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Lok Sabha 2024 election: The run-up

ELECTIONS, LIFELINE OF INDIAN DEMOCRACY

THE RISE AND FALL OF I.N.D.I.A

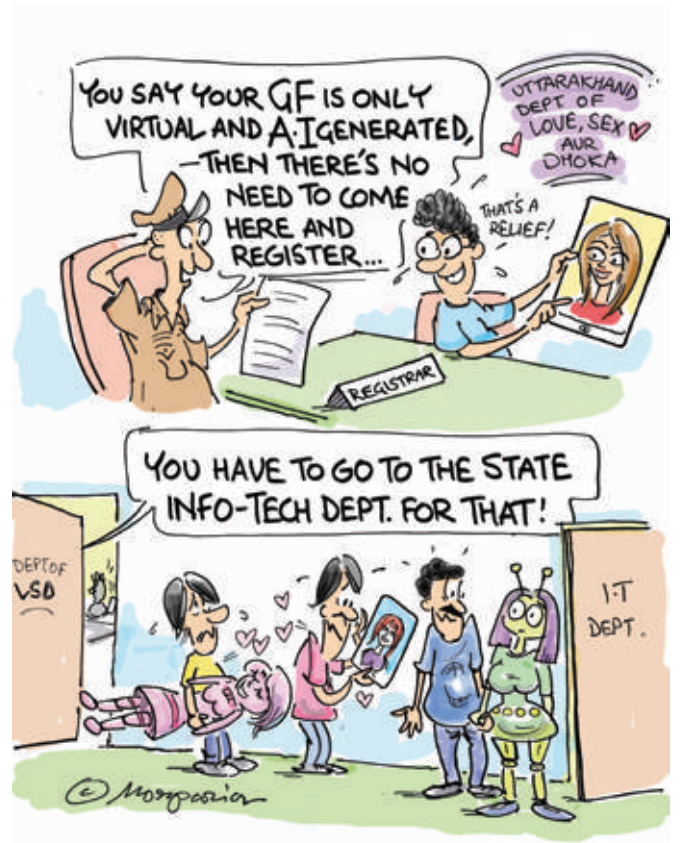
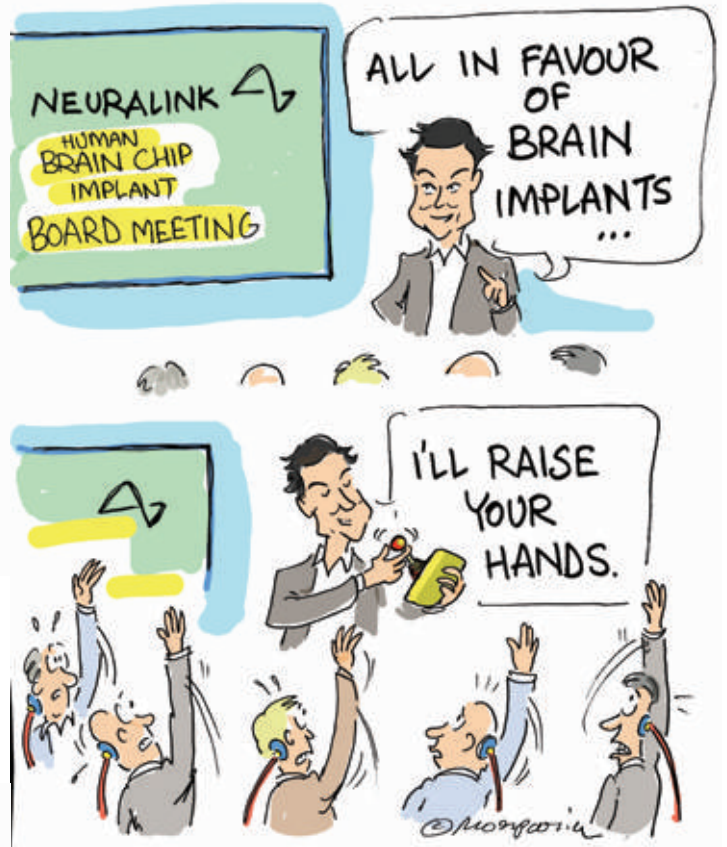
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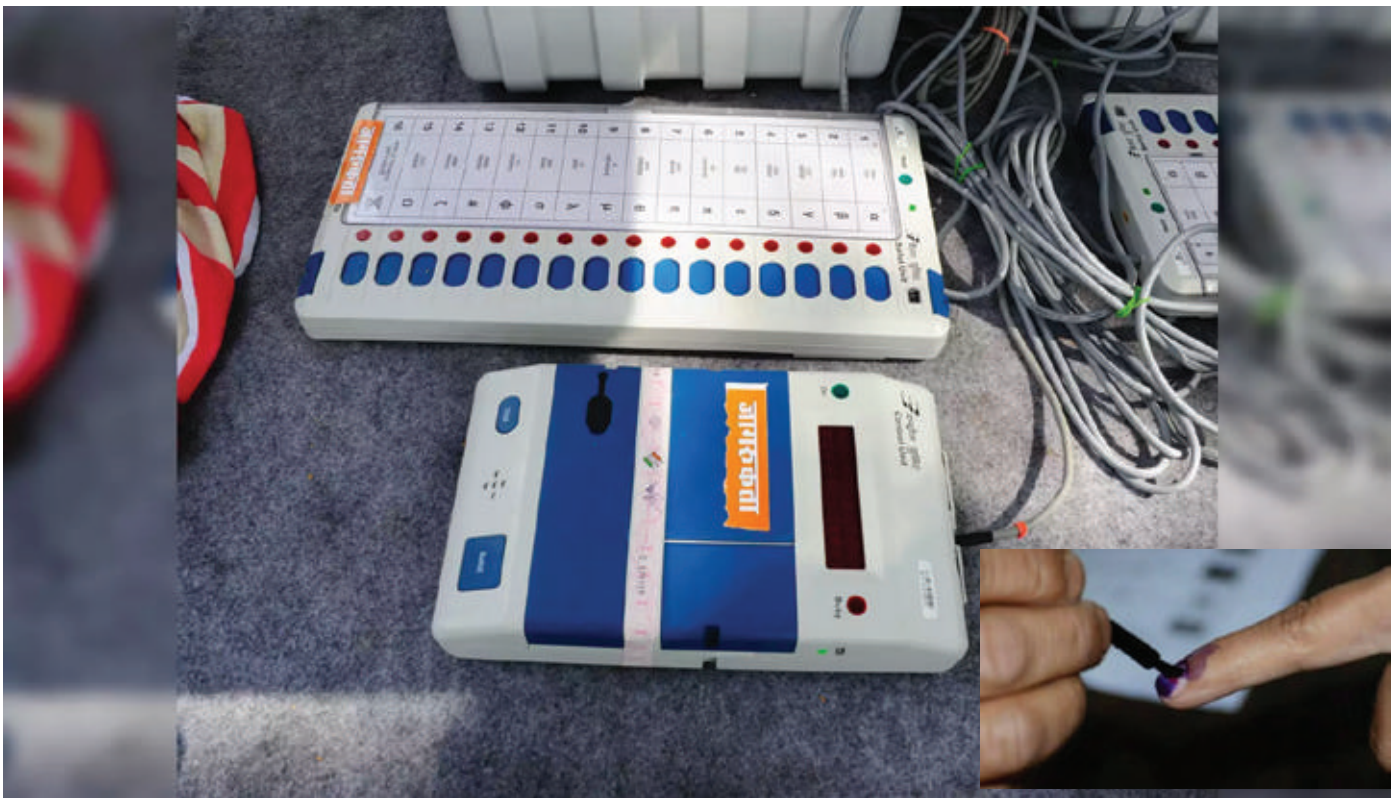
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Elections, lifeline of Indian democracy

As the country stands on the threshold of another milestone election, **Nandini Rao** takes a look at the overall pre-poll scenario in the country and infers that the while ruling party, the BJP coasts along, riding on PM Modi's popularity, his political adversities appear in a disarray. She also speaks about the peripherals and attendant factors that may have an impact on the elections, asserting that the 2024 General Elections are on the edge of a contest marked with a multitude of factors exerting their influence on the ultimate outcome.



Electronic voting is the standard means of conducting elections in India, using Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs)

The upcoming 2024 General Lok Sabha Elections in India are poised at the precipice of history and set to carve a path shaped by the intricacies of the nation's political landscape. At the forefront of this pivotal moment stands the political party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), under the stewardship of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, preparing to navigate a myriad of challenges and opportunities as the electoral battlefield beckons.

Recent revelations from state assembly elections have infused the ruling party ranks with a surge of confidence, bestowing upon them a tangible advantage over their political adversaries. However, within this overarching narrative lies a complex web of factors, each casting its own shadow and leaving an indelible mark on the unfolding political saga.

The myriad factors

The foresight of state-level polls is known to add a layer of certainty to the electoral landscape, as the traditional barometer of state elections continues to exude predictive power. This persisting dynamic permits political players to recalibrate their strategies.

Meanwhile, the dynamics of opposition alignment unfolds as rival faction manoeuvre to find common ground and forge alliances in their bid to challenge the BJP's dominance. This delicate balancing act requires a deft touch and strategic manoeuvring, as parties jostle for position in the political arena.

The fervent contest for support among backward

communities such as tribals and caste groups emerges as a critical battleground within the larger electoral landscape, as political parties vie for the allegiance of these marginalised segments. This demographic bloc holds significant sway in shaping electoral outcomes, making it a coveted prize for parties seeking to secure a decisive advantage. Additionally, the race to outbid one another in welfare pledges adds a layer of competitive fervour to the electoral fray, as parties roll out a slew of promises and incentives aimed at wooing voters.

Amidst this whirlwind of activity, the mounting significance of foreign policy emerges as a key determinant in shaping public opinion. As India's global footprint continues to expand, voters are increasingly becoming attuned to the country's international standing and its impact on domestic affairs. This newfound awareness adds a new dimension to the electoral discourse, as parties seek to articulate their vision for India's role on the world stage.

The alliances

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has voiced an optimistic outlook on the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) performance, envisioning a substantial haul of seats in the impending electoral contest. Simultaneously, opposition factions are constantly navigating the political terrain, striving to forge alliances aimed at challenging the BJP's dominance in the impending electoral showdown. The 2024 General Lok Sabha Elections in India are on the edge of a contest that is marked with a multitude of factors exerting their influence on the ultimate outcome.

A strong opposition is a sign of a healthy democracy. And, the existence of a robust opposition will entirely depend on the results of the forthcoming General Elections. The largest alliance at the moment is I.N.D.I.A, which stands for Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance, where several regional and national parties have come together to compete with the BJP-led government under PM Modi.

The alliances, old and new, are known to keep changing form and dimension. Rifts are appearing in the I.N.D.I.A bloc and most recently, Chief Minister of Bihar Nitish Kumar switched loyalties when he left the Mahagathbandhan, he was an integral part of, to form an alliance with the BJP and became the Chief Minister of the state again.

On the other hand, in West Bengal, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee announced that in the upcoming elections, her party which is the Trinamool Congress will fight alone, without any alliance support. It must be noted that her party was a part of the I.N.D.I.A bloc earlier.

The opposition coalitions are actively working to put up a big challenge against the BJP. Overall, the 2024 Lok Sabha Elections in India will be a battleground where an array of factors will come into play to decide political dominance.

Recent wins

The recent electoral triumphs of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have cast a profound and imposing shadow over the impending 2024 Lok Sabha elections in India, reshaping the very contours of the electoral narrative. The BJP's decisive victories in pivotal states such as Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh are recent examples.

"The results in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and

Rajasthan indicate that the people of India are firmly with politics of good governance and development, which the @BJP4India stands for," Prime Minister Modi wrote on X, formerly known as Twitter, after the welcome win.

These victories serve as a testament to the party's adept political acumen and strategic manoeuvring, positioning the party as a dominant force to reckon with in the forthcoming elections.

The BJP's successful bid to secure a significant portion of Lok Sabha seats from states where it emerged victorious in the assembly polls further solidifies its stance as a formidable contender. This calculated move not only bolsters its electoral foothold but also underscores the party's meticulous planning and execution in capitalising on its state-level triumphs to consolidate power at the national level.

Interestingly, the results of the assembly elections in 2018-19 that were held four months before the general elections were not favourable indicators of the trend at the national level. During that time, the three state assembly elections of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh were dominated by the Congress party. Still, in the general elections, BJP took away 62 of the 65 seats that belonged to these three states.

The BJP's electoral victories serve as a reminder of the fragmented existence of opposition forces, who are struggling to form strategic alliances to mount a challenge against the ruling juggernaut. The need for opposition factions to unite and forge cohesive alliances seems pressing now, more than ever, to counter the ruling party, to project, what most feel, an integral sign of a healthy democracy.

As opposition factions endeavour to navigate the complexities of forging alliances, negotiating seat-sharing agreements and present a united front against the BJP, the dynamics of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections in India stand at a critical juncture, poised for a transformative trajectory that could reshape the nation's political landscape for years to come. The constituent parties of the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (I.N.D.I.A) grapple with the arduous task of relinquishing claims over constituencies they traditionally "own" in a bid to present a united front.

However, this endeavour is beset with complexity, as historical rivalries between constituent parties in various states complicate the process. Moreover, defections from the opposition bloc and the Congress party's dismal performance in recent state elections further muddy the waters, rendering the task of forming workable alliances an uphill battle.

The situation for the opposition factions only worsens because of the popularity and faith of voters in Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The promises made by him are positive, development oriented and focusing on governance, which he has been delivering in the last two terms, as opposed to the Opposition's campaign aimed to sully the PM's image at any cost, that has failed to strike a chord with the electorate.

Nandini Rao is a media researcher with The History and Heritage Project – A DraftCraft International Initiative to document details, analyse facts and plug lacunae generated by oversight or to further national or foreign agenda in History and Heritage Across India and Beyond Borders

The rise and fall of I.N.D.I.A

On the opposition alliance, a desperate bid to counter the Modi juggernaut, **Nandini Rao** says there are inherent contradictions within it, as it has powerful regional parties that are direct rivals of each other in some states, not to speak of the ideological differences and personality clashes that beset them. Unable to connect the dots, the collapse of I.N.D.I.A and the disarray within its ranks have unwittingly played into the hands of the BJP, bolstering the latter's electoral prospects.



Opposition leaders at I.N.D.I.A (Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance) meet in Bengaluru

In a bid to counter the dominance of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Indian politics, an alliance of opposition parties known as the Indian National Developmental Alliance (I.N.D.I.A) came into existence in July 2023. It was an alliance of 26 political parties led by the Indian National Congress (INC) with the primary goal of defeating the BJP led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in the upcoming 2024 general elections.

The alliance, a revamped version of the UPA led by the Congress, was an outcome of a two-day brainstorming session that was held in Bengaluru to discuss the 2024 election strategy particularly to unite the disparate opposition factions under a common platform to challenge the BJP's 'hegemony.' The formation of I.N.D.I.A marked a significant development in Indian

politics, as opposition parties sought to forge a united front against the BJP's formidable electoral machinery.

The alliance comprises the following parties: Indian National Congress, Trinamool Congress, DMK, Aam Aadmi Party, JD(U), RJD, JMM, Nationalist Congress Party (Sharad Pawar), Shiv Sena (UBT), Samajwadi Party, NC, PDP, CPM, CPI, RLD, MDMK, Kongunadu Makkal Desia Katchi (KMDK), VCK, RSP, CPI-ML (Liberation), Forward Bloc, IUML, Kerala Congress (Joseph), Kerala Congress (Mani), Apna Dal (Kamerawadi), and the Manithaneyya Makkal Katchi (MMK).

Political evolution

The alliance initially managed to bring together India's previously fractured opposition parties that are aiming to keep

the Modi government from coming to power again. The alliance includes powerful regional parties that are direct rivals to each other in some states, and the parties are also beset with ideological differences and personality clashes.

The BJP's emergence as a dominant political force in India has been a defining feature of Indian politics in recent years. The party's electoral success has been attributed to its positive development agenda, emphasis on national security, and its ability to tap into the aspirations of the masses. The formation of the I.N.D.I.A alliance has posed a challenge to the BJP's dominance in key electoral battlegrounds.

The BJP's electoral success has also been attributed to its ability to forge strategic alliances with regional parties in key regions. The party's determined stance on national security and its commitment to restoring peace in Kashmir have resonated well with the voters. Also, the tangible progress in de-escalating violence and containing cross-border terror has strengthened the party's credibility as a responsible guardian of national security and national interests.

The I.N.D.I.A alliance, at the time of formation, was set to have an eleven-member coordination committee to decide on important issues that directly or indirectly affect the elections and the alliance including important decisions like seat sharing among the alliance partners and PM candidate for the elections. Apart from defeating the BJP in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, other objectives of the alliance include uphold India's secular values, protect the Constitution of India and to promote inclusive development.

The challenges

The I.N.D.I.A alliance faces several challenges in going ahead to weaken the BJP's dominance in key electoral battlegrounds. To begin with is the reality of fragmented opposition. The alliance comprises a diverse set of opposition parties with varying ideologies and regional interests. Maintaining unity and strategic coordination among these parties is a significant challenge, especially in a "winner takes all" electoral system where a fragmented opposition can benefit the ruling party.

The BJP has a disciplined and a strong organisational base, which has been a key factor in its electoral success. Challenging the BJP's ground-level mobilisation and campaign infrastructure poses a significant challenge for the I.N.D.I.A alliance. Additionally, the alliance's ability to forge working partnerships and coordinate strategies in key states, each with its unique set of variables, will be crucial.

The BJP has made inroads in several states and has formed alliances with regional parties, making it essential for the I.N.D.I.A alliance to navigate complex regional dynamics and form effective alliances. The BJP, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has garnered a strong national appeal and has been successful in projecting a pan-India narrative. Challenging the BJP's national appeal and countering its overarching narrative, particularly on issues such as national security and development, is a significant challenge for I.N.D.I.A.

In India's 'first past the post' electoral system, the alliance's ability to strategically field candidates, manage seat-sharing arrangements, and consolidate the opposition vote is crucial. Fragmentation of the opposition vote can benefit the BJP, making it essential for I.N.D.I.A to manage electoral arithmetic

effectively. The 'First Past the Post' System, aka simple majority system, is a voting system where the candidate who has won the most votes in a constituency is declared 'elected'. In India, the Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assembly elections are based on the FPTP system.

Key players

Bihar Chief Minister and leader of Janta Dal United JD(U) Nitish Kumar's leadership was pivotal in galvanising support for I.N.D.I.A and rallying opposition parties behind a common agenda. His stature as a senior statesman and his track record of governance in Bihar lent credibility to the alliance's efforts. However, Nitish Kumar's sudden withdrawal from the alliance dealt a severe blow to I.N.D.I.A's prospects of what it set out to do.

Nitish Kumar's absence triggered a chain reaction within the alliance, a leadership vacuum, leading to a destabilisation of the bloc's unity and cohesion. With key opposition parties re-evaluating their strategies and priorities in the absence of a unifying figure, I.N.D.I.A bloc is struggling with internal discord and conflicting agendas. The fragmentation of the alliance and the subsequent loss of momentum has dealt a significant blow to the opposition's electoral prospects and its ability to pose a credible challenge to the BJP's dominance.

In early January 2024, I.N.D.I.A alliance was considering appointing Nitish Kumar as the convenor of the bloc. However, within a few days, and in an unexpected turn of events, Nitish Kumar resigned as the Chief Minister of Bihar, broke ties with Lalu Prasad Yadav's RJD and formed the government again in partnership with the BJP.

At that time, JD(U) spokesperson K C Tyagi was outspoken in blaming the Congress for the turn of events and the fall of the much-talked-about opposition bloc in Bihar. He remarked that members of the Congress leadership were more interested in consolidating the part position rather than the opposition grouping. He also said that the Congress kept on delaying talks on seat sharing which was crucial in strategising for the upcoming elections.

The collapse of I.N.D.I.A and the ensuing disarray within the opposition ranks have inadvertently played into the hands of the BJP, bolstering its electoral prospects for the 2024 elections. With the opposition fragmented and lacking a cohesive strategy to counter the BJP's electoral juggernaut, the ruling party stands poised to secure a stronger mandate in the upcoming polls.

The absence of a united opposition front has provided the BJP with a strategic advantage, enabling it to consolidate its support base and appeal to undecided voters disillusioned by the opposition's internal squabbles. The rise and fall of I.N.D.I.A as an alliance of opposition parties underscore the complexities of coalition politics in India's politics.

Nandini Rao is a media researcher with The History and Heritage Project – A DraftCraft International Initiative to document details, analyse facts and plug lacunae generated by oversight or to further national or foreign agenda in History and Heritage Across India and Beyond Borders.

Unlacing India's democratic fabric

Harshita Singh takes a comprehensive look at the factors that drive India's electoral fortunes. She concludes that India's vast and diverse population is not only a defining characteristic of the country but also a significant determinant in its electoral dynamics. The sheer size of the electorate poses logistical challenges in conducting elections, requiring extensive planning and resources to ensure a smooth and inclusive process.



In the run-up to the 2024 elections, political parties are expected to deploy sophisticated campaign strategies aimed at mobilising voters

India is preparing for its next general elections in 2024, which are expected to be influenced by various factors such as population dynamics, regional disparities, and socio-economic realities. The tenure of the 17th Lok Sabha, for which the general elections were held in April-May 2019, is scheduled to end on 16 June 2024. And, the next General elections are expected to be held between April and May 2024 to elect 543 members of the 18th Lok Sabha.

The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is gearing up for the election, with the party's recent victories in state elections boosting its confidence.

The upcoming election is significant not only for India but also on a global scale, as more than 70 countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom, will hold nationwide elections in 2024.

Voter equality

As India's 2024 General Election approaches, it is expected to be a contest of competitive welfarism, with issues such as the challenge of opposition coordination, the battle for backward groups, and the emergence of foreign policy as a mass issue shaping the political discourse. It is important for voters to

be aware of their rights, including those of differently-abled and the illiterate voters.

The Electoral Laws in India guarantee equality to Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) and make provisions for facilitating their access and participation in the electoral process. The Election Commission of India has drafted a framework to strengthen the voter base of PwDs, including identification of PwDs, facilitation in filling up voter registration forms, and assured minimum facilities at polling stations. Voters with disabilities or literacy challenges can seek assistance from an electoral officer who will record their voting choices using their preferred method.

The officer of elections shall keep a record including the name of the voter and of the person marking the ballot, and the record shall be certified and kept with the poll books. Every voter is entitled to be informed about the candidates vying for the election, including their financial electoral platforms and any criminal records they may have.

Factors and patterns

India's vast and diverse population is not only a defining characteristic of the country but also a significant determinant in its electoral dynamics. The sheer size of the electorate poses logistical challenges in conducting elections, requiring extensive planning and resources to ensure a smooth and inclusive process.

Population distribution across India's diverse states and regions plays a crucial role in electoral politics. Political parties often focus their campaign efforts and resources on states with larger populations, such as Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and Bihar, to maximise their electoral gains.

These populous states wield greater electoral significance due to the higher number of parliamentary seats they contribute. For instance, the BJP's recent wins in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Rajasthan have widened its footprint in the country, accounting for almost half of the 543 Lok Sabha seats.

However, there are substantial variations in voting patterns between urban and rural areas, with urban residents having a greater tendency to vote in state assembly elections than rural dwellers. The magnitude of the task of conducting general elections in India is staggering, with about 9,00,000 polling booths and five million election personnel mobilised.

Moreover, India's demographic composition, including factors such as age, gender, caste, religion, and socio-economic status, often shapes voter behaviour and electoral outcomes. Political parties tailor their messaging and campaign strategies to appeal to specific demographic groups, leveraging issues relevant to their concerns and aspirations.

Campaign strategies and mobilisation

In the run-up to the 2024 elections, political parties are expected to deploy sophisticated campaign strategies aimed at mobilising voters across diverse demographic groups and geographical regions. Traditional campaign methods, such as rallies, roadshows, and door-to-door canvassing, will be supplemented by digital outreach and social media engagement to reach a wider audience, especially among the younger demographic.

This shift towards digital engagement is crucial, given the significant impact of India's urban population on electoral outcomes and on the deep digital penetration in rural India. Urban residents have a greater tendency to vote in state assembly elections, highlighting the importance of targeting this demographic section through online platforms.

Additionally, the ruling party's recent wins in the heartland have given it a significant boost, emphasising the need for comprehensive campaign strategies that resonate across different states and regions. As India's population distribution and demographic dynamics continue to evolve, political parties must adapt their campaign approaches to effectively engage with voters across the diverse landscape of the country.

Political parties will also focus on targeting key demographic segments, including women, youth, rural voters, and marginalised communities, through targeted messaging and outreach programmes. Issues such as employment generation, healthcare, education, infrastructure development, and social welfare are likely to feature prominently in campaign agendas, reflecting the diverse concerns of the electorate.

Regional dynamics and local issues will also influence campaign strategies, with parties designing their outreach programmes and promises to resonate with specific regional aspirations and priorities. Regional parties, particularly in states with significant linguistic and cultural diversity, will play a crucial role in shaping electoral outcomes and coalition dynamics at the national level.

Socio-economic realities

India's socio-economic realities such as development disparity will continue to influence voter perceptions and electoral outcomes in 2024. Issues such as agrarian distress, unemployment, access to basic services, and social justice are likely to resonate with voters, especially in rural areas and among marginalised communities.

Political parties are under pressure to tackle socio-economic challenges in their campaign agenda, offering policy solutions and welfare schemes to help the disadvantaged. The success of these promises in addressing the electorate's aspirations and grievances will determine the electoral fortunes of political parties and candidates. The relationship between socio-economic issues and political activities is well-documented. Socio-economic factors, such as income, education, and trust in government, influence political participation and knowledge.

Additionally, the political economy, which examines how political forces affect the economy and vice versa, plays a crucial role in shaping economic policies and, by extension, the electorate. Therefore, the interplay between socio-economic challenges and political dynamics is a key determinant of electoral outcomes and the overall functioning of democracies.

India's upcoming general elections in 2024 will be influenced by a variety of factors, including population dynamics, regional disparities, socio-economic realities, and demographic compositions. These elements intersect to shape the electoral process and outcomes. Political parties are expected to pool in all resources to create and run a targeted campaign strategy with specific outreach programmes to mobilise the diverse electorate across different demographic groups and geographical regions of India. The elections in the world's largest democracy will unfold against the backdrop of its rich and complex landscape, reflecting the aspirations, concerns, and hopes of its diverse populace. The democratic makeup of India is intricately woven with the country's vastness and unparalleled diversity which play a significant role in shaping the electoral process and the verdict. Political parties will need to navigate these in the upcoming elections that will showcase the dynamic interplay between the diversity and vibrant democracy of India.

Harshita Singh is a researcher with The History and Heritage Project – A DraftCraft International Initiative to document details, analyse facts and plug lacunae generated by oversight or to further national or foreign agenda in History and Heritage Across India and Beyond Borders.

The Northeast amalgamation

Anushka Singh narrates how Northeast has suffered marginalisation and geographical isolation, grappling with problems ranging from insurgency to lack of development. She explains how its amalgamation into the India's mainstream fabric is multifaceted, encompassing infrastructure development, connectivity enhancement, economic revitalisation, cultural integration and security strengthening.



The Bogibeel Bridge in Assam symbolises the government's unwavering dedication to increasing connectivity across the region

Over the span of the last decade, the Northeast region of India has undergone a remarkable transformation, witnessing a profound evolution in its assimilation within the nation's fabric. Long characterised by marginalisation and geographical isolation, the Northeast has grappled with a myriad of challenges ranging from insurgency to lack of development. Yet, in a concerted effort led by successive central administrations, notably under the stewardship of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), strides have been made to narrow the divide and bring the region closer to the nation in a true fashion.

The process of integrating the Northeast within the broader framework of India has been multifaceted, encompassing infrastructure development, connectivity enhancement, economic revitalisation, cultural amalgamation and security strengthening. Among the important endeavours undertaken, focus has been directed towards enhancing connectivity through an array of infrastructural projects spanning roads, bridges, railways and air travel networks.

Enhancing connectivity

A crowning achievement in this regard was the inauguration of the Bogibeel Bridge in Assam, a monumental feat symbolising the government's unwavering dedication to increasing connectivity across the region and increasing accessibility. The bridge connects the south bank of the Brahmaputra River in Dibrugarh in Assam to Dhemaji's Silapathar that borders Arunachal Pradesh. Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the bridge, heralded as Asia's second longest and India's longest rail-cum-road bridge, on the birth anniversary of former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee in 2018.

The economic initiatives aimed at promoting investment and development in the Northeast too have been multidimensional and include various measures to spur economic growth and employment opportunities in the region. These have been prioritised to address the historical underdevelopment and geographical isolation of the Northeast.

The launch of the 'Act East Policy' by the BJP-led government has emphasised the region's strategic importance in enhancing India's engagement with strategic partners especially the South-East Asian countries.

Boosting development

The Northeast Industrial Policy 2017 provides incentives for businesses to invest in the Northeast, including tax breaks, subsidies and land grants for businesses that set up operations in the region. This policy aims to attract investment and promote industrial development in the Northeast, thereby contributing to economic growth and employment generation.

The North-East Industrial Development Scheme (NEIDS), 2017 is helping promote industrialisation and increase employment by covering manufacturing and service sector industrial units in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. It offers incentives such as reimbursement of the central share of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) and income tax benefits to industries in the Northeast, which are designed to attract industries and promote economic development in the region.

The Northeast Special Category States (NECS) Scheme provides financial assistance to the eight states in the region, including funding for infrastructure, education, health, and other sectors. The government has prioritised infrastructure development in the Northeast to enhance connectivity and promote economic growth. This includes the construction of vital infrastructure such as roads, bridges, and railways, as well as the launch of the Northeast Special Infrastructure Development Scheme (NESSID) to fund infrastructure projects in the region.

Cross-Border economic zone

To boost new regional economic cooperation and synergy, the development of a cross-border economic zone with neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh and Myanmar has been set in motion. This innovative initiative is poised to transcend borders and form a conducive environment for trade and investment in the Northeast, opening up avenues for mutually-beneficial collaboration and economic growth.

Envisioned as a nexus of economic activity, the cross-border economic zone holds the promise of unlocking the untapped economic potential of the Northeast. By facilitating seamless cross-border trade and investment, it aims to create a dynamic ecosystem conducive to industrial development and economic prosperity. Through strategic partnerships and collaborative ventures with neighbouring nations, the economic zone seeks to harness synergies and capitalise on shared resources, further amplifying the region's economic prowess.

These far-reaching economic initiatives are not merely confined to bolstering industrial growth but are also geared towards fostering inclusive development and regional economic integration. By promoting economic growth and generating employment opportunities, they serve as catalysts for uplifting the socio-economic landscape of the Northeast.

Moreover, the establishment of the cross-border economic zone underscores India's broader vision of nurturing robust regional economic cooperation. By forging closer economic ties and promoting cross-border trade and investment, it aligns with the overarching goal of a more integrated and prosperous South-Asian region.

Cultural integration

Cultural integration has been another focal point, with efforts to promote the rich cultural heritage of the Northeast and greater interaction between the region's people and the rest of the

country. Initiatives such as the Northeast Festival and cultural exchange programmes have played a significant role in furthering a sense of belonging and unity among the diverse communities of the region.

The security situation in India's Northeast has been a longstanding concern. However, significant efforts have been made to address these challenges and restore peace and stability in the region and mitigate internal conflicts for a more secure environment.

Enhanced security measures along the India-Myanmar border have also been instrumental in curbing cross-border activities and ensuring the safety of the region. The porous nature of the border and historical factors have made it susceptible to infiltration and illicit markets, posing significant security challenges. The government has been taking steps to address these and strengthen border security to prevent unauthorised cross-border movements and activities.

The multipronged approach to addressing security concerns in the Northeast includes not only military and law enforcement measures but also initiatives aimed at addressing the root causes of unrest and promoting development.

The Ministry of Home Affairs has been actively involved in addressing the genuine demands of various ethnic groups and the approach encompasses a willingness to engage in dialogue with them and seek resolution of their demands within the framework of the Indian Constitution.

The overall security situation in the Northeast has shown tremendous improvement. However, it is important to continue addressing the remaining security challenges to ensure lasting peace and stability in the region. The government's efforts to strengthen security, engage in dialogue, and promote development are crucial in addressing the complex security dynamics of the Northeast and ensuring a more secure and peaceful environment for its people.

Political implications

The BJP, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has made significant inroads in the region, securing electoral victories in states like Assam, Manipur and Tripura. The party's emphasis on development, infrastructure, and connectivity has resonated with the aspirations of the people of the Northeast, leading to a notable shift in political dynamics in the region.

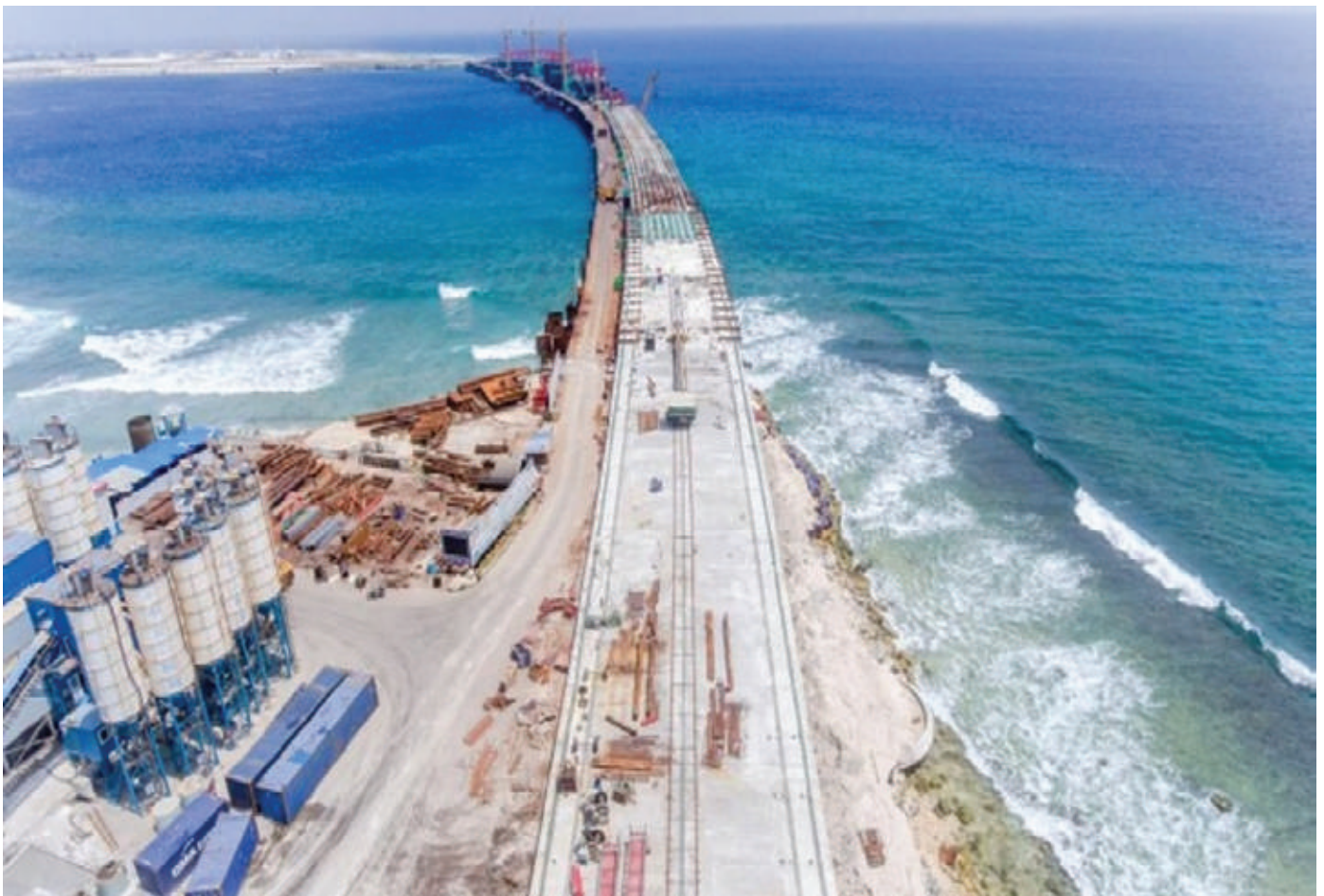
Looking ahead to the 2024 General Elections, the strides made by the ruling party in integrating the region within India and addressing long-standing issues have garnered support for the BJP among the people of the Northeast. The party's track record of development and governance in the region is likely to bolster its electoral prospects, with the BJP aiming to consolidate its gains and expand its footprint in the Northeast region.

The inclusion of the Northeast within India over the last decade has been a transformative process, marked by significant achievements in infrastructure, economy, security, and cultural integration. As the 2024 General Elections approach, the BJP's performance in the Northeast is poised to be a key determinant in the party's overall electoral fortunes.

Anushka Singh works with DraftCraft International as a Media Researcher and writes mostly on issues affecting the Fourth Estate. She likes reading contrarian literature and analysing sources of news.

Revamping external ties and fallout within

*With emphasis on China, and as recently as Canada and Maldives as templates, **Ruchi Verma** outlines how India's deft diplomatic manoeuvres have been bringing it on global centre-stage and asserts it has substantial ramifications for domestic policies. The reference to border dispute with China, Canada's posturing on Sikh separatism and strategically located Maldives' criticism of PM Modi explains the algorithm.*



The Greater Male Connectivity Project is a development project by India in the Maldives

India has been actively redefining its foreign relations strategy, particularly in its engagements with China, Canada and the Maldives. These diplomatic manoeuvres are not only crucial for shaping India's position on the global stage but also carry significant implications for its domestic politics, especially as the country gears up for the 2024 general elections.

The relationship between India and China has been characterised by a mix of cooperation and competition, underscored by historical grievances and contemporary geopolitical ambitions. In recent years, tensions have flared over border disputes, economic competition, and strategic influence in the Indo-Pacific region.

The China conundrum

India's approach to its relations with China under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been marked by a combination of pragmatism and assertiveness. The Modi government has sought to engage with China on issues of mutual interest, such as trade and investment, while also standing firm on matters of national security and territorial integrity.

However, the 2020 Galwan Valley clash, which resulted in casualties on both sides, served as a stark reminder of the underlying tensions between the two Asian giants. In response, India has taken steps to bolster its military capabilities along the

disputed border and strengthen strategic partnerships with like-minded countries in the region, including the United States and Japan.

The evolving dynamics of India-China relations are closely watched by domestic audiences, particularly against the backdrop of heightened nationalist sentiments and concerns about Chinese assertiveness. The outcome of India's foreign policy towards China is likely to resonate with voters, who are increasingly attuned to issues of national security and sovereignty.

Trade and immigration

Canada and India share a multifaceted relationship spanning trade, investment, education, and immigration. Historically, ties between the two countries have been characterised by a significant Indian diaspora in Canada and growing economic cooperation. In recent years, bilateral relations between India and Canada have faced challenges, particularly due to Canada's perceived support for Sikh separatist movements and concerns over trade barriers faced by Indian exporters.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government's position on issues such as the farmers' protests in India and human rights concerns has further complicated the relationship. The postponement of a trade mission to India and the contentious meeting between the two countries' leaders reflect the strained nature of their current relations.

Despite these challenges, India and Canada have longstanding bilateral ties built upon shared traditions of democracy, pluralism, and strong interpersonal connections. The two countries have also been working to enhance cooperation in various areas, including trade, investment, and counter-terrorism. While frictions exist, both countries continue to engage in efforts to improve their ties and address the issues that have strained their relationship.

Striking a balance

Under the Modi government, India has taken a more assertive approach in its dealings with Canada, seeking to address trade imbalances and push back against perceived interference in its internal affairs. The Indian government's decision to suspend certain agricultural imports from Canada in retaliation for Ottawa's criticism of the farmers' protests underscores the shifting dynamics in bilateral relations.

The two nations were negotiating a FTA (Free Trade Agreement) which India paused when it realised that Ottawa was harbouring subversive elements in the country who were involved in anti-India activities. The deal, in its first phase, was covering goods, services, rules of origin, technical barriers to trade, and dispute settlement by this year; followed by the India-Canada CEPA to cover other bilateral issues of strategic importance.

The evolving trajectory of India-Canada relations is likely to factor into the electoral calculus, particularly in those constituencies with significant Indian diaspora populations. Issues related to trade, immigration, and national sovereignty are likely to resonate with voters, shaping their perception of the government's foreign policy stance.

Navigating the Indian Ocean

The Maldives, strategically located in the Indian Ocean, holds significant importance for India's maritime security and regional influence. Historically, ties between India and the Maldives have been characterised by close cultural and economic linkages, although the relationship has experienced ups and downs due to political instability and external influences.

India, in the recent years, has sought to deepen its engagement with the Maldives, particularly in the areas of infrastructure development, maritime security, and counterterrorism cooperation. Prime Minister Modi's government has prioritised enhancing bilateral ties with the Maldives, viewing the island nation as a key partner in its "Neighbourhood First" policy.

The signing of agreements for infrastructure projects, such as the Greater Male Connectivity Project – with an Indian

grant of USD 100 million and a Line of Credit of USD 400 million, and the strengthening of defence and security cooperation underscore India's commitment to bolstering its relationship with the Maldives. These developments are closely watched by domestic audiences, who perceive India's engagement with its neighbours as critical for safeguarding its strategic interests and countering external influence in the region.

The relations between the two nations hit a low recently following the newly-elected Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu's criticism of PM Modi and pledge to remove Indian military troops from the country, and Maldives' minister's derogatory remarks on PM Modi's visit to Lakshadweep.

During a discussion at the second meeting of the India-Maldives High Level Core Group, the MEA announced that the two nations have agreed to a set of 'mutually workable solutions' to allow 'the continued operation of Indian aviation platforms that provide humanitarian and medvac services to the people of Maldives.' The MEA spokesperson confirmed that India's military personnel in the Maldives are set to be replaced by technical personnel.

Domestic discourse

India's evolving foreign relations policy vis-a-vis China, Canada, and the Maldives is likely to shape the discourse in the lead-up to the 2024 elections. Key themes such as national security, economic diplomacy, and sovereignty are expected to feature prominently in political debates and electoral campaigns.

The government's handling of issues related to China, including border security and economic competition, will be closely scrutinised by voters, particularly in constituencies bordering China and those with significant defence and security concerns.

The outcome of India's engagements with Canada, especially on trade and immigration, will resonate with the Indian diaspora and business communities, influencing their electoral preferences.

Similarly, India's strategic partnerships in the Indian Ocean region, particularly with the Maldives, are likely to be viewed through the lens of regional stability and maritime security. The government's efforts to strengthen ties with neighbouring countries and counter external influence will be a focal point in political narratives, shaping voter perceptions of India's foreign policy priorities.

The preparations

India, under the Modi government, has been actively strengthening its strategic partnerships in the Indian Ocean region to enhance regional stability and maritime security. The country is building its naval assets and maritime surveillance capabilities to counter the growing threat of China in the Indian Ocean Region.

The government's strategic engagement in the Indian Ocean, particularly with countries like the Maldives and France, reflects its commitment to ensuring a secure and stable maritime environment in the region.

These partnerships are crucial for India's role as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean and are aligned with its Indo-Pacific strategy. The evolving dynamics in the Indian Ocean region are integral to India's foreign policy and its pursuit of strategic interests, including trade and security considerations.

This carries significant implications for the domestic political discourse, particularly as the country prepares for the 2024 elections.

Ruchi Verma is a media researcher with The History and Heritage Project – A DraftCraft International Initiative to document details, analyse facts and plug lacunae generated by oversight or to further national or foreign agenda in History and Heritage Across India and Beyond Borders.

Southern tectonics and political dynamics

Shunning their traditional disdain for the dominance of major parties, the Southern states, known for their linguistic diversity, unique cultural identity and pride, and regional political dynamics, have altered the country's political landscape. Neeti Prakash takes a look at the shift in this complex electoral arena and concludes the states are now slowly veering round towards the ruling party with implications for federalism.



Kerala chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan



Karnataka chief minister Siddaramaiah



Andhra Pradesh chief minister Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy



Telangana chief minister Anumula Revanth Reddy

In the vast and dynamic landscape of Indian politics, the Southern states have long been considered bastions of regional parties, with national political discourse often taking a backseat. However, this has changed in the last decade and, in a remarkable turn of events, the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) has embarked on a gradual inclusionary journey, challenging the traditional narrative and making significant inroads into the political arena of states like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana.

The Southern states of India, known for their linguistic diversity, unique cultural identity and pride, and regional political dynamics, have historically been immune to the dominance of national political parties. The Indian National Congress (INC), once a pan-India political force, gradually lost its foothold, leaving the regional parties to shape the political landscape. In this regard, the BJP's foray into the politics of the Southern states signifies a departure from the conventional approach and has been reaping immense benefit for the political party.

The ruling party's efforts to gain a stronger foothold in the Southern states of India had earlier been met with significant challenges. The region's unique social and cultural identity and the historical dominance of regional parties had made it difficult for many national-level political parties to establish a strong regional presence. The Bharatiya Janta Party's attempts to increase its seats in the Southern states in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections have led to a re-evaluation of election strategy and underlined the need to adopt newer channels to win voters.

Complex battlefield

The complex election battlefield and the array of variables deciding the outcome have been a subject of significant interest and debate. National political parties have always been under scrutiny in the Southern states when it comes to their attempts to further their political agenda and, in some cases, reverse political fortunes in the region and the

historical reasons why they always found it difficult to compete in the Southern states.

In the case of BJP, the party's lack of prominent leaders in the Southern states, the absence of alliances and the need to regain the support of former partners seem to have been the major issues affecting its success in elections in the Southern states and the party has been working to rectify these. In the context of the party's broader electoral success and the formation of the I.N.D.I.A alliance, the party's attempts to gain ground in the Southern states have significant implications for the national political landscape. The BJP's efforts to challenge the dominance of regional parties and restructure the politics have been met with both opportunities and challenges, making the Southern states a key battleground in the lead up to the 2024 election.

Political experts believe that the journey into the politics of the South will be successful if parties appreciate and accept the nuanced understanding of local issues, focus on strategic alliances, and ensure local leadership to resonate with the unique socio-political dynamics of each state. This is something many national-level political parties are struggling with and must focus on, at the same time.

Leadership dynamics

In states like Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, the BJP has invested in cultivating strong local leaders who understand the pulse of the electorate. This departure from a centralised leadership model has resonated well with voters. Presently, BJP is not in power in any of the southern states. In Karnataka, Congress took away power from the BJP. BJP, however, has made significant progress in Telangana although Congress won in Telangana as well and Revanth Reddy took charge since December 2023.

Following the results of the recently concluded State Assembly elections, the I.N.D.I.A alliance received setback and failed to decelerate the momentum of its primary contender as it had hoped to do before the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. This was preceded by an internal disagreement in the alliance over claim of the Prime Ministerial candidate for the 2024 General Elections that led to snubbing of some of the key allies of the alliance.

In other states in the South, the national parties are mostly relegated to the second or third spot or are part of a coalition. For example, in Kerala, Pinarayi Vijayan of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) is the Chief Minister and serving since May 2016. In Andhra Pradesh, Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy is serving as the 17th chief minister of the state. Earlier a member of the Indian National Congress, Jagan Reddy, son of former CM of Andhra Pradesh Y S Rajasekhara Reddy, founded the YSR Congress Party in 2011.

In Telangana, Anumula Revanth Reddy is serving as the second and current Chief Minister of the state. He came to power on 7 December 2023 after the recently concluded assembly elections. Representing Telangana's Kodangal constituency, Revanth Reddy belongs to the INC. His predecessor who led the state for more than nine years was Gajwel MLA K Chandrashekar

Rao from Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS). The party's name was changed to Bharat Rashtra Samithi on 5 October 2022.

Strategic alliances

Recognising the importance of regional allies, the BJP has entered into strategic alliances with regional parties in certain states. In Andhra Pradesh, for instance, the alliance with the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) has provided the BJP with a platform to extend its reach. Similarly, in Telangana, aligning with TRS has opened avenues for the in the state's political landscape. The party's growing reach in the South can also be attributed to its adept handling of regional issues. The party has demonstrated a willingness to engage with and address concerns specific to each state, from the Cauvery water dispute in Karnataka to language and cultural identity issues in Tamil Nadu.

The party has also faced resistance in its initiatives in the South, rooted in the historical dominance of regional parties, linguistic complexities, and scepticism about aligning with a party perceived as being more attuned to Northern interests. Cultural nuances play a significant role in Southern politics. The BJP has been navigating sensitivities related to language, traditions, and regional pride. Instances of cultural clashes and missteps have been seized upon by opponents, posing challenges for the party's inclusive narrative.

The Southern states, with their strong regional identity, have been historically sceptical of national parties meddling in their affairs. Breaking through this scepticism and convincing voters that the BJP is attuned to the unique needs of the South has required a delicate balancing act.

The most tangible impact has been the electoral gains made by the BJP in states like Karnataka and Telangana. Winning a significant number of seats in these states has not only altered the political equation but has also positioned the BJP as a formidable force capable of challenging regional parties. This shift has led to a more nationalised policy agenda, addressing concerns that cut across state boundaries. It has injected a national narrative into traditionally regional-centric politics. This has implications not only for the states in question but also for the larger idea of federalism in India, with a rebalancing of power dynamics between the Center and the States.

Neeti Prakash is a media researcher affiliated with The History and Heritage Project – a DraftCraft International Initiative dedicated to documenting details, analysing facts, and addressing gaps that may arise due to oversight or the advancement of national or foreign agendas within the realms of History and Heritage across India and beyond borders.

From de-escalation to perception shift

Kriti Kalra discusses the crucial Kashmir factor and its relevance for the BJP in the ensuing General Elections, in terms of both opportunities and challenges. Kashmir's complex maze read with BJP's efforts to transform the region's political scenario, underscore its significance in Indian politics, she avers, pointing out that the party's proactive approach and resolute leadership resonate with citizens, reinforcing the importance of national security in shaping electoral outcomes.



Post the repeal of Article 370, restoration of peace became a priority in Kashmir

Kashmir, nestled in the scenic Himalayan valley, has long been a focal point of contention and conflict in Indian politics. Over the years, the region has witnessed a tumultuous journey marked by insurgency, militancy, and cross-border tensions. However, recent efforts by the ruling government toward de-escalating violence and addressing cross-border terrorism have significantly reshaped the region's politics, particularly for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as it prepares for the 2024 Lok Sabha polls.

The pursuit of peace and prosperity in Kashmir has sparked debates, with the government actively promoting economic development and attracting outside investment to the region. The BJP's firm stance, including deploying additional troops and implementing a two-pronged strategy against terrorism, has played a pivotal role in shaping the region's dynamics.

As the BJP gears up for the 2024 General Elections, it faces both opportunities and challenges in Kashmir. While the party has achieved electoral success in the Northeast, navigating the complexities of the Kashmir conflict and the diverse

socio-political variables remains crucial for consolidating its position in the upcoming elections.

Kashmir's intricate dynamics, coupled with the BJP's efforts to transform the region's political scenario, underscore its significance in Indian politics. As the 2024 General Elections draw near, the BJP's strategies and actions in Kashmir will play a pivotal role in shaping its electoral prospects and influence on the national stage.

Partition and politics

Kashmir has a storied past dating back to India's partition in 1947. The territorial dispute between India and Pakistan over this picturesque land has fuelled decades of insurgency and militancy. Its strategic significance, coupled with unique socio-political fabric, places Kashmir at the heart of Indian politics.

The region straddles modern-day India and Pakistan. Since gaining independence from the British rule, Kashmir's strategic location and predominantly Muslim population have

(Continue on pg 30)



All roads lead to Ayodhya

*Ayodhya, the birthplace of Ram has now acquired national prominence given the history and sequence of events that preceded its construction. It has now become a must-visit destination for not just devout Hindus, but also tourists from all over the world, registering a heavy footfall daily. **Manu Shrivastava** traces Ayodhya's architecture, culture and how it gained significance in the course of history. Apart from the being a centre of cultural and religious activities and structures, Ayodhya also has many spots for nature lovers that includes the quiet-flowing Saryu River.*



Devotees and guests gathered for the Pran Pratishtha ceremony

Ever since the Ram Temple was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Ayodhya has become the talk of the town and the centre of attention for people all over. This ancient city, located on the banks of the Saryu river in the state of Uttar Pradesh, is believed to be the birthplace of Lord Ram, one of the most revered deities in Hinduism. And now, with the grandeur of the Ram Temple, Ayodhya has become a must-visit destination for not just devout Hindus, but also tourists from all over the world.

Ayodhya has a rich and varied history that dates back thousands of years. According to Hindu mythology, it is believed that Lord Ram was born in Ayodhya as the eldest son of King Dashrath and Queen Kaushalya. The epic tale of Ramayan revolves around Ayodhya and its surroundings, making it a signifi-

cant place in Hindu culture. The city has seen many rulers and dynasties come and go, each leaving their own mark on Ayodhya's architecture and culture. From being the capital of the ancient kingdom of Kosala or Kosaladesh to being ruled by various dynasties including the Mauryas, Guptas, and Mughals, Ayodhya has a diverse cultural heritage that is reflected in its monuments and structures.

Ram Rajya or the grandeur of the kingdom was epitomised under the rule of prominent kings namely Ikshvaku, Prithu, Harishchandra, Sagar, Mandhata, Raghu, Bhagirath, Dileep, Dashrath and Ram. Famous epics like Ramayan and Shri Ramcharitmanas also detail the grandeur of Ayodhya which has, over the years, garnered interests from historians, archaeologists, pilgrims and travellers.



Entrance to Hanuman Garhi

The Ram Janmabhoomi

One of the most prominent landmarks in Ayodhya is the Ram Janmabhoomi complex, which houses the newly constructed Ram Temple. The complex also includes other significant structures like Sita Rasoi, Hanuman Garhi, and many more. It is believed that this spot was the exact location where Lord Ram was born.

Hanuman Garhi temple, is dedicated to Lord Hanuman, who played a vital role in Lord Ram's life. The statue depicts a young Lord Hanuman sitting in the lap of his mother Anjani. The temple is located about one km from Ayodhya Railway Station, and it is believed that 'Pavan Putra' Hanuman lived here to guard Ayodhya.

Notably, Ramkot, which is the site of an ancient citadel resting on an elevated ground is also the main place of worship in Ayodhya. Pilgrims and devotees visit the sacred site throughout the year and on auspicious occasions such as Ram Navami, Lord Ram's day of birth.

A series of ghats or steps on the bank of Saryu River, known as Ram Ki Paidi, serve as a place for devotees to take a dip in the holy river, perform rituals, offer prayers and atone for their sins. The Ram Ki Paidi is also a spectacle of lights and colours, especially during the evening, when thousands of lamps are lit and floated on the river, creating a mesmerising sight.

For those interested in history and architecture, Ayodhya has plenty to offer. The city is home to many ancient temples and structures like Kanak Bhawan, one of the finest



Kanak Bhawan, believed to have been gifted by Kaikeyi to Sita after her marriage to Lord Ram

temples in Ayodhya, which is said to be the place where Lord Ram and his brothers spent their childhood.

Kanak Bhawan lies to the North-East of the Ram Janmabhoomi complex and it is believed that Kaikeyi gifted this place to Sita after her marriage to Lord Ram. Later, Vikramaditya renovated the bhawan where the sanctum or the garbhagrih has idols of Lord Ram and Sita.

Ancient temples, biodiversity

One of the oldest temples in Ayodhya known as Treta Ke Thakur or Tretanath Temple, located at a distance of two km from the railway station, is where Lord Ram performed the Ashwamedha Yagya after his victory over Ravan. It is believed that the idols in this temple were brought here from the original temple that once stood on the bank of the holy Saryu river.

This temple is located at Naya Ghat in Ayodhya. The temple is constructed in Nagar-style of architecture comprising the shikharas and has idols of Lord Ram, Devi Sita, Ram's brothers Lakshman, Bharat and Shatrughan, and Rishi Vashishtha,



Idols in Kanak Bhawan



The banks of Saryu River

made from single black sandstone. Interestingly, the Treta Ke Thakur Temple opens for devotees only one day in the year on the auspicious occasion of Kartik Shukla Ekadashi which falls around October or November.

Apart from the being a centre of cultural and religious activities and structures, Ayodhya also has many spots for nature lovers. The Saryu river, which flows through the city, offers a serene and peaceful ambience for a boat ride. The city known for religious tourism is now developing a bird sanctuary at Samdha Lake in an effort to draw nature enthusiasts.

Once the work is complete which includes clearing the lake of encroachments, planting trees, etc. to restore the lake to its original form, the site will promote bird watching. Samdha Lake is spread over 67 hectares and located 15 km from the city. In fact, the local development authority has plans to restore and revive the more than hundred water bodies in the zone.

Some of the birds found in the region are Common Myna, Eastern Cattle Egret, Indian Pied Starling, etc. which are regularly spotted in the area especially the hotspots that include Guptar Ghat, Ramayan Theme Park, Ram Janki Mandir, Saryu



Guptar Ghat



Nageshwarnath Temple entrance

Majha, etc. Once the lake restoration work - incorporating sustainable material and practices - is complete, migratory birds along with local birds could be seen here.

Mythology and tales

Ayodhya is one of the most sacred and ancient cities in India, as it is believed to be the birthplace of Lord Ram, the seventh incarnation of Lord Vishnu. It is also a prominent destination for pilgrims and history lovers, as it has many temples, monuments and attractions that showcase the rich cultural and religious heritage of the city. Many structures and temples in the city are preserved in time, telling tales from Hindu mythology.

The Nageshwarnath Temple, dedicated to Lord Shiva and located at Ram Ki Paidi in Ayodhya, is believed to have been made by Lord Ram's son, Kush. Legend says that Kush lost his armlet in the Saryu river and found it in the possession of a Nag Kanya, or a snake princess, who had fallen in love with him. The temple is one of the oldest in Ayodhya, and has a unique architecture, with a dome-shaped roof and a spire. The temple also hosts an annual fair, which attracts thousands of devotees and visitors. Shivratri is celebrated with pomp and fervour when



Ram Ki Paidi



Interiors of Ram Mandir

processions are carried out.

The sacred Guptar Ghat located on the bank of the holy Sarayu River is another must-visit destination in Ayodhya for the devout. It is believed that Lord Ram took jal samadhi here. The ghat is a series of steps that were built in the 19th century by king Darshan Singh. There are many temples around the ghat such as the Narasingh Temple, Sita-Ram Temple and shrines such as the Chakrahari and Guptahari shrines.

Apart from its historical and religious significance, Ayodhya also has some interesting trivia associated with it. Ayodhya is believed to be one of the seven holiest cities in Hinduism. It is also believed that Ayodhya was once the capital of the legendary king Raja Manu, who is said to be the first king of the human race.

The holy city is also known as Saket, which means a place of peace and tranquility. It is believed that Lord Ram's rule was so just and righteous that it brought peace everywhere. Even today, Ayodhya has a serene and peaceful environment, making

it an ideal place for spiritual seekers.

History in the making

The developments in Ayodhya following the Pran Pratisthan ceremony undertaken by PM Narendra Modi on 22 January 2024 have been significant. The ceremony, which marks the consecration of the deity, was attended by a large number of people, including prominent personalities from the film industry and over 7,000 guests, including 3,000 VVIPs, priests, donors, and politicians. The ceremony was scheduled to take place under the guidance of Pandit Laxmikant and during the auspicious Abhijeet Muhurat.

Additionally, several tent cities were developed to accommodate thousands of devotees who attended the ceremony. The event was highly anticipated, and various media platforms teamed up with Doordarshan to cover the ceremony and keep subscribers informed about the latest developments. The Pran Pratisthan ceremony and the inauguration of the Ram temple have been significant events, drawing attention and



Pran Pratishtha Ceremony of Lord Ram

participation from across the country and beyond.

The economic diversification plans for Ayodhya after the Pran Pratishtha ceremony include leveraging the potential of temple tourism to drive economic growth and infrastructure development in the region. The inauguration of the Ram temple is expected to significantly boost religious, with an estimated 100 million people expected to visit the Ram temple in Ayodhya annually. This surge in tourism is touted to improve connectivity, infrastructure development, and economic opportunities for the local community.

Enhanced connectivity, development

The Ram Temple inauguration has made Ayodhya more accessible than ever before. The government has announced new flights connecting Ayodhya to major cities in India, making it easier for people to visit this sacred city. The railway department has also introduced new train services that connect Ayodhya to

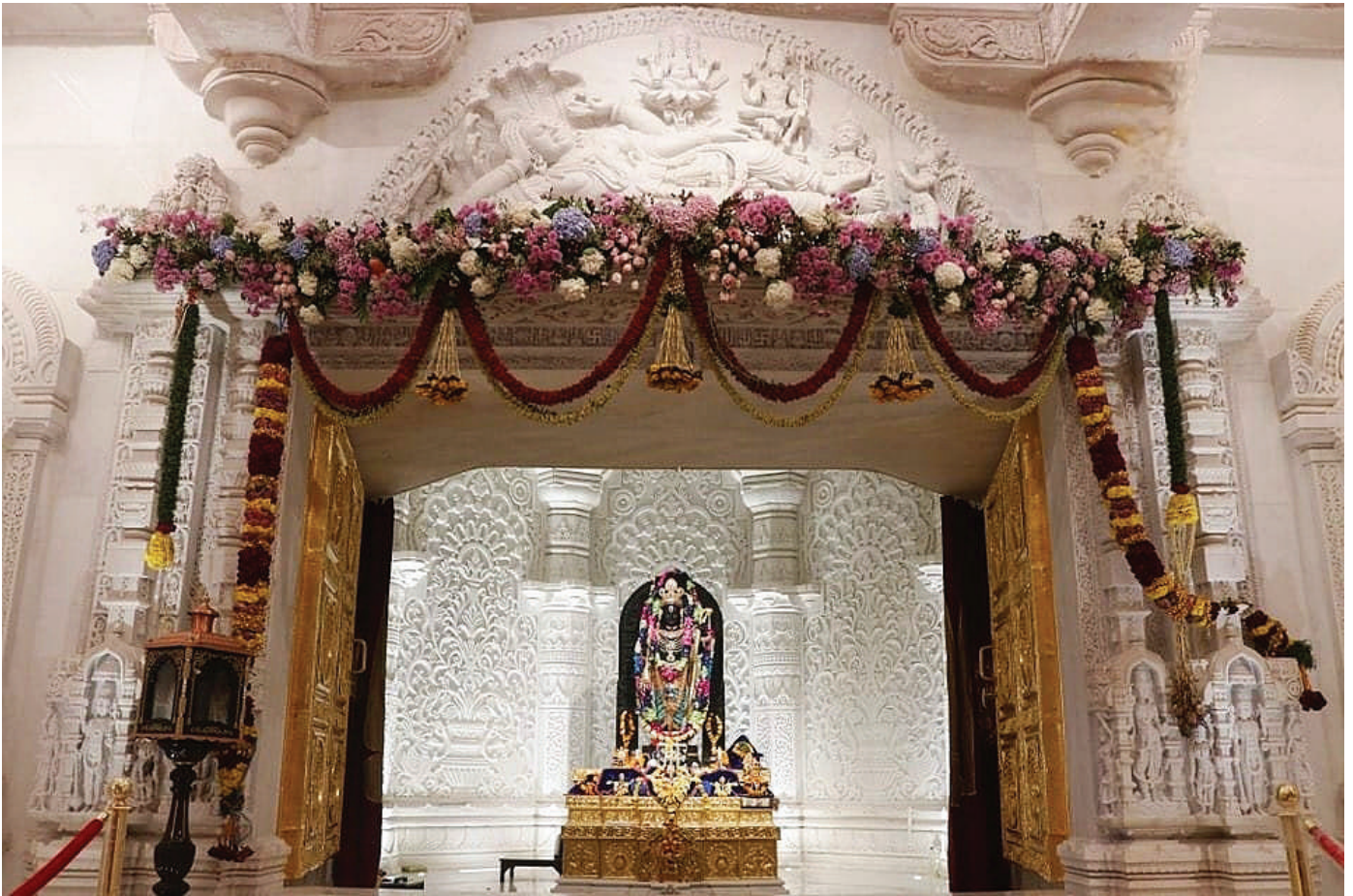
different parts of the country.

Ayodhya also has immense potential for tourism from all over the world. With a significant population of NRI Hindus, it has become a must-visit destination for them as they reconnect with their roots and pay homage to Lord Ram. The city is also attracting tourists from other countries who want to experience the rich culture and heritage of India. The government has also added a GI tag to the besan laddus sold around the Ayodhya Ram Mandir, which is expected to help drive sales up.

The economic diversification plans for Ayodhya after the Pran Pratishtha ceremony at the Ram temple revolve around leveraging the potential of temple tourism to drive economic growth and infrastructure development in the region, while also supporting local communities.

The Ram Mandir

The Ayodhya Ram Mandir, set to be the largest temple in India, has several unique features. The temple, built in the



Garbhagriha with Ram Lalla Idol

traditional Nagara style of temple architecture is constructed in pink sandstone and has the characteristic shikharas or the towering spikes. Spread over 2.7 acres, the temple is surrounded by a courtyard and other smaller shrines of Hindu gods and goddesses.

The Ram Mandir is 161 feet tall and spread over three distinct floors. The first floor is dedicated to Lord Ram and called Shri Ram Darbar, second to Lord Hanuman and third is a museum displaying Ayodhya's history. The complex is spread over 67 acres and includes a yagnashala or a sacred place to perform yagnas.

The temple has five mandapas in the middle of the garbhagriha (sanctum sanctorum). Shri Ram Darbar has five halls or pavilions namely, Nritya Mandap, Rang Mandap, Sabha Mandap, Prarthana Mandap, and Kirtan Mandap. Temples of Hanuman and Annapurna are located on the north and south side of the temple.

In all, there are 366 columns or pillars in the temple which have 16 idols each of the ten Dashavatara, incarnations of Lord Shiva, the 12 incarnations of the goddess Saraswati, and the Chausath Yoginis. The temple foundation comprises a 46 ft-thick concrete layer with a 21 ft granite base put for moisture protection.

In terms of accessibility, there are ramps and lifts, pilgrim facility centre which can accommodate over 25,000 people, community kitchen, medical facilities, locker services, etc. The construction has been environment friendly with 70 per cent of the complex being a green space.



Ram Lalla Idol



Ramkot

Intriguingly, the temple has a time capsule buried 2,000 feet below the ground. The time capsule or the kaal patra carries a message in Sanskrit about Lord Ram and his birthplace Ayodhya and is meant to be preserved for thousands of years.

Historical significance

One of the most iconic and popular places to visit in Ayodhya is the Ram Janmabhoomi, or the birthplace of Lord Ram, which is the site where Lord Ram is said to have been born. The Ram Janmabhoomi has been a subject of controversy and dispute for centuries, as it was also the location of the Babri Masjid, a mosque built by the Mughal emperor Babur in the 16th century. The mosque was demolished by Hindu activists in 1992, sparking communal riots and legal battles.

In 2019, the Supreme Court of India ruled in favour of the construction of a Ram Temple at the site, and handed over the land to the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust. The trust was set up for the construction and management of Ram

Mandir in Ayodhya by the Government of India in February 2020.

The construction of the Ram Temple began in 2020 and was completed in 2024. The entire temple has intricate carvings and sculptures depicting scenes from the Ramayan. The sanctum sanctorum houses the idol of Ram Lalla, or the infant Ram. The inauguration of the Ram Temple was a historic and auspicious event, as it marked the culmination of a long and arduous struggle for the Hindu community and symbolised the unity and harmony of the nation. The inauguration took place on 22 January 2024 and the temple is set to celebrate its first Basant Panchami on 14 February 2024, which celebrates the onset of spring and the goddess of learning, Saraswati.

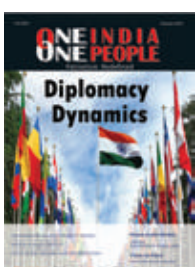


Manu Shrivastava is a journalist and lawyer with DraftCraft International and Co-Convenor of #TheWomanSurvivor, #MeTooAtHome and #MeTooBeyondBorders initiatives.

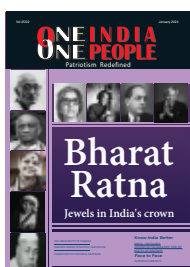
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“From Vijay Merchant to Sunil Gavaskar and Sachin Tendulkar, cricketers and other sportspersons have always visited our store.”

The Marine Sports, India's oldest sports bookstore in Mumbai, established by Bruno Braganza in 1946, is a retail, and service provider of sports books, cricket books, etc. A real institution for cricket fans, it is currently located in Dadar, though started initially in Marine Drive, from where it derives its name.

It is a hole-in-the-wall place with lots of old sports books from around the world, magazines, and other mementoes including bats, stumps, etc. It even publishes books.

Theodore Braganza, the present owner CEO of the bookshop spoke with **A.Radhakrishnan** about the joys of being a bookstore owner.

Tell me a little about yourself

I was not very fond of sports nor was a voracious reader like my dad. But when he had a second eye operation, he asked me to take over. With a *DME* from MS University, I was then working for Hindustan Brown Boveri at Baroda (now Vadodara).

But having got to know a lot of cricketers through Sunil Gavaskar, a regular visitor, I found the trade enjoyable and so I joined my Dad in 1972. I did two short-term courses in Bookselling and Publishing and also did a short term course in Publishing in England. I continue to take books to cricket matches, chess tournament and other sporting events and have visited almost every sports institute in the country.

How did the book store get its name Marine Sports?

My father Bruno Braganza started Marine Sports in 1946 in the Dhobi Talao area as a sports equipment dealer and named it after the area.



Theodore Braganza

As an insatiable reader, he used to go to sports meets and found a demand for rule books, and began importing them. The first title he imported from England was 12 copies of the Athletic Official Guide, and managed to sell one copy. Y. A. Gole, the Secretary of the Athletic Association bought all the remaining eleven copies for a pretty big sum of ₹ 10!

Buoyed by the first success, he imported the Football Referees Chart and later MCC Laws of Cricket, which took off tremendously. From 1946 to 1956, he kept both sports goods and the books.

So how did the idea for the switch to only sports books come up?

Unfortunately, 10 years later, in 1956, he had to vacate his premises as sub tenant and move to Dadar, which was something of a cricket hub then. Those were tough times but he kept the shop going. The new premises being small, he realised that catering to sports books got a far better clientele than goods.

Attending Athletic Meets pan India generated good business and also helped him build a contact list for a mail order business. Soon he went to cricket matches, chess and bridge tournaments and his network and staff grew.

Around this time Dr. Kanga Memorial Library was started by the Bombay Cricket Association (BCA) at the Brabourne Stadium and Homi Contractor, its secretary, ordered all sports books in multiples. Major cricket Associations were contacted and many sports libraries were set up and business flourished. Meanwhile, local publishers approached us and we marketed books published in India and started an export trade for Indian books.

British publishers too approached us to market and distribute their sports books like Wisden Cricketers' Almanac, Playfair Cricket Annual and several other annuals. In the 60s when cricket magazines were booming, we handled the distribution of The Indian Cricket Field - Annual co-edited by Dicky Rutnagar and Anandji Dossa.

Marine Sports thus created a mind space for a whole generation of sports fans, players, young journalists and officials.

How many footfalls per day?

Our footfalls were very high in the 60s and 70s, close to 100, but today our business is by mail and we get 40 to 50 orders daily. Less individuals visit the store in search of books nowadays. Most will head to some mega shop. But they keep only current best-sellers. However, there is a certain allure to simply leafing through books without any particular intention. In many respects, you frequently learn about topics you were unaware of. However Marine Sports has a wide variety, new and old, well-known and little-known.

Bookstores continue to struggle; will they always be around?

Bookstores do struggle and some very good ones have closed. Fortunately our specialisation helped us survive. There are only three such booksellers in the world and we are the oldest. Survival, though, isn't easy. The core audience has changed as well.

Before the 1970s, there were books, then there were videos, and now we are in the digital age. With rising prices, buyers have become selective and it is a surprise that technical and instructional books like umpiring; about the rules of the game or even technique are outselling biographies. And there's always demand for Don Bradman's *The Art of Cricket* - a manual on how to play cricket - Bradman style.

We reprint and distribute books to institutes and dealers; and buy and sell rare sports books.

What do you enjoy most about being a bookseller? What are skills needed?

The greatest pleasure I derive is to cater to the mental development of sportsmen, and satisfy their needs and assist them in their growth.

Just passion for books and reading.

At one time it was finance, today it is number of readers.

How do you manage to stay relevant in the market?

Recently we added a second-hand section. We buy big and small collections. Marketing becomes easy as single copies are sold, margins are better too and we can depend on the rarity and demand.

What do you think makes a great book? Describe your personal reading preferences.

It has to be written with passion and be frank, bold and share experience, skill and inputs from the heart. I love Cardus, though I enjoy Arlott, Fingleton and in recent times Gideon Haigh. I enjoyed Gavaskar's Sunny Days. It wasn't very popular when it was initially printed, but it has since persevered and grown into a classic. I see a lot of fathers come in and buy the same books that they had once read, for their sons to read. Seeing it gives me hope for a small shop like mine, which is encouraging.

Your publications?

We published several books including one on C. K. Nayudu, Sachin Tendulkar and 1983 World Cup and a book on the 75th Anniversary of the Brabourne Stadium.

Do you invite authors for a book signing at your shop?

We used to do that earlier, but when readership dropped, we avoided as it became very embarrassing.

Famous sportspersons who have visited your bookstore?

It was a different time period; there was no internet or television, and listening to radio commentary wasn't the best way to understand the game. As a result, practically every decent cricket player would head straight for Gokhale Road in Dadar West to our bookstore.

Cricketers and other sportspersons have always visited our store. Vijay Merchant, Sunil Gavaskar, Sachin Tendulkar, Vinod Kambli, Dilip Vengsarkar, Bishan Singh Bedi, P.R. Mansingh, Sanjay Jagdale, Raju Mukerji, Joaquim Carvalho, Jal Pardivala, to name

a few.

Gavaskar, a regular visitor, before any match, would read up on his opponents. Once, before leaving for Australia, he asked me for a book which was sold out. In those days books were imported by sea as airmail was costly. Dad refused to order just one copy. But I insisted as I felt it would make a positive contribution to Gavaskar's growth. Finally, when we got the book, I realised why he wanted it. It contained articles on Lillee and Thomson and techniques to face them.

I realised then that Marine Sports was developing sports through books and helping sportspersons mentally develop themselves. Actually, we were more than just another business!

On Sundays, when Kanga League matches were cancelled, instead of resigning to another day cooped up at home, waiting for the rain to end, Gavaskar dragged all his team mates from Dadar Union to my bookstore. Even today if in the city, he sneaks in - carefully making sure that he isn't facing the door, so that no one recognises him. In a similar manner, Bishen Singh Bedi would frequently stop by while en route to the airport.

Chatting with me about the old days; their eyes would scan the shelves filled with sports books. Every once in a while, they would pick out a book and read - comfortable in the knowledge that no one will trouble them here. During the 1980s, prior to their getting star status, Sanjay Manjrekar and Sachin Tendulkar would stop by in search of videos. My people in England and

Australia would record matches and then send me a copy immediately. I catered to a much-specialised audience.

How do you handle customer complaints or negative feedback?

We strive to satisfy the customer the most, even at a loss. Money is insubordinate to keeping the relationship alive. Many a times we have given books free to institutes, club, libraries, helping boost the appetite of the readers. Since I live just three buildings away from the bookstore, I oblige the customer anytime and, on all days, if I am around.

What next?

The journey of Marine Sports will go on, till a successor takes over.

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(Will now be contd of the Kashmir article)

made it a contentious issue. Three wars and numerous conflicts have shaped its history, resulting in the Line of Control (LOC) dividing Kashmir into territories administered by India and Pakistan, with a third region under Chinese control.

Kashmir's political saga weaves together external influences and internal struggles. It emerged as an 'international dispute' in 1947, with the Kashmiri movement for self-determination shaped by pivotal events. The British withdrawal and the partition into India and Pakistan triggered violence and territorial disputes, reflecting diverse views among Kashmir's people.

The Kashmir conflict primarily involves India and Pakistan, with China also playing a role. The aspirations of its inhabitants and strategic interests have kept the issue unresolved. Beyond Indian politics, this conflict draws international attention due to its impact on regional security and stability.

Recent developments

In recent years, the Indian government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has made concerted efforts to de-escalate violence and restore peace in the region. Enhanced security measures, intelligence-driven operations, and counter-insurgency strategies have significantly reduced violence and militancy in Kashmir.

The BJP government's proactive approach in addressing cross-border terrorism has played a crucial role in increasing security. Measures such as fortified border fencing and surveillance have thwarted infiltration attempts from neighbouring countries. Additionally, strategic diplomatic initiatives aimed at isolating Pakistan on the global stage and exposing its support for terrorism have contributed to containing cross-border terror activities.

In 2019, the Modi government took decisive steps related to Jammu and Kashmir. Firstly, it rendered Article 370 of the Constitution inoperative, effectively revoking the special status that had been in place for almost 70 years. This move was made possible by applying the power granted under the same Article of the Indian Constitution. Secondly, the state of Jammu and Kashmir was bifurcated into two Union Territories - Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh. This historic decision fulfilled a long-cherished demand echoing sentiments that had persisted for many years.

Article 35A, which was not part of the original Constitution but found mention in the Appendices - was conceived under the 1952 Delhi Agreement entered into by Jammu and Kashmir with India, granted J & K certain autonomous powers. These included the ability to bar outsiders from buying property and settling in the state, as well as denying Kashmiri women their right of inheritance upon marrying an outsider.

Developmental focus

The Modi government's actions brought about significant changes in these legal distinctions, ensuring uniformity across the nation. Post the repeal of Article 370, the restoration of peace became a priority. The government's efforts led to a reduction in violence and a more stable environment in the region. Developmental activities gained momentum, with a focus on infrastructure, education, healthcare, and economic growth. Investments in Ladakh and Jammu and Kashmir re aimed to uplift the lives of the local populace.

The creation of the Union Territory of Ladakh served strategic purposes. By separating it from the political compulsions of the Kashmir Valley, the government aimed to insulate this strategically significant region. Ladakh's unique cultural heritage and geographical importance were recognised, leading to targeted development initiatives.

The abrogation of Article 370 reinforced the idea of a unified India. It emphasised that all regions, regardless of histori-

cal complexities, would be treated equally under the Constitution. The government's proactive stance on national security resonated with citizens, bolstering confidence in its ability to safeguard borders and citizens.

As India moves forward, the evolving dynamics in Kashmir stand as a testament to the BJP-led government's commitment to a more secure, prosperous, and integrated nation. The repeal of Article 370 was a transformative step, and its impact continues to shape the region's trajectory.

Political hotspot

The Kashmir region has been a longstanding hotspot for security challenges due to its historical context, territorial disputes, and cross-border tensions. The BJP, as the ruling party, faced the formidable task of maintaining peace and stability in this sensitive area. Insurgency, militancy, and cross-border infiltration have been persistent issues, impacting not only the local population but also the broader national security landscape. The BJP had to navigate these complexities while ensuring the safety of citizens and territorial integrity.

The BJP's approach to addressing cross-border terrorism was marked by decisiveness. Swift and targeted actions were taken to neutralise threats and prevent further violence. These actions solidified the party's image as a strong and resolute leader in matters of national security. The electorate perceived the BJP as a party that prioritised safeguarding the nation's interests. This was something unprecedented and historic and was welcomed by the people.

Successfully containing security threats in Kashmir had a ripple effect across India. The populace gained confidence in the BJP's ability to handle security challenges effectively. The party's commitment to restoring peace resonated with voters. The historical significance of Kashmir in Indian politics amplified the impact of these efforts.

The BJP's proactive stance on national security extended beyond Kashmir. Policies related to defence, border management, and counterterrorism contributed to its positive perception. Voters appreciated the party's unwavering commitment to safeguarding the nation's borders and citizens. Tangible progress in de-escalating violence and managing cross-border terror bolstered the BJP's credibility. It demonstrated responsible custodianship of national security.

As the 2024 elections approach, the BJP's electoral prospects in the region have improved significantly. Voters associate the party with stability and effective governance. The reduction in violence and successful handling of cross-border threats has transformed the security landscape in Kashmir. This, in turn, has positively impacted the BJP's electoral standing.

Kashmir became a litmus test for the party's governance and leadership. Its ability to navigate complex security dynamics influenced voters' choices. As India prepares for the 2024 elections, the evolving dynamics in Kashmir stand as a testament to the BJP's commitment to a more secure and prosperous nation. The party's proactive approach and resolute leadership resonate with citizens, reinforcing the importance of national security in shaping electoral outcomes.

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Weeding out graft: A transformative journey

Observing that corruption has always been an integral part of electoral politics, **Vedika Jain** says that in the run up to the 2024 general elections, parties seem to be aware of the government's efforts at combating it. The ruling party through a combination of policy initiatives, institutional reforms, and enforcement measures, has displayed its commitment to rooting out this malaise from the system and restoring public trust in governance.



Demonetisation drive was intended to curb black money circulation and eliminate unaccounted wealth from the economy

Corruption has been a very important issue in Indian politics, one that has even pulled down governments. During his speech on the occasion of the 76th Independence Day, Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke about the twin challenges of corruption and nepotism and called out the need to curb them for the country's development.

In the lead-up to the 2024 general elections in India, the political parties in the country find themselves in a significantly changed space, one that has been shaped majorly by the government's relentless pursuit of combating corruption over the past decade.

Corruption has long been a pervasive issue in Indian politics, undermining trust in public institutions and hindering socio-economic progress. However, the BJP's concerted efforts to tackle this scourge have not only garnered public support but also positioned the party as a beacon of integrity and accountability.

Stifling growth

India's struggle with corruption had been a longstanding challenge, with various segments of society impacted by its corrosive effects. Corruption had permeated every facet of governance, stifling growth and perpetuating inequality. The pervasive nature of corruption had eroded public confidence in political institutions and fuelled disillusionment among the people.

The corruption conundrum in Indian Politics has been a topic of discussion for years, with countless cases and scandals surfacing over time. It can take various forms including embezzlement of public funds, bribery, and nepotism. The country's vastness and diversity, the heterogenous nature of its political economy and most importantly lack of political will had made it extremely challenging to combat corruption effectively.

Owing to the sheer population size of the country, the extent of corruption – scale and scope – has been vast in India. Corruption can affect all aspects of development of a country and the life of a common man.

Countering corruption

In the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) for the year 2023 by Transparency International, India stood with Maldives, Kazakhstan and Lesotho, securing the 93rd position out of a total of 180 countries. India's score was 39, one point more from what it was in 2022 when it held the 85th position, on a scale of zero (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean).

Government have been introducing various measures to address corruption, including the introduction of the Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, 2013, and the Whistleblowers Protection Act, 2014. Corruption in India is a multiheaded demon that has permeated and crippled many aspects of governance, public administration, etc. However, more efforts are needed to address the root causes of this social ill to further a more transparent and accountable governance system.

Recognising the urgent need to address corruption, the BJP, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, embarked on a comprehensive anti-corruption agenda. The party's commitment to eradicating corruption was evident in its election manifesto, policy initiatives, institutional reforms, and enforcement measures aimed at rooting out the malfeasance from the system.

Policy initiatives and more

The BJP government introduced a series of policy measures to combat corruption effectively. The implementation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime that aimed to streamline tax administration, reduce opportunities for tax evasion, and enhance transparency in fiscal operations was one of the most significant moves. Additionally, the demonetisation drive was intended to curb black money circulation and eliminate unaccounted wealth from the economy.

Institutional reforms were another cornerstone of the BJP's anti-corruption strategy. The establishment of specialised anti-corruption bodies and empowering them bolstered the government's capacity to investigate and prosecute cases of corruption effectively. Strengthening regulatory frameworks and enhancing oversight mechanisms were also prioritised to prevent corrupt practices and hold wrongdoers accountable.

The BJP government has demonstrated a zero-tolerance approach towards corruption through robust enforcement measures. High-profile anti-corruption campaigns, such as 'Operation Clean Money' targeted individuals and entities engaged in corrupt activities, sending a strong message that impunity would not be tolerated. Stringent penalties and swift judicial action against offenders underscored the government's commitment to upholding the rule of law and restoring public faith in the justice system.

Curbing economic offences

By leading from the front, the Modi government has strived hard to win on the plank of eradicating corruption from the roots. Notably, there have been no scams during the Modi government's two tenures and zero tolerance for corruption is being upheld at the top of the administrative pyramid. The government has also been proactive in curbing economic offences and generation of black money.

The Modi government accepted several recommendations made by the court-monitored SIT, whose establishment was one of the first decisions by his cabinet. More than ₹ 70,000 crore of black money was detected by the SIT of which ₹ 16,000 crore was resting in offshore accounts.

Another remarkable feat by the government was the enactment of the long pending Benami Transactions (Prohibition) Amendment Act, 2016 that enabled confiscation of Benami property and prosecution of Benamidar and the beneficial owner. As part of this, 24 dedicated Benami Prohibition Units (BPUs) have been set up for swift action on Benami properties.

The Black Money (Undisclosed Foreign Income and Assets) and Imposition of Tax Act, 2015 also brought in by the Modi government permits penalty up to '90 per cent of the value of an undisclosed asset in addition to tax at 30 per cent' even rigorous imprisonment. The Fugitive Economic Offenders Act was enacted in 2018 by the Modi government that empowered the investigating and law enforcement agencies to catch absconding economic offenders and confiscate their assets. The Fugitive Economic Offenders (Procedure for Conducting Search and Seizure), Rules, 2018 ensure faster attachment and confiscation of assets.

Electoral confidence

The BJP's relentless efforts to combat corruption have resonated well with the electorate and has shaped public perception in a positive way influencing the political dynamics. The party's proactive stance against corruption has positioned it as a credible force for change, earning the trust and support of voters disillusioned with the status quo. This government has done what several previous governments failed to do. The perception of this government as one committed to transparency and accountability has bolstered its electoral prospects, particularly among segments of the population disillusioned with the rampant corruption that plagued previous administrations.

As India prepares for the 2024 elections, the BJP's track record in combating corruption is poised to be a defining factor in shaping its electoral fortunes. The party's unwavering commitment to integrity and accountability has solidified its image as a responsible steward of public resources and a champion of good governance. The electorate's recognition of the BJP's anti-corruption efforts is likely to translate into electoral support, providing the party with a significant advantage in the upcoming elections.

Through a combination of policy initiatives, institutional reforms, and enforcement measures, the party has demonstrated its unwavering commitment to rooting out this ill from the system and restoring public trust in governance. As India enters a new electoral cycle, the BJP's anti-corruption agenda stands as a testament to its vision of a transparent and accountable government, setting the stage for a transformative journey towards a corruption-free India.

Vedika Jain is a legal researcher with www.thewomansurvivor.com – an initiative of DraftCraft International to protect and empower women by bringing on one platform the latest on rights and issues, strategic case studies, state initiatives and informed legal opinions.

A question that nags national conscience

The curious case of Bengaluru CEO Suchana Seth killing her kid son brings to spotlight what has been known as Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy (MSBP), but was it really so? **Shoma A. Chatterji** dissects this and other such cases that have hit headlines.



Munchausen Syndrome By Proxy is a lesser-known issue of psychological health where the child is the victim of his/her mother's insane mental state who otherwise appears and behaves 'normally.'

Is motherhood overrated over the years? Or, is the case of Suchana Seth one of the rarest exceptions that has put a more or less black blot on the image of motherhood as we have been conditioned to learn, think, feel, emotionally, morally and even physically? Or, is she a chronic patient of Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy (MSBP)?

What exactly is MSBP? Munchausen's Syndrome is named after Baron Von Munchausen (1720-1791) by Asher in 1951. People with Münchausen Syndrome have an uncontrolled need to assume the sick role by exaggerating complaints, falsify tests and/or inflict illnesses on themselves directly. In Münchausen Syndrome by Proxy perpetrators fulfill their need for positive attention by hurting their own child, thereby imposing the sick role onto their child, by proxy. In 1977, Roy Meadow, then professor of pediatrics at the University of Leeds, England, discovered the extraordinary behaviour of two mothers and labelled this Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy. Meadow said that one of the two mothers had poisoned her toddler with excessive quantities of salt while the other had introduced her own blood into her baby's urine sample.

MSBP is a lesser-known, lesser-written-about and lesser discussed issue of psychological health where the child is the victim of his/her mother's insane mental state who otherwise appears and behaves 'normally.' Mark Gado in his serialised articles *Mothers who Kill* in Crime Library describes in detail some of the most notorious mothers in the history of crime.

Among them are Susan Smith, Andrea Yates, Sally Clark, Angela Cannings, Maxine Robinson and the most notorious of them all - Marybeth Tinning. It took 14 years and nine tiny corpses to finally take action against Tinning in 2011. Tinning was charged with the murder of only one child, Tami Lynne. By that time, she was already 68 but was due for parole two years later.

But all these are Westernised theories that fit into stories about Western mothers. How can this be true in India renowned for our faith and worship of Durga, the Mother Goddess and her fiery avatar, the Goddess Kali who saved the entire clan of Gods in heaven by killing the Asuras across the universe? In Christianity, we worship Mother Mary whose immaculate

conception brought Jesus Christ on earth.

Within this scenario, why did Suchana Seth, a data scientist for 12 years, an apparent fellow at Harvard University, a woman who made it to the 100 Brilliant Women in AI Ethics list, end up killing her own son? She was no ordinary mother. Nor was she an ordinary woman. She was an empowered woman who was financially independent, married to a power equal and more or less settled in life complete with that final flag of triumph – motherhood?

The technical name of killing one's own offspring is called "filicide" which applies to fathers too which is more 'open' and does not raise as much disgust and mass revulsion like a mother killing her own child for whatever reason. But Suchana Seth cannot be labelled as suffering from Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy because she did not need to draw more attention to herself at the cost of doing away with her own child.

Dr. Prabha Chandra, Senior Professor of Psychiatry and Dean, NIMHANS, Bengaluru, states, "a rising number in filicides related to divorce, severe parental conflict, and custody disputes. Some experts in the field also use the term 'Revenge Filicide', which is related to severe relationship problems with a partner or spouse. Here, the child is killed as revenge against the spouse's behaviour, infidelity, divorce, and especially custody and visitation disputes. Clearly, a mother who kills her child must be held accountable for the action. However, it is important to also understand the mental state of the mother prior to the incident, any earlier history of mental illness, criminal behaviour, child maltreatment or violence".

So, perhaps, while exploring the reasons for this terrible tragedy, Suchana Seth was going through a bad divorce and perhaps, considering that the father had been given visiting rights, she reportedly denied this to him and also, when he insisted through legal means, she failed to turn up at the appointed place with the son. Visitation disputes are quite 'normal' in these abnormal situations, but killing the child just to deprive the husband from having access to his son even temporarily, is just unbelievably cold-blooded and brutally cruel.

Studies have stated that mothers have reported powerlessness, helplessness and social isolation prior to the offence. But Suchana Seth does not fit the bill of being powerless, helpless or being socially isolated. The reported marks on her wrists have been interpreted as her attempt to commit suicide after the crime. But this has not been proved yet. Besides, if this be true, this is no proof of her innocence.

In his Parental Investment Theory, Gad Saad suggests that the very mechanism that predicts that women should be the ones to provide greater investment to their children can often 'misfire' by psychiatrically damaged women who create conditions to draw the attention of the world to how much of motherly care they shower on their children. The presence of MSBP is based on deception and therefore, is elusive, potentially lethal and often misunderstood for child abuse, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) and/or medical neglect.

Suchana Seth is no exception though hers is a rare case. The 2012 murder of Sheena Bora by her own mother, the high-profile and glamorous beauty Indrani Mukherjea mainly due to property reasons and for the young lady having fallen in love with her then-current husband Peter Mukherjea's son from a previous marriage was not liked at all by Indrani, Sheena's own mother.

Both Indrani and Suchana have two things in common. One, they continue to deny having killed their kids though it is quite clear that no one else could have done this misdeed though Indrani managed to achieve this with the help of her driver and one of her two ex-husbands discovered after more than three years.

And two, both Indrani and Suchana belong to the elite class of highly educated women who earn a handsome income and are financially independent. These two mothers are enough to disprove all theories of mothers killing their own children for reasons like disempowerment, helplessness, a disturbed childhood, poverty, domestic violence or anything of these. So, this is not exclusive to any particular socio-economic, religious or communal group. Neither of these two women is a patient of Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy. The question "Why" keeps hanging in the air, waiting for an answer.....



Shoma A. Chatterji is a freelance journalist, film scholar and author. She has authored 17 published titles and won the National Award for Best Writing on Cinema, twice. She won the UNFPA-Laadli Media Award, 2010 for 'commitment to addressing and analysing gender issues' among many awards.



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AIR MARSHAL MINOO M ENGINEER, PADMA BHUSHAN (1921-1997)

A much decorated war veteran

Air Marshal Minoo Merwan Engineer, PVSM, MVC, DFC was a former pilot in the Indian Air Force (IAF). He is among the most decorated officers in the Indian Air Force, with the second-highest civil decoration - the Padma Bhushan, two gallantry awards - the Maha Vir Chakra (MVC) and the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC), and the highest peace-time distinguished service award - the Param Vishisht Seva Medal (PVSM).

Engineer was born Aspy Merwan Irani on 1 December 1921 in Lahore, Punjab Province, British India to Meherwan Irani and Maneckbai. He was the sixth amongst eight siblings - two girls and six boys.

His brothers, Aspy, Jungoo and Ronnie, also joined the Indian Air Force, while another brother, Homi, joined the Indian Army.

Aspy, Minoo and Ronnie were recipients of the DFC, a unique feat where three brothers were decorated with gallantry awards. Minoo's interest in mechanics led his friends to rename him Engineer.

Engineer studied in Elphinstone College, Mumbai. He joined the Royal Indian Air Force (RIAF) in 1940, being commissioned on 1 August. During World War II, he served in Myanmar as a part of No. 3 Squadron, RIAF. "As Flight Commander, he led many successful attacks in support of the Army, most of the time bombing and strafing in difficult country within a few hundred yards of our own troops. At all times, he showed outstanding ability and skills in leading his flight". For this he was awarded the DFC for the Arakan, Myanmar operation.

On 30 November 1945, Engineer was promoted as Squadron Leader and appointed commanding officer of No. 8 Squadron RIAF. After the war, on 1 November 1946, he was appointed commanding officer of No. 4 Squadron RIAF. The squadron relocated to Miko, Japan as part of the occupation forces. Engineer led the squadron in the relocation and operations in Japan.

During Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) Operations 1947-48, as Wing Commander, he was drafted for Kashmir Operations for almost a year. Under Engineer's guidance, the enemy was hit hard on a number of occasions at Kishanganga Bridge, Skardu and Gilgit. During the capture of Gurais, the Air

Force extended very effective support to the land forces. For this operation, he was awarded the MVC, the second-highest war-time gallantry award.

After the war, in 1949, he was selected to attend the Royal Air Force (RAF) Staff College, Andover, UK. After completing the staff course, he returned to India and was appointed Senior Air Staff Officer (SASO) of the Training Command in Bangalore.



During the Indo-China War of 1962, he was specially selected and appointed Air Officer Commanding (AOC) of the No. 1 Operational Command based at Tezpur, Assam, where the Chinese threat was growing. Coping remarkably with all the air support requirements projected by the Army within the meager resources of men and material then available, he was awarded the Param Vishisht Seva Medal.

From 1964-69, Minoo was the Deputy Chief (equivalent to Vice Chief today). He oversaw the 1965 war, revamped the Deputy Chief of the Air Staff (DCAS) office introducing concepts of offensive and air defense arms. He was promoted to Air Marshal. At the time of Indo-Pakistani War of 1971, he was Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief of Western Air Command. His retaliatory air strikes on 3rd and 4th December 1971 took the air war deep into enemy territory and his leadership contributed greatly to Indian victory. For this, Engineer was awarded the Padma Bhushan.

Just a month short of retirement, he flew in the Republic Day fly-past in a MiG-21U. He retired in 1973. Below his jovial, exterior lurked a steely resolve. In 1990, Maharashtra government honoured him with 'Gaurav Puraskar.' On retirement, he plunged into different challenges such as CEO of an advertising agency which he ran in failing health till his death in 1997.



Contributed by Renu Prakash from the data bank of Late Brig. Suresh Chandra Sharma.

PILOO DARA REPORTER (1938-2023)

Impartiality in white coat!

Piloo Dara Reporter, nee PD, was a successful Indian international cricket umpire who officiated in 14 Test matches (1984 -1993) and 22 One Day Internationals (1984 -1994).

He earned the respect of players everywhere for his impartial umpiring. Very vocal, he remained composed even when facing notable cricketers such as Malcolm Marshall, Viv Richards, and Imran Khan.

Born in Bombay, he began working for MSEB. At first failing the exams after responding to an advertisement from the Bombay Cricket Association for umpires, he, eventually began officiating domestic local leagues and district matches, such as the Kanga League, in 1961, at the age of 22.

Finally, he was hired as an umpire for the Ranji Trophy in 1967-1968 at the age of 29. He participated frequently in Irani and Duleep Trophy matches in the ensuing years. Reporter also participated in thirteen first-class games, officiating two of them as a match referee.

It was only a question of time until the moment came in September 1984, when he officiated in his debut international ODI match at Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium in Delhi between Australia and India. He marked the end of his ODI tenure in February 1994, in a match between India and Sri Lanka at Rajkot. It should be noted that this event marked the first day-night match in Indian history.

Reporter's maiden Test was during England's India visit in 1984, in Delhi with another umpire Dara Dotiwalla as his partner. His last appearance was in February 1993 Mumbai Test between the same teams.

In November 1986, Reporter and another Indian umpire, V K Ramaswamy, accomplished a historic first by becoming the first two impartial neutral umpires in contemporary cricket history since 1912. This occurred in Lahore during the Pakistan vs. West Indies series, where they officiated to remove the stigma associated with biased umpiring, at the request of Pakistani Captain Imran Khan.

In the end, this resulted in the ICC designating a single impartial umpire for Test matches starting in 1992 and

formalising it two years later.

His exceptional abilities as the lone Indian umpire during the 1992 World Cup in Australia and New Zealand were appreciated when he stood in seven matches.

His distinct aggressive, quick, and unorthodox boundary signaling style made him incredibly popular, evoking laughter from players, commentators, and spectators. Cricket pundit Henry Blofeld called his distinct style, Milkshake.

He officiated games at a time when there was no third umpire, nor DRS rule applied. Just like a batsman on the crease, umpires such as Reporter were totally focused on their work.

In addition to being an excellent popular umpire, he was a delightful person with a cheerful disposition and a charming demeanour. The Cricketers Foundation awarded him a cheque for ₹ 75,000 in January 2021 as a token of appreciation for his exceptional contributions to Indian cricket.

In 2004, Rupa & Company released his book, *An Umpire Remembers: The book of Piloo Reporter*, in which he chronicled his dramatic career as an umpire, which began at the club level in the early 1960s and culminated in a spectacular manner three decades later at the World Cup, the premier cricket event.

Reporter, who was eighty-four, passed away in Thane. His wife and two daughters survive him.

Aspiring umpires and cricket fans alike continue to find inspiration in his commitment to the game of cricket, both on an international and domestic level.



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NAVROZE CONTRACTOR (1944-2023)

A multi-faceted genius

Cinematographer, painter, documentary film maker, still photographer, jazz enthusiast, raconteur, ace motorcyclist Navroze Contractor was born in 1944 at Wai in Maharashtra and completed his schooling and college education in Ahmedabad.

A passion for fine arts saw him complete his Bachelor's degree in Painting from the Faculty of Fine Arts, M S University in Baroda. He later shifted to Pune to enrol in Pune's Film and Television Institute (FTII) where he earned a Diploma in cinematography and direction. He later honed his talent after a course in advanced cinematography with Lizio Kowacs in the US and also learnt video production in Sony Corporation in Japan.

His first assignments as a cinematographer were in the films directed by avant garde film makers whose forte was parallel cinema. After collaborating with famous director such as Mani Kaul in *Uski Roti*, Contractor made his debut as a full-fledged cinematographer with Mani in the much-acclaimed film *Duvidha*.

His worked with Nachiket and Jayoo Patwardhan in films like *22nd June, 1897, Devi Ahilya Bai and Limited Manuski Devi, Percy, with Pervez Merwanji, Hunshi Hunshilal (Sanji Shah) Pehla Adhyay (Vishnu Mathur) Frames (Chetan Shah) Devarakadu* directed by Pattabhirama Reddy, and a mainstream Hindi film *Lalach* helmed by a young Shankar Nag.

Contractor later switched over to documentaries along with his wife Deepa Dhanraj. He shot for several international documentaries like 'La Ballade de Pabuji (Georges Luneau), 'Dreams of the Dragon Children' (Pierre Hoffman) and 'Last House in Bombay (Lude Jennings). Among Indian documentaries Contractor's work was appreciated in films like 'All in the family' directed by Ketan Mehta, 'Famine 87' by Sanjiv Shah and 'The Open Frame' by Chetan Shah. He also turned director with a couple of documentaries 'Bharat Parikrama' that detailed his circumnavigation of the country on a motorcycle and 'Jhadu Katha' a film on sweepers.

Navroze Contractor was the only male member in a feminist film collective *Yugantar* which produced pioneering films like Malkarin Tambuku Chackila Oob Ali, *Idi Katha*

Maatramena and Sudesha. All these films for which Contractor cranked the camera were examples of offbeat cinema at its best.

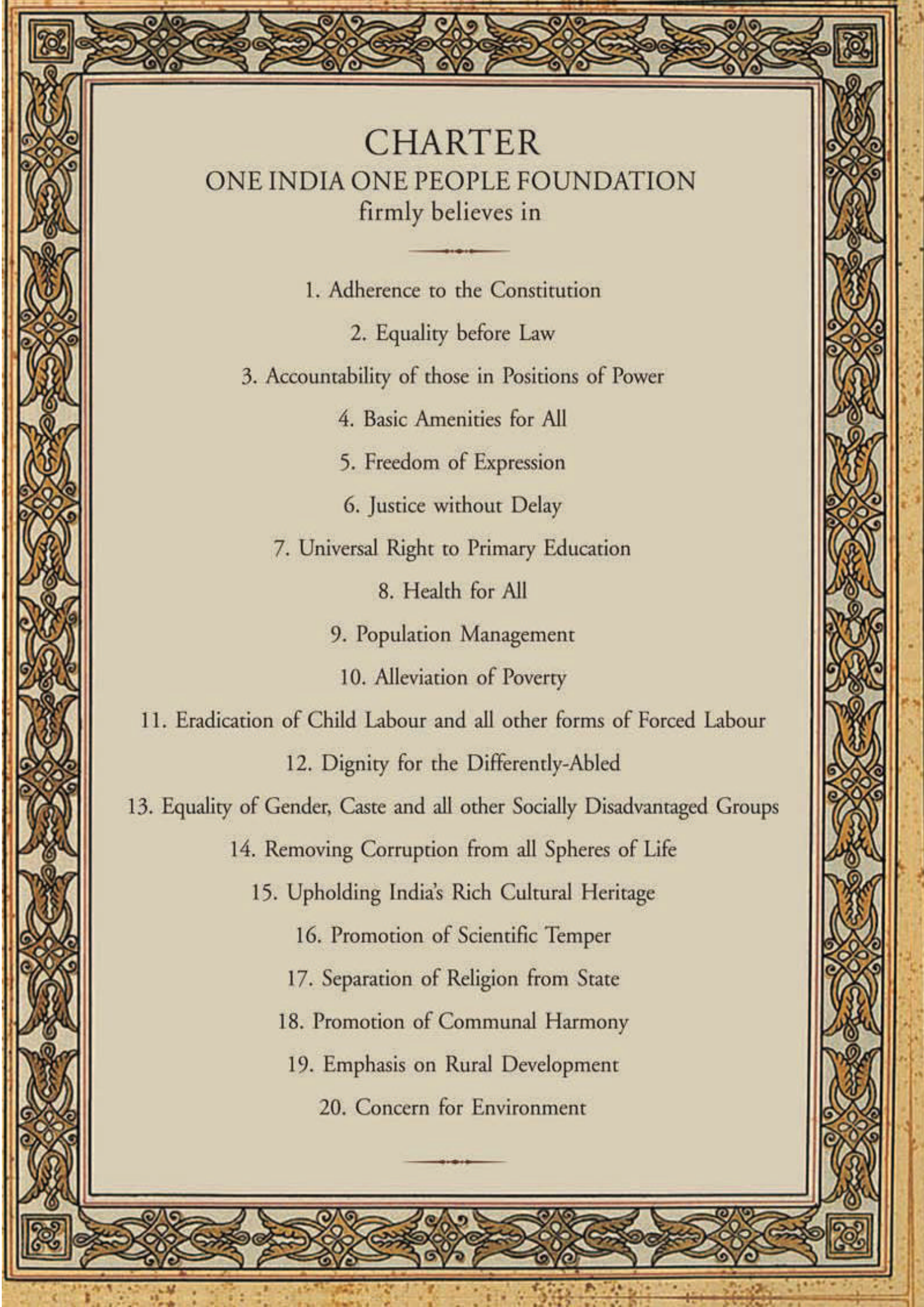
Another of Navroze Contractor's abiding passions was still photography. He put his training at the FTII Pune to good use and his photographs of jazz musicians are in the collection of the prestigious Smithsonian Museum in Washington in the US. His photographic skills were also amply evident in his photographs of artist Bhupen Khakkar which is part of the collection of the Tate Modern in London. He conducted a number of photography workshops across the country and overseas, and evinced interest in teaching the young. As jazz enthusiast in his early years he was a regular at clubs across the country where jazz performers were in action. Sports was another passion and though he was partial to cricket, Contractor was also fascinated by wrestling and was a frequent visitor to *akhadas* in his capacity as a photographer.

His achievements as a cinematographer and documentary film maker however did not come in the way of his vocation as a writer and he was a regular contributor to several journals including 'Car India' 'Bike India' 'Zigwheels Unplugged' and 'Fast Bikes'. He also penned a best seller titled 'The Dreams of the Dragon's Children' on his film making experience in China. He also had a lifelong affair with motorcycles and was a proud owner of several high-end bikes. Tragically, Contractor, known as a safe rider, lost his life in a motorcycle accident on the 18 June 2023 when a motorcycle coming from the wrong side crashed into his vehicle. He succumbed to his injuries in the hospital.

Navroze Contractor lived a multi-splendoured life and had a very wide circle of friends and acquaintances who benefited from his rich experience of life. His contribution to cinema as a cinematographer and as a director will certainly stand the test of time.



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1. Adherence to the Constitution
 2. Equality before Law
 3. Accountability of those in Positions of Power
 4. Basic Amenities for All
 5. Freedom of Expression
 6. Justice without Delay
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 16. Promotion of Scientific Temper
 17. Separation of Religion from State
 18. Promotion of Communal Harmony
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 20. Concern for Environment
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WHO AM I?



Am I a Hindu first or an Indian first?

Am I a Muslim first or an Indian first?

Am I a Christian first or an Indian first?

Am I a Buddhist first or an Indian first?

Am I a Brahmin first or an Indian first?

Am I a Dalit first or an Indian first?

Am I a South Indian first or an Indian first?

Am I a North Indian first or an Indian first?

Am I the President of India first or an Indian first?

Am I the Prime Minister of India first or an Indian first?

Am I the Commander-in-Chief first or an Indian first?

Am I a supporter of any 'ism' first or an Indian first?

Am I a white-collar/blue collar worker first or an Indian first?

Am I a youth/senior citizen first or an Indian first?



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Sadanand A. Shetty, Founder Editor
(October 9th, 1930 – February 23rd, 2007)

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