

THE NEEDLE'S EYE

One week before Phase 1, the voter still holds the cards

# #MainBhiHindustani



Chaitanya Kalbag

Loyalty to the Nation all the time, loyalty to the Government when it deserves it.

— Mark Twain

After five years of 'achhe din', you would think we'd be gazing with happy expectation at the bright lights of even better days, looking forward to a future of growth that fits the Olympic motto of Citius, Altius, Fortius — faster, higher, stronger.

Instead, we are beset by dark talk, full of foreboding. Our leaders look back in anger. Our patriotism is easily suspect. We eye our fellow citizens warily, hoping to identify quislings. We frequently invoke the foe on our western flank, making it an undeserved interloper in our national election, and using it as a dog-whistle for our communal biases.

We should exult at living in the world's largest and most spectacular democracy. Instead, we are presented with scary vistas of what lies ahead if the Opposition were to win. Every campaign speech is angry, and fulminates on the lines of Donald Trump's 'American carnage' inaugural address two years ago.

This is the first election in which the 21st-century Indian will vote — the Election Commission estimates there are 15 million voters in the 18-19 age group (oddly for a nation as young as we are,

this is fewer than the 23 million 18-19 year olds in 2014). Generation Z is smart and "tech-savvy, pragmatic, open-minded, individualistic but also socially responsible", as Merriam-Webster puts it. We do not know how our Gen Z will react to the rhetoric flying about.

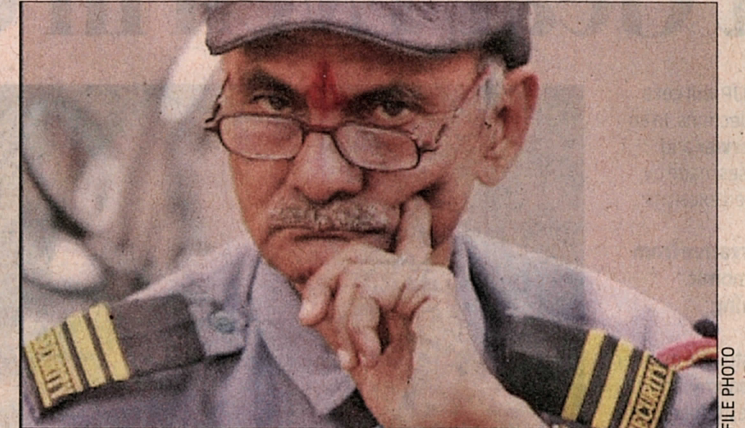
This much is starkly clear: the narrative has changed dramatically. The week before Pulwama, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was circling his wagons. After Balakot, he is the confident chowkidar who gave Pakistan a bloody nose on its own turf. If you question the air-strike, you are anti-armed forces, and therefore anti-India, and therefore pro-Pakistan. Conversely, if you are fearful of the enemy and weary of terrorism, you are likely to be tugged by the national security magnet.

## 18 Not Out

"Nobody in this country can doubt Narendra Modi's patriotism," Modi told a television interviewer last week, deploring the Opposition's 'personalised attacks' on him and its 'dirty politics'. He is right. Nor does he have to resort to hyper-nationalism to burnish his credentials as the unchallenged and tireless CEO of the nation. He does not need to prove his prowess as a politician, either.

Modi is the only Indian to boast of 18 unbroken years at the head of governments, both at the state and central levels. In his longevity in power, he has already surpassed Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi.

Like Indira Gandhi, Modi demands complete and total loyalty, but he has surpassed her here, too. In this self-promoting age of social media saturation, huzzahs travel at warp speed. Bhakts, and even nastiks, have raced to embrace #MainBhiChowkidar and change their Twitter handles. So, what does it mean to live in a nation of chowkidars?



Hmm, now to choose

A chowkidar, a.k.a. a 'security guard without weapon' under the labour law in Haryana, where I live, is entitled to a minimum daily wage of ₹356.59. That works out to a monthly income of ₹10,694.70, far below the lowest income-tax slab. If he is from an upper caste, he can try and opt out of this thankless avocation and apply for the 10% reservation in government jobs that the Modi administration rammed through not long before the elections.

Most chowkidars are barely literate, and have left their families behind in their villages, trying to escape hard-scrabble farming lives. If they chose to stay back, they would likely be worse off with the ₹6,000 a year assistance from the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN) scheme.

Or, if the impossible happens and Congress wins power, they might get a dole from NYAY (Nyuntam Aay Yojana) that just about matches the minimum wage. Not a dazzling future. If the chowkidar continues to work for a security company that provides him with minimal provident fund and health insurance benefits, he is most likely to be working 12-hour shifts, seven days a week.

A November 2017 report (bit.do/eNoKt) by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (Ficci) and PwC estimated there are 8.5

million chowkidars in India, rising to 11.5 million by 2020; the sector is one of the largest employers. The report says about 60% of chowkidars work in the unorganised sector, making them vulnerable to "unfriendly employment practices". It adds that "the sector continues to be perceived by the workforce as non-aspirational". That's shorthand for a terrible career.

## Promises to be Broken

Not to worry. The Congress manifesto says: "We recognise the need to create lakhs of low-skilled jobs in order to absorb young men and women who have completed only a few years in school." The party has promised a lot else, which the BJP says is non-implementable. Arun Jaitley has called NYAY 'chhal kapat' (skulduggery) and charged that the manifesto's national security agenda was drafted by Rahul Gandhi and his 'tukde-tukde' (nation-breaking) gang.

Manifestos are a bit of an ivory tower vestige of more civilised elections. The BJP is scornful of manifestos and released its 2014 document on the first day of polling. (This time the Election Commission has said manifestos must be published at least 48 hours before polling starts.) As for me, I intend to exercise my fearless franchise, because #MainBhiHindustani.

The week before Pulwama, the PM was circling his wagons. After Balakot, he is the confident chowkidar who gave Pakistan a bloody nose on its own turf