



Blinkers on

The BJP's manifesto is unabashed about its narrowly nationalist agenda

The Bharatiya Janata Party's election manifesto offers glimpses of its understanding of India and its vision for India. It is a reiteration of the party's three-point agenda of nationalism, welfare of the poor and good governance. Prepared after consultation with a wide range of people and released days before the polls start, the manifesto is to that extent a welcome contrast with 2014, when the BJP did not release it until the first phase of polling was under way. A manifesto is important not for being a catalogue of vote-catching, tall promises, but as a document that explains the direction that a party proposes for the country. The BJP manifesto needs scrutiny for more reasons. It must be judged against its performance in government for five years and also in comparison with the manifestos of other parties, particularly the Congress. In promising welfare for the people, economic growth and material development, the BJP manifesto is not drastically different from the others. But its clarity on what makes the party distinct is remarkable. The BJP's deep yearning for the reshaping of India into a cultural monolith, which it projects as essential for progress, is clear.

Unlike in 2009 and 2014, this manifesto is not expansive on the party's cultural agenda, but its stated resolve to "mainstream" the people of the Northeast, its hardline approach on Jammu and Kashmir, and the recurring theme of an unforgiving state as the hallmark of a 'new India' all point towards a hardened nationalist course if the party were to retain power. While the BJP has its alliances, it is also emphatic in its pursuit of a majority of its own. The manifesto promises a Ram temple in Ayodhya, a national registry of citizens for the entire country, and citizenship to Hindus, Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs fleeing persecution in neighbouring countries. The BJP government has taken significant measures during the last five years to advance this Hindutva agenda. The emphasis on Narendra Modi is also unmistakable – his name figures 32 times, while 'BJP' figures 20 times. The manifesto is boastful of the government's performance on the national security front, and runs down all previous governments to the extent that it would appear that India assumed superpower status and made strides in sectors ranging from space technology to higher education almost exclusively on Mr. Modi's watch. Yet, the BJP manifesto does not dwell too much on Mr. Modi's single most momentous decision: demonetisation. The document claims to be an account of the current challenges, and an ambitious vision to be realised before 2047, the 100th anniversary of India's independence. Yet, it does not mention religious harmony. As a vision statement, the BJP's manifesto is limited in its understanding, and blinkered in its vision.

Closure on cynicism

Supreme Court's solution of increased VVPAT verification should reassure the EVM sceptics

By ordering an increase of the existing Voter-Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) verification rate from one to five random Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) per Assembly constituency or segment, the Supreme Court has sought to reassure those sceptical about the integrity of counting by means of EVMs. By limiting the verification to five machines instead of the 125-odd machines per constituency that the Opposition's demand for a 50% VVPAT count would have amounted to, the apex court has enabled the Election Commission of India to declare the results on the counting day itself. The higher figure, which will increase the overall number of EVMs to be counted to close to 20,000 machines, should reasonably address the very remote possibility of 'insider fraud'. It will also verify a higher sample of EVMs in the smaller States and bring the sample within reasonable confidence levels to discount chances of EVM-tampering. In any case, the VVPAT slip verification is more of a reassurance to voters that the EVM is indeed foolproof, over and above the technical and administrative safeguards that are already in place to prevent any tampering. This should effectively blunt criticism that has, unnecessarily, brought the electoral process into doubt. The fact that some of the Opposition parties moved away from their untenable demand for a return to paper ballots in their petition to a plea for a higher VVPAT count has also helped yield this reasoned proposition from the Supreme Court.

For the ECI, the key technical issue with EVMs and VVPATs is not really in regard to tampering but to machine glitches. While the parliamentary by-elections in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and the Assembly election in Karnataka last year had registered significant machine replacement rates (20% and 4%, respectively), these were brought down to less than 2% in later elections held in the winter months. The ECI made technical fixes to the VVPAT to make them more resilient during use across the country, and it should be well-prepared to handle any glitches during the seven-phase Lok Sabha election. The availability of replacement machines and the ability to deploy them quickly in case of a failure of VVPATs are essential to avoid disruptions. In the past couple of years, the doubts raised about EVMs by parties and the new constraints encountered in the electoral process due to hastened VVPAT implementation have bogged down the ECI and narrowed the discourse regarding electoral reforms. Now that the Supreme Court has brought a closure of sorts to the issue, it is time for the ECI to focus on the hassle-free conduct of polls to the Lok Sabha and to four State Assemblies, and later consider other important issues – increasing voter enrolment, effective regulation of campaign financing and implementation of the model code of conduct.

Technology and the unhurried mind

The saga of the EVMs has started looking tedious to many people – abundant caution would help



KRISHNA KUMAR

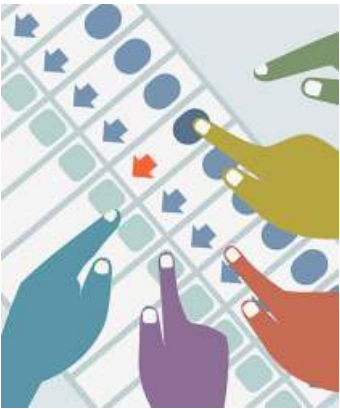
Visiting the present office of the *Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)* felt like a pilgrimage. The new office is in the lower Parel area of Mumbai. It is an old industrial area, with multi-floor offices and workshops huddled together. Many of the lifts are old – with a grill door and an operator sitting on a stool – going up and down all day with visitors. He manages the heavy grill, stretching its hard metal to close it for movement, then pulling it back to let the visitor out. In the lift I took, the grill puller was an old man. He told me that if I want to, I could take one of the new lifts. I decided to stick to him for my short journey to the third floor. While inside, I recalled my first visit to the *EPW's* legendary editor, Krishna Raj in the early 1980s. The magazine's office at that time was in the Fort area. Krishna Raj sat in his small room with a manual typewriter. The short letters he wrote, indicating a topic on which he wanted an article, were full of grace and humility. Receiving it was a short step before obedience to a moral authority that the *EPW* was. It had become a symbol of the status of debate in democratic governance.

Out of a time capsule

After an hour-long visit, I got into a taxi with a driver from eastern Uttar Pradesh. I felt I had been into a time machine adjusted to both the

old and the new worlds of democratic India. My driver told me that his vote is in Mumbai, but he is in close touch with his village in Jaunpur. There are 14 castes, he said, in his village, and all are going to vote for the Bahujan Samaj Party candidate. As far as he was concerned, U.P. had only two worthwhile leaders, Mayawati and Akhilesh Yadav. Ms. Mayawati, he said, showed what it means to control, and Mr. Yadav showed the meaning of development. Then why did he lose so badly, I asked. The answer, my taxi driver said, lay in EVMs, or electronic voting machines. Then he added, "People are more vigilant now." A minute later he said, "But you never know what all can happen." His voice carried a healthy mix of hope and resignation.

The saga of the EVM has started looking a bit tedious to many people. The Election Commission of India (ECI) itself seems frustrated with the continued suspicion of political parties in the integrity of the EVM system. As a citizen and voter, I often wonder why the EVM story has dragged on for so long. The system that the EVM has replaced was vulnerable in many ways, such as by booth capturing. Recently, when a public commentator used the term 'election capture', I was reminded of the days when incidents of booth capturing were common. In the era of EVMs, booth capturing has lost its value, not just its possibility. Another constraint of the pre-EVM era was the high proportion of invalid votes. Many people found it difficult to put the stamp in the allocated space. In the new set-up, the difficulty they might face in locating and pressing the right button



will never be known. The EVM voter is presumed to have good sight and a dexterous finger. And if he does not fulfil these assumptions, no one will ever find out. The EVM has deleted the risk of invalidity.

The linking of EVMs with a Voter-Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) is a fine mechanical response to the suspicion that EVMs can be manipulated. This doubt-removal machine offers a seven-second long image of the symbol and name chosen by the voter. One can say that a country of millions of smartphone users can be confident that its voters will look at the VVPAT screen during the given time-slot to satisfy themselves that their choice has been correctly recorded. I hope it is all right to wonder whether using a smartphone is as consequential as casting a vigilant glance at the VVPAT while waiting for the beep that announces the completion of the voting process. What the glance reveals and what can be done in case one is not satisfied are matters that can only disturb further the chain of faith that snugly surrounds the EVM system.

Democracy is a modern faith.

Brexit and the fragility of the U.K.

The muddle over how to leave the EU is threatening London's sway over Scotland and Northern Ireland



PRIYANJALI MALIK

The continuing impasse over Brexit has brought an entire continent to a standstill. It has also strained the very unity of the United Kingdom. Nothing illustrated this more clearly than the pro-Brexit demonstrations on March 29, the original departure date. Protesters, waving the English flag of St. George, denounced the delay as 'a betrayal of England'. Note this was not considered a betrayal of the U.K.: in this fight, England has gone its own way. In any case, Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain in the European Union (EU).

The narrowness of the Leave win (52% to 48%) has of course divided communities over positions on Europe. But it has also highlighted divisions between the constituent nations of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, to use the formal name of the British state. The U.K. is not one nation but four: Wales was brought under English rule in the 13th century; Ireland was incorporated by a combination of military force and political persuasion in 1801; Scotland, though never militarily defeated, was persuaded to join the Union in 1707.

Until they joined the U.K., Scotland and Ireland were governed by

their own parliaments. These were dissolved and power transferred to Westminster. This transfer of power to London did not go unchallenged locally, and the embers of resistance were never quite stamped out. The Republic of Ireland eventually gained independence for most of the island, barring the Protestant majority north, in 1922. Scottish nationalism remained subsumed under the promise of Empire: Scotland had gained power and wealth from the colonial enterprise, which tempered the loss of sovereignty to Westminster.

View from Scotland

Indeed, part of the reason that Scotland joined the Union in 1707 was because it was broke: the kingdom had suffered heavy financial losses from a disastrous expedition to secure a trading base in the late 17th century. The failure of the Darien Scheme, as it was known, was caused in no small part by resistance from Scotland's southern neighbours who were protecting the trading rights of the East India Company. Once within the Union, the colonial enterprise and then Empire offered not just wealth but all the trappings of great power. The end of the Empire signalled Britain's departure from the global stage. The Suez crisis of 1956 confirmed its diminished status. And Brexit, Britain's retreat from its own continent, has completed the project. Little England has withdrawn into itself to protect mythical ideas of Englishness against the supposed onslaught of waves of fo-



reign immigration and EU rule.

The Scots are only too aware of this. Scottish nationalism has been simmering for years now, only partly placated by the devolution of some domestic powers to a Scottish Parliament under the Scotland Act of 1998. A referendum on Scottish independence in 2014 ended up being a closer call than had been anticipated (55% vs 45%), though it was clear even then that part of the reason for remaining was that the U.K. offered membership of the EU (which was not automatically on offer for an independent Scotland). Now, with Brexit looming, Scottish demands for independence resurface regularly.

A fragile peace

The Northern Ireland question is even more intractable. Brexit threatens the fragile peace imposed by the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, which formally ended the Troubles, or decades of bitter sectarian violence. Between 1968 and 1998, the mainly Protestant Unionists were pitted against

the mostly Catholic Republicans, who wished for Northern Ireland to join the Republic of Ireland. Paramilitary forces grouped on both sides, and the British Army and the Royal Ulster Constabulary (the police) were also pulled in. Indeed, the Troubles became the longest major campaign of the British Army. The Good Friday Agreement has allowed the region to move forward.

It is, however, a fragile peace, comprising complex intertwined agreements between first, most of Northern Ireland's political parties; and second, the British and Irish governments to manage the relationships between Britain and Ireland, and between Northern Ireland and the rest of Britain. Underpinning all of this is the dismantling of the border infrastructure – watch-towers, fences, checkpoints – that had divided the island of Ireland. This was only possible because both countries belonged to the EU. If Britain leaves the customs union and single market of the EU, which guarantees the freedom of movement of people and goods between member states, then some sort of infrastructure will have to come up at the border between the EU and Britain in Ireland.

It is indeed astonishing that the tenuous peace in Northern Ireland did not concentrate minds during the 2016 referendum, or indeed afterwards, when Theresa May's government decided to opt for the hardest form of exit by declaring that Britain's future relationship with the EU could not include eith-

er a customs union or staying within the single market. Tellingly, Northern Ireland found only passing mention in her letter of March 29, 2017 to the President of the European Council invoking the Article 50 process and starting the countdown towards leaving. It was disposed of in a sentence expressing a wish 'to avoid a return to a hard border between [the] two countries'.

And yet, peace in Northern Ireland is still in its infancy. The EU will not imperil this process by allowing a border to come up between Northern Ireland and Ireland. Hence the provision for a backstop in the transition deal that Ms. May negotiated with the EU, which would keep the U.K. in a customs union and Northern Ireland in the customs union and parts of the single market should the two entities fail to arrive at a permanent free trade agreement that continues to negate the need for border infrastructure within the island. The different status for Northern Ireland would effectively raise a border between the island of Ireland and the rest of Great Britain, something that is unacceptable to the Unionists and Ms. May.

The hard core of Brexiteers, however, are willing to gamble with the unity of Britain – willing indeed, to risk losing Scotland and Northern Ireland – in their quest to be 'rid' of Europe once and for all.

Krishna Kumar is a former director of the NCERT

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Rafale deal

The mystery over the bona fides of the Rafale fighter aircraft deal is getting murkier by the day, compounded further by the reluctance of the NDA government to subject itself to scrutiny and come out clean (Page 1, 'Exclusive', "Rafale: Modi govt. gave unprecedented waivers in offset agreements", April 9). Even if, for the sake of argument, no *quid pro quo* for monetary gain was involved, it is necessary that unfair, unprecedented waivers and concessions offered be probed in terms of procedural lapses and financial losses. Is it proper for an elected government to dismiss all the evidence so far as a figment of the imagination when the revelations are based on extracted documents from no less than the Union

Defence Ministry? Maybe the government is emboldened by the fact that the layman hardly understands the intricacies of a complex defence deal, a belief corroborated by the findings of a major election survey that the Rafale issue is not so serious an electoral issue in 2019. But an elected government owing allegiance to the Constitution is duty bound to ensure that the interests of national security are not compromised in any way.

V. SUBRAMANIAM, Chennai

■ I am unable to fathom what *The Hindu* is trying to convey with its 'exposés'. From all that has been published so far, I only find that the Prime Minister has acted as the highest decision-maker should. He appears to have allowed all the procedures to be followed

and also intervened whenever impediments were found. One cannot fault him for making a decision to hasten the process of acquisition. The United Progressive Alliance had a full 10-year term to ensure the fighters arrived, but, alas, it was not to be. The 'exposés' only seem to have strengthened decision-making at the highest levels by keeping the best interests of the country in mind and without worrying about criticism – probably factored in when such decisions are made.

T.N. VAIDYANATHAPURA, Maddur, Mandya, Karnataka

BJP manifesto

Even as it has stuck to its narrative of strident and combative nationalism in its manifesto, the Bharatiya Janata Party has tried to embellish it with a heavy dose of welfarism by

attempting to address many of the socio-economic issues that have come to dominate the political discourse. In all, it is unpretentious and is a people's manifesto (Page 1, "BJP manifesto keeps focus on national security, farm support", April 9).

C.K. SUBRAMANIAM, Mumbai

■ The BJP has, once again, started brooding over the issue of the Ram Mandir at Ayodhya. This is nothing less than an undesirable tactic to reap more votes. It also indicates that in case the party wins in 2019, as quite a few surveys and polls seem to point towards (Page 1, "Advantage NDA, but it may fall short of majority", April 9), it is all set to vitiate the social and political spheres. It is unpalatable that a political party which is contesting elections in a secular and democratic

republic is using religion as a key means to achieve success. Voters must be wary of falling for such baits keeping in mind that secularism is the bedrock of the Indian Republic. Any attempt to weaken this foundation is bound to invite catastrophe.

SHIVAM AGGARWAL, Ludhiana, Punjab

Salem corridor

The Madras High Court judgment quashing a notification issued last year to acquire land for the ₹10,000 crore Salem-Chennai expressway proves yet again that development is inevitable but not at the cost of the poorest sections. The fact of losing invaluable agricultural land reiterates the need for a more transparent system of referendum in such a land acquisition process. Else such projects will only

compound an already severe agrarian crisis.

N. VIJAI, Coimbatore

Renamed

A place name is a place name. To rename Chennai Central station as "Puratchi Thalaivar Dr. MGR Central station" is like stripping Chennai city of its name. No doubt great leaders must be honoured; indeed, MGR has been honoured duly by attaching his revered initials to many institutions such as universities in Tamil Nadu but this tendency to rename institutions so ubiquitously after a single person reveals a paucity of imagination and thought. The timing of the decision on the name-change is also unfortunate, and has a political angle to it.

C.G. RISHIKESH, Chennai

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