



Words and deeds

In its campaign, the Congress must discuss the road map for implementing its manifesto

The Congress party in its manifesto pledges to follow a 'wealth and welfare' approach if voted back to power. In an attempt to appeal to the poor without scaring away the rich, it promises to create wealth through promotion of private enterprise and expand welfare for the vulnerable sections of society at an unprecedented scale. An ambitious minimum income guarantee scheme is to directly transfer ₹6,000 a month to the poorest 20% households. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, introduced by the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government in 2005, is to be expanded to ensure employment for 150 days instead of the 100 days now. The promised expansion of health care, education and housing has attracted a lot of public attention, but equally eye-catching is the manifesto's approach to several other critical questions of public policy. While welfare schemes are an attempt by the Congress to reconstruct its lost public support on the basis of a renewed development agenda, the manifesto tries to address many current questions that impact Indian democracy. Defamation will only be a civil offence; provisions for charging people for sedition will be removed from the Indian Penal Code; and the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act will be amended to address human rights concerns. The party promises to expand reservations to private educational institutions, an unfinished component of UPA-I's agenda of OBC reservations in educational institutions. Congress leaders stress that this manifesto addresses the needs and aspirations of the marginalised sections of society.

Election manifestos are important for political discussions ahead of elections, and for understanding the direction different political parties propose for the country. However, it must be kept in mind that parties overpromise ahead of elections, and the Congress must explain why it must not face that scepticism. Its manifesto has scant details about how its ambitious schemes will be funded. It is true that the Congress did deliver on many of the promises it made in 2004, though not entirely and to the full extent. Nonetheless, the Congress will do well to address follow-up questions on its schemes and their implementation. The manifesto has triggered a national debate on several issues that are close to people's lives, and that is a welcome development. It has also prompted a fresh round of debate on broader topics such as India's development path, the potential and limits of welfare and questions of fiscal discipline and revenue extraction. The Bharatiya Janata Party should join this debate on the merit in the Congress's promises rather than use this as yet another opportunity to question the patriotism of its opponents. Details are inadequate, but the direction envisioned in the manifesto is encouraging.

Serious setback

Quashing of the 'February 12 circular' could undo credit discipline in the banking system

The Supreme Court order quashing a circular issued by the RBI on resolution of bad loans is a setback to the evolving process for debt resolution. The voiding of the February 12, 2018 circular could slow down and complicate the resolution process for loans aggregating to as much as ₹3.80 lakh crore across 70 large borrowers, according to data from the ratings agency ICRA. The circular had forced banks to recognise defaults by large borrowers with dues of over ₹2,000 crore within a day after an instalment fell due; and if not resolved within six months after that, they had no choice but to refer these accounts for resolution under the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code. Mounting bad loans, which crossed 10% of all advances at that point, and the failure of existing schemes such as corporate debt restructuring, stressed asset resolution and the Scheme for Sustainable Structuring of Stressed Assets (S4A) to make a dent in resolving them formed the backdrop to this directive. The circular was aimed at breaking the nexus between banks and defaulters, both of whom were content to evergreen loans under available schemes. It introduced a certain credit discipline — banks had to recognise defaults immediately and attempt resolution within a six-month timeframe, while borrowers risked being dragged into the insolvency process and losing control of their enterprises if they did not regularise their accounts. RBI data prove the circular had begun to impact resolution positively.

It is this credit discipline that risks being compromised now. It is not surprising that international ratings agency Moody's has termed the development as "credit negative" for banks. It is true that the circular failed to take into account the peculiarities of specific industries or borrowers and came up with a one-size-fits-all approach. It is also true that not all borrowers were deliberate defaulters, and sectors such as power were laid low by externalities beyond the control of borrowers. The RBI could have addressed these concerns when banks and borrowers from these sectors brought these issues to its notice. By taking a hard line and refusing to heed representations, the RBI may only have harmed its own well-intentioned move. That said, it is now important for the central bank to ensure that the discipline in the system does not slacken. The bond market does not allow any leeway to borrowers in repayment, and there is no reason why bank loans should be any different. The RBI should study the judgment closely, and quickly reframe its guidelines so that they are within the framework of the powers available to it under the law. Else, the good work done in debt resolution in the last one year will be undone.

A very risky gamble in Wayanad

Rahul Gandhi's decision to contest from Kerala flies in the face of Opposition unity



ZOAYA HASAN

Congress president Rahul Gandhi has decided to contest from Wayanad in Kerala as a second Lok Sabha seat in addition to his Amethi constituency in Uttar Pradesh. He has acquiesced to a demand that emanated from Congress leaders in Kerala who feel that his presence will lift the party's prospects in three States as Wayanad is at the tri-junction of Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. In 2009, the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) in Kerala had won 16 of the State's 20 seats, and is looking to repeat the sweep in 2019.

The Congress game plan

But the question is, why did Mr. Gandhi acquiesce to the demand of the Kerala unit of his party to contest from Wayanad even at the risk of jeopardising Opposition unity? One reason for choosing a seat in the south is that he enjoys significant popular support in the region. Also, this seat has been won by the Congress in the last two parliamentary elections, though with a reduced margin in 2014; it's not exactly a safe seat but the chances of the Congress winning it would be high with Mr. Gandhi in the fray. Furthermore, the Congress claims that this is part of his outreach to south India. An important reason, however, is that the Congress depends heavily on the control of government for the consolidation of the party, so that when it is not in power, the party feels paralysed. The main goal in the circumstances is restoring the primacy of the Congress after its

spectacular defeat in 2014. It seems alliances matter but not at the expense of its push to maximise its individual tally by building its own base.

A series of other questions arise too. The Congress's opponent in Wayanad is not the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has hardly any presence in Kerala, though the party is fielding a candidate from there. Its main opponent is a party in the Left Democratic Front (LDF), the Communist Party of India (CPI), which is in the forefront of the fight for a secular alternative to the ruling BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA). True, the Congress-led UDF will be contesting all 20 seats in Kerala, but the Congress president pitting himself against the Left Front in one of these seats gives an impression that the Congress perceives the Left parties to be its main rivals, as much as the BJP, against whose candidate Mr. Gandhi is pitted in Amethi.

A big mistake

We do not need cutting edge theory or psephological analysis to see that it's a mistake for the Congress chief to contest from Wayanad in the context of what lies ahead in the 2019 elections. If the idea is to strengthen the Congress in south India, then Kerala is a curious choice because the party is already quite strong there. Even if we accept the argument that the Congress president going to Wayanad can have a ripple effect across neighbouring States, that purpose could have been served by contesting from Karnataka. In the past, Indira Gandhi chose Medak in Andhra Pradesh (now Telangana) and Sonia Gandhi chose Belary in Karnataka as second seats. Kerala didn't figure as an option. This has changed with Mr. Gandhi contesting from Kerala.



By contesting from Kerala, Mr. Gandhi is sending a double-edged message: he would be supporting the southern States against any intrusion by an overpowering Centre, but he's also opposing the Left, despite the priority to fight the Right in this critical election. This is complicated messaging, and is not the best way to differentiate between the BJP and the Congress. It actually dilutes the party's aggressive stand against the BJP and undercuts Opposition unity, which is needed to prevent Hindutva forces from returning to power in 2019. For this, parties have to recognise that the primary fault-line is political mobilisation along religious lines promoted by the Hindu Right, which needs to be confronted. Mr. Gandhi's candidacy in Wayanad does not counter this basic contradiction.

It is useful to put this change of narrative in the historical context. Post-1991, the most progressive phase of the Congress was under the first United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, from 2004-09, when it passed a slew of landmark rights legislations with the support of the Left parties inside and outside Parliament. The Left had a significant role in the formation of this alliance and its common minimum programme.

However, the policy of welfarism that defined UPA-I began to wither away under UPA-II (2009-14) after the withdrawal of Left support in 2008, leaving the government free to pursue neoliberal economic policies. It is worth stressing that the UPA-I period when the two formations came together was undoubtedly good for the Congress, but it was also good for the Left parties. At a broader level, the coordination was conducive for growth, signalling that social welfare is not incompatible with economic growth. The decision of the Left Front to withdraw support from the UPA over differences on the India-U.S. civil nuclear deal ended this social compact, which hastened the Left's decline, as it went down from 60-odd seats in 2004, to about 30 in 2009, and then to single digits in 2014.

Mr. Gandhi's Wayanad gamble complicates this further and could contribute to further erosion of the Left. It's only in Kerala that the Left Front is actually in power, but here too there are fears that anti-incumbency could work against it. But even if the Left parties don't win many seats in the elections, their support is crucial for the Congress's redistributive politics as this paradigm shares a natural affinity with the Left and the multitude of people's movements that have emerged across the country, particularly on issues of farmers' and workers' rights, joblessness, atrocities on Dalits, and against cow vigilantism and mob lynchings, even as the Congress often failed to raise its voice against the same. These demonstrations and protests have shaped the political discourse against the Narendra Modi government on the ground in the last five years. It is here that the interweaving of the Congress-Left narrative is to be located. The Wayanad decision marks a rupture

in this narrative to some extent.

A strategy

Mr. Gandhi's controversial decision has drawn sharp criticism from the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led LDF, which is irked because the Left parties were counting on Kerala to make up for potential losses in West Bengal and Tripura. But a more judicious strategy, though counter-intuitive, would be to not get drawn into a bitter war of words over the Congress letdown. It is the time to try to take like-minded people and forces along, which has the additional advantage of pinning down the BJP to the extreme right of the political spectrum.

The Congress too must avoid a vitriolic campaign against the Left Front and instead restate that it is a firm ally in the wider struggle to safeguard pluralist India against Hindutva majoritarianism in this watershed election. The party has taken the lead in attacking the BJP, which has catapulted it to the centre stage of opposition nationally, even as it aligns with regional parties in some States, and continues to battle others, as in West Bengal, Kerala and Uttar Pradesh. This contradiction is the central challenge of this election, which has complicated the emergence of even State-level alliances against the BJP because many parties that are opposed to it are also opposed to one another in the States. Given the exigencies of national politics, it is important for these parties to focus on cooperation so that they are able to form an alternative secular government, should the NDA fall short of an absolute majority on its own, which is not unlikely.

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Proving a point on audit trail

Nizamabad has 185 candidates — it is an opportunity for the Election Commission to settle the EVM and VVPAT debate



S.Y. QURAISHI

As the campaign for the 2019 general election builds up, so too with the debate on electronic voting machines (EVMs) and Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trails (VVPATs). For example, as a result of a new development in the Nizamabad parliamentary constituency in Telangana, the Election Commission (EC) would have been forced to conduct elections using ballot papers — there are 185 candidates in the fray. This exceeds the capacity of an EVM, which can cater to 64 candidates (63 candidates and the None of the Above, or NOTA, option). The EC is now considering using special machines which can accommodate up to 384 candidates. These will use 24 ballot units connected in series. For this it will have to buy at an enormous cost 26,820 ballot units, 2,240 control units and 2,600 VVPATs. I wonder whether it is possible to acquire so many machines with technical changes in the short time available.

In the past, in A.P.

The use of ballot papers to conduct elections is not new; they were used in the same State in 2010 in a near comic situation.

In July 2010, the Telangana agi-

tation was at its peak, and 12 MLAs of the Andhra Pradesh Assembly had resigned and were contesting the by-elections. This coincided with the Bharatiya Janata Party-led anti EVM campaign. After the EC turned down the request of political parties to go back to paper ballots, the parties resorted to a smart ploy. The Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) decided to field more than 64 candidates in each constituency. So, there were 114 nominations in Yellareddy (then in Nizamabad district and 107 in Siricilla. Even after large-scale rejection of nominations, the numbers in six constituencies exceeded 64. The EC was forced to conduct elections in these constituencies by ballot paper.

The EC took it as a great opportunity to showcase the relative strength of EVMs. While the EVM results were available in four hours, the ballot paper results took 40 hours. Adding to this were thousands of invalid votes. The other issues were the economic and environmental costs of printing ballots and prolonged drudgery for polling staff. Ironically, the results from both systems across seats were similar.

Where did the political parties stand then? A media report said the TRS opposed EVMs "because it [had] reliable information that the Congress [would] try to manipulate the machines to win the polls". The Telugu Desam Party president N. Chandrababu Naidu demanded that ballot papers be used in all 12 constituencies. Ban-



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daru Dattatreya, BJP president in then undivided Andhra Pradesh, said, "We have been demanding that there should be a nationwide debate on EVMs. The TRS has used the right strategy." A Congress spokesman said it was unfortunate that the parties had doubted the EC's integrity, forcing it to incur additional printing expenses. So, while the issue remains the same, the characters have changed.

It is pertinent to point out that the difference between the 2010 incident and this time (in terms of the number of candidates) is that a large number of farmers are contesting as independent candidates to highlight their problems. It has nothing to do with an anti-EVM movement.

Stringent trials

Since the last general election, there have been allegations about the BJP hacking EVMs. The EC has repeatedly challenged conspiracy theorists to demonstrate that EVMs can be hacked but no party has accepted it.

This debate should have ended in October 2010 when the EC called an all-party meeting which

unanimously recommended the adoption of VVPATs, which was promptly accepted. The two factories manufacturing EVMs were asked to develop VVPATs, and an independent committee of professors from five Indian Institutes of Technology was requested to monitor the process.

There were a series of trials, followed by two full-day election simulations in five cities across India (with different climatic conditions) in 2011-12. Only after the VVPATs passed all the rigorous tests (climatic endurance and technology) were they deployed, initially in 20,000 polling booths. As manufacturing progressed, all constituencies were equipped with VVPATs. In 2013, the Supreme Court lauded the EC's initiatives, directing the government to release adequate funds for procurement for all booths for the 2019 elections.

Since 2017, all elections have been held with VVPAT-attached EVMs. A total of 1,500 machines have been counted as per the present norm of counting slips generated by one VVPAT in each Assembly constituency. Not a single mismatch has been detected.

Sorting things out

The only pending issue is of VVPAT audits. As many as 23 Opposition parties have moved the Supreme Court demanding that half the total slips be tallied. A group of retired bureaucrats and diplomats has also written to the EC regarding the sample size to en-

sure 99.9% public satisfaction.

The EC has submitted to the court that the three-member expert panel comprising members from the Indian Statistical Institute, the Chennai Mathematical Institute and the Central Statistics Office has endorsed the current practice of counting one VVPAT per Assembly constituency, and that the sample size proposed by political parties would only serve to delay results by six days. The judgment is expected soon.

I have also proposed an alternative. The top two runners-up in the constituency can choose any two VVPATs to be counted as they have the highest stake in the results. This would serve to do away with a large sample, as only four machines per Assembly would have to be counted to ensure public faith in the system. This is on the analogy of the highly popular and successful Umpire Decision Review System in cricket.

EVMs have made India a proud global leader in elections. After incorporating VVPATs, the system is now foolproof. After the expert panel report, the EC's initiatives in this regard stand vindicated. It should now clinch the EVM debate and utilise the opportunity in the Nizamabad constituency to demonstrate the relative superiority of the EVM as the wonder machine of Indian democracy.

S.Y. Quraishi is a former Chief Election Commissioner of India and the author of 'An Undocumented Wonder - the Making of the Great Indian Election'

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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

The fine print

Even if wishes were horses, it is doubtful whether the Congress party would be able to deliver even a fraction of what has been promised in its over-ambitious manifesto, which is obviously not backed up by any due diligence or practicalities (Page 1, "Congress promises to create wealth, ensure health for all", April 3). The party should have taken into account that in all probability it may only be leading a coalition catering to uncompromisable regional aspirations. A united Opposition front with a Common Minimum Programme would have ensured more credibility. It is a pity that even after Independence, parties are still talking about finding

solutions to farmers' grievances in a predominantly agriculture-oriented nation. While all the manifestos promise windfalls, one has still to find a party with a practical road map for sustainable economic growth. Such an exercise would have automatically taken care of all the ills facing the country. It is evident that the vision and mission of all parties are aimed only at short-term electoral gains.

V. SUBRAMANIAN, Chennai

The Indian voter is inured to the lure of grand promises made once every five years or so because they struggle through the debris of broken promises every day of the intervening period before the next set of promises.

Although the Congress's manifesto promises dignity and autonomy to institutions, there is no road map for this.

P. ARIHANTH, Secunderabad

The annual minimum guaranteed income, whatever be its good intent, reminds one of John Wayne's words, "Government has no wealth and when a politician promises to give something for nothing — he must first certify that wealth from you either by direct taxes or by the cruelly indirect tax of inflation." Come election time, it is not only the Congress, with its proposed NYAY scheme, but also other parties which promise huge bank loan waivers, attractive freebies, excessive subsidies that seem to throw sound

principles of economic logic to the winds. All such indiscriminate doles are bound to substantially widen financial deficits, pushing the economy into a vicious circle of dented growth, escalated unemployment, snowballing inflation, hiked interest rates and growing recession. Do parties bother at all about the inescapable and long-term, self-damaging economic consequences of their myopic vote-catching strategies?

A. MOHAN, Chennai

It is time we ask our leaders why climate change and air pollution are not adequately discussed during electoral campaigns. According to the WHO, 6.2 lakh people die of air pollution and lung-related issues every year in India. In

London when the air quality became poor, there was a health emergency. Subsidising electric-powered transportation and renewable energy sources is important.

APOORV ACHARYA, Chittorgarh, Rajasthan

Connected

I would say that another vital step towards achieving 24x7 power for all is a widespread awareness campaign on renewable energy sources (Editorial page, "How to achieve 24x7 power for all",

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

The first woman chief of the Sashastra Seema Bal was Archana Ramasundaram and — not Archana Ramachandran, as stated in the OpEd page article titled "The principle and procedure in Lokpal" (April 3, 2019). In the penultimate sentence of the article, the word chor was erroneously translated as chief. It should have been thief.

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