

Indian Election: Rising Curve for BJP?

The BJP seems to have introduced new dynamics in Indian politics, but will that be of any help in the upcoming elections? Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz analyses



Thinking leader: Will Sonia be at the top?

AFTER the BJP-led coalition government in India fell in March last it was at once accorded a kind of martyrdom and there was a spate of sympathy for its embattled leader, Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee. The public perception was that he had been wronged by being pulled down so unceremoniously. Obviously the BJP wanted an early poll so that it could ride the sympathy wave so spontaneously created.

On the other hand, the opposition Congress which could sense the prevailing mood after

its failure, to provide an alternative government favoured delay so that the unsavoury chapter of its politics was forgotten by the electorate. The Election Commission, for its own reasons however, scheduled it rather late — in the months of September-October — thus affording BJP an opportunity to head a longest ever caretaker government. For the BJP it was a blessing in disguise which the party never anticipated earlier. But it is not only this blessing but also the party's political skill which has contributed

toward making the party a favourite of the electorate for the thirteenth Lok Sabha poll. notwithstanding its non-performing governance of thirteen months stained with vandalism of the members of the Sangh Parivar.

It is surprising that the BJP, a declining party after its State Assembly defeats late last year has re-emerged with confidence almost from its ashes. It has been able to burnish its image as the sole custodian of Indian pride — thanks to the outbreak of Kargil conflict which provided it a godsend chance to wash off its dark spots. Not only has its *Hindutva* been reinvented, but it has also been given a new gloss with jingoism aroused in the wake of Indians' war against Pakistani intruders in Kargil. Making use of information technology the BJP could project the Kargil conflict — truly a television war — to its full advantage. As a result, the BJP now seems poised to notch up its tally even higher this time.

The BJP has introduced new dynamics in India's politics with its full control over them. In less than two decades it has come to be the most powerful political force in the country. It has swept through the political space vacated by a century old Indian National Congress and smashed the attempts of any third force taking shape in the country.

Born in the early 1980s out of the remnants of disintegrated Janata Party of Late Mr Morarji Desai, the BJP came a cropper in 1984 election by winning just two seats in Lok Sabha, the lower house of Indian parliament. By adopting an aggressive *Hindutva* stance and throwing in its lot with the Ram Temple movement of VHP, Lal Krishna Advani, the party's redoubtable hawk put the outfit on the first track of India's politics.

In the next general election

in 1989 the BJP put up an impressive show by capturing 89 seats. Thereafter the trajectory of BJP's success has been one of uninterrupted ascendancy and it never looked back. In post *Rath-yatra* election in 1991, the party's tally rose further when the BJP captured 119 seats thus becoming the largest opposition group in the parliament. Belying the hopes of the secular optimists that with the scar of Babri Mosque demolition, the BJP will be down in the dumps, the party emerged as the single largest majority in Lok Sabha with over 60 seats in 1996 election and briefly occupied the citadel of power in Delhi.

In the 12th Lok Sabha election in 1996, the BJP's record of a rising curve remained intact and its tally went further up with 183 seats. It again cobbled up its government comprising 19 assorted parties and alliances with a tight grip over this heterogeneous body. This is no mean achievement for a Hindu Nationalist party in secular India. It is now about to throw a modern India of cultural pluralism back to medieval ethos of *Hindutva* and push the country into a fascist mould. But then it is to the credit of the BJP which has been able to increasingly carry the electorate along towards its dangerous goal.

By all indications BJP will keep up its records also in the next election. Even if the BJP will fall short of getting an absolute majority in a 545-member house it is virtually impossible, as the forecasts go, to stop its onward march. With the Congress neutralised in India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh, sending as many as 85 members to the Lok Sabha and its setback in Maharashtra where Congress faces a fresh rival in Sharad Pawar, such prospect for BJP has indeed brightened.

Moreover, the BJP's strategy in alliance making and favourable seat sharing is by

far the best among the major political formations. Although the BJP's vote base has all through been smaller than that of Congress, it is, with its adept handling of the allies, able to get disproportionately larger number of seats.

BJP has made full use of its extended incumbency. Taking advantage of myriad ambiguities of rules and conventions with regard to caretaker government of such a long duration, the party has taken a plethora of steps to reap electoral benefits.

Seizing on post-Kargil patriotic passions, it has introduced policies that suit only the permanent incumbent. Unlike any interim government it has introduced Agni II, talked of neutron bombs and drawn up nuclear doctrine for India ostensibly to win over Indian public hungering for national honour. Obviously, the BJP will be the sole beneficiary of all these during the 13th Lok Sabha poll.

In the meantime, the Congress, BJP's main contender, is in bad shape. In spite of the promises it showed in last year's State Assembly elections, it soon stumbled with the secular forces disintegrating. It is an irony that many of the hardcore secularists have today switched over to the BJP camp. The Congress itself has split in several places. Elsewhere it is victim of severe infightings. The central leadership is subjected to ineptitude. The minority votes, traditionally the Congress preserve, is divided.

The *India Today* and *Outlook* have already conducted opinion polls showing the BJP comfortably ahead of the Congress. In the electoral race lasting two weeks more it will be difficult for any other parties to overtake the BJP.

The whole world is eagerly watching how the contenders will be reaching the finish line in the world's largest democracy.

Fire Exchange Stops

Indo-Bangla border quiets after skirmish, writes P. Jayaram from New Delhi

INDIAN officials say the situation is quiet on the India-Bangladesh border in Tripura after the exchange of fire between the security forces of the two countries.

"We haven't received any report (of firing) since Tuesday afternoon," a Border Security Force (BSF) spokesman here said as the commandant of the paramilitary force and his Bangladesh Rifles counterpart prepared to hold a flag meeting to defuse the tension.

Officials pointed out that incidents of firing were not unusual along some sectors of the 4,000-km-long border. The latest exchange took place near Belonia in south Tripura, bordering Nowakhali district of Bangladesh. Additional BSF forces had been sent to the area

and prohibitory orders banning gathering of people promulgated.

Though incidents of this nature are not unusual, the intensity of firing this time surprised officials. India considered the situation serious enough for the External Affairs Ministry to call Bangladesh Acting High Commissioner Alimul Haque for a meeting where the need for a halt to the firing was stressed and a flag meeting between the two sides suggested.

Officials said the firing was a sequel to a squabble over a disputed island on the Mahari river, which separates the two countries. Farmers from both countries cultivate on the island, leading to disputes, and usually officers from the two

sides hold flag meetings to defuse the situation.

They noted that many sectors of the India-Bangladesh border were porous and smuggling was an occupation for settlers on either side. From India, food-grains, sugar, kerosene, diesel, cycle parts and medicines are smuggled, while some synthetic fabrics and electronic goods are smuggled into India.

The officials said the Belonia border was known for smuggling of small arms and ammunition into India. In view of the coming general elections and reports of intensified activity by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in Assam and other border states, there was stepped up patrolling of the area, they added.

—India Abroad News Service

National Heroes and a Culture of War

Ritu Menon writes against the culture of militarism

THE aftermath of war in our times has generally been an elusive peace. "Low-intensity conflict" is almost insidious now in much of the subcontinent and we have learnt to live with it, much as we live with the daily crime in our cities. This, too, is low-intensity, and persistent.

The last few weeks I have been seeing and reading the coverage of Kargil in our national press and television, with a growing feeling of alarm and alienation. The high-pitched hosannas to our "brave boys" who "gave up their today so that we may enjoy our tomorrow", the thousands of hopefuls waiting to enlist the glorification of guns, arms, tanks and, even, the deadly accuracy of the infamous Bofors; the half-page ads extolling "us", decrying "them", the emotive coverage of heroes' funerals, attended by lakhs of ordinary citizens; page after page of battle photographs and lists of those who have contributed money or raised funds for the war effort; the Kargil Consensus shared by artists, dancers, writers, sportsmen, film stars. Even school children.

What are we glorifying? Have we forgotten what one chronicler has called "the private life of war"? That it doesn't take long for brutality to get internalised and hideous violence to take place. (If this were not the case, there would be no such thing as war crimes.) That those millions of survivors who have lived through war are seldom able to understand or come to terms with the reasons for waging it. That war is one of those events that defies assimilation, by its very nature. Yes, our soldiers have "recaptured" strategic heights, turned back the intruders and fought with valour. But they have also killed and that is the logic of war: kill or be killed.

And yet here we are actively promoting a culture of militarism. For all those who believe that this is a necessary, temporary phenomenon, there is reason to pause. Militarism has a way of seeping into the very dalliance of our lives. No longer are we surprised by a military presence in our towns and cities — indeed, many of us go so far as to say "What we really need is the army" to ensure discipline, security, law and order. No longer are we dismayed by increasing levels of violence and the easy availability of firearms for use in peace-time against each other. Machine-gun, AK 47, revolver, pistol — all part of our urban landscape, all accessible. To each according to his means. And in our drawing rooms we watch reports from frozen heights, full of drama and spectacle. Truly, a theatre of war.

The cult of the warrior finds its nurture in a culture of war. In a climate of insecurity. In a paradox of "patriotism" which acknowledges only one kind of allegiance — unconditional assent, unreserved support. Anything else is, at best "demoralising", at worst, treasonous and anti-national. To talk of peace is to risk ridicule.

Right now the intoxicant is assault, attack, seize and vanquish.

But let us know how readily the prejudices of war-time can become the enemies of peace. Militarism against it. The totally uncalculated and unacceptable demand made on Dilip Kumar to return the Nishan-e-Imtiaz of Pakistan or leave India is part of this prejudice; as is Kapil Dev's equally unacceptable equation of sports with patriotism. The fact that the Cricket Board has heeded his call to cancel the game only goes to show how easily prejudice becomes a matter of national pride.

This is what a military mind-set does: it defends the ideology of war and rationalises the use of violence to curb dissent and quell demands for justice. It devalues individual freedom and blunts democratic principles. Militarisation extends the power of the state into civil society, feeds the military-industrial complex, and eventually, brutalises social relations.

The equation of national security with increasing militarisation has bedevilled every country in South Asia for the last 50 years. Military "preparedness" continues to be the watchword, despite the fact that four wars and two partitions

stantial increase in its current defence expenditure of Rs. 41,000 crores a year.

Two of the five countries in the region have had extended periods of military rule, one has had internecine war for over 15 years and all have suffered grievously as a result. This we know, and in a more sombre moment, recognise as a reality. We also know that the only enduring settlement we can hope for in the subcontinent is a politically negotiated one rather than a "decisive military victory".

But militarism does not allow for negotiated settlements because battle-lines have to be very clearly drawn. There is a real danger that these lines then get drawn in peacetime too, between all the "others" in our own countries. And these "others" can as easily be you or me. If we don't donate our blood for Kargil or raise funds for it, we have failed in our "patriotic duty" to those who "laid down their lives" for us.

Contrary to current euphoria but true to our experience in the subcontinent, the greater the level of militarisation, the more vulnerable is our citizenry. Women within and outside the women's movement, and peace groups everywhere, have for decades called for an end to violence of all kinds, and



later (1947-1971) we are no closer to either peace or greater security. Everyone has taken up arms — the extremists, the terrorists, the mujahideen, the freedom fighters, the Tigers, the liberationists the armed revolutionaries — and national governments. According to analysts, the Asian arms market is the second largest in the developing world, and accounted for 30 per cent of all arms transfer agreements in the period 1991-94. Late Mahbub-ul-Haq, author of the *World Human Development Report*, says that India and Pakistan spend around \$20 billion a year on defence and bought twice as many arms as Saudi Arabia from the global arms bazaar. Both countries have six times more soldiers than doctors, and spend thirty one million dollars a day contesting the Siachen glacier. Pakistan spends \$27 per person per year on defence, and only \$3 per person per year on welfare. India spends a paltry \$9 per person for welfare and Bangladesh, only \$2. Post-Kargil, India is seeking a sub-

especially an end to the use of violence to resolve conflict. Women have fought against the presence of military bases in their countries and against rest and recuperation facilities that make such an easy transition to sex tourism. They have learnt through painful and bitter experience that for women, the weapons of war are not very different from those of peace: violence and the abuse of superior power. And those who work among refugees across the battle lines, whether in Sri Lanka or Kosovo or Bosnia or Montenegro or anywhere else have firsthand knowledge of how deep the wounds of war can be.

It is sad that at the close of a century that has seen so many disastrous wars we still seek military solutions to political problems, whether in Kosovo or Kargil. Let us try at least, not to make of them such a cause celebre.

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What is the Point of Criticism?

by Ayaz Amir

IN Pakistan we might not have arrived anywhere else but we certainly have reached the end of criticism. Just as talking is useless and listening is of no use if it leads to nothing, least of all to any kind of change.

Pakistani rulers, or at least the crop we have had since the re-birth of democracy (some joke, this), are averse even to reading newspapers. Praise and sycophancy they consider their due, a merited tribute to their talent and genius. For criticism they have no patience.

Nor, much of the time, the required understanding. How then do you construct what in other climes, more salubrious than ours, is called a national discourse? There is no such animal in Pakistan.

Indeed over here the printed word is an anomaly. It feeds the waters of cynicism, angst and despair. It gives a powerful boost to the passion for breast-beating which is one of our foremost national characteristics. But the printed word has never stopped a government from committing a blunder or otherwise traversing the paths of folly. It has never stopped anyone in a position of authority from behaving in a wilful, corrupt or even self-destructive manner.

Consider the records in office of Pakistan's leading mon-

uments to democracy: Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif. They have bristled at criticism, considering it either opinionated or driven by selfish motives (which in many cases, alas, has been true). But they have never, not once, thought it expedient or sensible to mend their ways because of the power of the printed word.

The press is far from being perfect and it has more than its share of blackguards in its ranks. But generally, from General Zia's time onwards, the responsible press has successfully, and with some ability, pointed the finger at governmental blunders and transgressions. But to no effect. Only the quality of wilful behaviour has changed. In her first term Benazir Bhutto and Asif Zardari were amateurs in corruption. In her second term she and her husband became sophisticated and bold, stepping into places angels would have feared to tread.

Nawaz Sharif's first term was distinguished by the cooperatives' scam (its victims still holding on to their useless pieces of paper), the yellow cab scheme (which drove a nail into the banking sector) and the motorway. Pakistan's idea of what a white elephant should look like. In his second term the proclivity to go for grandiose schemes has become more daring.

As proof there is the 'Maira Ghar' scheme which required audacity to conceive. With land seized for free, the government, having become the biggest gabza group of all, and with astronomical costs put at an astronomical 650 rupees a square foot (a rate at which palaces of Italian marble could be built), it is hard not to see who stands to make a killing from this enterprise: the construction mafia. But will criticism or even well-meant counsel make a difference? Not the slightest.

In countries more fortunate than ours resoluteness and determination are usually applied to enterprises of some moment. In Pakistan resoluteness stands for persisting in folly even when every available sign suggests that it will lead to self-destruction.

Politicians of course are not the only ones to blame. Since the mid-eighties the English press, to the extent it could make its voice heard, has emphasized the disastrous consequences of Pakistan's Afghan policy. But without the slightest effect on the godfathers of this policy, the army and the ISI. We have reached a point where no one has any idea of how to deal with, or curb the messianic zeal of, the jihadi organisations whose proliferation and strength is a direct consequence of our ambition to become the chess-masters of

Afghanistan. Yet there is no attempt at re-examining the doctrinal foundations of an approach which poses a serious danger to Pakistan simply because it lacks the strength to sustain the external adventurism implicit in this thinking.

Or take Kargil. So much has been said and written about Pakistan's deep humiliation in this crisis. Elsewhere heads would have rolled, *hara-kiri* would have been committed. Not in Pakistan, where a complete absence of humility on the part of the prime minister and his team serves only to pour salt over open wounds. The sad truth is that in a milieu which lives on certainty, and where to ask questions is not part of the national culture, nurturing a spirit of scepticism is a useless undertaking.

In brief then, the press in Pakistan can neither influence policy nor affect the behaviour of individuals in authority. What is good at doing is at painting 'impressions'. Benazir's corruption, Zardari's flamboyant behaviour in financial matters, the cupidity of the Sharifs, their skill in turning public office to private advantage, the drugs-and-guns legacy of the Afghan war, the disaster of Kargil.

While these are powerful impressions, with a great deal of emotional content in them, they are of no use unless ex-

ploited by someone and used as levers of change. Ghulam Ishaq Khan and General Beg used the widespread perception of Benazir's corruption to oust her from power in 1990. Ishaq Khan exploited the perception of Nawaz Sharif's cluelessness in office by ousting him as prime minister in 1993. When Leghari dismissed Benazir in 1996 few tears were shed because of the widespread impression that by her actions she had brought about her own downfall.

Events have come full circle. Despite sinister attempts to control the press, the press has been successful once again in exposing the inadequacies of Sharif's second coming; the tonal ineptitude of his government and its lack of direction. Kargil has only served to fix this perception in stone.

The Sharif government is thus vulnerable but there is nothing around to take advantage of its weakness. The system of checks and balances enshrined in the Eighth Amendment lies in our constitutional junkyard. After Kargil the army is licking its wounds and is unsure of itself. If the lack of leadership is total, so is the lack of alternatives. In this situation revving up the engines of criticism is little better than hurling javelins into a void.

Courtesy: The Dawn of Pakistan

Thimpu's 'Net-men'

IT sector in Bhutan is on the road to development. Kunga T Dorji writes

As information technology steadily permeates into mostly uncomputerised areas and computer literacy gains importance in Bhutanese society, the demand for software, or programmes, is swelling in quantity, quality and variety.

Expectedly, a number of questions have come into focus in urban centres like Thimpu and Phuentsholing notably: Are there any software designers in Bhutan? If so, how good are they? Should organisations in Bhutan use ready-made programmes available in the market or custom-made ones? Which would be suited to specific local needs? Does designing of tailor-made software require imported labour?

A cursory glance through government and public sector offices indicates that, in contrast to earlier years, the organisations suffer no dearth of programmers.

These programmers, a majority of whom are equipped with a two-year diploma in information management systems from the Royal Institute of Management (RIM), are today the custodians of computerisation in their respective offices. Against the backdrop of the climbing demand for software some among them have successfully developed original software and stood out.

The Bhutan Development Finance Corporation used local hands to design an accounting and inventory package as did the Royal Insurance Corporation of Bhutan for a share system. The Survey Division has a welfare fund accounting system and an automatic quotation evaluation package written by a Bhutanese programmer.

While there are a range of personnel information systems (PIS) currently available or used, the Royal Civil Service Commission has sought the services of a notable local pro-

grammer in developing a uniform system for all government agencies. And there are stock/inventory systems, payroll systems and shop billing systems.

Such systems have come to the rescue of some who have fallen victim to the whims of outside agencies after hiring them to design software.

The City Corporation is an example. Its water billing system, which has been found to be "problematic", has the municipal authorities running to the Bangladeshi firm that designed the software some years ago for the slightest repair and modification.

"They did not give us internal access so that they could maintain their market," a spokesman of the City Corporation lamented. "It is becoming very expensive to bring in their personnel time and again."

The Corporation has decided to discard the entire software and is now working with a local programmer on tailoring a billing system that won first prize at the national IT exhibition in early June, this year.

Computer professionals say, however, that the entire lot of these locally developed programmes are basic or simple systems based on one of the many programming "languages" — such as Visual Foxpro, Visual Basic, Pascal, Delphi and Microsoft Access — taught at the RIM.

Such systems have to contend with similarly affordable readymade systems in the market. In the absence of adequate testing facilities and know-how in Bhutan the confidence of users has tended to favour the tested ready-mades.

According to Mani Pradhan,

the Deputy Director of the Computer Support Centre in Thimpu, such trends reflected the country's late start and current stage of infancy in the computerisation process as also the uncertainties therein.

The programmers in Bhutan are more the answer to mere teething problems as the use of IT expands in the country. Meanwhile, companies that need larger and more complex software have had nowhere else to turn to except software designing agencies beyond the national borders.

Too inexperienced and ill-equipped to deal with the superior technical knowledge of these global and regional software market players, Bhutanese users who have employed the specialised services have felt the pinch as well.

The Bhutan National Bank (BNB) paid a branch of a large multi-national bank in India, about \$100,000 (about Nu 4.2 million) to use their Microbanker system and has spent another \$100,000 on updating, repairing and maintaining the system.

Although Microbanker is said to be used by banks in 60 different countries BNB officials are of the opinion that the software is suited more for corporate banking, which has fewer transactions than retail banking, which is what the BNB does.

In spite of its "many advantages" Microbanker is not flexible, a glitch in the software which makes the BNB incapable of certain functions. If, for example, the Royal Monetary Authority was to demand a statement of BNB loans amounting between, say, Nu 200,000-500,000, Microbanker would not be able to provide the

information.

As with many other software developed by outside firms, Microbanker is coded. Which means the BNB has limited access into the programme and is unable to make modifications. Which also means that, like the City Corporation, major repairs and adjustments require the "expertise" of the software manufacturers.

"There were more advanced and flexible software available but they were also much more expensive," said the Managing Director of the BNB, Kipchu Tshering. "To ensure cost-effectiveness we had to settle for one of the lowest priced ones."

Having paid a whopping amount for one of the lowest priced software the BNB has no choice but to make do with it through the next seven-eight years.

At its main office in Phuentsholing, the Bank of Bhutan (BOB) uses a programme called the Druk Banker. Written by an Indian firm in Hyderabad, this programme required that the bank employ a system engineer of the Indian firm permanently. The system engineer heads a group of computer-literate IT upgrading and maintenance of the software programme.

The buzz now is, how and when can Bhutan develop the ability to design complex software and break free from dependency?

The optimists believe, very soon. The Centre itself has taken steps in this direction. According to Mani Pradhan, one of the most challenging tasks in the IT industry in Bhutan will be the development of a Bhutan Automatic Customs System (BACS), a complex and heavy programme that inte-

grates in itself other revenue and customs systems.

The CSC strategy is to float tenders so as to attract about 15 non-national firms and as many local firms and then awarded the contract to a competent joint venture firm formed between companies in the two groups.

"Giving preference to joint ventures is one way of fostering effective transfer of technology to the local partners," said Mani Pradhan. "Eventually, we will be able to design advanced programmes."

The other glimmer of hope is seen in the east, in Kanglung's Sherubtse College, where a first batch of 13 students are taking a degree-level course in computer applications.

The three-year course, which has flexible syllabi that include studies in computer fundamentals and programming, business practices, language and communication and modern trends in the IT industry, is expected to produce competent programmers.

There is an ever increasing market for all kinds of software, a computer instructor of the college said. "If our students function as a team after their graduation they should be able to design complex systems."

When the computer applications course was introduced in 1997-98, the University of Delhi had said that the course would "cultivate an intellectual approach to problem-solving, as applied to many fields including information systems and would promote sound knowledge of software development techniques with emphasis on scientific and business fields."

As the providers of "the needs of the computer industry in the future" the Bachelor of Computer Application (BCA) students are expected to be able to design and develop software business systems.

—Ruensel

War of Symbols on the Campaign Trail

POSTERS, banners, arches and other election paraphernalia which are meant to add value to a campaign are unexpectedly causing embarrassment to many parties.

The most affected is the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which is not just being inspired by thoughts of the military victory in Kargil but is being haunted by military symbols as well.

First it was Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee who was embarrassed during his Haryana tour when he realised that the backdrop of a dais on which he was seated had the paintings of the three service chiefs. Vajpayee said that he had not noticed the painting, which is a clear violation of Election Commission rules.

The BJP later admitted it was a mistake, an explanation which the Election Commission accepted.

Just as the party felt that the

message had percolated to party workers came reports of the seizure of yet another Kargil-related symbol being used in the campaign of the BJP's candidate in Secunderabad, Bandaru Dattatreya.

The symbol was a jeep modified to look like a tank with a long barrel. Crackers were burst inside the jeep to create a rather crass imitation of a tank firing shells.

The firing tank was the centre of attraction during the BJP campaign, but soon the police too arrived on the scene to seize the vehicle.

The seized vehicle was parked on a side road after the police took away the keys. Soon BJP workers arrived with duplicate keys to drive the Kargil tank away. But the police chased the 'tank' through the busy roads of Secunderabad in what an onlooker described as a "Kargil-like situation," intercepted it and this time took it to the nearby police station.

Not all candidates have to indulge in such campaign dangle-dangle, though. Mahesh Kanodia, the BJP candidate in Patan in northern Gujarat, does not require any external symbols to draw crowds. The three-time winner from Patan is a music director and actor and enthralls his crowd with caecos.

"I am a performer first," he said as he headed himself before yet another acting performance in front of his home crowd. The act that is most popular is his mimicking of Sonia Gandhi. Kanodia also launches into popular Gujarati songs to keep the crowd captivated.

He told reporters that he still feels sad that he has studied only up to class two. That definitely has not affected his popularity as people crowd around him asking for a repeat of the Sonia Gandhi act.

—India Abroad News Service