North East to stay with different families in different parts of India. Apart from the BJP, more than 4000 trained 'sevaks' work in Arunachal Pradesh who run Shakhnas and other





programmes which works at the level of social but impact the political mood. Apart from it, affiliated organisations run Civil Service Orientation Services.

There are programmes dedicated to students who require engineering coaching. On top of it, new Yoga Centres have also come up which focus on individual character building. Additional to this is the massive network of Bal Bari schools. Though RSS insists that it has nothing to do with the BJP but the fact is that RSS, unquestionably, has laid the ground for BJP in the North East. Central to this social action are the faceless pracharaks who devote their lives to an ideology that also ends up shaping civil society sentiments on a number of political issues.

The special focus is imparting lessons on cultural nationalism (which is debatable) and national integration which provides an alternative discourse to the civil society.

Unlike Congress of the 50's and 60's which was then the sole repository of nationalism, the RSS-BJP combine has shifted the axis by claiming nationalism as its own domain. Today, they claim to be the sole repository of nationalism. It has allowed them to combine culturally and socially different voices into one, like pre-colonial Congress. Congress refashioned the dominant discourse of the nation into its own image. It started before independence but was institutionalised after independence.

Earlier, the RSS-BJP too wanted to

refashion the discourse of nationalism into its own image but only succeeded in the last 25 years. It is this shift which is finding an imprint in our electoral history cutting across regions. It is this worldview, aided by rapid urbanisation and consolidation of a larger Indian national identity, that is emerging as the main opposition to highly volatile, violent, dominant and majoritarian global Islam.

RSS-BJP's intensive interaction with the civil society has also succeeded in underlining its role as the only party which unites and keep India united. Assam result broke this very myth of geographical and ideological limitations of BJP. It made them local and national at the same time.

Such has been the impact of the effort that the issue of food habit has been kept aside in the North East, and prayer houses have been built for local communities who worship elements of nature in the state.

Despite having an acrimonious relationship with Christian Missionary establishment all across India, RSS has worked both ends in the North East. It has organised non-Christian communities in their cultural realm preventing conversions and also engaged the existing non-Hindu religious establishment by sharing political space with them.

It created space in states, such as Tripura where Congress has not been able to unseat the Left for past 15 years. The BJP also hijacked the issue of illegal migration and consolidated votes in

Assam on this issue, making minority votes irrelevant. For Congress to come back today, it cannot harp on the issue of alienism of BJP.

BJP has become as indigenous as Congress in the North East. RSS-BJP combine might rest on national integrity, focusing on local issues and threat which it faces from migrant populations which can change the local political axis.

Though Congress recently started a Professional Congress, it still needs people who can create a daily ritual of interaction between the worker, leader and civil society. It is through this interaction that social opinion in conjunction with political action translates into mass politics. Most of its departments are defunct today and have not functioned properly for years.

Various frontal organisations of the Congress have an episodic and politico-electoral relationship with the civil society where intimate bond with the organisation is missing. The absence of this bond further dilutes ideological underpinning of an individual. It should worry the Congress. It is for this reason that despite a massive anti-incumbency, BJP was able to retain Gujarat by a thin margin. At the end, personal bond infused with ideology does work.

(Dr. Chandan Mitra is a journalist, currently Editor of The Pioneer Group of Publications. He is also former BJP MP, Rajya Sabha.)

COVER STORY

PM 2019?

WHAT WILL BE MAJOR FACTORS TO DECIDE INDIA'S
NEXT PRIME MINISTER



Can you make a difference between business and politics?" The answer is simple: "In politics, there is no value for being number two."

There are no prizes for coming second in an election. All you get is five years to introspect what you did wrong. Being out of power can be really depressing, especially once you have tasted it. Elections, thus, are the most innovative form of business, and politicians are the smartest entrepreneurs. The Prime Minister's post is the ultimate trophy in this winner-takes-all contest. They have every incentive to try all sorts of innovations, tricks, and games to win and be number one.

There are nine factors – three sets of numbers, three strategies, and three tactics – that will determine India's next Prime Minister.

The Numbers

330-230-130:

This is what the BJP and Congress win together in the 543-seat Lok Sabha, as you can see in the table (in the video), which shows the story of elections since 1991. The rest go to regional parties, who may or may not be allied with either of the two national parties. Thus, the most important contests are the ones where the BJP and Congress fight directly against each other. Each seat outcome results in a relative difference of two between them.

For Narendra Modi to continue as India's PM, he would like to ensure that BJP's 282 tally should not fall below 230, which means Congress' tally should be less than 100. For Rahul Gandhi to make an attempt to become PM, he will need to at least ensure that Congress' 44 seats go up to more than 130, which means BJP's seats should be less than 200. So, BJP + Congress is 330, BJP's target is 230+, and Congress' target is 130+.

The number game:

10 crore and 67 crore:

Ten crore is the number of unregistered voters in India. Of these, 7.5 crore are in the 18-24 age bracket, while the other 2.5 crore are older voters who have not registered for a variety of reasons. As you can see in the graphic, the 7.5 crore unregistered youth, form half of all 18-24 year-olds in India.

These 10 crore missing voters are part of the 33 crore Indians who do not

vote. Another 34 crore are undecided, or not likely to support any one of the mainstream parties. Together, the number is 67 crore – two-thirds of the eligible voters in India. And they are up for grabs. This is four times the BJP's core support base, and eight times the core Congress support.

128:

The total number of seats in the two large states with four strong parties – Uttar Pradesh with 80, and Maharashtra with 48 seats. BJP won a total of 94 seats and its allies won another 20,

making a total of 114 of 128 seats. With BJP as the party to beat, the number of candidates against the BJP will determine its success in the next election. The more the candidates from the main parties, the better will be its chances. So, the key to the next election lies in the index of opposition unity in these 128 seats.

The Strategies Wave Creation:

A wave election, like 2014, is needed to ensure a national mandate. Else, elections tend to be an aggregation of





state elections, which tend to lead to fractured mandates. There have only been three wave elections in the past 40 years – 1977 (after the Emergency, which brought the Janata party to power), 1984 (after Indira Gandhi's assassination, when Rajiv Gandhi's Congress swept the nation), and 2014 (where Narendra Modi's BJP became the first party in 30 years to win a majority). Parties like waves – it unites voters to create a winning majority. Will the next election be a national wave or states summation?

Big Idea Selling:

To create a wave, the election has to be about a couple of big ideas. No one really bothers with manifestos anymore. Which party will have the big ideas in this election? Congress record in government in the 60 years starting in 1947? BJP's track record in delivering 'acche din' since 2014? Corruption? Governance? Narendra Modi himself?

(S)electorate Targeting:

To sell its big idea, a party only targets a selected set of voters – those who they think will support them. So, it is not about the Electorate, but about the selectorate. This is the minimal mix

There have only been three wave elections in the past 40 years – 1977 (after the Emergency, which brought the Janata party to power), 1984 (after Indira Gandhi's assassination, when Rajiv Gandhi's Congress swept the nation), and 2014 (where Narendra Modi's BJP became the first party in 30 years to win a majority).

of smaller groups that is needed for a party to craft a win in a first-past-the-post system, where the party getting the highest number of votes wins. BJP's selectorate was the middle class for a long time, but it now seems to be transitioning its focus to the poor.

The Tactics Polarisation Game:

Elections are about divide-and-rule. Like in a marketplace, politicians and their parties like to have voters see sharp differentiation, to ensure they turn up to vote. Hence, the need for polarisation. Caste, community, class – all can divide the electorate and therefore unite the selectorate. In the absence of

optimism, a party will use anger, fear, high passion to maximise voter turnout in its support base.

Ground Game:

India has 10 lakh polling booths, each with about 1,000 voters, which comes to about 250 families. In every election, what matters besides the top-down media campaign is the ground game, especially closer to the voting day. Using data and analytics to identify supporters, and then getting them out to vote on election day will be instrumental in determining the eventual winner. To make this happen, parties need the sales army – the booth workers who can register new voters, persuade the sup-

porters and undecideds, and then turn them out to vote.

Digital Game:

The one big change from 2014 is the amazing growth of smartphones and data connectivity across India. As a result, Facebook and WhatsApp have become the primary methods for sharing content and opinions. You see the explosion of creative content every time a big news story breaks. More than half of all voters, and at least one person in every household in India, is now digitally connected via a smartphone. Digital India may take time, but India's Digital Election is coming!

So, these are the numbers, strategies and tactics that will decide who will be India's next Prime Minister. What happens in the elections will determine our individual and collective future – now more than ever. India is a young nation. We have lost a lot of time over the past decades in pursuing policies that keep taking us away from the path to prosperity. This election offers yet another

moment for change. Be aware of the games the politicians and their parties play, and vote wisely – for India's First Prosperity Prime Minister.

Whoever may be the Prime Minister, here's is what my opinion on the issue constitute:

Born to an Indian father who values western culture and way of life more than anything, he was brought up as any kid in the elite class would have been expected to be. Such was the extent of the elitism in the household that speaking in the vernacular was not entertained even on the dining table. The boy goes on to study at Harrow and later at Cambridge. On returning to India, inspired by a certain MK Gandhi, he takes up a lead in the nationalist movement of the time. His involvement in the movement and his image availed the whole country to see him as the second-in-command of the struggle against the Raj. So much so that, his chief contender Patel once said, 'The masses, they come for him.'

I talk about a person named Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru.

The Congress that Nehru inherited was a mixed bag of liberals, conservatives, and radicals. But when he embarked on building a nation on the foundations of rational liberalism and secularism, no one dared oppose him. Because they knew that their seats, their posts, and positions in the new democratic India were because people voted for Nehru, not for the individual MPs. If Nehru resigned, their own positions were at stake. It used to be called Nehruvian consensus. Imagine. A person who grew as an elite, who spoke and wrote in English so proficiently (more than in vernacular), who preached and propagated those versions of Secularism and Socialism that were alien to Indians, he, was more popular in the Indian rural heartland than any conservative of that time.

Why Not Congress-mukth?

There is an argument I hear every now and then that the current BJP Gov-



ernment has the mandate of citizens and hence it should not be a cause of concern for us because 'democracy is being followed.' I would with due respect disagree. Democracy is not raw majoritarianism. When we say, 'Democracy is government by, for and of the people,' it means it is by, for, and of all the people. Not by, for, and of just a majority. Let's say, hypothetically, 51% of people vote to support the banishment of the remaining 49% of the citizens of the country, is it sensible to implement it?

In all this binary game of 'yes-no's, we are forgetting the basic intent of democracy. Democracy is a practicable framework of governance that will ensure human rights and dignity to all the citizens, not a tool to assert majoritarianism. That is why there is a concept called Participatory Democracy, wherein citizens, from time to time, check the government and assist the government in catering best to their needs.

And how is this done? Four major ways: Opposition in the legislature, Judiciary, Media, and protest. And each of these four is essential. You cannot say that 3 of them are working fine in checking the government; hence the fourth one need not work. My attention in the current essay will be on showing the importance of Opposition in Parliament.

Let's take the example of one of the latest bills that the Lok Sabha passed, the Finance Bill. The Finance Bill made provisions for private companies to make as much donation to political parties as they wish, without disclosing the name of the political party they are donating too. If read carefully, it is easy to infer that it is cronyism. Which of the above four checked the passage of this law? Media was busy with Yogiji's rule in UP (which was also important to cover). Social media even less, with BJP trolls trolling anyone who so much as says a thing against BJP and government. Judiciary couldn't have acted in such short a time span. And even if it could, the amendment had been made and it had become a law. So, unless, there is a violation of the 'Basic Structure of the Constitution', it cannot overturn the amendment. And, the Opposition? It was so weak that neither the government nor the citizens took it any seriously. A majority of the amendments were added one day before the final vote after all the discussion had happened and it was passed through the brute force of majority. Could things have been better had opposition been stronger (not



in terms of the number of seats but the support it gets from the citizens)? The fact that the same opposition (which had farmers' support) were able to stall the amendment to Land Acquisition Act 2014 shows it is possible.

Therefore, it is important that the citizens of the country rely also on the opposition for their own good. But for that, it is important that the opposition shows itself to be competent and strong to the citizens. The point I make is, a strong opposition is essential to a healthy democracy. And the closest to opposition in India today is Congress. And the set of leaders who are closest to making that opposition strong can be Rahul Gandhi, Kapil Sibal and Shashi Tharoor.

Still Sibal or Tharoor?

The example of Nehru that I gave in the beginning of the essay was to address the larger point that no seemingly elite politician is capable of reaching the masses of the rural heartland of the country. It, however, doesn't address the barriers that lie between Sibal or Tharoor and the UPA Candidature for Prime Ministership in 2019. Let me address these as answers to potential questions that might arise about his candidature.

What about Rahul Gandhi?

I know that Sonia Gandhi is not that naive a person to allow for someone other than Rahul or a puppet to be the PM. But this is politics and, as the cliched statement goes, 'Anything can



happen in Politics.’ Trust me. I am not going to go into counterfactuals. Let’s look at Congress realistically. The narrative in Congress so far has been, ‘We get votes because people vote for the descendants of Nehru and Indira.’ In essence, the brand of Congress was what was giving MPs votes. But has it been working? Did it work in Bihar 2011? In UP 2012? In India in 2014? In UP 2017? Don’t accuse me of being selective. Of course, I didn’t mention Bihar 2016 because it was Nitish-Laloo’s win rather than the brand of Congress’. In the above-mentioned elections, Rahul Gandhi was the star campaigner. And clearly, it didn’t work in party’s favor. There is a high possibility of change in the leadership. A political party can never be owned by a person. It is owned

by people. Politics change according to what people want. Status quo in Congress is highly unlikely. Whether I am right or wrong, time will tell.

What does Congress has to offer to the country anyway?

If an alternative to Modi is the only thing Congress has to offer, I have no doubt that it’ll not work. I don’t say Congress party doesn’t have an ideology. Its ideology is of Liberalism, Secularism, and Socialism. But these are textbook concepts. Even a middle-class Indian, leave alone rural peasant, would not understand these. You need to have a narrative. The world sustains on stories. Stories of the holocaust, stories of China stealing our jobs, stories of Mexicans polluting our country, stories of

EU eating our wealth etc. Stories work. Which is why good politicians are effective storytellers.

Congress too had a story to tell. A story of ‘New Possibilities’ (1950s), then a story of ‘Jai Jawan, Jai Kissan’ (Sastri), then a story of ‘Garibi Hatao’ (1971), then a story of ‘Vote for Government that works’ (1980), a story of ‘Sikhs are our enemies’ (1984), a story of ‘Rama Rajya’ (1991). They worked. Now, the dominant Congress story is ‘BJP is anti-Minority’. This story has no robustness. It is not a philosophy, rather a counter argument. So, yes, the Congress has to literally go back to its drawing board. And start making a story that will convey the textbook concepts that it stands for, a story that is robust in itself.

When Tharoor said that Rahul Gan-

dhi might not have a conviction but he wants people to tell him what they want to be done, I found myself in amazement. Surely, Tharoor knows better than that in politics.

What if Sibal or Tharoor becomes Manmohan Singh II?

Well, everything is contingent on that not happening. If they remains faithful to the family, like they does now, I take my proposition back. But I am sure that if they were to become a Prime Minister, both would assert themselves well enough to be the Prime Minister and not a Principal Secretary of 10, Janpath Road. Both has seen and been involved in more politics than Manmohan Singh.

So, Modi-mukth Bharat?

I am a full-time Capitalist and a part-time Conservative. And I am a vegetarian too. So, I don't have qualms with the current regime personally. Yet, I care about the personal liberties of everyone to be concerned about the developments in the country today. The discourse has become more and more polarized (because of lack of stories from one of the sides) and the authority of the government is being asserted at an alarming magnitude. I don't want a Modi-mukth Bharat. I rather prefer a Bharat where the government doesn't set precedents that might increase the authoritarianism. For which we need a counter-narrative (not counter-argument, we already have one). Sibal or Tharoor's ascent is not going to be easy. It is difficult. But what that is good is easy? In the end, my nation is bigger than any of these politicians. Yet, my nation is the people in it, not a landmass with boundary.

Drawing battlelines for 2019: Upcoming Lok Sabha election will define future of Indian politics

Though the 2019 Lok Sabha election is more than two years away, every political calculation now revolves around it.

Make no mistake: 2019 represents an existential moment for several parties. If Prime Minister Narendra Modi leads the BJP to victory in 2019, it could spell the end of the dynastic Congress. Rahul Gandhi will be 54 in 2024. He would by then have spent 20 unsuccessful years in politics. Sonia Gandhi will be 77 and no longer a key factor in Indian politics. Priyanka

Gandhi, 53, would remain the Congress' wild card. But by 2024 playing it may be too little, too late.

Other parties in the Opposition recognise the danger of a second successive victory for Modi. It explains the near-hysteria the Prime Minister's demonetization scheme has caused. Only Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik among Opposition leaders have grasped the full political ramifications of Modi's war on black money. They know that the economic

Nitish Kumar, for example, has used morality in governance to burnish his political career. He has legislated against benami properties in Bihar and banned liquor. The JD(U) pointedly broke ranks with the rest of the Opposition over demonetization. Nitish is even talking to Finance Minister Arun Jaitley about a joint initiative to forge a digital-pay economy.

benefits — and these could be considerable — are dwarfed by the political implications.

In a country where poverty in varying degrees afflicts nearly half-a-billion people, the emotional appeal of punishing bla*ck money hoarders and tax-evading millionaires has irresistible moral appeal.

Nitish Kumar, for example, has used morality in governance to burnish his political career. He has legislated against benami properties in Bihar and banned liquor. The JD(U) pointedly broke ranks with the rest of the Opposition over demonetization. Nitish is even talking to Finance Minister Arun Jaitley about a joint initiative to forge a digital-pay economy.

None of this suggests that Nitish Kumar's JD(U) is about to return to

the NDA fold. As if to squelch growing murmurs of Nitish's bromance with Modi, the Bihar chief minister declared: "The Central government's actions are creating fear among minorities. The Centre is deliberately weakening federal power of the states. Some people talk about ghar wapsi and cow protection and are spreading hatred. But we are working to achieve our goals and will continue to do it in Bihar."

Despite the rhetoric, Nitish has two problems. First, the erratic behaviour of his coalition partner Lalu Prasad Yadav and his family. The return of jungle Raj in Bihar has damaged Nitish's reputation for good governance built methodically over two decades. Second, Nitish has sensed the national mood on demonetization. Aligning with those who oppose action against black money carries a huge political risk.

Unlike Mamata Banerjee, Mayawati and Arvind Kejriwal who react emotionally to events, Nitish has a cold, clinical approach to power. But, he too knows that a victory for Modi in 2019 will end any realistic chance he has of being Prime Minister in a future national mahagathbandhan.

Modi, of course, has problems of his own in the run-up to 2019. He has to make demonetization work on the ground. Moral victories can vanish if the poor continue to suffer due to a continued shortage of cash.

Modi also has to cross the hurdle of the Uttar Pradesh assembly elections in 2017. Many realignments among the Opposition will take place after UP. The importance Modi attaches to the state is highlighted by the number of rallies he is holding there months in advance of the poll.

Modi also has to recalibrate ties with his allies. The Shiv Sena is a prickly customer, though somewhat sobered by the BJP's recent victories in local elections in Maharashtra. The forthcoming BMC poll will decide how the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance holds up in 2019. Meanwhile, other NDA allies like SAD in Punjab, LJP in Bihar and TDP in Andhra Pradesh have weakened electorally since their wins in 2014. They will need to be whipped into shape.

Modi and his opponents both know that the results of the 2019 Lok Sabha election will define the contours of Indian politics for a generation.

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BATTLEGROUND 2019

Akhilesh-Mayawati Alliance Has Downside Too. So, it's advantage BJP?

Mihir Swarup Sharma

The comprehensive defeat of the Bharatiya Janata Party in two parliamentary by-elections in Uttar Pradesh - Gorakhpur and Phulpur - as well as one in Araria, Bihar - has understandably caused many

to re-evaluate their perceptions of the party's prospects in 2019. It is difficult to understate what these losses mean for a party dependent on a sweep of the north and west of India to retain its majority in the Lok Sabha. It follows the BJP's humiliating defeats in Ajmer and Alwar a few weeks ago - but those could

be explained away as reflecting state-specific sentiment. In UP and Bihar, it was assumed, the party continued to be in the ascendant. But that is clearly no longer true. It has now lost multiple Lok Sabha constituencies in areas it should have won - not just UP, Bihar and Rajasthan, but also Madhya Pradesh and



Punjab. In fact, it is perilously close to losing its majority.

So, yes, nobody should assume that 2019 is a simple win for Narendra Modi led BJP. Repeating 282 was always going to be tough, even with Modi's popularity still strong. But I at least had always assumed that 235 seats plus/minus 35, was the BJP's likely performance in 2019. Some observers now think that is optimistic. After all, you can't lose practically every by-election in the north and west for years and continue to be seen as the favourite. It's incredibly tough for an incumbent party to lose by-elections, and yet the BJP seems to be able to do so with ease.

However, I'm not yet going to mark the BJP as an underdog in the north and west just yet. Here are eight reasons why we should assume Modi and Amit Shah can still turn it around:

The Samajwadi Party's victories in Gorakhpur and Phulpur required unity between the SP and the Bahujan Samaj Party. While the alliance held on the ground for this victory, such alliances are naturally fragile. For good reason, Mayawati distrusts and dislikes Mulayam Singh Yadav. And the Yadavs are as capable of self-sabotage as the Gandhis. A repeat of this strong alliance across UP in 2019 could give a new maha-gathbandan in excess of 50 seats

out of 80. If the alliance frays, the BJP should get over 60.

Even if the SP-BSP alliance stays together, it is extremely risky. Modi is more than capable of redefining the narrative in short order. In fact, a united opposition makes it easier for Modi to claim that everyone else is corrupt, terrified, and hypocritical - and that he alone is the principled, honest saviour India needs. Arithmetic - adding up the BSP and SP vote shares - does not always trump chemistry. And Modi, through his ability to cook up a narrative in his lab, is India's pre-eminent political chemist. Opposition unity actually makes his job more straightfor-



So, yes, nobody should assume that 2019 is a simple win for Narendra Modi led BJP. Repeating 282 was always going to be tough, even with Modi's popularity still strong. But I at least had always assumed that 235 seats plus/minus 35, was the BJP's likely performance in 2019.

ward. He is at his best when pretending to be an underdog fighting against dark and overwhelming forces.

This election suggests that a BSP-SP coalition should not be considered as automatically being in a losing position. This is actually bad news for any coalition negotiations going forward. The only thing that could have reconciled Mayawati to dealing with the family that humiliated and terrorised her in the 1990s is a sense of imminent disaster for her party and the Bahujan movement. The possibility of victory makes it, paradoxically, harder for her to compromise.

For Modi and Shah, this defeat is not as problematic as it may appear. You might argue that any defeat discolours their aura of invincibility, so important in the run-up to 2019. But the Prime Minister himself was not the person at risk in the UP by-elections. In Bihar, it was Nitish Kumar, and anything that



weakens a coalition partner is not entirely unwelcome to the BJP. More importantly, in UP it was Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath whose credibility was on the line. Adityanath was supposed to be able to deliver Gorakhpur at least with ease. Phulpur, while not traditionally BJP territory, should also have been manageable. Yet the Adityanath name was not enough, nor were his last-minute rallies, over a dozen of them, sufficient to turn the tide against the BSP-SP alliance. It is an open secret that Modi and Shah distrust Adityanath. That is one reason why this defeat is not entirely unwelcome to them. It is also true that now Adityanath has reduced bar-

gaining power when it comes to ticket distribution in 2019. Shah and Modi are free to distribute tickets based on their winnability criteria.

The notion that seats in the Hindi belt in 2019 are wide open will encourage a plethora of independents, vote-cutters, and other political entrepreneurs to throw their hat in the ring. Such chaos inevitably favours the large force with greater monetary resources. There is no question that in 2019, this better-resourced force will be the BJP, by a factor of five, perhaps 10. Chaos means horse-trading, and the Modi-Shah BJP is by far the better horse-trader.

In UP, the BJP's loss of popularity

under Adityanath which appears to be real is largely because his government is correctly seen as an upper-caste raj. Yogi samrajya is Thakur samrajya. His famed encounter policy consists of Thakur cops going after OBC or Muslim suspects. His ascendancy has led Dalits to feel even more unsafe than under the SP, underlined by widely-circulated reports of the vandalism of Ambedkar statues. The BJP's candidate choice for Gorakhpur in particular hardly did anything to dispel the notion that it was a savarna raj party. But there is still a year to go for 2019 if the elections are not brought forward. That's more than enough time for Modi, India's most po-



litically successful OBC politician, to persuade non-Yadav OBCs and even many Dalits that his government is not savarna raj. Skilful candidate selection will help.

Both the Phulpur and Gorakhpur elections were noticeable for extremely low turnout. This is a sign of many things, urban discontent with the government being high on the list. If it is the case that low turnout favours the BSP's committed voters, and high turnout means more Modi-leaning swing voters are going to the polls, then we can assume the 2019 election will be high turnout. Nothing so far suggests that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

and the BJP's panna pramukhs have lost their potency as a turnout-generation machine. They just weren't put in overdrive for this election.

Finally, there is a noticeable divide here - as in the Rajasthan by-polls and in the Gujarat Assembly elections - between urban and rural voters. Rural voters are clearly more dissatisfied with the BJP. But stepped-up efforts to woo them through waivers, transfers, higher MSPs (minimum support price) and so on might moderate their discontent. Indeed, if this year's monsoon is particularly good for production, a great deal of agrarian distress will be alleviated just in time for the 2019 campaign.

Eight reasons are more than enough to reserve judgment about the BJP's fortunes in the north and west next year. If I were to add a ninth, it is this: Modi as Prime Minister is more than capable of using the office to take the sort of drastic decision, like demonetisation, that the opposition is simply unable to respond to. Yes, there will be some inevitable attrition in the BJP's seat count from 2014. Yes, Modi's government is losing popularity. But Modi and his party are still clear favourites in 2019.

(Writer is a fellow at the Observer Research Foundation.)

TESTING TIMES

The First litmus political challenge for Modi and Shah emerges from Akhilesh Mayawati reunion in UP

Rajeev Sharma & Ashok Upadhayay

It doesn't need rocket science to say that the BJP's 3-0 loss in three Lok Sabha by-polls - Gorakhpur and Phulpur in Uttar Pradesh, and Araria in Bihar - is an alarm bell for the saffron party and Prime Minister Narendra Modi ahead of the next general elections, due by May 2019.

The BJP's triple loss takes away the sheen from its emphatic win in the Northeast, particularly Tripura. Its allies formed governments in Nagaland

and Meghalaya too, the latter being the 22nd BJP-ruled state even though the saffron party won only two seats in the 60-member Assembly.

The setback is all the more severe for the BJP as Gorakhpur and Phulpur are no ordinary Lok Sabha constituencies and were represented by chief minister Yogi Adityanath and his deputy Keshav Prasad Maurya respectively.

Since the Modi tsunami in 2014, the BJP hasn't witnessed such a poll debacle. It's all the more worrisome for the BJP as it comes from a state where

the party's impressive scoreline was 71 out of 80 seats in the 2014 general elections, and 325 of 403 in Assembly polls last year.

The by-poll results, particularly from Uttar Pradesh, are the best news so far for the Opposition which has been travelling from one electoral defeat to another in the past four years with just three exceptions - Delhi, Bihar and Punjab in chronological order. (Just for the record, the BJP won one - Bhabhua - of the two Assembly by-polls in Bihar. The Jehanabad Assembly seat



went to the RJD.)

The UP experiment - Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) supporting Samajwadi Party (SP) - has given the “khul ja sim sim” code to the Opposition for entering the Alibaba caves in 2019. After Bihar, the UP by-polls have conclusively proven that the Modi juggernaut can be finally stopped if the Opposition joins hands and replicates Bihar-type grand alliance in key states.

Here's how the by-poll results would impact key stakeholders.

Mayawati

The biggest gainer is Mayawati and her BSP, the party which couldn't even open its account in the 2014 general elections and managed to win just 17 seats in last year's Assembly polls. This is the first time in six years (her cycle of electoral losses began in the 2012 UP Assembly polls) when Mayawati has reasons to smile. She announced her

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support to the SP candidates at the eleventh hour, first time since 1993 when the two parties were in the same boat. She said it was not a long term policy which would be determined by the outcome of this experiment. Her new-found bonhomie with the Akhilesh Yadav-led SP should also improve prospects for her Rajya Sabha seat.

The “Bua-Bhatija” slogans that rent the air in Gorakhpur and Phulpur today may well become the template for 2019 general elections. Mayawati has reasons to see light at the end of the tunnel and

can afford to be more optimistic that her political winter is finally getting over.

Akhilesh Yadav

Another UP satrap, Akhilesh Yadav, also has reasons to grin from ear to ear. It's not just because he has now taken his Samajwadi Party's LS tally to seven and reduced BJP's to 69, but also because the SP's spectacular win would go a long way in boosting the morale of the party cadres. The SP victory is like winning a crucial league cricket match before the knockout stage of the tour-





Conspiracy theorists may say that PM Modi himself crafted and choreographed the BJP's by-poll defeat to clip Yogi Adityanath's wings, it's highly unlikely that a shrewd politician like Modi would consciously score a self goal when general elections are inching closer. However, Modi supporters would have a valid argument if they were to point to the fact that Modi didn't campaign in the by-polls.

nament which improves the net run rate and bolsters the team's prospects in upcoming tight contests. Besides, it would inevitably improve bargaining chips for the SP in allocation of seats when SP-BSP-Congress grand alliance is being sewed up ahead of the general elections.

Yogi Adityanath

If Mayawati is the biggest gainer, then Yogi Adityanath is surely the sorrest loser. The by-poll losses would dent his image, particularly Gorakhpur, his well nurtured and nourished constituency which he has won for past five consecutive terms. Since he became the UP CM - after some combative posturings with the BJP and intense lobbying with the RSS when the Modi-Amit Shah combine had virtually decided to name union minister Manoj Sinha for the CM's post - he had emerged as the BJP's new poster boy and poll mascot who was increasingly being used to address election rallies across the country.

Conspiracy theorists may say that PM Modi himself crafted and choreographed the BJP's by-poll defeat to clip Yogi Adityanath's wings, it's highly unlikely that a shrewd politician like Modi would consciously score a self goal when general elections are inching closer. However, Modi supporters would have a valid argument if they were to point to the fact that Modi didn't campaign in the by-polls.

The grapevine also has it that all is not well between the RSS and the Modi-Shah team. If that were indeed be so as there is no smoke without fire, it means all the more trouble for Yogi, and his problems would compound during the next general elections. After all, he himself had recently dubbed the UP by-polls as "a dress rehearsal" for the next general elections, a remark which he must be ruing now. Well, loose lips sink ships.

In conclusion, it won't be improper to say that Modi's BJP would be really worried if Adityanath's remark - that these bypolls are "dress rehearsal" before the 2019 general elections - were incidental or prophetic.

The BJP will have to change its election strategy in a big way. The BJP's defeat in its stronghold and Hindu bastion poses a sensitive question - whether the Hindutva card is probably past its expiry date? It's an ideal situation for the Rahul Gandhi-led Congress to reinvent itself, first in the forthcoming Karnataka elections and then in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh this year-end.



Here's what the drubbing means for the BJP.

1) Going by how the BJP has been projecting Yogi Adityanath as its star campaigner in poll-bound states, it seems the party has been trying hard to strengthen the "Yogi model". While the saffron party was banking on him to help win elections in other states, Adityanath couldn't even retain his home turf. Defeat in Gorakhpur has dented his vote-gathering capabilities to a great extent.

2) Since 1989, the BJP had not lost the Gorkhapur Lok Sabha seat. Although the party's electoral fortune has seen several ups and down, Gorkhapur, until today, remained a saffron citadel. The BJP lost its stronghold despite the party's popularity at its peak and the chief priest of the "Nath Panth" temple in Gorakhpur occupying the CM's seat. The fact that the voters chose to go with the Samajwadi Party, will force the BJP and its chief minister to do some serious introspection.

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3) Winning Gorakhpur was a matter of prestige for the BJP as it has been a bastion of chief minister Yogi Adityanath, who has won from that seat for five consecutive times. Yogi Adityanath had secured over 50 per cent vote share in the last three elections, and has campaigned aggressively in this by-poll. He addressed as many as 16 public meetings - something, local party leaders claim, he never did even when he himself was contesting earlier.

Over a dozen state ministers, two

Union ministers and several party MPs and MLAs were deployed by the BJP for canvassing in the two constituencies. And yet it lost the two seats.

4) It was after 23 years that arch-rivals Samawadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party reached an electoral understanding, which seems to have got the people's approval. Although Yogi Adityanath has called it sheer opportunism, it cannot be ruled out that the new combine may led to major changes in UP's political scenario and may also prove to be a game-changer ahead of the 2019 Lok Sabha elections.

5) In the last Lok Sabha elections, the BJP managed to win 71 of 80 seats on its own in UP (ally Apna Dal also won the two seats where it was contesting, increasing the saffron party's tally to 73) with around 43 per cent vote share. This was dubbed as a tsunami because the Opposition was fragmented. Had the BSP (with a 19.77 per cent vote share), SP (with 22.35 per cent) and the Congress (with 7.53 per cent) fought the elections together, their vote share would have been 49.65 per cent. This shows that a united Opposition could have stopped the Modi's juggernaut even in the 2014 in Uttar Pradesh.

The message for the Opposition is clear. Get united to stop the saffron tsunami, or remain divided and get drowned.

6) A dedicated vote bank of Dalits ensures that Mayawati is capable of transferring votes seamlessly to its alliance partner. It doesn't matter who she is supporting. And, in this election again she has shown how her support-

ers have voted for the Samajwadi Party, which was her bitter rival until a few days ago.

7) The Congress party fielded Sureetha Kareem from Gorakhpur, and Manish Mishra for Phulpur, but failed miserably. The party must examine if it wants to follow a go-it-alone policy or go for a grand alliance on the lines of 2015 Bihar's mahagathbandhan. There are two choices for the Congress - either expand its own base, or stop Modi.

8) Today's election results have also raised serious questions on the Modi and Yogi model of governance. The fact that the BJP CM and his deputy couldn't manage to retain their home turfs despite being in power in the state as well as at the Centre, calls for some serious introspection. While BJP president Amit Shah claims that "achhe din" promised by the party has arrived, it seems the people in these constituencies think otherwise.

9) There were speculations of a BJP hand behind former Phulpur MP Atiq Ahmed, who is currently lodged in jail, joining the poll fray. The BJP reportedly tried to divide the minority votes by fielding him as an independent candidate. It seems the voters have seen through the conspiracy and the electoral ploy failed to work for the BJP.

10) The BJP needs to do a serious rethink if it wants to fight back in 2019. It needs to focus on governance, go for another social engineering and try to bring in smaller parties within its fold.

What's Modi's plan for India after 2019?

Does Mr Modi have a roadmap beyond the victory post-2019?

S Nihal Singh

How has the Republic fared with Prime Minister Narendra Modi steering the country towards the general election of 2019? It has been a mixed record, with the willingness to take decisions trumped by ideological blinkers and a propensity to think of the virtues of Ram Rajya.

The Sangh Parivar leadership has not quite reconciled itself regarding how far to take the concept of Hindutva in ruling a heterogeneous and multi-ethnic country. And Mr Modi has to engage in battle with the Sangh Parivar to win his hand in the cause of governance each time.

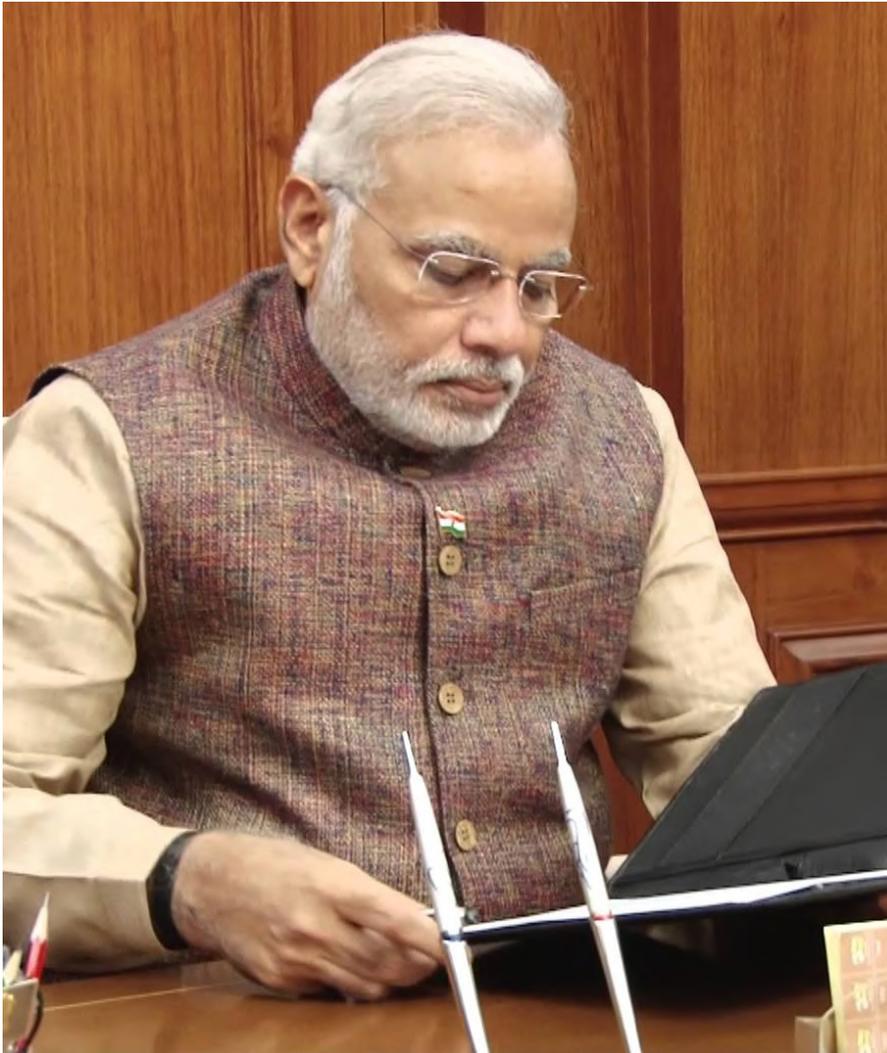
Two major decisions merit attention — the sudden move for demonetisation of a huge chunk of our currency and the hasty introduction of the Goods and Services Tax.

Two major decisions merit attention — the sudden move for demonetisation of a huge chunk of our currency and the hasty introduction of the Goods and Services Tax.

The first decision was Mr Modi's own prescription for the evils of black money and it has badly misfired, slowing down the economy, while the GST, an essential measure that earlier Congress governments had failed to bring in, was imposed somewhat post-haste.

The demonetisation scheme was essentially Mr Modi's idea, and although he talked it up as a kind of poor man's revenge against the rich, the poor suffered the most. There has been no suggestion of apology on Mr Modi's behalf on slowing down the economy and its





numerous other consequences.

Given the fact that Mr Modi's is a cohesive government, compared to the loose coalition headed by Dr Manmohan Singh, it takes much less time and debate to take decisions, a welcome relief. Indeed, the alacrity with which New Delhi can take decisions on certain major issues comes as a major boost.

In the field of foreign policy, Mr Modi has built on the country's record, considerably enhancing ties with Israel and becoming the first Indian PM to unreservedly welcome Israel into the hall of nations. Mr Modi has decided that India's defence and geopolitical links with the Jewish state are important enough to be concentrated and the risks minimal as the Sunni monarchies are also reaching out to it. In any case, Mr Modi is due to pay a visit to the Palestinian territories soon.

The question that needs asking is whether the Prime Minister has a central idea of what India is all about. In looking at the future prospect of a Hindu Rashtra, this aim is bound to be distorted because the very premise of a Hindu India is wrong. How far will the

new framework be imposed is something that remains to be seen.

There is a businesslike characteristic about the present Narendra Modi Cabinet and there is certainly the feeling that its members are being tested in their jobs. A few have lost their portfolios. Among the heavyweights, finance minister Arun Jaitley and home minister Rajnath Singh are the most self-assured.

Does Mr Modi have a roadmap beyond the victory post-2019? Judging by his exertions in Davos and elsewhere, he is rustling up plans for a major internal manufacturing spree on the basis of abundant foreign investment. But circumstances have to be propitious for such investment because men with money and resources have options.

In this conflict in his mind over the kind of India that is desirable, Mr Modi seems to have decided to concentrate on the mechanical, rather than the ideological, aspects of ruling India to run the country's affairs. There is enough work to be done in a variety of fields, with reforms in the judiciary only one end of the problem.

The essential point is that the Modi government has not fully grasped the enormity of the problem he faces in changing the direction of giving India a Hindutva facelift, which is contrary to the direction set over 70 years of its independent existence. And the Sangh Parivar is adamant that it should be brought about.

Essentially, the BJP and the Sangh Parivar are now concentrating on the prospects of the 2019 general election, with the state parties in play and the wooing of such regional parties as Chennai's AIADMK.

Indeed, the clear objective since it came to power in 2014 was to consolidate its electoral hold in every way it can and it even deprived the Congress of victory in states like Goa and in the Northeast by some clever footwork. For the BJP, everything comes after the results are in.

Is there chemistry behind the rise of the BJP? The Congress had lived a long political life in a democratic framework, thanks to its leadership calibre and the nationalist cause that it espoused. But the Congress was turning careerist and getting flabby. It was revived in quite another sense by Indira Gandhi, who lived to see a brief glorious phase of the Bangladesh war.

When the time came, the BJP was waiting in the wings, the first time achieving power in a coalition under Atal Behari Vajpayee, until Mr Modi claimed a majority of his own in the 2014 election.

Is the room for major reforms over? It would seem so because the Modi government is heavily engaged in ensuring a victory for the party in 2019.

What the Modi administration is reluctant about is to open old wounds. The kind of Hindutva that should be brought about will no doubt be the subject matter of much debate and will go through its various layers of authority to be adopted. It would appear that Mr Modi has given himself some room in which to manoeuvre, should the Sangh Parivar luminaries prove to be difficult.

In Gujarat, he had shut the Parivar out of the state's economic agenda. But as Prime Minister, he cannot seek Gujarat's shelter as the stakes are much higher in his present job. It is the first time that the Sangh Parivar has the option of building a Hindutva India.

The country will enter a new phase after the 2019 polls, and it will be an entirely new ballgame.

(Writer is a veteran journalist)

REFORM TO EMPOWER

Modi mission 2019 is linked to Reforms Beckon for India

Frank-Jürgen Richter

Narendra Modi is no scientist, but he is in fact conducting the world's largest every experiment. At the helm of history's largest democracy in history, 2018 will determine whether 1.3 billion people can continue to cooperate in a capitalist democracy and whether his ambitious economic reforms will continue beyond the 2019 elections.

The battleground for this experiment will be fought in rural India. National growth is high at around 7%, but the majority of voters living in impoverished rural India must feel ownership of these gains if Mr Modi is to be re-elected. This means a rapid transition from the primary sector (agriculture) to the secondary (industry) and then to the third sector (services).

Employment in India is wedded to the outdated regulatory and legal envi-

ronment that has constrained business, innovation and entrepreneurship. Mr Modi knows he cannot single-handedly resolve these issues- he needs to collaborate with legions of administrators and legislators across the country, including entire state governments, to change the system.

His new GST regime, which came into effect in June, has taken the first step towards creating a single Indian market for the first time. Now, three





challenges will shape Mr. Modi and this new market's destiny in 2018.

One will be attracting foreign direct investment. A new FDI policy was an-

nounced in September, set to come into action fully in 2018. He has tasked the government with removing layers of bureaucracy, cutting red tape and simpli-

fying the process of investing in Indian business from abroad. This will be no easy feat, the World Bank's 2018 doing Business report ranked India 100th out of 190 countries in ease of doing business. The abolition of the Foreign Investment Promotion Board may bring cheer to foreign investors who dealt with that body but it will take hard work to make sure the new 'Foreign Investment Facilitation Portal' (FIFP) is not just as restrictive.

India's state has also long resisted inward investment in certain industries to protect local players. In fact, recent directives from the PMO's office to government departments to favour local vendors for tenders are likely to impact FDI negatively. This means reduced competitiveness outside influences sharpens local skills. Presently in key industries like IT, it is Western firms breaking new ground, with Indian companies falling behind. Mr Modi's pressure to open up India to investment would increase competition and effectiveness throughout Indian business.

The second will be encouraging entrepreneurship and stopping the legal challenges that so many entrepreneurs have been facing. A litmus test is right around the corner in January 2018, when India's Supreme Court will rule in a case related to direct selling. It is high time India, like so many other countries in the world, authorised and regulated an industry which is absolutely crucial in fostering entrepreneurship. In the words of Nobel Laureate Dr Muhammad Yunus, the priority is now to lift people from 'job seekers to job creators'.

The third challenge will be a continuation of Modi's battle with India's gargantuan tax code, to be undertaken in the government's last full budget in February. Here again he has signaled major changes, proposing a further simplification of the code and a cut for individuals and for corporations from 30 to 25% in an attempt to encourage native businesses to invest. A cut in corporate tax will also depend on revenue outlook for GST in the first fiscal quarter collections have fallen in recent months, and concerns about India's fiscal deficit are mounting.

The reforms are always painful, it causes disruption hence reforms are always considered lethal in a democracy. The history has shown that majority of the countries in the recent past that have adopted GST are shown doors by the people. The demonetization and GST can be singled out to be the boldest yet unpopular move by the Modi government may become deterrent for mission 2019.

POWER CLUB

Who are the 10 most powerful politicians of India?

The limits of power are defined by the individuals who wield it. The 10 politicians in our list, recognised as the most powerful in the country, certainly derive their authority from the positions they hold-but that is not the sole source of their power. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, for example, has mastered silence and secrecy, craftily combining it with an element of surprise to add an aura to his constitutional authority. From the surgical strike to demonetisation, disruption is the new language of power. And as he constructs his vision of New India, his two major force multipliers-BJP president Amit Shah and RSS sarsangh chalak Mohan Bhagwat have been redefining India's electoral politics and seeking to re-engineer its social discourse. At the same time, Modi's core agenda of development is served by his cabinet colleagues Arun Jaitley and Nitin Gadkari, who have been oiling the wheels of administration to ensure growth in GDP, FDI and road construction.

At the other end of this spectrum are chief ministers-like Mamata Banerjee and Nitish Kumar-who challenge the Modi doctrine. But the narrative of political power has been rewritten this year by two unconventional politicians-UP chief minister Yogi Adityanath and Dr Subramaniam Swamy who is recently jolted several top congress leadership in corruption cases. And then there is Rahul Gandhi, the permanent under-study, who is yet to define his place in the political landscape. He could learn from the other members in the list-Modi, Bhagwat, Mamata and Adityanath.

Rank 1- NARENDRA MODI **Age: 66, Prime Minister of India**

First among equals: Because he is the unchallenged leader of India. With the Congress desperately trying to remain relevant and regional stalwarts restricted to their own turfs, there is no political leader who can serve as a credible alternative

Because the victory in Uttar Pradesh has almost ensured that he will have a second term, and silenced his detractors within the BJP

Because his soaring personal popularity ensures the government massive public support for difficult and dangerous decisions-from the surgical strike in PoK to demonetisation

DID YOU KNOW? When he writes in Hindi or Gujarati, he usually doesn't have to change or rewrite a single word for copy running up to 10 pages





Rank 2- AMIT SHAH

Age: 54, BJP President

Poll position: Because he was behind the BJP's massive victory in Uttar Pradesh. This demolished the idea that elections in India are won only on caste- and religion-based platforms

Because he is the prime minister's most trusted lieutenant. He impressed upon Modi the importance of selecting Yogi Adityanath as the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh

Because he was behind the BJP's opening up of new political frontiers in places it has traditionally been weak Assam and Manipur

DID YOU KNOW? He is fond of Hindi movie thrillers, and goes to watch films with his wife, Sonal. He was also a successful trader at the stock market

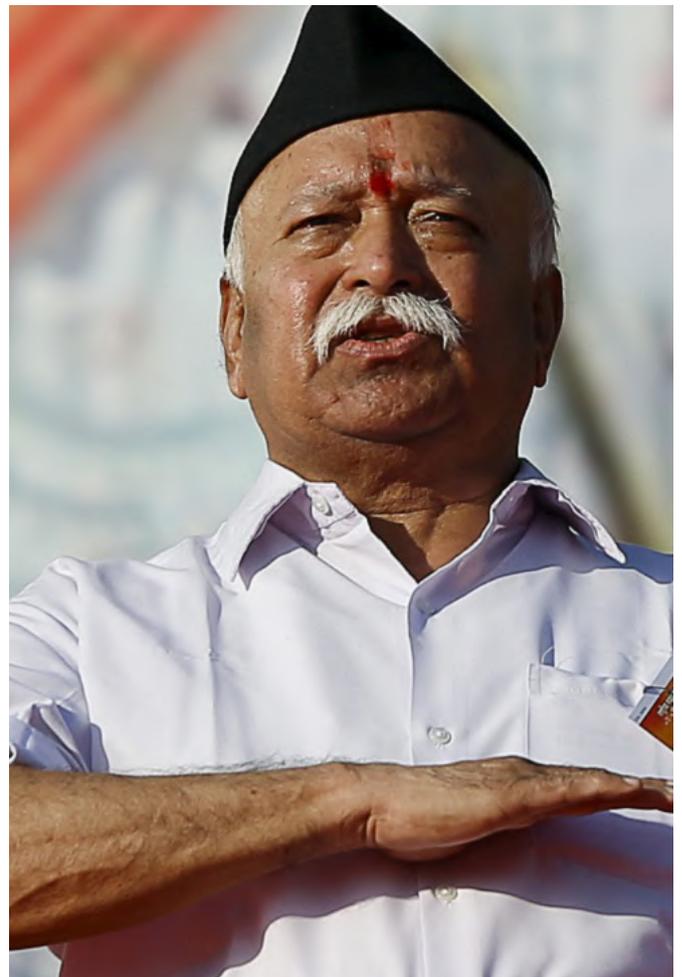
Rank -3 MOHAN BHAGWAT

Age: 66, RSS Sarsanghchalak

The organiser: Because he heads the RSS, the ideological guiding force behind the BJP. It's no coincidence that several BJP chief ministers, including Devendra Fadnavis, M.L. Khattar, Shivraj Singh Chouhan and Sarbananda Sonowal maintain a hotline to Bhagwat.

Because his opinion is asked for whenever the Union government takes a policy decision-appraisals of several key ministries are regularly performed at RSS headquarters in Nagpur. An instance: while framing the new education policy, the HRD ministry took serious note of the RSS's swadeshi philosophy on education.

DID YOU KNOW? His favourite song in his college days was 'Mere saamne wali khidki mein' from the film Padosan.





Rank 4- ARUN JAITLEY

Age: 64, Union Minister for Finance, and Corporate Affairs

The pointman: Because he is the ultimate trouble-shooter for the government-from negotiating with J&K chief minister Mehbooba Mufti to reaching out to the late J. Jayalalithaa to get the AIADMK on board with GST. It was his negotiation skills that helped the Modi government get the GST Bill passed.

Because he is responsible for ensuring that the Indian economy continues to grow. India is projected to grow at 7.2 per cent in 2017 and 7.7 per cent in 2018. FDI flows into India touched an eight-year high (almost Rs 3 lakh crore) in 2016

DID YOU KNOW? From being a foodie, he has become a disciplined eater, with small meals every two hours

Rank 5- YOGI ADITYANATH (NEW)

Age: 44, Chief Minister, Uttar Pradesh

Raj yogi: Because he has been chosen to rule Uttar Pradesh by the most powerful people in the country-Prime Minister Narendra Modi and BJP president Amit Shah. Thanks to Adityanath's aggressive Hindutva agenda, he also has the blessings of the RSS, though he has never been a pracharak. However the loss in the home turf at Gorakhpur has dented his power at the national level.

Because he has emerged as the strongest Hindutva icon of recent times, eliciting comparison even with Prime Minister Modi's initial years as chief minister of Gujarat. There are projections in party circles that he could even rise to be the heir apparent to Modi.

DID YOU KNOW? He owns a revolver worth Rs 1 lakh, and a rifle worth Rs 80,000. He is the only CM to have been booked on an attempt to murder charge.



Rank 6- MAMATA BANERJEE (NEW)
Age: 62, Chief Minister, West Bengal

Big sister: Because despite facing a grand alliance of the Left and the Congress, the EC breathing down her neck, scams tumbling out of her party cupboard and a flyover collapsing in the middle of the election, she won the 2016 assembly polls with a landslide victory.

Because though the TMC is only the fourth largest party in the Lok Sabha and the fifth largest in the Rajya Sabha, its MPs have emerged as the most vocal opponents of the government in both houses, often eclipsing the principal opposition party, the Congress.

DID YOU KNOW? She has written 69 books, and relaxes by painting, singing, playing the synthesiser and cooking. She walks around 5 km every day on a treadmill



Rank 7- NITISH KUMAR
Age: 66, Chief Minister, Bihar

Power partner: Because he is the most acceptable leader of any probable coalition against the BJP juggernaut. The Congress accepted his leadership in Bihar, with even his bete noire Lalu Prasad Yadav joining hands with him. He can also count on the support of Mamata Banerjee and Naveen Patnaik.

Because he takes his own decisions and stands by his convictions. He did not succumb to pressure over the liquor ban in Bihar, and refused to join the Opposition chorus against Prime Minister Modi's demonetisation move, even publicly applauding it

DID YOU KNOW? He often carries a CD on Yoga Nidra. He loves rasgullas from a shop in Lajpat Nagar, New Delhi. Fav-ourite food: masala dosa





Rank 8- NITIN GADKARI

Age: 59, Union Minister for Roads, Transport and Highways

The performer: Because he is one of the key ministers in Prime Minister Modi’s cabinet. His ministry claims to have constructed 8,144 km of roads in 2016-17, at 23 km per day. He says he wants to raise that to 40 km per day

Because the heads of several Indian banks look at him with gratitude for bringing down the quantum of NPAs (soured loans) on their books. Gadkari managed to get a series of stalled road projects, that banks had issued loans for, off the ground

DID YOU KNOW? When Gadkari was in the US, travelling from San Francisco to Los Angeles, he had the idea of having a new Mumbai-Goa highway constructed along the coast. Work has already begun.

Rank 9- Dr Subramaniam Swamy

Age: 75, BJP RS MP

Merit Subramaniam Swamy is an Indian economist, mathematician, lawyer and politician who serve as a Member of Parliament in Rajya Sabha, the upper house of the Indian Parliament: he is Harvard scholar and brilliant economist.

Because he successful in combating corruption in India via judiciary, media and parliament

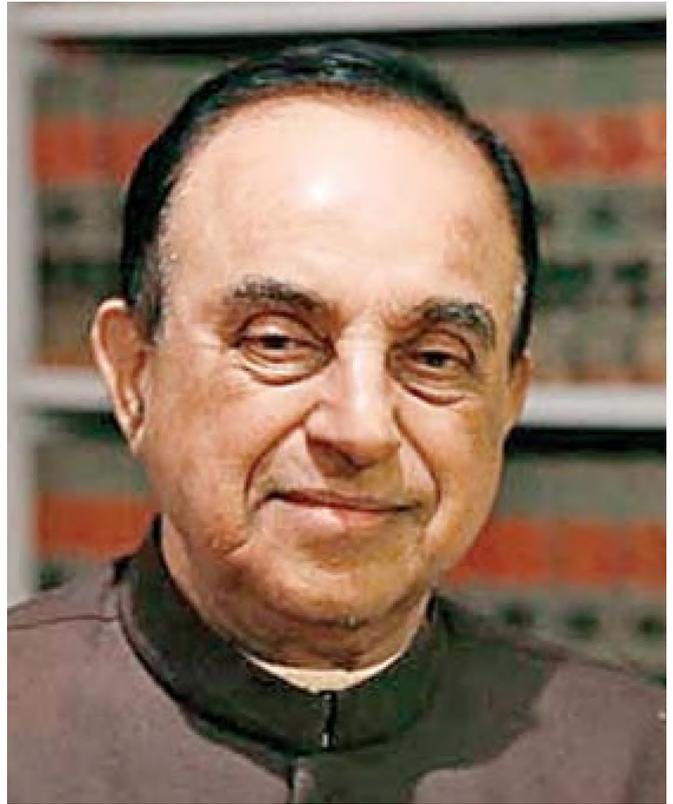
Because he is close to RSS and a Hindu mascot associated with Ram temple, Ram setu, Kailash Mansaorwar related issues since long

DID YOU KNOW? Dr Swamy was cabinet miniter with Law & Jistice and Commerce portfolio. He is perhaps the most followed BJP leader on twitter and facebook.

Rank 10- RAHUL GANDHI

Age: 46, Congress President

Failure to launch: Because despite the party losing successive elections since 2014, there is no threat to his position and authority. He is head of India’s second largest party.



Because as the chief of the grand old party, he is a possible pivot around which a grand alliance against the ruling BJP could form. The Congress is the only party acceptable to almost all other parties-from the TMC to the Left, SP to the BSP, JD-U to the RJD

DID YOU KNOW? He got the 2012 Delhi gang rape victim Nirbhaya’s younger brother to train at the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Udan Akademi in Raebareli. He is now a pilot with a reputed airline. He also helped the elder brother in his engineering studies.

By OPINION EXPRESS News Desk.



Bond with the west

France President Emmanuel Macron's India visit consolidates Indo-France Ties

Claude Arpi

Directed by their want of strategic partnership into decision making at the governmental level, India and France have taken a decision during Emmanuel Macron's visit to become traditional partners. It's the time for both the countries to take the hold and shape narratives and developing institutional agendas.

On the last day during his visit to India, Macron went to Varanasi to enjoy the cruise on River Ganga with Prime Minister Modi. This was the culmination of a visit with a difference. Macron's trip touched upon two aspects of the bilateral relations, the ancient and the modern (and strategic). Before the visit to the Ghats, Macron offered to Modi, an original copy of the Bhagavad Gita translated from Sanskrit into French in the early 20th century by the great

French scholar Émile Senart. This symbolizes the first aspect of the relations, but perhaps more important in today's world there is the 'strategic' angle.

Addressing the French community in Delhi, the young President explained: "geopolitical context is deeply changed. India rightly fears the reorganization of the world; she fears forms of hegemony in the region and in particular in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. And why not name it, she fears a Chinese hegemony".

He reminded his countrymen: "France is a power of the Indian and the Pacific Oceans; we are present at the Reunion, we are also there in French Polynesia and New Caledonia. And we are a maritime power, it is often forgotten but France is the second maritime power in the world. We have a strong navy, we have nuclear submarines equipped like few other powers in the world; a maritime surveillance capa-

bility through our own satellites and technologies; it is obvious we are a military and intelligence power ranking us among the first nations in the world". France is now ready to share this power with India.

Before concluding, Macron quoted the Australian Prime Minister, who spoke of "freedom of sovereignty"; he then added: "This renewed strategic partnership is reflected by the confirmation of a defense link that has already materialised in some very important contracts, be it in the naval or aviation domain, in the engine industry ...a coming generation of a new partnership on development of engines (the Kaveri for the Tejas), but also enhanced cooperation in terms of spatial surveillance or in terms of intelligence".

A vast programme, symbolizing the special relations between France and India, which celebrate 20 years of 'strategic partnership'; the accord signed



in 1998 by French President Jacques Chirac and Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee is the oldest such partnership.

Over the last two decades, it has grown steadily, no major political difference having darkened the sky between Paris and Delhi.

Between 1947 and 1954, the relations were often tense due to the issue of the French settlements in India which would only be solved with the de facto transfer of Pondicherry to the Union of India at the end of 1954.

What is less known is that despite differences, India and France continued to work together. This was perhaps one of the most trying times on the ground, particularly in Pondicherry. A contract had, however, been signed with Dassault in June 1953 for 70 planes; in October 1953, while another 35 were sent to the Dixmude aircraft carrier, four planes reached India by air. The remainder 32 aircraft would be delivered in early 1954. And those were the difficult days between the two nations!

Since the signature of the 1998 Strategic Agreement, France has constantly been supportive of India.

On his arrival, Macron stated that the visit would open a new era in the strategic partnership for the coming decades: “Our two democracies have common concerns, like terrorism, lots of common risks and common threats. But we have to protect this history and the state of freedom”.

The French President also said “I want my country to be the best partner in Europe. This is a strong message. I want Indian citizens coming to France for studying, becoming entrepreneurs and opening start-ups”.

Some 14 bilateral agreements were signed at Hyderabad House, strengthening the bilateral economic, political and strategic ties between the two countries. The joint statement affirmed: “Both leaders agreed to deepen and strengthen the bilateral ties based on shared principles and values of democracy, freedom, rule of law and respect for human rights”.

A message for China?

And on the emotive side, it recalled “the valiant sacrifices made by Indian and French soldiers during the First World War”. The Indian Prime Minister agreed to participate in the closing of the First World War Centenary celebrations, which will take place on November 11 in Paris.



And there is, of course, the Rs59,000 crore deal for 36 Rafale fighters in September 2016; it will soon prove to be a game changer, mainly due to the offset clauses forcing the French to reinvest in India 50 percent of the total deal's amount, but also for India's western and northern fronts.

Delhi also knows that it needs to diversify its diplomatic relations if it wants to play a major role in the world. Here too, France could be a crucial partner. According to the Joint Statement: “The leaders reiterated that this cooperation will be crucial in order to maintain the safety of international sea lanes for unimpeded commerce and communications in accordance with the international law”. It may translate into a logistics accord allowing India access to the strategically important French base in the Reunion Islands near Madagascar. Another possibility is the opening to India of the French facilities in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa where India's rival China has already a military base. This is part of India's new maritime strategy.

The shortest article of the Joint Statement is worth noting: “The leaders noted ongoing discussions between Defence Research and Development Organisation and SAFRAN on combat aircraft engine and encouraged necessary measures and forward-looking approaches to facilitate early conclusion”.

The idea is to develop an M88 engine for the Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas with Safran, one of Dassault's partners in the Rafale deal.

There is also a vibrant educational cooperation between Indian and French Universities and academic institutes; a host of agreements were signed during the Knowledge Summit, the first Indo-French conference on research and higher education in presence of the French and Indian Minister of education.

The Joint Statement spoke of increasing the number and quality of student exchanges, with the aim of reaching 10,000 students by 2020. An agreement for the mutual recognition of degrees should “facilitate the pursuit of higher education by Indian students in France and French students in India and enhance their employability”. The cherry on the visit's cake was the co-hosting of the International Solar Conference (ISA). An alliance of more than 121 countries launched at the UN Climate Change Conference in Paris in November 2015, the ISA wants to create a coalition of solar resource-rich countries and address each participant's special energy needs.

All this does not mean that the practical collaboration will be easy, but it is worth a try.

(Courtesy: The Pioneer)

FARMER FRIENDLY

How to double or multiply the income of Indian farmers



When our political executive commits or resolves to double the income of farmers, it is not simply a policy economics but creation of an eco system of agriprenuership coupled with tailor made or customised solutions to be suitable with regard to small and micro farmers who have either small or unviable holdings or discouraged to have viable farming.

I am sure and without quoting statistical conclusions, it is very great to think and design an action eco system that goes well for the farmers at the



bottom of pyramid to increase their income. It is also true that this great goal cannot be made realisable by only Govt schemes but a complete eco system of schemes and consultancies inculcated through infrastructures with forward and backward linkages with regard to inputs and outputs can make things truly grounded. The rural society of ours is used to prosper in an eco system of in formalism than the formalism.

The paper book approach of schemes etc has resulted into unsuccessfulness of schemes. The agriculture which holds or hinges the critical dynamics of economy and sociology of India, needs to be given pragmatic, Indianised and reasonable visits and solutions to make the dream of our PM a big success. First important issue to realise this dream is to complete the Agro mapping of regions, juxtaposing crops and climatic constraints with conduciveness.

Then this can be converted in to a mobile app with GPS enabled processing to find the areas suitable to particular crops, vegetables and fruits etc according to the automated analysis of complete crop suitability factors. Second is the capital and social constraints. Third is the support eco system. Fourth is the market linkages, forward and backward, supported by the storage infrastructure including cold chains. We have to see which farmer with how much Agro holdings (land + live stock etc) with what kind of Agro profiling, can and will succeed in multiplying his income from all sources. I have already analysed that size matters and Agro profiling must be done according to size and other climatic viabilities.

The landless labour should go for animal husbandry, goat, cow and poultry etc and micro holders of land may add vegetable farming, medicinal farming along with animal husbandry and fisheries etc. Small holders may opt all the above options with suitable grain crops. Only the multitudes and optimisations of farming can contribute in the critical increase of income of farmers. In fact informal rearing of goats, hens, cows, buffalos and fisheries etc can do miracles for poor farmers provided that the insurance (livestock) and medical care (vet) infrastructure are user friendly and affordable on single window modes, supported by dedicated call centres.

The formal structures and procedures of implementation of rural schemes do either generate indifference of farmers or malpractices by doers.

The procedural constraints of formal-banking sectors do push farmers to go to informal arrangements of finance which are costly and exploitative but easily available. Easy availability of things is key to success in rural areas. If goat milk is given market linkages, it can create a buyer storm what to say of its value added products like goat cheese etc which we buy for RS 2000 per kg in the Khan market Delhi. What we need are the hygiene and packaging market-ers. Informal rearing of geographically sustainable breeds are the best solutions. Goats are poor's cows but their produces have huge demands from the elite class of India. Besides, formal finance markets of India are not conducive to farmers, more so for the poorest of poor people living in villages.

Therefore when our PM thinks to double the income of farmers, it is primarily for small and micro farmers on the bottom of pyramid. Designing Agro solutions for such farmers, keeping their geographical, financial, risk and market linked constraints in mind is the need of hour. We need an enabling eco system for farmers than the subsidised systems or measures only. We need to create an exchange eco system so that farmers can trade or barter their produces and be beneficiaries by negotiating their input costs. There cannot be indifference with regard to certain dangerous trends in rural India. Depleting underground water levels, wastage of water model of irrigation, law and order constraints, do affect adversely the momentum of growth. The lacking infrastructure of agricultural consultancies at village levels, do disturb the economics of rural India. A Govt led approach can be by enabling driven platforms rather than the actual doings to be true game changers.

Besides doubling the farmer's income issue may further be targeted in two phases. First phase of this mission should be dedicated to landless or negligible land holders in rural areas and the other group with 4 acres or less land holdings (this will cover roughly 85% farmers of India). The problem with these land holders is that they are either rent seekers of their land and then farming is done by tenants who may be laborious but not so aware farmers.

Many landless people have taken land on rent. They put their hard work and generate subsistence income for their families. Now agriculture is shifting from the hands of owners to doers. With these informal understandings, things are going in a totally unprofes-



sional way, encouraging only subsistence farming for both. Unfortunately, they (tenants) do not want to take risks being either less confident of returns or being not sure of their land retainer ship in case of payment defaults. The awareness horizon of small farmers is limited up to only legacy farming plus some tinkering did to remain in ultra safe modes. We have to optimise the potential the crop selection and outcome dynamics.

If one acre land according to its soil condition, irrigation viabilities and other precautionary measures of safety etc, can fetch one lakh rupees in a year, why a small farmer is settling with 10 /15 thousands a year due unscientific crop selections and aftermath lapses. Is it deficit of knowledge or incentive or absence of market linkages? What can be the reasons of appealing more to farmers? We need agricultural leaders in villages; they can experiment and decide

the trajectory of paths for such farmers. We have to shift our small farmers from grain crops to vegetables and medicinal plantations, horticulture and other high profit crops with forward linkages to markets. I am of the firm belief that land consolidation can be a big measure to help farmers to consolidate at one place their various small pieces of land, located at different places and then crop and irrigation planning can be better done.

The problem with vegetables etc farming is that they are highly perishable and with seasonal volatilities. Barring a few items, they need to be consumed within reasonable time frames. For this, the eco system of market needs to be pragmatized. We need differential pricing policy or minimum support price along with buying's from the fields rather than farmers going to the markets approach. I think it is the difficulty of sale and price negotiations that make

a farmer going in to traditional mode of farming. We need agriculture audit and profiling of land pieces so that a five year horizon of optimum crop selections can be planned region wise and marketwise to convince farmers to opt the business mode of agriculture from that of subsistence mode.

Unfortunately agriculture is done on auto mode basis without caring inputs like crop, irrigation, seed, fertiliser and soil dynamics. Here lies the problem. The practical consultants on informal basis down to the level of villages are the need of hour. We may treat it as a skill and accordingly select village wise KISAN MITRA who can be the facilitator for farmers for many things. I think that these KISAN MITRAS can be encouraged by Govt by linking their stipends from the propionate enhancements of incomes of farmers, generated through proactive counselling. Linking this will motivate them to be more creative and



persistent. The Kisan Mitra should be a doer of agriculture and not theoretical speaker. His stipend should be given in a non bureaucratic fashion so that he does not become a liability. Village wise entrepreneurs in the cold chain process need to be identified and then mentored by public private eco system. The problem is that we do not find any accessible, affordable and informal infrastructure arrangements at village level. We need to focus our efforts village wise instead of different denominations.

The census of land piece holdings and their potential output profiling from crop selection perspectives can do miracles in multiplying the income of farmers. Now I will come on the other dimension of agriculture. Animal husbandry, fisheries, dairy and poultry etc are thought to be the choice of only big farmers. We have to break this mental blockade. Informal doing of these things will not only eradicate farmer's

malnutrition etc but will leverage farmers to push their surplus in the markets. How the market will buy these produces of farmers, for this we need a facilitator eco system and not only a regulator.

The facilitator eco system will help them for inputs and outputs as well. Doing anything on formal and big scale is not the issue here. What I want to say is that a farmer who is 30 years age with one acre land can do something like this. He can rear three goats, four five hens, 10x20 feet pond for fisheries, two three cows and then in one acre he can plant some seasonal vegetables and some medicinal plants etc. I mean he can earn at least two lacs in a year with such systematic combinations that otherwise is living in 1/10 of his financial capacity. The farmer is not in the business mode now.

What are constraints credible and informal advice, market eco system, seed money (capital) and support eco system

of medical (vet), insurance (crop) and live stock etc are the areas to facilitate. I think that village wise approach with some models can be planned with crop and animal husbandry etc combinations, farmer wise and then we can get that embedded in the minds of farmers. Many migrant workers in cities are living on wages may be made targets to go back and do something like this. In villages, the volatility of circumstances and other factors have made farmers sceptical in doing creative experiments. Therefore they have to be given an informal model by showing practically how they can multiply their income. Social financing at village level is prevalent but it is very exploitative.

Banks do not have better interfaces with these small and uneducated farmers. Where should they go for on the spot and immediate financial requirements is the challenge to be tackled? I think that pre crop mortgaging of crops arrangements; live stock mortgaging being insured etc, can be options to finance farmers. The interface of micro financing can be good but how to create the finance eco system to help farmers in easy ways is the biggest challenge. Banks are too formal to make farmers comfortable and reachable. I think that we can make some small finance solutions using all options to realise this goal. Chicken and egg who was before syndrome, needs to be broken with regard to financing farmers.

We should explore potential paying capacity model through better crops than the routinised past economic capacity models to decide the eligibility for financing. We can give Kisan credit cards, calculating the animal husbandry potentialities of farmers for buying inputs instead of cash financing to farmers. We can create a platform where poultries, fisheries, cows and goats etc can be bought through Kisan cards by automatic mortgaging of live stocks with automated insurances etc. Can we create an after sale care service eco system for farmers with regard to live stocks through during sale or purchase time settlement of fee fixations, integrated with call centres. Forward mortgaging, automated insurance, availability of medical (vet) care can make viable models of financing. Thus it will require very proper and conducive infrastructure to realise the dream on time line basis.

(Writer is an IPS officer in Delhi and can be reached at Mntiwari66@gmail.com)

SOUND OF SUCCESS

Oscar winning versatile Resul Pookutty aims for greater height

Nithya Ramesh

Although it isn't in his nature to boast, Resul Pookutty is the only name in India who can brag about of having received an Oscar - The Academy Award for Best Sound Mixing in 'Slumdog Millionaire', British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) Award for Best Sound in 'Slumdog Millionaire', National Film Award for Best Audiography in 'Pazhasi Raja', Golden Reel Award for Best Sound in Documentary film 'India's Daughter', Padma Shri Award by Government of India, Ashoka Chakra by the Joint Session of Parliament and the list goes on.

He has spent over 23 years working in sound design and is one of the most highly respected sound designers in the film industry. Some of his greatest works were seen in films like 'Ghajini', 'Black', 'Kabir', 'PK', 'Kick', 'Highway', 'Saawariya', 'Gandhi, My Father', 'Blue', 'Robot', 'The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel', 'Shootout at Wadala' and many more to his credit.

Tell us how your journey began. When did you decide you wanted to make a career in sound?

When I began I never thought I will make a career in sound. Actually I wanted to be physicist. On a general note like any other Parent, my mother wanted me to take up science. I was in my 12th grade, when I fell in love with Physics. I wanted to research conductivity and was keen on inventing super conductive element and bring Noble Prize for India. That was my ambition in life then. But you know many things that you plan don't happen and during that time I couldn't Pursue masters in Physics. I was doing nothing so I decided to study Law. When I was pursuing first year of law, couple of my friends from Physics advised a course in film institute (FTII, Pune) for sound recording and sound engineering and the basic qualifications for enrollment was B.Sc. in Physics. The five of us took admission to the film school and applied for the course. I was the only one selected at the entrance exam. So I went to the film school from Law College to

attend the second stage of selection procedure and didn't get through! All my structured learned mugged up answers didn't do any good.

That failure was a very big turning point in my life. I discovered Cinema in that failure and I decided cinema is what I wanted to do. So I came back to Trivandrum, joined my law school and for the next one year I prepared myself at understanding what art and culture is, as a science student I did not have much knowledge on the subject. There was not a single day and single event of any concerts or a kacheri (carnatic classical concert) or anything to do with art and culture in Trivandrum that I had left unattended. I visited temples, British library, university library, doorki bhavan and used to sit on the steps of Padmanabhaswamy temple for a year to study and update myself. For the second time I went to the film school, I was complete different man. I stood first at the selection process and got eligible for scholarship.

I went to the film institute as the village boy who couldn't speak good English and knew only Malayalam and if I had to make a note in English then I would take some time to translate the same from Malayalam to English. I put a timetable to myself every day just not for me to learn but also because I had very limited resources. I never took money from my parents for something that I wanted to pursue on my own as they were already worried I was jumping through different professions. I had to manage my tuition fees, hostel fees and living expenses with 500 rupees. From three years of studying and watching cinema, I was transforming myself to a person of artistic integrity. The institute had changed my life completely forever.

I came out from FTII to the film industry as an idealistic student. If you ask me, what your journey is and what are the struggles that you faced, I had two kinds of struggle, one I was a village boy to a metropolitan city finding oneself in the realm of art and to meet different people from different culture and languages. And my second struggle was far more important and difficult to function with all the knowledge that I

had acquired from a structured study in an industry that constantly told me that my education had no value or there is no need for education in this industry! That's probably the biggest downfall of Indian film industry because we don't need to study to be part of it. I had to find my foot holds in the industry that had constantly rejected me. I thought if the industry doesn't need me then I had to create a need for myself to be a part of the industry. Fourteen years later when I won an Oscar I became the first Asian to win the award in Best Sound Mixing category and that is because of this conviction, hard work and people around me put together. It was not my individual achievement, it was an achievement of everyone who was a part of my life in that 14 years.

What does it mean for you to associate a particular sound to a visual event? What are the mental or purely instinctive paths competing in making the choice?

It still amazes me how a sound could open up the movie when I do it every time. Something magical happens when an effect of sound is added to the picture and sometimes it doesn't turn out to be predictable. I still depend on experiments by putting sounds against image to see what happens and it doesn't stop there for me. First of all we sound technicians called the "sound man" is not understood well by the people outside the medium or at times people within the medium. I think we are far more powerful people compared to a Director of Photography. To me a visual is only abstract, when you look at a moving or frozen image, the meaning of it is an abstract but the moment I start putting sound into it the meaning gets concretized. And cinema is a continuum of time and space. The real meaning of an image is actually decided by the sound that is going with it, for it is the temporal element. We have some of the most amazing visual effects in a film but that does not become natural experience unless it has the sound that concretizes the meaning of moving image, the experience of sound and picture together makes the most real and natural experience. I think in terms of finding the



meaning to the image we are far more powerful, which is not readily understood by the common man or even the common traits within my industry.

When I hear somebody walking in a film, I can define the person from an anthropological perspective. For example if I put the sound of a high heel shoe then the image of that person changes and it can be changed by adding the sound of a flip flop. You don't have to see the person, but just with the sound that I add for their walk you can define who is walking. And once the final edit of the film is over I sit on it and do my own version of the script through sound. It is as if I am rewriting the script of the film through sound.

Your primary job is as a sound designer – what does that entail? It sounds quite abstract and

I don't think that many people know what a sound designer actually does...can you elaborate?

You probably know the work of a cameraman; he gives the visual language to the film by a way of using lights, shadows, movements and lenses to achieve that. Likewise a sound designer gives oral texture to the film. He has the performance of the actors which is their oral performances as one of the elements, ambience that define each spaces of those performances as another element. And the sounds the actors make while they perform are the third element. We have sound design which is very musical in nature but not real music. It is interpretation of a sound designer through various sound natural or otherwise like a musical score. Then next is the actual music, when composer interpretation through musical notes

and instrument of a particular situation or of a performance in the film. With these elements in hand, I create loudness graph that compliments a narrative graph as the film progresses from one scene to another with certain emotional intensity. Sometimes you hear very little, sometimes you hear far more things, like a landscape is opening and closing. We make selective listening for the audience who come to watch a film and make him feel life as he is experiencing one continuous emotional ride so in a way sound design is very subconscious art. This is the job of a sound designer.

You are a believer that sound exists in nature and are not a product of a skilled craftsman. Your work has always been exquisite and known for unfailing delivery of quality sound. Would you like to talk about it?



(Giggles) It's a huge compliment. Thank you. I do agree that sound exists in nature. When I was doing a film like 'Saawariya', the film had only four nights. The night before the rains, night during the rains and night after the rains. When a boy and a girl meet and when they are in love no reality exists between them. There's only that moment where there is moonlight. 'Saawariya' was full of moments like that. I had recorded so many nights and one night I went into the deep jungle in film city Mumbai. The jungle was a part of Western Ghats. I was standing next to a pond as I was recording the night; I realized there is space for every creature in this universe. What defined that night was there were sound of crickets from the floor, there were elements, there were creatures in every step, trees, leaves rustling, birds that were moving, sound of plonk with fishes jumping out of the water and the air around me as atmosphere. That day I realized that we think of ourselves so big but we are just a blue dot of dust in this Universe and nothing else. Every living creature in this universe are so embedded in the atmosphere which I managed to capture with that ambience. Someone who saw the film called me from New York one night and spoke to me about the sound

of that night, I think for me with every piece of sound that I leave behind in the film strip, I am trying to make a conversation with my audience. With a phone call like that and talk of that particular night I feel my one such conversation is complete. For me every film is a pursuit to find that one person who would call me from some part of the globe where we are able to converse through images and sculptures in time.

Which movie do you consider “the perfect movie for sound” that you have worked on until now?

Oh god!! (Laughs) That's a very difficult question to answer. If I had ten children and you ask me which one is the perfect child then who do I pick? Every film I have worked I have emotionally invested myself in it. So every film is important. Every film that I watch after years I want to change it. That is the feeling that I have on all the film that I have done. It is very difficult for me to choose just one film but there are certain films that are close to me for various reasons like 'Gandhi, My Father', 'Black', 'Slumdog Millionaire', 'Liv & Ingmar' etc.

How has life changed? Post Oscar!

Laughs... No easy films are coming to me after Oscars, I have to struggle as peoples expectations on me are getting bigger and bigger and if I work hard to create something new then people say that it is okay and was expected out of me. Every time I have this huge pressure on me to perform better each day.

Life hasn't changed, but my life for others have changed. I think my life has touched people and I'm still the same person. I want to lead a ordinary life. I always tell myself that I'm an ordinary man thrown in extraordinary situations in life.

To be honest I haven't kept my Oscar anywhere in the studio or at my house because I don't want to look at it each day. I remember what Mr. Amitabh Bachchan told me once that “the kind of achievement that we have taken in our life, we have to prepare our shoulders in a way that those achievements will shine on it”. I don't know if my shoulders are capable enough (Smiles). I have locked my Oscars in my bank vault and every year I take it out to clean it and put it back and that's the only time my children get to hold the Oscars and BAFTA. I also have big Ashoka Chakra that is given to me by the Joint session of the Parliament and I have kept all these three awards in the vault room so

that I don't have to see them every day.

What made you decide to work on '2.0'?

'2.0' is a sequel of the movie 'Robot' (Hindi version) or 'Enthiran' (Tamil version) which I had worked for earlier. '2.0' is huge and a very ambitious film. So I worry for Shankar because I don't think anybody else can do something like that in Indian cinema. I think time has come for us to think big, we have to capture our imagination of our people and improve the markets of our own films. 80% of India's films market share that we make are domestic and is the biggest saving of our industry. A number of Hollywood films like 'Avatar' which made 57 crore, 'Fast & Furious 8' which 71 crore and 'Jungle Book' which made close to 200 crore and other such movies are making huge collection from India. Hollywood is taking away the resources from India without spending a single penny in its making and that is where sanctity of film like '2.0' lies. If we do not contain our audience for the next decade then we will be wiped out and there will only be Hollywood. There is already a generation of youngsters who think that Indian cinema is redundant and only Hollywood is real and for me that is unacceptable.

As more and more young people get drawn towards careers in the film industry, where do you think the future of sound design lies?

After my Oscar there are tons and tons of sound engineering institutes that have sprung up. I just want to tell my youngsters and their parents that I have studied the art of film making and sound as a craft. If you want to become somebody like me, you have to study in a film school where they teach you history of cinema, art and culture. Sound is just one small part among them. Not any private institutions can do this because education has become business. Don't be a victim of these business proposals.

You have worked closely with A R Rahman on a number of films. Does a good relationship with a music director help the collaboration from an early stage?

I have a very different equation with A R Rahman. Working with him for every film has bought me different experiences. He has brought a new dimension to music in Indian cinemas. The first

time we worked together was 'Slumdog Millionaire' and even though 'Ghajini' came earlier than 'Slumdog Millionaire' it was the second film that we sat in a room and worked together. 'Ghajini' is an unforgettable film for me which has touched my heart due to death of Sreedhar who was the sound engineer for A R, who created that unforgettable sound of Rahman's music.

Rahman and I spend a lot of time talking together whenever we meet and we share parallel ideas when it comes to work. It has helped us give great sound and music to the film that we worked together. He is kind of an elder brother to me and guides me. For me he is just not a colleague or a music director who is working in a film together, he is much more and bigger than that.

You said a movie needs to be designed for sound before you start designing sound. What do you mean by that?

Yes, first and foremost choice of the sound has to create a sense of image of something that I have seen, heard, experienced or that I invent. I remember when I was doing a film like 'Blue', what would it sound like 200 meters deep under the sea, it was something that I had probably not experienced but I imaged it as an experience and transposed that experience to the audience. In a way I become the first listener. I did a film with Buddhadeb Dasgupta called 'Sniffer'. There was a sequence in the film which was a single shot of 8 minute long. The camera was placed at the bottom of a hillock and the sun comes up as Anwar (main character in the film) begins his last journey in the film. Just this shot offered me so much possibility of sound. I decided to visit the exact same location and recorded many such mornings, the result of which is a composition of 8 minute long with sounds that are captured in many mornings' diegetic and non-diegetic. This simply can be called as sound art that is probably why I said a film needs to be designed for sound before sound is designed.

Could you talk about your acting debut film which is making sensational news across and yourself playing a sound designer in the movie?

(Laughs) I don't look at it as an acting debut. The whole idea happened after my Oscars, when I once told in an interview that my dream was to record the sounds of the Pooram, one of

the biggest sound events in the world. I wanted to record the sounds of the Pooram for my personal archive. Raveesh Panakal a producer himself called me from US and said he would like to facilitate the dream of mine.

The event was massive with 100 elephants, 500 musicians and a million people over 70 acres of land and realized it was not possible by just being a sound man. I wanted to capture the process of recording it. During the shoot I met a Mahout and discovered that one of the elephant in the procession was blind. I wondered if an elephant could go through the procession with the help of the sound then why not visually challenged person experience the Pooram without being there in person. That was the seed for the film titled 'The Sound Story' directed by Prasad Prabhakar. It is basically the struggle and survival of the sound man to record the Pooram to make it an experience for a visually challenged person. That is how I became an accidental actor and it's not a documentary film.

Can you talk about your upcoming projects?

I think this year I'm pretty much occupied with a lot of films. At present I have '2.0' coming up. I'm working on a Hindi film 'Manto' which is a biopic of Saadat Hasan Manto. I have a Hollywood film called 'Love Sonia' from the maker of 'Life of Pie' David Womark and directed by Tabrez Noorani. I have a Malayalam movie 'Praana' directed by VK Prakash. I have another Malayalam film based on a novel 'Aadujeevitham' written by Benyamin where I and A R Rahman will be working together again. And I have got a couple of more Hindi films.

Do you have any final words for the readers of OPINION EXPRESS magazine and your fans across the globe?

For readers and fans out there I would like to say that we are living in a time where technology is constantly telling us that we don't need faculty of memory anymore whereas our tradition says our memory is knowledge. Till this contradiction we need to be constantly aware of three things; first to be factual, second to be logical - in things we say and propagate and third to be more humane. It is respect and love for one another that makes us a truly one good family in the world of contradictions.

Bureau Chief FASHION & Entertainment

THE ICONIC STAR

The style icon of the South is a prolific dancer and rated among the best in the Indian film industry

Nithya Ramesh

Allu Arjun is one actor who shot right up the ladder since his debut in Tollywood. Allu Arjun soon began riding the wave of success and landed blockbuster films such as 'Arya', 'Bunny', 'Happy', 'Arya 2', 'Race Gurram', 'S/O Satyamurthy', 'Sarrainodu', 'DJ' and many others. On the surface, his road to superstardom has been enviably easy marking to be the next superstar in the industry. He burns up the screen with his energy that spikes out in all direction, sweeping you up with its force even in casual encounter.

He is the only South Indian actor whose movies have reached the 100 crore club thrice. His Hindi dubbed movies have collectively surpassed 530 million views on YouTube and has a huge crossover appeal across India especially in Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and among other states.

Today, his fan following is increasing by every minute and so is the number of filmmakers wanting to sign him. What's more he has hit a beautiful equation in his personal life as well. Riding the crest of his huge fans

followers of 12.7 million in Facebook alone making him the highest among any South Indian actor and many Bollywood stars too. Apart from these Allu Arjun's interest in the beverage as investor/partner for B-dubs and Hylife Brewery(India) has taken a turn that is both altruistic and entrepreneurial.

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the people I work and interact with are the ones to help and keep me grounded as much as possible.

As an established actor how are you able to measure success

As an actor what keeps you motivated and so grounded?

Motivation and being grounded are two different aspects.

I always aspire to give and be the best in whatever I do which in itself is what keeps me motivated. To do better than before each time, I do and undo myself and improve on my skills is what motivates me.

Being grounded is to never lose sight of ourselves as a normal human being however successful one is in life. On a very fundamental level my family, close circle friends, my staff and



and build on this ?

The world generally rates your success by quantifying the amount of business you make and currently our business is in the order of three digit crore. This is an objective approach of measuring success. Seeing through the lens of subjectivity which is a harder way of measuring success, success is living a happy and satisfied life. I am happy with what I am doing. I am in a profession that I enjoy and feel the best when I am at work and I get highly involved with it.

Simply put, rather than basking in the numbers as measured by the market, success should be more about how satisfied you are with your achievements and your work. To build on this, I would strive for more and get a lot more name, fame and recognition to the South Indian film industry.

Filmmakers have imagined you in different ways over the years. What excites you any more in a script?

There are lot of genres that haven't been touched in Indian films and a quite a lot of new genre which we haven't explored should be created in the future. Unlike before, people nowadays are opening up and embracing creativity and originality. A lot of novelty is seen in almost every genre because people are appreciating originality more than anything else and especially here in this industry. Audiences expect that you give the best to your role. I am looking forward to original ideas and scripts that would be coming up in the future with lesser western and eastern touch to the films. Another interesting thing is that a lot of these scripts have a very realistic approach in the commercial cinema which makes it even more appealing. And this is what is exciting to me in the current script as well - a mix of originality and realism.

If you could be one person from history, who it would be?

(Laughs) I am not much into history but I would be Narendra Modi. It is quite an achievement from where he had started and till becoming the Prime Minister of our nation.

You have achieved many milestones in your career as an actor and entrepreneur. Is there anything that you still want to achieve?

There are lot of things I still have to achieve as an actor and I would say that entrepreneurship is just a by-product of being an actor. Innately, I have an interest in entrepreneurship but what's fundamental is that at the end of the day I am an actor. Being in the field of acting and as an actor there is so much more to explore and achieve. I feel that this is a new epoch and a golden era in cinema worldwide and especially in India because cinema is opening up to many a new horizon. Audience are nowadays more open to accepting different genres and different kinds of films. I would like to make the best out of this golden era and try to make a unique mark for myself.

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Apart from acting or being an entrepreneur, I am very actively involved in social service activities and charity. I like to do my part to make our society a better place to live and also do my part in bringing happiness to others lives. It gives me immense happiness if I can bring smile to others.

Are you overwhelmed with the kind of support you get from your fans globally?

Oh yes! It's very nice because now that the cinema has opened up and especially South Indian films are being bought over or being dubbed by Bollywood and other languages in India. The viewership of Telugu cinema is no longer just the Telugu audience as the dubbing of Telugu cinemas to other languages is increasing at an unprecedented pace. The Telugu films are highly watched in Kerala, Karnataka,

and are also going places to Tamil Nadu and in belts of Maharashtra. The online reach of Telugu films is really huge. There are lot of people from Bangladesh and other neighbouring countries who watch and appreciate this kind of cinema. So it's very overwhelming that our original films are being appreciated by people across different cultures. What entices them about our films is the uniqueness and they feel this uniqueness more than we feel about it in our films. That is quite a commendable achievement for all of us.

How did 'Naa Peru Surya' happen? What attracted you to the script?

I as a person have the highest respect for soldiers, farmers and teachers. When I heard the script that had a story about a soldier, I immediately got connected to the film with no second thought. 'Naa Peru Surya' is a great story of a young soldier who has a dream of being posted at the border and how he achieves that dream come true. It is as simple as that. It's very contemporary film and at the same time very real.

How tough was it playing the role in 'Naa Peru Surya' considering you're always stocked with energy?

(Smiles) Playing this role was very different as it was not like my any other previous roles and it required different skills from what I usually play. I had to go through a basic physical fitness regime to get that look and I had to go through a lot of look tests to transform myself to get it right. The toughest part was the shoot schedule of the film because we had to shoot in multiple geographical regions with varying landscapes and a lot of change over in the film entailing a lot of tough travel. That was one of the most challenging part to play the role in 'Naa Peru Surya'.

You have got to work with the finest directors since the beginning of your career. One director in mind that you always wanted to work with?

(Smiles) Yes it is very true and I have been lucky enough that from the beginning of my career I got to work with the best directors. My debut film 'Gangotri' was directed by K.Raghavendra Rao which also hap-



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pened to be his 100th film and I started with an excellent guidance. Honestly, there are many good directors and one of my favourite directors with whom I always wanted to work with is K. Balachander. But this is no longer a possibility as he is no more. I really wish I were acting in the era in which he was directing films and we did a film together.

You are a man of many roles. You are an actor, an entrepreneur, a husband and a father. How do you balance both a profession-

of scripts. My upcoming film 'Naa Peru Surya' will be widely released in May in seven languages. Till date I have been working only in Telugu film industry. I have been getting offers from Tamil film industry, and also from Bollywood. Now the options are plenty in Bollywood than what it used to be. Apart from Telugu films, my next plan is to venture out to either Tamil or Hindi films and give it a shot.

Do you have any final words for the readers of OPINION EXPRESS maga-

I am trying to balance it well. Everybody has to go through this little struggle of striking a balance. The trick is that when I am professionally working I don't think about my personal life and when I am in my personal space I don't think about my professional life. Be in that moment. That's how one can achieve and balance being a man of many roles. It's a very simple thing to follow but it will bring a huge change and that's my mantra.

al and personal lifestyle equally?

I am trying to balance it well. Everybody has to go through this little struggle of striking a balance. The trick is that when I am professionally working I don't think about my personal life and when I am in my personal space I don't think about my professional life. Be in that moment. That's how one can achieve and balance being a man of many roles. It's a very simple thing to follow but it will bring a huge change and that's my mantra.

Can you talk about your upcoming projects?

Honestly I haven't zeroed down on any films for now though I have heard a couple

zine and your fans across the globe?

I love the word "Opinion" in itself because having an opinion is a very strong trait in a personality and being able to express that will define your character. It's a very strong word for something that I fundamentally connect with and something that I believe in.

To the readers of **OPINION EXPRESS** and fans across the globe, thank you very much for watching South Indian cinema. I thank you all for continued support and love. We hope to do better work and to impress you more and more. I hope the reach of South Indian cinema grows worldwide.

QUICK BYTES

Describe your best quality as an actor?

I always thrive to do better and I try to unlearn as much as I can.

What's your favourite car?

I like most of the Porsche cars.

What's your favourite colour?

Black and white which are not colours (giggles).

What's your signature style?

My signature style is my AA icon as I'm the only actor in South who has one.

What's your best day in life?

Today (laughs). That's the only day you live. Past is a memory, future is imaginary and only today is real.

What's your favourite cuisine?

I like Mexican and Japanese food.

Where is your all time favourite holiday destination?

Maldives and New York are my all time favourite holiday destination.

Which is your favourite genre?

Love!

Which co-star was most easy to dance with?

Shruti Hassan and Tamannaah.

Craziest fan story?

A guy called Allu Sujith, he has thirteen tattoos of me and I think that's a crazy fan I got.

Favourite dance form?

Street dance.

What is your favourite daily wear attire?

Track pants and sweat t-shirts.

You are super interested in photography. What kind of pictures do you like clicking?

I love clicking portraits.

Landmark Judgment

SC verdict on instant Triple Talaq will go a long way in changing the life of Muslim women

Laraib Fatima Warsi

The much anticipated and debated topic known as talaq-e-biddat or instant divorce is a form of Islamic divorce practiced by Muslims in India. From ancient times, Muslim faith has been plagued by the portrayal of Muslim men regularly misusing the perceived “right” to divorce their wives instantly by simply uttering ‘talaq’ thrice. People are debating and discussing about it, some have raised questions regarding gender equality, justice, secularism, human rights etc.

The Modi government has restored the faith in humanity by criminalizing instant triple talaq. “When they have a brother like Narendra Modi, they do not need to be afraid of anyone,” a BJP MP said, assuring the Muslim women during discussions in the Lok Sabha when the Bill criminalizing instant triple talaq was introduced and passed on December 28.

The Prime Minister has expressed his deep concern for the plight of the Muslim women who are victims of instant talaq time and again. During the election campaign in Uttar Pradesh, our Prime Minister vowed to bring justice to them. He referred to their plight again while he was in Gujarat and declared that banning triple talaq is not a political question, but a matter of bringing justice to Muslim women.

The proposed bill of triple talaq that criminalizes the practice of instant divorce “empowers” Indian Muslim women by giving them a larger say in dissolving marriages, custody of minor children and the right to seek maintenance from their estranged husbands, according to the cabinet-cleared controversial legislation opposed by Muslim groups.

The bill defines triple talaq as “any pronouncement (of divorce) by a person upon his wife by words, either spoken or written or in electronic form, or in any other manner”. It proposes to make the practice a punishable offence and allows women to take a right stand for themselves.

The bill states that urgent suitable



legislation was necessary “to give some relief to, the hapless married Muslim women who suffer from harassment due to talaq-e-biddat and this is therefore essential to prevent such kind of divorce, wherein the wife does not have any say in severing the marital relationship.

After the criminalization of the triple talaq has been done, the legislation now would help in ensuring the larger constitutional goals of gender justice and gender equality of married Muslim women and help sub serve their fundamental rights of non-discrimination and empowerment. The Prime Minister himself took this major move and assured that the very purpose of banning triple talaq was to allow women greater security in the institution of marriage by allowing for due process in divorce.

The saffron party has been whoop-

ing over the fact that it has been able to bring the law criminalizing triple talaq and pass it from Lok Sabha which is indeed appreciable.

The Muslim community, like all communities, is not divided along gender lines – women, the helpless victims of triple talaq and the brutish men who pronounce triple talaq are part of the same composite community which is being increasingly pushed to a corner where survival is at stake. Prime Minister Modi, has said that the government wants to improve the lot of the Muslim women in the country so that it brings social security and benefits for the Muslim women. Thus, criminalizing triple talaq would definitely bring changes in the women’s financial well-being and they’d be empowered.

Writer is a regular contributor of Opinion Express Magazine.



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