

Thank You For Being a Part of the Fan Family



Chaitanya Kalbag

The end of campaigning in Amethi in a cacophony of anger, derogation, and obloquy was briefly leavened by "Twitter joining Rajinikanth." The Superstar's followers piled up at the rate of 20,000 an hour. Not even Narendra Modi, one of the Thalaivar's first followers, could have matched that. Fantasy had trumped politics.

As if in affirmation, two days earlier poet and lyricist Gulzar was conferred the Dadasaheb Phalke Award. In close contention was our Election Commission, for giving us the greatest show on earth so regularly and unfailingly. The interminable, good-versus-evil potboiler of our 2014 elections is churning out sweat, toil, blood and tears. We have had a closet wife, a hidden sister, and a secret lover come out of the woodwork, not to speak of chest-thumping villains, family feuds, astral projections, song, dance, drugs, drunken louts and oaths like "*mittikisaugandh*" and "*maaki kasam*". Those pitiful few of us who pay our taxes – what better payback could we ask for? You've got to wonder which other mass mobilisation brings together so many relatives.

This year is the 50th anniversary of Jawaharlal Nehru's death and the 125th anniversary of his birth. When I sat in gridlocked traffic recently and watched Priyanka Gandhi Vadra zoom past in a four-SUV convoy, I wondered if being a Nehru-Gandhi conferred the right to power, and whether the Gandhis embodied the arrogant certainty that you can be genetically predisposed to enjoy lifelong pelf and privilege. Forty-six per cent of 65,000 people in a recent poll said they did not mind dynastic politics.

That was before Priyanka hit the Amethi-Rae Bareilly campaign trail – she even walked a half-kilometre barefoot when her footwear broke – and began hurling sarcasm and invective at Narendra Modi. I guess that justifies the Lutyens bungalow, Z-class security, private aircraft, and other privileges she enjoys despite the fact that she does not hold any elected or constitutional post. Like any good Bollywood wife, she felt it necessary to defend her husband, whose name figures at airports as someone who is exempt from security checks. A modern-day Scheherazade, Priyanka was spinning spell-binding fables about the three thousand six hundred and forty-six nights of the Congress Valhalla.

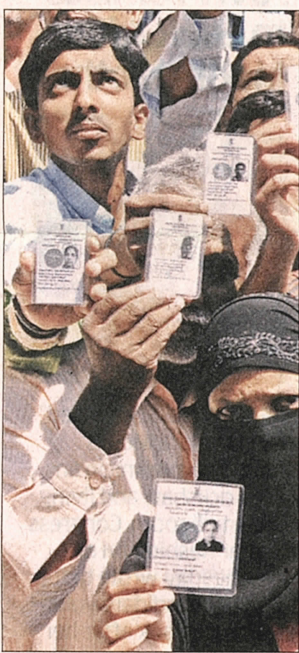
The hubris was suffocating, and perhaps this was why, as the temperature rose, Congress apparatchiks of all stripes exuded the odour of missed opportunities and regretful inflexion points. The young Indians that Congress boasted of arming with mobile telephones were using them to talk, listen and plot the only way they knew to rebel – by voting for change. That is how it should be, for it is clear that whoever gains the golden crown in eight days will have to make sure this surge is turned into a social and economic revolution, not blood on the streets.

The Gandhis have mostly had fame thrust on them: Indira in 1966, Rajiv in 1984 – and Sonia. On December 29, 1997, she said she would "accede" to the pleas of genuflecting Congressmen and campaign for the party without herself standing for election against the BJP's dominant personality, Atal Behari Vajpayee. In eerie imitation of her mother-in-law, as I wrote then, the "only pebble on the beach" took on the sari draped over the head, the dark glasses, the high-pitched oratory. And she has never looked back – even taking a leaf out of Indira's book to outwit Sharad Pawar's

rebellion. She had 16 years to study the first "Mrs G". Her son's apprenticeship has been shorter and less thorough, if you look at the way he has taken on Modi.

Despite the hoopla about Priyanka, television has been merciless in its search for view-ability. I requested the Centre for Media Studies to monitor five major Hindi and English news channels from March 1 to April 30. CMS found that in prime time (8 to 10 pm) Modi drew 33.21% of total coverage of political leaders. Arvind Kejriwal got 10.31%. The three Gandhis plus Manmohan Singh added up to just 10.38%.

If all this is making you morose about the men and women whose names will go up in lights on May 16, spare a thought for Arjun Ram Meghwal. He is 60 years old and fighting for a second term in Parliament from Bikaner. He won 43 per cent of the



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vote in Bikaner in 2009. The Bharatiya Janata Party MP, who radiates the optimism of somebody on a winning streak, was the best performer in the 15th Lok Sabha. He had a 99% attendance (shocker!), asked 749 questions and 466 supplementaries, introduced 20 private members' bills, and took part in 430 debates during the past five years. He is certain that the character of Parliament is improving despite the general gloom about the decline of decorum, the disruption and shouting and rowdiness, and the appalling under-performance of our elected representatives.

Meghwal says the number of MPs with criminal records is likely to decline this time. He is probably being too starry-eyed. Despite the Supreme Court ruling on convicted MPs being thrown out of Parliament, the tide is yet to turn. The number of MPs against whom criminal cases were pending rose to 162 in 2009 from 128 in 2004, and the Association for Democratic Reforms says 17%, or 1,279 of 7,562 candidates it checked (with eight of nine rounds of polling completed) had criminal cases pending against them. The winners will be called "lawmakers."

The Author is Former Reuters Asia Editor