

# The Indian EXPRESS

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

## A question for Modi

Amit Shah's vicious campaign in Muzaffarnagar revives fears the BJP's PM candidate must address

BJP leader Amit Shah's talk of "izzat (honour)", "apmaan" (insult) and "badla (revenge)" in the run-up to the election in Muzaffarnagar in UP is offensive — Muzaffarnagar is yet to recover from the communal violence it was convulsed by last year, there is a precarious truce between communities. Shah's rhetoric is also dispiriting. It indicates that, on the ground, the BJP campaign is not staying with the themes it projects in Delhi: its identification of sliding economic growth, price rise and corruption as the problems and its broadcasting of Narendra Modi, his leadership and the "Gujarat model" as solution. While even that message could be judged as problematic for its obsessive focus on the leader's persona, it did seem to play down divisive issues. The gap that has been revealed now between Delhi and Muzaffarnagar cannot be ignored or excused. As the party that is widely seen as the strongest challenger for power at the Centre, the BJP must take responsibility and visible corrective action. Or, face the charge that its campaign speaks in two voices, using a moderate veneer to cover up a polarising politics.

There are several reasons why what Amit Shah says and does in Muzaffarnagar cannot be dismissed as a footsoldier's departure from script. Shah, a former minister of state for home in Modi's cabinet, currently out on bail on charges of extortion and conspiracy in connection with fake

encounter cases, is a high-profile and controversial figure. On election-eve, this key Modi lieutenant was entrusted with the UP campaign, and parachuted in from Gujarat. Since then, he has worked to set the tenor of the BJP's mobilisation in a state Modi has chosen to contest from as well. If Modi's candidature from Varanasi acknowledged UP's outsized grip on the national imagination, it also follows that what the BJP does in UP cannot now be played down as a matter of local context or compulsion.

Only recently, the BJP loudly protested against Congress chief Sonia Gandhi's meeting with the Shahi Imam of Delhi's Jama Masjid, and accused her of "communalising" the election through her reported soliciting of the support of Muslims in this manner. The BJP may well have had a point, even though the Shahi Imam's influence on the "Muslim vote" is vastly exaggerated. But the Amit Shah controversy now forces the party to take the call: does he want his 2014 bid for the Centre to be as discoloured by bitterness and fear as his campaign for Gujarat in the aftermath of the 2002 riots? As voting begins, Modi must decide whether he can afford to allow the Amit Shah message to linger on in the minds of potential allies and the people.

## Hope prevails

High Afghan poll turnout could mark beginning of an impressive democratic transition against great odds

DISPELLING widespread gloom around the world regarding Afghanistan's political future and the Taliban's efforts to disrupt the elections, Afghans turned out in large numbers at the polling booths on Saturday. According to preliminary estimates, nearly 7 million of the 12 million eligible voters, or close to 60 per cent of the electorate, cast their ballots to elect a new president to replace Hamid Karzai, who has steered the nation after the US forces ousted the Taliban at the end of 2001. The previous presidential election in 2009, marred by allegations of fraud, saw barely a third of the electorate turn out to vote. The enthusiastic turnout this time is a befitting political answer to the Taliban, which mounted attacks that killed scores of people through Saturday.

If none of the eight presidential candidates gets 50 per cent of the votes cast, there will be a run-off between the top two candidates on May 28. Opinion polls showed that the main contenders are Abdullah Abdullah, a runner-up in the last election, and Ashraf Ghani. Running a distant third is Zalmai Rassoul who is said to have the outgoing president's backing. All three have sought to bridge the

deep divide in Afghanistan between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns by choosing vice-presidential candidates who expanded their ethnic appeal.

The next president's political legitimacy, however, will not resolve Afghanistan's multiple problems. The Taliban continues to enjoy sanctuaries across the border in Pakistan. The armed forces of Afghanistan have demonstrated their growing capabilities by securing the nation against violence but remain weak and vulnerable to future destabilisation from the Pakistan army. The nation's economy is in bad shape as large volumes of foreign aid that flowed in since 2002 dry up. All the presidential candidates have agreed to ratify the security pact with the US that will allow the presence of a few thousand American troops after 2014. Since 2002, India has invested considerable political and economic resources in support of the fledgling democracy in Afghanistan. The next government in Delhi will have to demonstrate much stronger strategic commitment to the unity, stability and security of Afghanistan amid the continuing threats from Pakistan and declining Western support to Kabul.

## Stela record

The world's oldest weather report reveals how climatic changes turn the tide of history

BEFORE the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, there was the Tempest Stela, a 3,500-year-old block of calcite inscribed with messages of disaster. The world's oldest weather report was found in the ancient Egyptian city of Thebes, and it gives the IPCC some stiff competition in doomsaying. If the latest IPCC report predicts the seas rising, cities flooding and wildfires spreading across North America, the Tempest Stela speaks of the "sky being in storm without cessation, louder than the cries of the masses". The weather patterns described in the inscription are said to have been caused by the Thera catastrophe, a volcanic eruption that changed the course of the ancient world.

The Tempest Stela goes back to the time of the pharaoh Ahmose. It helps understand how environmental changes shaped the fortunes of empires. Weakened by the cataclysmic ef-

fects of the Thera eruption, the Canaanite kingdom of Egypt fell to the invading Ahmose, and the Babylonians to the Hittites. Through the centuries, the weather has turned the tide of human history — the Medieval Warm Period was a period of stability and prosperity for Europe, and the devastating Black Death that came afterwards has been attributed to climatic changes. In 1816, a Europe still recovering from the Napoleonic wars experienced the "year without a summer", extreme weather conditions that were later connected to a volcanic eruption in Indonesia. With thousands dying from hunger and cold, England would witness a period of agricultural riots and social unrest.

In the summers of the past lie the clues to the future, and the current period of global warming is likely to change more than just physical conditions. When the Tempest Stela of our times is written, it may explain some of these changes.

# A crowded stage

State level actors will not be content to simply sign up to a Modi show

LOUISE TILLIN



dated and then inspired Central programmes.

Chhattisgarh's Mitran programme, introduced under Ajit Jogi's Congress government, inspired the female community health activist or "ASHA" component of the National Rural Health Mission. Andhra Pradesh's Aarogyasri health insurance scheme, introduced under the Congress chief minister, Y.S.R. Reddy, was a forerunner of the national health insurance scheme.

In the 1990s, the Central government pushed states to take more responsibility for the public distribution system — a major subsidy programme — by introducing targeting for BPL populations. As the Central government partially withdrew, states were faced with a

dually competing claims on this agenda at the state level, from non-Congress governments. The idea that there are clear national divisions along party lines on approaches to welfare and development becomes quite hard to maintain.

In such a multi-level system, the lines of electoral accountability can be opaque. How do voters make sense of this situation? Which level of government or elected representative should they punish or reward for better or worse service delivery? We have become accustomed, in recent years, to thinking of parliamentary election results as voters passing a verdict on state governments. But studies of voting behaviour in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections suggested that the Congress and its allies at the national level were able to garner

**Both the BJP and the Congress face problems of attribution. How far should Modi receive the credit for a 'Gujarat model' when growth rates rose to unprecedented levels under the UPA's watch? To what extent should the Congress receive the credit for social welfare programmes, when opposition state governments have turned around the implementation of Central programmes for the better?**

dilemma. They could enforce politically difficult decisions to exclude current beneficiaries from access to subsidies, or they could continue to subsidise access for a larger population than those officially recognised as BPL by the Central government. Many states chose the latter path, and states with flourishing PDS models today, such as Tamil Nadu (where competing political parties have supported food security measures over time) and BJP-ruled Chhattisgarh, have moved towards quasi-universal access, along with efficiency reforms that have both plugged leakages and ensured that vulnerable populations have access to subsidised foodgrains. Thus, when the Congress highlights its new legislation on the right to food — the Food Security Act — it faces gen-

some electoral benefit from major welfare programmes such as the MGNREGA. Data from the National Election Studies conducted by Lokniti, CSDS, analysed by Pradeep Chhibber, showed that those who voted for the Congress and its allies across states were more likely to say that the Central government mattered in their voting decision than those who voted for the NDA. This suggested, as James Manor argued in a separate study, that the Congress and its allies were able to derive some mileage from their national anti-poverty programmes. However, they still shared the credit with state governments.

Going into the 2014 elections, the Congress seems to be struggling to take credit for its innovative investments in welfare policies under

## Northeast to the centre

The region has emerged as an important battleground in this election



THONGKHOLA HAOKIP

WITH just 25 Lok Sabha seats, India's Northeast has been a largely neglected region in electoral terms. However, in the era of coalition governments, because of the expectation of a fractured verdict in 2014, it has increasingly received political attention. Traditionally, electoral battles in the region have been fought between the Congress and various state parties. Parliamentary seats are usually represented by the ruling party in the states.

In the run-up to the 16th Lok Sabha elections, the importance being assigned by the two main national parties, the Congress and the BJP, to the Northeast is underscored by the schedules of their star campaigners — Rahul Gandhi and Narendra Modi. The Trinamool Congress chief, Mamata Banerjee, has also followed suit and campaigned extensively in the region.

BJP prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi's campaign in different parts of the Northeast has allegedly created a "Modi wave", as is perceived in other parts of the country as well. But the purported wave may be largely limited to the dissatisfied middle class and business groups of the region, who are expected to gain from Modi's economics, which is apparently focused on employment generation, and the creation of world-class infrastructure in the IT, power and

manufacturing sectors. For students and unemployed youths in the region, who are desperate for job opportunities, Modi has struck the right chord. His promise to create BPO jobs in the Northeast and eventually make the region an IT hub on par with Bangalore and Hyderabad is appealing. Modi's vision to harness the potential of the herbal, horticulture and agro-processing industries has also appealed to the business classes in the region. But the pro-Modi sentiment is also a function of the anti-incumbency prevailing in many states.

**On the removal of AFSPA, national parties have remained silent, even though the issue is important in the Northeast.**

The Congress, on the other hand, has been pushed to the lowest popularity level in its history because of the corruption scandals that engulfed the UPA government's decade-long rule at the Centre. Congress vice president Rahul Gandhi, who has maintained a distance from the day-to-day affairs of the UPA government, has enjoyed great popularity and appeals to the youth of the region. Yet, despite being the Congress's star campaigner, Gandhi's charm has diminished in the run-up to the elections. He is increasingly identified with the debacles of the Congress-led UPA government.

Nevertheless, for certain sections of people, particularly the underprivileged, Gandhi's "feel-good economics" is still attractive. The UPA is credited with having started as many as 80 Centrally-sponsored schemes. These schemes benefit the disadvantaged masses, primarily settled in rural areas. And this is expected to reflect in their voting behaviour.

Apart from the appeal of Modi and Gandhi, there are certain regional factors, which will determine the voter choices, and should be taken into account. Dur-

ing the last two decades, the nexus between politicians and insurgent groups, and their influence over the outcome of the polls, has played an important role during elections in certain states of the region. Powerful insurgent groups in Manipur, Nagaland and some adjoining districts try to interfere in the election process through their links with political parties and candidates, even though the state governments have asked groups that are currently negotiating for peace not to get involved with the elections. Black money, clan/tribe preferences and the use of muscle power are also important factors during elections.

But on the crucial issue of the removal of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, the national parties have remained silent, even though this contentious issue is very important in the Northeast. This may be why the BJP might not sweep the entire region even if it manages to make inroads.

Although there is a sizeable number of Muslims in Assam and Manipur, they are not a homogeneous group. By and large, they are inclined to vote for the Congress or All India United Democratic Front. This time, some Muslims are expected to break from tradition and vote for the AAP, AGP or even the BJP.

This troubled periphery of India, which has hardly played any role in the electoral calculations of the major national parties in the past 60 years, has become one of the battlegrounds for election 2014. This development is one giant step towards the integration of this alienated region with the rest of the country. Hopefully, this will prompt a change in the mindset of people who treat every shade of "otherness" with contempt. This election could bring the Northeast and the rest of the country psychologically closer.

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### LETTER OF THE WEEK AWARD

To encourage quality reader intervention *The Indian Express* offers the Letter of the Week Award. The letter adjudged the best for the week is published every Saturday. Letters may be e-mailed to [editpage@expressindia.com](mailto:editpage@expressindia.com) or sent to The Indian Express, 9&10, Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, New Delhi - 110002. Letter writers should mention their postal address and phone number.

The winner receives books worth Rs 1,000.

### Letters to the EDITOR

#### So last season

■ THE BJP has no manifesto yet ("BJP no-show", IE, April 5). It intends to make do with a chargesheet for the time being. It seems that its PM candidate does not believe in making promises either before or after the polls. The Congress, being old and traditional, seems to have issued one from its archives. The Left has the least problem presenting a manifesto, as this has not changed for half a century and more. Luckily, both the Senas have spared the nation from their weighty thoughts, busy as they are with each other. The Dravidian scenario is almost the same. Though the AIADMK came out with a manifesto, it is more busy working out the number of the combination to the southern lock. The electorate may well go into election 2014 without a voting guide. In this age of apps, manifestos are old hat.

—R.Narayanan  
Ghaziabad

#### Wave theory

■ THIS refers to 'More than Modi' by Pratap Bhanu Mehta (IE, April 4). Mehta has advanced cogent reasons for the evolution of the BJP into the strongest contender for power. There is no gainsaying the fact that Narendra Modi might have ruffled feathers among senior leaders such as Jaswant Singh. But he has been quite careful in not antagonising regional leaders like Shivraj Singh Chouhan, Vaundhara Raju, Raman Singh and Manohar Parrikar. Apart from these influential chief ministers, regional leaders who have clout are also being nurtured. This policy appears to have worked to the advantage of Modi and the BJP. In comparison, the UPA dispensation, which is fighting a monstrous anti-incumbency wave, seems to rely on hollow promises and slogans.

—Chandramohan V.  
Mumbai

#### Missing the point

■ THE campaign for the Lok Sabha elections has been marred by a number of hate speeches. Sadly, the offenders, instead of showing any sign of remorse, seem to revel in their actions. This should be stopped immediately. This cannot be the democracy we boast of. One wonders why the various political parties can't have public discussions and debates over the real issues, like poor industrial growth, low power production, poor health infrastructure, shabby educational infrastructure, uncontrollable inflation and rampant corruption.

—S.K.Gupta  
Panchkula

#### Not so fast

■ THIS refers to 'What Jay-alalithaa wants', by Sushila Ravindranath (IE, April 4). Tamil Nadu Chief Minister J. Jay-alalithaa seems to harbour prime ministerial ambitions and her syncretic supporters have bolstered this impression. However, the leader and her followers have overlooked one simple fact. The party can, at the most, win 40 out of 40 seats in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry (which in itself is an unrealistic proposition). This is less than 10 per cent of the total number of seats in Parliament. Her reluctance to play second fiddle also rules out a lot of potential allies.

—C.V.Aravind  
Bangalore

## Passing the parcel

with dust swept in from the Sahara, the cloud was blamed, initially, on overseas factors... It will not be an easy process, for the causes of air pollution are complex and tricky to control. At a local level, we need to encourage councils to create clean-air zones and to find ways to discourage cars and trucks from speeding through our streets and roads. In addition, ways must be found to tackle the growing use of diesel engines which are particularly intense producers of particulates. Most of all, however, we need to realise that the air we breathe needs as much protection as our seas and our land.

From a leader in 'The Guardian', London



### WORDLY WISE

A vote is like a rifle: its usefulness depends upon the character of the user.

Theodore Roosevelt