



Familial face

Priyanka Gandhi can be a star campaigner, but the Congress still needs to flesh out its vision

In appointing his sister Priyanka Gandhi Vadra as a general secretary of the party, Congress president Rahul Gandhi probably calculated that the benefits outweighed the risks. While the BJP lost no time in decrying the move as another instance of dynastic politics, the high-stakes manoeuvre could lift the profile of the Congress as a serious contender in the general election. In Uttar Pradesh, where it has been left high and dry in the seat-sharing deal between the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party, it sorely needs a dramatic turnaround in political fortunes. While her formal induction into politics may have been prompted by a number of factors, including the ill-health of her mother, former Congress president Sonia Gandhi, the charge of eastern Uttar Pradesh was surely meant as a signal to the SP and the BSP. Although her only previous formal role in politics was as the party's campaign manager in Amethi and Rae Bareilly, constituencies of her brother and mother, Ms. Vadra is high on charisma quotient, that intangible but nonetheless real quality that saw crowds gather in the party's pocket boroughs. The Nehru-Gandhi lineage aside, Ms. Vadra commands a stage presence, helped no doubt by a resemblance to her grandmother Indira Gandhi. Whether she will take her mother's place in Rae Bareilly is not clear as yet, but this is a suggestion that there could be a long-term role.

In many ways, the nomination is an admission of the party's over-reliance on the family, but to the credit of Mr. Gandhi, he has been engaging in wider consultations within the party on important decisions. The Congress is still a centralised party, and Mr. Gandhi is routinely authorised to take the final call on all matters big and small; but, equally, he has also shown the ability to step back in a spirit of accommodation in dealings with allied parties. That he did not declare himself as a prime ministerial candidate of the Opposition was born of tactical necessity; even so, he has shown a fair amount of maturity in dealing with a wide array of allies. During the Manmohan Singh years, the Congress was able to counter, to an extent at least, the perception that it revolved around the dynasty. And the BJP may not find much political purchase in linking Ms. Vadra's appointment to dynastic politics; there will be no surprise, however, if it starts harping on her husband's allegedly murky land dealings, which had cropped up during the 2014 election campaign. What should engage the Congress is not what the BJP may say about Ms. Vadra, but what she can say and do for it. The party needs much more than a star campaigner; it needs leaders that can revitalise the organisation by presenting it as an alternative to the BJP. For that, it will have to come up with a truly inclusive, egalitarian vision that privileges all-round development above all else.

Season's worst

A concerted public health push is required to tackle periodic outbreaks of influenza

Seasonal influenza poses a significant public health challenge for India every year. The spurt in infections during the first two weeks of 2019 cries out for an effective plan to contain it. Rajasthan, which had a big case load last year, is the worst-affected State in the current season, with 768 cases and 31 deaths as of January 13. There have been peaks in the country over the past six years, with the number of cases recorded by the Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme soaring to 42,592 and the death toll touching 2,990 in 2015. With better understanding of the nature of active viruses and the availability of a quadrivalent vaccine, State governments have no excuse for failing to sharply reduce the spread. Last year, the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare deputed teams to assist Rajasthan in containing the outbreak. It is pertinent to ask what preventive measures were put in place based on the experience. Large-scale vaccination covering high-risk groups such as health workers, people with lung, kidney, liver and heart disease, diabetics and the elderly could reduce the impact of the viruses in States such as Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Telangana and the National Capital Region, all of which had a large number of cases three years ago. A universal preventive programme should be considered at least for the future.

Last year, the Union Health Ministry put out an advisory on the right vaccine to protect against a known set of viruses, such as Influenza A H1N1, H3N2 and Influenza B. Yet, most public health programmes are not prepared for a mass adoption of the vaccine. Non-availability of sufficient doses of quadrivalent vaccine as well as profiteering on the demand have not been addressed. If a vaccine has proven efficacy in reducing the burden of seasonal influenza, it must be made part of the public health system. An umbrella scheme such as Ayushman Bharat can easily provide it to everyone using public and private institutions. Campaigns to educate the public through mass media ahead of the season, especially on respiratory etiquette and risk reduction, can help cut transmission. At the same time, upgrading existing vaccines requires a consistent effort to track viral mutations that take place periodically, and communicate the information to researchers through open access databases. There are 41 Virus Research Diagnostic Laboratories in India and they can study the nature of infections to provide genetic insights to peer scientists. This can help develop vaccines and remedies. When it comes to treatment, the availability of anti-viral drugs such as Oseltamivir in the public health system should be ensured. Seasonal influenza will, according to the WHO, continue to resurface. India must prepare for it with a comprehensive programme that covers all the States.

A tragedy that was long in the making

Illegal rat-hole mining in Meghalaya persists despite ruinous effects on the environment



PATRICIA MUKHIM

The efforts to reach the 15 miners trapped in an illegal coal mine in the East Jaintia hills of Meghalaya since December 13 continue, but they began belatedly and have faced many problems.

Doomed from the beginning

First, the Meghalaya government has no idea what happens inside these rat-hole mines, which are barely 2 ft wide, since mining is a private activity. Despite the National Green Tribunal ban of April 2014, mining continues in the State. Second, it was unfortunate that the district administration assumed the miners to be dead on the very day of the tragedy. This assumption was evident in the letter written to the National Disaster Response Force. It was only after a Delhi-based lawyer, Aditya N. Prasad, represented by senior Supreme Court advocate Anand Grover and his team of human rights lawyers presented their suggestions to the court that the Meghalaya government got different actors to the accident site. Mr. Prasad has never visited Meghalaya. When asked why he is the petitioner on behalf of the miners, he simply said: "They are fellow Indians and my brethren." That someone based in Delhi should have the empathy lacking in the people and the government shows that humanity is a dying virtue.

Mr. Prasad has done everything

possible to put things together to assist the rescue mission. But despite his initiative, things were delayed. The distance of the mine, for one, was a major hindrance. Then there are other issues that need to be highlighted. The trapped miners were being racially profiled in the minds of the people and the state. Of the 15 miners, only three were locals from the nearby village of Lumthari. The rest were Muslims from Garo Hills, Meghalaya, and Bodoland, Assam. Their socio-economic profile also worked against them. They were the poorest of the poor who took a huge risk to enter a mine and dig for coal without any safety gear.

When a mine is flooded, the immediate response, apart from pumping out the water, is to stop further flow of water into it. This requires a hydrologist to scientifically map out the area from where water entered the mine. Sudhir Kumar, a hydrologist from the National Institute of Hydrology, Roorkee, arrived only two weeks after the disaster. So did the divers from the Indian Navy and the 100 HP water pumps from Kirloskar Brothers. The remotely operated underwater vehicle (ROV) from Planys in Chennai came three weeks later. So did the geologists from Hyderabad. All these delays happened because there was no one person or agency to coordinate the rescue mission. This shows the kind of disaster preparedness we have in our country. One shudders to think what the response would be if there was a massive earthquake in the Northeast, which is listed as Zone 5 on the seismic scale.

There are many questions that arise with respect to rat-hole min-



P.T.

ing of coal. One, why does the state allow this archaic mining system, which has complete disregard for human life and safety? And two, why is Meghalaya exempted from national mining laws? Rat-hole mining, which started with gusto in the 1980s, has poisoned three rivers in the Jaintia hills: the Myntdu, Lunar and Lukha. Scientists from the North-Eastern Hill University have found that these rivers have very high acidic levels. Reports from other agencies suggest that pH of the water and sulphate and iron concentrations indicate significant deterioration of the rivers. Acid mine drainage from abandoned mines was a major cause for water pollution in the areas investigated, the reports added.

The coal mine owners have been hiring the best legal brains to argue for them in the highest court of the land. They say that rat-hole mining should continue because no other form of mining is viable (which means that their profit margins would reduce if other forms of mining were to take place). They argue that the NGT ban should be lifted. They claim

that coal mining provides livelihoods for many, but at what cost?

The fault-lines

The tribes of Meghalaya are divided on the issue of rat-hole mining. The fault-lines are clear. Those who care for the environment and for a future for their children and grandchildren have been clamouring for an end to the practice of rat-hole mining and reckless limestone mining. On the other hand, the mining elite have mobilised forces to demonise environmental activists. A community of just over a million is now fragmented. To add to these woes, cement companies also release their effluents into the rivers. So we now have a deadly cocktail of pollutants being released into the environment. The scale of the problem is clear in this one fact: there are 3,923 coal mines in one district with a geographical area of 2126 sq. km.

The other troubling factor is that coal mine owners are insisting that since Meghalaya is a State under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, national mining laws should be exempted here. The Sixth Schedule was enacted to

protect the community rights of tribals from any form of exploitation of their land and resources. How can it now be used as an instrument to protect an activity that is a private enterprise, that is inhuman, and that violates Article 21 of the Constitution? Why is the Sixth Schedule unable to protect the forests and rivers that are common property resources? Acid mine drainage has rendered even agricultural land non-productive. Mine owners do not care about environmental degradation.

Abandoning responsibility

The cement giant, Lafarge, mines limestone from Meghalaya's East Khasi Hills district and transports it to Chhatak in Bangladesh via conveyor belts. The Supreme Court placed a heavy penalty on Lafarge and asked it to strictly implement environmental laws apart from generating livelihoods for people residing within 50 km of the mining areas. In the case of coal mine owners, there are no such strictures. They have left thousands of abandoned mines as human graves. The State does not insist that they reclaim and afforest those mines. In 40 years of mining and profiteering, the mine owners have till date not constructed a single hospital or even a school. There is complete disregard for corporate social responsibility because the mines are privately owned by the tribals. How long can the Central government and the highest court of the land allow this to carry on in one part of the country when strict laws are applied elsewhere?

Patricia Mukhim is Editor, The Shillong Times

The ground beneath our feet has moved to the right

Hate has become mainstream. This can only change when democracy is no longer equated with majoritarianism



NISSIM MANNATHUKKAREN

At a public rally on January 22, BJP president Amit Shah claimed that the Opposition's mahagathbandhan rally in Kolkata did not have slogans of "Vande Mataram" or "Bharat Mata ki Jai." The implication was that the Opposition is anti-national. But the only hitch was that Mr. Shah's claim was fake. The bugle for the general election has been sounded.

Mainstreaming hate

Since the Congress's victory in December in three Assembly elections, there has been a flurry of communally laced fake news from the Sangh Parivar on social media. One claim was that Muslims in Rajasthan carried Pakistani flags as they celebrated the Congress's win. Another was that Congress president Rahul Gandhi praised Islam as the source of Mahatma Gandhi's non-violence. And yet another was that Mr. Gandhi prayed for a Muslim kingdom in India at a dargah. All these claims were exposed by *Alt News*.

While there is a gradual mainstreaming of hatred, elections especially push the envelope regarding what can be uttered in the

public sphere. But this normalisation of hate is not just verbal. According to Hate Crime Watch, a multi-organisation effort steered by FactChecker.in, last year saw the highest number of religiously motivated hate crimes in a decade, and in 75% of those incidents, the victims were minorities.

The Congress's recent victories cannot be read as a triumph of secularism over communalism, or of economic issues like rural distress and urban middle class angst about development. This is because the ground beneath our feet has almost irrevocably shifted to accommodate the extreme right-wing agenda of virulent masculinity, anti-minority and anti-Dalit hate. For instance, the state response to the brutal killing of a policeman by a mob in Bulandshahr in Uttar Pradesh was to make villages take a pledge against cow slaughter! Further, the National Security Act was invoked against the alleged cow slaughterers, but not the killers. Even the language we use has changed. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in a December election campaign speech, said: "The Congress has come up with a 'fatwa' that I should not begin my rallies with 'Bharat Mata Ki Jai'." It says a lot that the Prime Minister's pitting of a much-demonised term from Islamic jurisprudence against 'Bharat Mata' does not shock us. If there are images of an angry Hanuman everywhere, it is because there is a miasma of hate;



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK PHOTO

Hanuman cannot any more be a gentle devotee of Lord Ram. And if U.P. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath uses religiously inflammatory words like "Congress can keep Ali, Bajrangbali is enough for us" with impunity in campaign speeches, it is because his hate speeches have become commonplace.

Muslims bear the brunt of this new normal (witness the BJP's dangerous anti-Muslim rhetoric on the Citizenship Amendment Bill), for hate further marginalises the already politically marginalised. This is also facilitated by Muslim leaders themselves. For example, All India Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul Muslimeen leader Akbaruddin Owaisi responded to Mr. Adityanath's venomous speeches with the same religious rabble-rousing, chanting Naara-e-Takbeers in political gatherings completely populated by men.

In this thrall of a hate-filled false binary of a monolithic Hindu versus a monolithic Muslim, the building of solidarities on the basis

of caste, class and gender oppressions is postponed. The real beneficiaries are not the most oppressed Hindus and Muslims, but only the demagogues, the "fishers for eels" that Aristophanes recognised 2,500 years ago. When many distressed farmers and a section of the urban unemployed vote for the Congress or secular parties, it is not that they do not share the same ideological universe as the right-wing. The so-called victories of secularism will still be on a ground ploughed by the cancer of hate and mountain of fake news. It is no surprise then that the Congress too puts out fake news, albeit of a non-communal kind.

India is not unique in this respect. Hateful messages on social media propelled the far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro to victory in Brazil, they were used by the Myanmar military against the Rohingya, and they led to violence against immigrants in the U.K. and the refugees in Germany. Transformational democratic solidarities can scarcely emerge out of a toxic public sphere and social media. In India, the vastly disproportionate culpability of Hindutva conjoined with state power is clear. According to a BBC study, calls for nation-building are trumping truth and there is an "overlap of fake news sources on Twitter and support networks for the ruling party".

Social media portal ShareChat, used in 14 Indian languages, said very presciently about increasing

hate speech on its platform: "When you have politicians going on TV and saying these things every night, [we] can't start limiting people's freedom of speech... We can't take a call on what is hateful or not." Social media can rejuvenate democracy by giving a voice to the voiceless, but that space for debate has been hijacked by IT cells of political parties and the masses following them.

Eliminating hate

It is difficult to roll back something that acquires normalcy. "Uninstalling" hate from social media platforms and the larger public sphere cannot be achieved through mere electoral victories, or stronger laws, even if they are important. While electoral alliances, like that of the Bahujan Samaj Party and Samajwadi Party, can dent Hindutva-fuelled hate, they cannot eliminate it. This can happen only through a multi-faceted cultural and political struggle to realise that democracy is not majoritarianism; rather, its core tenets are equality, liberty and fraternity, all of which incontrovertibly stand against hate and demagoguery. And that there can be no democracy if there is no sanctity of speech, and no intention to speak the truth.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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

Priyanka in politics

The Congress is hoping that Priyanka Gandhi's resemblance to former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and the goodwill that the Gandhi family enjoys in parts of Uttar Pradesh will translate into votes ("Rahul appoints Priyanka as Congress general secretary", Jan. 24). Ms. Vadra's campaign can be expected to make some impact on the women vote bank. However, her appointment has given yet another opportunity to the BJP to allege that the Congress promotes dynastic politics. She also carries with her the baggage of Robert Vadra, who is facing corruption charges. The U.P. polls will determine not only the party's prospects this general election but also

Ms. Vadra's career to an extent.
S.V. VENKATKRISHNAN,
Bengaluru

It is unfortunate that the Congress used its dynastic card to change the course of the political game in U.P. That it does not mind splitting the anti-BJP vote in order to salvage its prestige speaks about its delusions about being the nation's natural choice for forming government. But the arrival of Priyanka Gandhi will neither change the SP-BSP's stand nor will it enthrone the voters who have no emotional connect with a politician who appears before them once in five years.
V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN,
Thiruvananthapuram

The appointment of

Priyanka Gandhi provides an additional blow to the BJP, which already seems to be rather jittery. That so many BJP leaders, including the Prime Minister, have commented on her entry proves this.
THARCUS S. FERNANDO,
Chennai

Priyanka Gandhi's appointment is a shot in the arm for the Congress, but it might diminish the aura reserved for Rahul Gandhi in the party. The party can benefit from this, however, if dual power centres are successfully avoided.
Ayyasseri Raveendranath,
Aranmula

This is a clear example of nepotism. Priyanka Gandhi may have taken decisions for the party in the past, but that surely does not

mean she deserves to be general secretary? As usual the Congress has failed to recognise party leaders who have worked hard and who have experience. One can only hope that Robert Vadra too isn't given some important role.
SIRAT SAPRA,
Fazilka

Let EVMs stay

The article, "An electoral intervention that has clicked" (Jan. 24), was heartening to read given the vehement pleas for a return to the paper ballot system. The Election Commission has been sincerely trying to improve the EVMs to avoid glitches and malfunctions. Political parties know the problems with the paper ballot system; that they continue to blame EVMs for their

defeats and want to return to paper ballot indicates that they intend to play mischief to gain electoral victory.
V.S. GANESHAN,
Bengaluru

Poor state of hospitals

It is admirable that the bus driver stopped the vehicle after suffering a heart attack. It is also admirable that the doctor in the bus gave him first-aid and the passengers and conductor tried to get him help ("Telangana driver suffers

heart attack but stops bus safely", Jan. 24). What is shocking is that there were no duty doctors at the hospital! What kind of a hospital is this that doesn't have doctors? What are people expected to do in emergencies? The government must ensure that government hospitals have infrastructure and staff who are as good as those in private hospitals.
B.J.S. CHRISTOPHER,
Hyderabad

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS: The weight of Microsat-R is 740 kg and not 130 kg as reported in the text or 100 kg as mentioned in the graphic of the report, "ISRO to launch military satellite tonight" (January 24, 2019).

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