


Politics of polls beyond the Vindhyas

The recent polls in Karnataka have started a spate of calculations. Many are with regard to India's forthcoming national elections in 2019. There are expectations galore in opposition camps. But are any significant changes foreseeable?



IFTEKHAR AHMED CHOWDHURY

IN terms of heights and magnitude the Vindhyas do not match the Himalayas. Yet both these mountain ranges find mention in the Indian national anthem. This denotes their importance. That of the Himalayas is obvious. But the significance of the Vindhyas lies in the fact that they comprise a dividing line of sorts in the landmass of India. In the classical Puranic times, they were seen as elevations that comprised the southern boundaries of "Aryavarta". That was the land of the Aryans. It finds a mention in Valmiki's *Ramayana* as the limit of the Indian empire, prior to the exile of Rama. So the separating hills were something of a "Lakshman rekha". It was a line not to be crossed without inviting some serious consequences.

The inhabitants below the ranges were seen to be civilisationally somewhat distinct. This was reflected in minds and myths. Yet the dichotomy became gradually blurred through the process of history. Over time the divided portions began to see themselves united in voice and values. Eventually, the common experience of the contemporary tumultuous Indian democracy became the buckle that tied and hyphen that fastened the two parts. Geography became only a frame of reference. There are times, however, when some fault-lines do emerge. Of late these could be exacerbated by the unintended results of India's chaotic electoral politics. Currently in the Union government in

Delhi, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) rule the roost. Their control extends over 21 of India's 29 states. But of the five major states in the south—Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Karnataka—the BJP held sway only in the last one. No longer. In a nail-biting election held in the state on May 12, the BJP, led by BS Yeddyurappa (popularly known as BSY), was out-manoeuvred. This was following a drama that would have matched any fictional thriller. The BJP had actually won 104 seats out of 222, falling short of the required majority by eight. The Congress of the incumbent Chief Minister Siddaramaiah secured 78. The third in the race was the Janata Dal Secular (JDS), led by a duo, former Union Prime Minister HD Deve Gowda and his son, HD Kumaraswamy, with a count of 38. As the election results became apparent, the latter two quickly forged a post-poll alliance that raised their combined number to 116. With a majority sealed, they staked their claim to form government. They also agreed that Kumaraswamy would be the chief minister—an offer the junior partner in the pact could not refuse. The decision was now up to the governor of Karnataka, Vajubhai Vala.

In the action that followed, many believe that Vajubhai Vala did not cover himself with glory. He was a BJP member, indeed from Modi's home state of Gujarat. He, apparently, in view of his critics, succumbed to his preferences failing to rise over the cut and thrust of everyday politics (as governors of yore probably would!). He chose his fellow party man Siddaramaiah as chief minister. Furthermore, he gave the appointee a long

timeframe, 15 days, to show a majority support in a "floor test" in the Assembly. But since it was well-known that the latter was eight members short, it was construed by analysts to be an open season for horse-trading. Audio evidence has since surfaced, though not yet authenticated, of his attempts to simply buy up opponents with offers of fortune and fame. These efforts came to naught. A wealthy Congress member, DK Shivakumar, herded the legislators-elect of the opposition much like a flock of sheep, moving them across locations in buses, away from the reach of the BJP. It cost money, but Shivakumar had enough to spare.

It was then that the Supreme Court, somewhat unexpectedly, came down on the BJP like a tonne of bricks. The opposition had petitioned them for relief. Appearing on the scene like a *deus ex machina* (God out of a machine) as in a Greek play, who enters the drama at a point near the end totally changing the course of the tale, the Court in its ruling cut the timeframe from 15 days to one. There was to be no time for the BJP to influence targeted politicians. Shivakumar was able to deliver the total numbers of those he had kept safely corralled in "resort hotels", at the Assembly doors prior to the floor test without any attrition. Yeddyurappa saw no further value in waiting for the vote test. So after an impassioned speech eulogising self and his party, he resigned. Like the King in the Arabian Nights, his reign extended to little more than a day. Vala, who obviously did not mind having to eat the humble pie, had no option but to swear into office the coalition nominee, Kumaraswamy. Curtain was brought down on a play that Shakespeare

would have delighted in penning.

No state in the South now had a BJP government. Some southerners began to speak of themselves as harbingers of change. They claimed to be offering a more "secular" option to the alleged "safronisation" of India through the burgeoning influence of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (the RSS, an ultra-right body) who champion Hindutva, and the veneration of the cow (resulting in the marginalisation of such minorities as the "untouchable Dalits" and Muslims). These southerners also see value in the "coming together" of the more affluent segment of the Indian Union—by which it is meant the states of the south. This, as opposed to some of the *bimaru* ("sick", implying "impoverished") states of the north such as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh.

This is one tendency. The other is that of an understanding among the regional parties of India, prior to the 2019 elections, to take on the BJP in the Centre. This would of course mean regional parties sinking their differences in the respective states to build an alliance in the Centre. For instance, Mamata Banerjee (an emerging counterpoise to Modi?) in West Bengal would have to align herself with her arch-foes in her own state, the Congress, and the Left. Not an immediate possibility, but can be a distant one.

The opposition to Modi, the Congress included, must be careful to avoid small successes spawning big aspirations. Some analysts are already juggling and calculating numbers in terms of seats in the future 2019 general elections. But mathematics does not always translate into politics. Any prognosis of Modi's political demise, to paraphrase

Mark Twain, would be premature. As of now, beating Modi is a tall order. Never mind the failure to deliver on many counts. He remains immensely popular. But most armours have chinks. The challenge for the opponent is to be able to detect them. In Modi's case they are not yet discernible. Locating them would take more time. And relentless efforts.

The only other major all-Indian National Party is the Congress. It is led by Rahul Gandhi, the great grandson of Jawaharlal Nehru. The latter, a towering personality, had urged Indians "to keep their trust with destiny." It was a clarion call to high achievements. Indians have always since cherished those words. Rahul Gandhi does not obviously possess the image and eloquence of his famous ancestor. Also, now he may have to be content, unlike his great grandfather, to play second fiddle to smaller political entities from the region. But for the young Gandhi, a baptism of fire may yet work to transform him into an effective leader. If the "regional front", as Mamata Banerjee calls it, keeps the Congress with it, it is good for all-India sentiments. Without a major national party as the Congress associated, such an alliance may encourage fissiparous tendencies. The growing collaboration among the regionals resembles the gathering of the Greek chieftains to assail the walls of BJP's Troy as in the epic, the *Illiad*. Troy had fallen. Might the BJP? Alas for the champions of change in India, history does not always repeat itself!

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Breaking the silence on menstruation

Empowering women and girls through proper menstrual hygiene management

KHADIZA AKTER

TODAY, May 28, is Menstrual Hygiene Day. The objective of observing this day is to raise awareness of the challenges women and girls face worldwide due to menstruation and highlight solutions addressing these challenges.

Choosing May 28 as Menstrual Hygiene Day has a symbolic meaning. May is the fifth month of the year and women menstruate on average five days every month, and their cycle tends to be around 28 days. The theme of this year's Menstrual Hygiene Day is "empowerment". The aim of the theme is to have a setting where women and girls can learn to take care of their body, health, mind and spirit during menstruation.

The theme is very relevant for Bangladesh. Though menstruation is a biological and essential part of women's and girls' reproductive cycle, in Bangladesh, menstrual management decisions are mostly based on people's cultural belief rather than proper information. It remains a taboo subject that is rarely discussed. Also, various stigma and myths surrounding menstruation hinder women's and girls' right to food, health, education, work, and dignity, and obstruct gender equality more broadly.

According to Unicef and WHO (2014), appropriate menstrual hygiene management (MHM) refers to women's and girls' access to clean menstrual management materials to absorb or collect blood that can be changed in privacy as often as necessary for the duration of the menstrua-

tion period; access to soap and water for washing the body as required; and having facilities to dispose of used menstrual management materials.

In 2014, the preliminary report of Bangladesh National Hygiene Baseline Survey indicated that knowledge on MHM among women and girls in Bangladesh is very limited. Less than 20 percent of women and girls practise hygienic menstrual management. Girls are mostly not introduced to menstruation before menarche (the first occurrence of menstruation) and 70 percent of girls get information from their mothers which is often not correct. Only 20 percent of girls get information from their teachers. Even though lessons on physical and psychological changes at adolescence are already in the school curriculum, in most of the schools this is not taught by the teachers.

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SOURCE: HELLOCLUE.COM

ask students to read those lessons on their own at home. Over 40 percent of girls do not attend school during menstruation for three days in a month on average because of a limited number of separate toilets for girls with adequate privacy, lack of access to toilet with WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) and MHM facilities, and due to a feeling of sickness during menstruation which is directly linked with MHM.

In addition, only 10 percent of girls and 25 percent of adult women use sanitary napkins during menstruation, while others use old cloths, cotton or tissue. The major reasons behind women's and girls' limited use of sanitary napkins are: (i) they cannot afford to buy sanitary napkins; (ii)

they feel shy to ask male members of their family to buy sanitary napkins for them; (iii) they feel shy to buy sanitary napkins in the market from male shopkeepers; (iv) access to market is limited; and (v) sanitary napkins are not available in some rural areas.

Furthermore, around 89 percent of women and girls dry and store the old cloth used to manage menstruation in a hidden place for repeated future use without proper laundering which is very unhealthy. A culture of shame forces them to keep these cloths out of sight of men and others. This practice makes them more likely to contract reproductive tract infections (RTIs). Very often serious infections are left untreated.

Ninety-five percent of girls experience restrictions in their daily lives during menstruation (restrictions on going outside of the home, especially in the evening, visiting religious places and social gatherings, attending religious and socio-cultural activities, sharing the bed with others, cooking in the kitchen, stepping on cow dung, touching clay pots, using oil in the hair, consuming nutritious food, especially meat and fish, taking baths, looking in the mirror, touching a cow or a plant, etc). In rural areas, it is believed that menstruation is a sign that a girl is suitable for marriage.


Therefore, unawareness, shame, and inconveniences linked to menstruation are some of the key obstacles for women's and girls' social, economic, political and physical empowerment. By remaining unaware of what happens in their bodies during menstruation and what course of action to take, women and girls face restrictions when it comes to work and education (leading to bad performance in these areas); endure malnutrition because of the lack of nutritious food; contract reproductive health diseases; face social violence like early marriage and illegal abortion; face restricted mobility; and are deprived of family and social support. All these factors combined decrease their opportunities and set them up for a lifetime of *dis-empowerment*.

Understanding these facts and overcoming them is crucial in ensuring women's and girls' empowerment. However, it is not possible to do so only by incorporating MHM issues in the school curriculum and having discussions on these issues in the

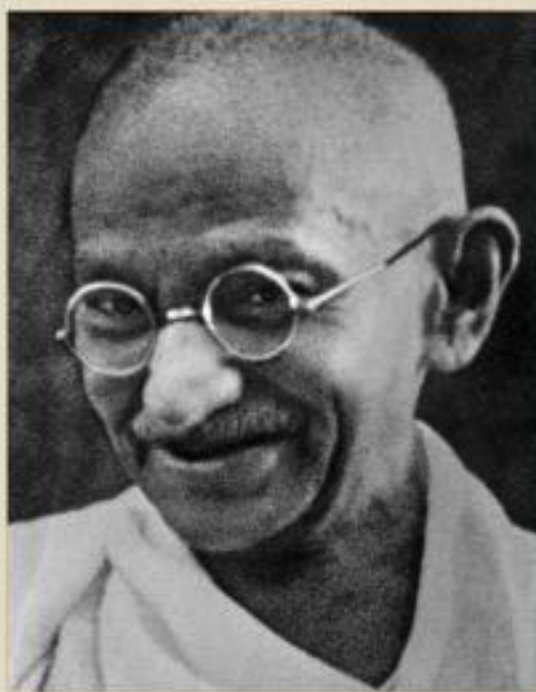
classroom, or by improving WASH and MHM facilities everywhere, or with greater awareness of taboos and knowledge of proper methods to manage menstruation. It is also important to enable women and girls to get access to, afford and use improved menstrual management materials by creating earning opportunities for them; improving their access to the market; marketing alternative recyclable low-cost menstrual management materials; mainstreaming MHM in WASH, health, and gender-related programmes; monitoring of progress regularly; and most importantly creating an enabling environment involving all the people in the community. These factors are obviously not all that need to be taken into account to ensure good MHM practice. However, this is a good place to get the ball rolling.

While MHM issues have recently gained attention in the global development agenda, Bangladesh needs to focus on them seriously. Above all, the number of women and girls of reproductive age is huge, and access to MHM materials and facilities will make them more confident and will ease the barriers in the way of their potential and capabilities. Thus, by building strong partnerships across non-government and government bodies, we can help to eradicate the challenges surrounding MHM and open a window of opportunity for women and girls as well as create a solid foundation for their empowerment.

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QUOTABLE
Quote



MAHATMA GANDHI
The leader of the Indian independence movement against British rule

Freedom is not worth having if it does not connote freedom to err.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Part to play

5 Surrounded by

9 Showed over

10 Challenges

12 Be patient for

13 Connery's successor

14 To the point

16 Veto

17 Heart chart

18 Scheme

20 More profound

22 Super serves

23 Replies to the host

25 "Get lost!"

28 Bettor's comeback

32 Put in a cell

34 LII doubled

35 Notre Dame's Parseghian

36 Tell secretly

38 Singer Mars

40 Peptic problem

41 Squelch

42 Casual shirts

43 Ellipsis parts

44 Spotted

DOWN

1 Came to again

2 Halloween hue

3 Secular

4 Tempts

5 Campaign creators

6 Great Leap

Forward leader

7 Like O. Henry tales

8 Glean

9 Went fast

11 Two sides in a battle

15 Mira of "Mighty Aphrodite"

19 Pathfinder launcher

21 Teacher to sophs

24 Spousal protections, for short

25 Strike defiers

26 Dreadful

27 Running by itself

29 Winter dripper

30 Like a profile picture

31 Civil rights leader

33 Clickable pix

37 Frozen chunk

39 Negating word

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

B	A	L	D	A	S	A	P
E	M	A	I	L	M	I	L
R	O	U	G	E	I	N	L
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M	I	S	C	O	N		
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A	R	C	S	I	N	E	O
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S	F	P	D		D	Y	E

BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

