

**Final Rajya Sabha term for Yechury**

Nine Rajya Sabha members retire in August. They include Congress' Ahmed Patel, Trinamool Congress member Derek O'Brien and Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) chief Sitaram Yechury. While Yechury could have returned to the House with the support of Congress legislators in West Bengal, the CPI-M bars its leaders from being a member of the Upper House for more than two terms. This is Yechury's second term. O'Brien and Patel are likely to be sent back to the Rajya Sabha by their respective parties.

**'Index of Opposition unity'**

The Rajya Sabha term of Bahujan Samaj Party chief Mayawati ends in April 2018. Her party won only 19 seats in the Uttar Pradesh Assembly polls, which will be insufficient for her to get elected. Even with the support of the Congress, which has seven seats, and the Rashtriya Lok Dal's lone seat, Mayawati would struggle to return to the Rajya Sabha unless Samajwadi Party (SP) legislators vote for her. Opposition parties are hoping the SP would show large-heartedness for the greater good of unity against the Bharatiya Janata Party in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls. Opposition parties believe their only chance of defeating Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls is by ensuring the "index of Opposition unity" is at its maximum.

**DID THEY REALLY SAY THAT?**

**Kejriwal is mentally unstable and we all can see that. When he got 67 seats in Delhi, then everything was fine. Now when Punjab has rejected him, he is not able to digest his defeat and is creating a ruckus.**

Union Food Processing Minister Harsimrat Kaur Badal in New Delhi on March 15

**CHECKLIST****CONGRESS DEBACLES: A LOOK BACK**

■ **1967:** The state elections were a turning point for the Congress. Economic conditions in the country were bad as a result of two successive years of drought, the 1965 war with Pakistan and the devaluation of the rupee in 1965. The party suffered significant losses in seven states: Gujarat (Congress won 11 out of 24 seats; the Swatantra Party won 12); Madras (Congress won three out of 39 seats; the DMK won 25); Orissa (Congress won six out of 20 seats; the Swatantra Party won eight); Rajasthan (Congress won 10 out of 20 seats; Swatantra Party won eight); West Bengal (Congress won 14 out of 40 seats); Kerala (Congress won only one out of 19 seats) and Delhi (Congress won one out of 7; remaining six were won by the Bharatiya Jana Sangh).

■ **1977:** The general election and some state elections were held together. The Congress' tally in Parliament dropped from 350 to 153. It failed to win a single seat

in Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Bihar, Punjab, Delhi. State elections were held in Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Punjab, Tripura and Bihar. In Punjab, its tally came down from 66 to 17. In West Bengal, the party won just 20 seats; the Left Front got 231 out of 294 seats. Kerala saved face as the Congress got 111 seats out of 140.

■ **1982:** The Congress' tally in Kerala, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh dropped to 88 seats from the 107 it held before the polls. In West Bengal, it more than doubled its share from 20 to 49 chiefly because of the disappearance of the Janata Party, but trailed far behind the Left Front (238 seats). In Himachal Pradesh the electorate shaved the Congress' share of votes by nine per cent to 43 per cent; in Haryana by two per cent to 27 per cent compared to the 1980 polls. In West Bengal its share dropped by four per cent to about 32 per cent.

■ **1991:** The BJP came to power in UP, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and HP. The Congress was decimated.

**OPINION**

C GOPALAKRISHNAN

# Our demand for new trains hasn't been attended to

Hon Deputy Speaker, Sir, I pray to my god, leader Puratchi Thalaivi Amma to speak on the Railway Budget. This is for the first time that the Railway Budget was presented by the finance minister. The ongoing projects introduced by the earlier UPA government have still not been completed. We are first-timers and our demand to introduce new trains has not been properly attended so far.

Every year hon minister of railways used to consult various organisations to include their views and demands in the Railway Budget. However, this time due to the merger of Railway Budget with the General Budget that could not happen. We request the hon minister to attend the business people, group chamber of commerce of our state and district for fresh demands for introducing trains.

Hon minister has not increased the rail fares this time and we thank him for that. However, he has increased rates of many items without giving notice to general public. The hon prime minister asked the government to be transparent in all matters. But the Railways increased many charges marginally without the knowledge of the common public. In the current scenario the speed of passenger trains and goods trains in India is excruciatingly slow. The engine of the passenger trains can travel at a speed of 150 kmph.

New trains are introduced every year but due to the major difference in the ratio of the new lines and dedicated freight corridor, these trains have to bear the brunt of traffic congestion thus delaying them and putting them behind schedule.

Sir, there were scams in freight operations in Railways. The CBI conducted raids all over India and it turns out to be a ₹4,000-crore scam. But till date the action taken against those involved has not been informed.

Sir, Southern Railway is the most earning railway in the country. Even Salem Division earned more profit within a short span after it started functioning. But facilities to Southern Railway, especially Tamil Nadu, are not being provided adequately. The trains overflow with crowds and there are no adequate trains from Chennai to Coimbatore, Madurai, Kanyakumari, Tanjavur, etc. I request the hon minister to introduce a new train from Chennai to Mettupalayam. Till that is done, the Cheran Express may be extended up to Mettupalayam with additional coaches. I also request the hon minister to introduce summer special trains from Chennai to Coimbatore, Madurai, Tirunelveli and Kanyakumari from April to June. I think the minister will accept this demand immediately.

**Southern Railway is the most earning railway in the country. Even Salem Division earned more profit within a short span after it started functioning. But facilities to Southern Railway, especially in Tamil Nadu, are not being provided adequately**

Railway hospitals, particularly in Tamil Nadu, are in pathetic condition. Dialysis facilities are not there in Chennai railway hospitals. It is reported that deaths also occurred in these hospitals due to non-availability of dialysis facility. The hon minister should improve the services and facilities in these hospitals. Promotions for employees in Southern Railway are getting delayed, especially so in the sports quota. The management is not taking into consideration the original seniority. In the case of ICF, Chennai, the sports quota should be filled by chief personnel officer by appointing his state people where he belongs to. There are a number of ICF apprentices who have completed training but have not been provided job opportunities yet. I request the hon minister to intervene and recruit those who have completed ICF apprenticeship. It is also brought to your notice that personnel officer of Railways and ICF should not stay at one place for a long period to avoid favouritism.

Hon Speaker, I raise an important and fruitful appeal to the minister to connect Mettupalayam with Chennai via Sathyamangalam, Gobichettipalayam, Cithode, Erode to Chennai to fulfil the genuine demand of the people of western Tamil Nadu. Mettupalayam is about 55 kilometres from Ooty which is the capital of Nilgiri district and a well-known tourist centre, the most popular destination of Indian cinema industry. In spite of my raising the matter in Zero Hour and also my representation to the railway minister, this has not been materialised even after 35 years. Tourists and the local people coming to or going from Ooty have to alight at Mettupalayam and continue their further journey. Mettupalayam lies deep in the Kongu region and it does not have rail connectivity to Erode via Sathyamangalam, Gobichettipalayam. If Mettupalayam is connected to Erode by broad gauge rail line, then people can easily reach Chennai as Erode is already connected to Chennai.

At present, a project to construct a new railway line from Chamrajnagar to Sathyamangalam, Gobichettipalayam and Erode is progressing. The work is going on very slowly. If this project is expedited, then the railway line has to be extended up a distance of only 46 kilometres. By doing this, Mettupalayam adjoining Ooty will be connected to Chennai by a rail line via Sathyamangalam, Gobichettipalayam, Cithode and Erode to Chennai at a very nominal cost. Local people as well as tourists are in dire need of this rail line.

Rameswaram and Thiruchendur are two important religious places in Tamil Nadu. There is no direct rail line and trains. There is need for construction of two under-bridges — one at Kolathupalayam and another at Pasupathipalayam. I also request for speedy completion of the road under-bridge project at Kolathupalayam, ₹6.50 crore for the road under-bridge project at Pasupathipalayam and another road under-bridge project that has been sanctioned at Pudukolathupalayam, which is on the Karur-Salem Railway line.

Edited excerpts from a speech in the Lok Sabha by AIADMK member of Parliament C Gopalakrishnan from the Nilgiris on March 14



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

**VIJAY CHAUTHAIWALE**, chief of the Overseas Friends of Bharatiya Janata Party (OFBJP), tells **Archis Mohan** there might be hiccups in India-US relations during the Donald Trump administration but by and large ties would be positive. He says the PM's visit to Israel, later this year, would be historic and is unlikely to impact India-West Asia relations even if the PM were to not visit Palestine.

# 'BJP's nationalism is not exclusive'

**The recent electoral victories have made Prime Minister Narendra Modi's position in domestic politics so much more unassailable. How could this impact his foreign policy?**

Modi has already put a significant stamp on his foreign policy agenda in the first half his tenure, and now with these results it will definitely have a positive impact. Already, the international press, and also rating agencies like Moody's, have reacted positively. In the context of several changes in the global scenario and upcoming uncertainties in Europe, I think this domestic popular support for the PM will help us go from strength to strength.

**Few leaders after Indira Gandhi have enjoyed such domestic popularity. Could this help the PM lead India to solve some of its more intractable problems with its neighbours, like the border dispute with China or relations with Pakistan?**

I don't think we should club these issues together. With China, even though we have several differences, we are still talking a lot. For example, Foreign Secretary S Jaishankar last month visited China. India-China border talks are an ongoing process and remain uninterrupted despite changes in the regime in India. So, we are hopeful that relations will be better despite some differences, for example on India's mem-

bership to the Nuclear Suppliers Group or the China Pakistan Economic Corridor.

As far as Pakistan is concerned, the ball is in Islamabad's court. It depends on how sincere they are in their anti-terrorist measures. So, I guess these two, we need to delink.

**How do you see India-US relations, particularly since you have been one of the key players in New Delhi's outreach to the Trump administration?**

As our senior leader (BJP General Secretary) Ram Madhav recently wrote, India-US relations will be more transactional (under the current regime) than what these were during the previous regime (the Barack Obama administration), and we need to accept that change. There will be some issues of contention, especially on HIB visa and on trade policy.

At the same time, there are new opportunities, for example, the US exiting the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement, which gives us more leeway to have bilateral negotiations with several countries, including the US. Our defence cooperation is strong and that will continue with the Trump administration also. There is bipartisan support in the US Congress on strong India-US relations. There might be some hiccups, but by and large things will move in a positive direction.

**There is speculation that Shalabh Kumar or Ashley Tellis could be the next envoy to India of the US?**

It is the prerogative of the US administration whom to appoint. I think both Kumar and Tellis understand India well. We will welcome anyone who has a good understanding of the depth and breadth of India-US relations, irrespective of whether he is of Indian origin or not. We have had US envoys of Indian origin, who were very successful, as also people who were not of Indian origin, like Robert Blackwill and Senator (Daniel Patrick) Moynihan, who were extremely successful in building India-US relations.

**The PM's Israel visit is much anticipated. You were recently in Israel. What are the expectations?**

I have just been to Israel to attend one conference on diaspora, which was organised by the Israeli foreign office. I also met policymakers in Israel and a large section of the India-Jewish diaspora — they are enthusiastic about the PM's visit. It is a well-known fact that Benjamin Netanyahu, the PM of Israel, and Modi have a good personal equation. The Jewish community in general is positive towards Modi and India. I think it will be a historic visit.

**Will there be criticism of and a fallout on India-West Asia relations if the PM were not to visit Palestine?**

It is not for me to say whether he will visit Palestine or not. It will be his considered decision. But I think we have now built strong relations with all the major countries in West Asia, whether Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates or Iran. Even though these countries have conflicting interests within themselves, India has been deftly able to manage these equations and look out for furthering India's interests. Whether the PM goes there or not,

India-Palestine relations will remain strong.

**Neighbourhood first was the narrative of the PM's first year of foreign policy. The focus in the second year was on the extended neighbourhood, in West Asia and South-east Asia. What will be the narrative next year?**

I think the role of some of the multilateral bodies needs a relook. There is the Non Aligned Movement (NAM), and there is uncertainty about its purpose. There is also the Commonwealth, which needs to redefine its objectives in the post-Brexit era. BRICS is also at a similar stage.

More nationalist and conservative leadership is emerging throughout the world. The UK is going through a process of assessing its relations with the rest of Europe. These are the issues we should focus upon.

**Do you think the BJP, with its nationalist ideological base, might find any commonality with the nationalist leaderships emerging in the rest of the world?**

Our nationalism is not exclusive. In some cases in the rest of the world, it might be exclusive and therefore have some repercussions. It is an evolving situation. But I don't see any commonality.

**How is India preparing for a post-Brexit world?**

The UK, at least in the next couple of years, would be too involved in conducting negotiations with the rest of Europe. We need to wait and watch the situation. There are lots of people in Britain who say the situation would lead to increased interaction between the UK and India and open up newer avenues. But the anti-immigration trend is not conducive to students going from India. Newer issues could emerge.

**You have been at the helm of the OFBJP for nearly three years now. What have been the changes?**

A major change was that in countries where the Indian diaspora is present we started working on advocacy-related issues rather than simply managing events. That has been a major shift. For example, just last week the OFBJP and other community organisations demonstrated in front of the CNN Center (the headquarters of CNN) against their controversial and deplorable documentary film, *Believer*, which shows the Hindu dharma in poor light. We are doing such advocacy on other issues as well. After the Kansas attack on Indians, the OFBJP wrote to Senators and Congressmen.

We are doing such advocacy, which we weren't doing in the past, with more vigour, not just in the US but also in Australia and other countries.

We are also encouraging — and we plan to pursue this more aggressively in the months to come — the Indian diaspora to become part of Modi's social programmes. There is now a platform by the Ministry of External Affairs, the India Development Foundation through which the diaspora can contribute financially to programmes like Swachh Bharat. The good part is the IDF doesn't have any overheads, so 100 per cent of the money is allocated to the project and a completion certificate is sent to the donor.

# Lack of options may see BJP through in Gujarat

With Opposition parties hit by infighting, people of the state say BJP is the only party that can offer them a stable government

SOHINI DAS &amp; VIMUKT DAVE

It was at a cosy dinner on a summer evening at the Gujarat chief minister's bungalow in Gandhinagar that Prime Minister Narendra Modi is said to have asked Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) members in the state to ensure victory for the party in 150 seats in the Assembly elections later this year.

The significance of 150? It would break the Congress' record of 149 seats in Gujarat under the leadership of Madhav Sinh Solanki in 1985.

After the spectacular win in the Uttar Pradesh polls, the BJP has turned its attention to Gujarat. A win in the state is critical for reaffirming the performance of the BJP in UP and Uttarakhand.

Speculation is rife that the BJP may consider advancing the dates of the Assembly elections from December, so as to ride the UP victory wave. Sources close to the party leadership dismiss this speculation.

Both Modi and BJP President Amit Shah are known to have taken feedback from party leaders in the state on holding early elections.

Neither leader has spoken clearly to state party leaders.

Political observers say that except for a strong anti-incumbency sentiment, there is little that might go against the BJP. "Hardik Patel, Alpesh Thakor and Jignesh Mevani are the three faces of unrest and opposition in Gujarat," says a senior political observer. "Alpesh has already tilted towards the BJP. Jignesh does not seem to have mass appeal while Hardik is increasingly being seen as fickle and lacking a concrete plan."

Sociologist and political analyst Vidyut Joshi predicts a win for the BJP, but adds that its tally might come down. He says the party will clinch 110 seats out of the total 182. In 2012, BJP had won 119 seats, the Congress 57 (final tally after by-elections).

"Anti-incumbency sentiment is strong; farmers and anganwadi workers are disillusioned to some extent," Joshi says. "There are compatibility issues between the chief minister and his deputy. Modi might send senior party leader Purushottam Rupala (minister of state for agriculture) to take charge of Gujarat."

A dip-stick survey across districts

in Gujarat shows that farmers are not satisfied with the BJP government. Ramesh Borhaniya, a cotton and groundnut farmer near Rajkot, says: "The government has not sided with us on minimum support price. It did not increase procurement."

Another farmer in the Saurashtra belt, a traditional BJP stronghold that was shaken up by the Patidar agitation, says that demonitisation has left them deprived of cash.

But farmers admit there is no option other than the BJP. "Opposition parties are hit by infighting," Borhaniya says. "They cannot offer a stable government."

The Congress, on its part, has fastened its seat belt. The party is set to hold a meeting of its state leaders, booth-level workers and district-level leaders on March 20. The party is likely to announce a youth employment scheme. "We will invite applications from the youth," Gujarat Congress chief Bharat Singh Solanki says. "We are planning to offer an unemployment allowance. For postgraduates the amount will be ₹4,000 a month, for graduates ₹3,500 and ₹3,000 for higher secondary pass-outs."

The Congress is trying to woo urban voters this time. "We won only four out of 68 seats in the urban areas last time," he told this paper in an interview earlier this year. "So, we have to increase our share to at least 50 per cent there. We are targeting

34 seats. We will sweep the rural areas, barring a few seats."

The party made a comeback in the 2015 panchayat elections, winning 22 out of 31 panchayats. In the 2010 polls, it had won only one seat.

Modi has asked party men to step out of their offices in the state capital and start reaching out to the masses. Lack of mass connect cost the BJP a majority in Goa. From 21 seats in the previous elections, it was reduced to 13 this time. The party did form the government, but with support from allies.

In Gujarat, the BJP is trying to reach out to all sections of society. State party chief Jitu Vaghani could not be reached for comment despite several attempts. However, it is learnt that the message from Delhi is not to isolate any community, rather to try and build bridges with the Patidars.

Demographically, Muslim voters make up 10 per cent of the electorate in Gujarat; the remaining 90 per cent are Hindus. Of them, around seven per cent are Dalits, around 20 per cent Patidars, 14 per cent tribals and the rest belong to Other Backward Classes (OBC).

The OBC vote would be crucial. Thakor's outfit, the Gujarat Kshatriya Thakor Sena, has started witnessing cracks. Around 1,000 members resigned in Banaskantha district in February, accusing Thakor of using them to nurture his own political ambitions. "Many see Thakor as

BJP's B-team, and that he will tone down his protests at just the right time," says an observer.

Surat, with its diamond merchants, is considered the deciding factor in the Gujarat elections. It is still reeling from the after-effects of the Patidar agitation. This is the soft spot the BJP's opponents are targeting. But traders, like farmers, say they have little option. "We have no other choice but to go with the BJP as it can offer a stable government," says a cotton trader based in Kadi.

Patel has a different take. "The current government is overconfident," he says. "Whether Assembly elections happen now or later, the people of Gujarat are not happy with the BJP. This is sure to go against them." He adds that while he has no plan at present to contest the Assembly elections, he will nonetheless try to gauge the mood of the people.

"The BJP has won in the state with the support of the Patidar community," Patel says. "We will not participate in the elections, but there are only two parties — the BJP and the Congress. We will support those who work for the youth, farmers, women and development." Sources in the Congress say Patel might side with them.

Meanwhile, senior AAP leaders from Delhi have landed in the state. AAP Convenor and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal is expected to visit the state in the end of March.