



Crossing a bridge

India has done the right thing by deciding to attend the Indus Waters Treaty meet

Even in the fraught and volatile framework of India-Pakistan ties, the Permanent Indus Commission mandated to implement the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) has met like clockwork, 112 times in 56 years, annually in each country. The commission has experts who look into issues and disputes on the ground over the utilisation of the waters of six rivers of the Indus system. Under the treaty, India has full use of the three “eastern” rivers (Beas, Ravi, Sutlej), while Pakistan has control over the three “western” rivers (Indus, Chenab, Jhelum), although India is given rights to use these partially as well for certain purposes. As a result, there should be little to comment in the normal course when India accepts Pakistan’s invitation to the next round of talks, as it has for the Permanent Indus Commission in Lahore later this month. The move is welcome, as it denotes India’s commitment to the treaty that has stood the test of time and war, and also displays New Delhi’s sincerity on the issue of water-sharing, given that the IWT is seen to be a model in dispute management. In September last year, doubts had been raised over India’s commitment after the terrorist attack on an army camp in Uri, killing 19 soldiers. In the days that followed, senior officials announced the suspension of talks until there was an “atmosphere free of terror” after Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a review meeting on the treaty to consider retaliatory measures against Pakistan for the attack, saying, “blood and water cannot go together”. Mr. Modi repeated some of those angry sentiments at public rallies where he said India would not allow even a “drop of water” to go waste into Pakistan. The atmosphere was also charged after the government announced “surgical strikes” had been carried out along the Line of Control and subsequently pulled out from the SAARC summit in Pakistan, leading to fears of a freeze in bilateral ties.

In the event, the government has chosen wisely, with some encouragement from the World Bank and persistence by Pakistan, to step back from much of that rhetoric, and allow IWT commissioners from both countries to meet. The decision follows several other moves between India and Pakistan in the past few weeks indicating a softening of positions on some other issues as well: from a marked reduction in LoC firing, the regular annual exchange of nuclear lists, the release of prisoners by both countries, and India being part of the consensus to elect the Pakistani nominee as the SAARC Secretary-General this week. It would be premature to expect that any of these events, some of which are routine, consolidate a thaw in relations between the two countries. However, they reaffirm the high stakes that are woven into India-Pakistan relations, and the need to keep certain issues such as water-sharing above the politics of the moment.

Moscow’s shadow

The Russia angle continues to trip members of the Trump administration

Less than three weeks after the resignation of Michael Flynn, U.S. President Donald Trump’s National Security Adviser, over failure to disclose contact with Russian officials, Attorney General Jeff Sessions is now staring down the barrel of similar allegations, intensifying a storm that the White House was already struggling to cope with. This week Mr. Sessions faced three distinct, serious questions regarding his conduct in this context. First, did he have an undisclosed meeting with the Russian Ambassador to the U.S., Sergey Kislyak, in September? Second, if he did make such contact with Russian officials, was there not a conflict of interest in the Attorney General overseeing an investigation into Russia’s alleged attempts to influence the November 8 presidential elections? Third, did he then perjure himself during his confirmation hearing in the Senate when he appeared to fudge a direct question about contact with Russian officials? The first and second questions have already been answered – investigations by the *Washington Post* revealed that Mr. Sessions and two senior aides met with Mr. Kislyak in his Senate office on September 8, about a month before the Obama administration accused the Russian government of interfering with the U.S. election process and three months before it ejected 35 Russians diplomats from their U.S. posts and slapped sanctions on Moscow.

Under immense pressure from Democrats on Capitol Hill, on Thursday Mr. Sessions recused himself from the inquiry into alleged Russian meddling in the election. They must now wait for the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Department of Justice, which Mr. Sessions heads, to get details on the nature of contact that Russian officials had with Mr. Sessions, Mr. Flynn, and Mr. Trump’s son-in-law, White House adviser Jared Kushner. The law enforcement machinery must then determine whether U.S. national security was in any way compromised by those interactions. The third question regarding whether Mr. Sessions lied under oath to Congress about his meetings, a potential felony under U.S. law, may make his continuance in office uncertain. The combined weight of the conversations that he and other Trump team members had with those officials makes Moscow’s fingerprint on American politics hard to ignore. This saga leaves a heavy question hanging over the sovereignty of U.S. foreign policy in the days ahead. President Trump, who’s come to office on an “America First” battle cry, will struggle yet more to counter the allegations of Kremlin’s hand covertly influencing policy. The denouement matters immensely to the outcomes in Syria, the future of the embattled European Union, and across an increasingly multipolar world.

War, state and martyrdom

In a democracy, national security functions cannot be shielded from critical public scrutiny



HAPPYMON JACOB

Amid the ongoing commotion triggered by arrogant and puritanical claims about nationalism and patriotism, the words of Gurmehar Kaur, a Delhi University student whose online video of May 2016 has suddenly become a needless controversy, come across as profoundly wise and humane. Ms. Kaur’s moving and thoughtful statement – “Pakistan did not kill my dad, war killed him... I fight for peace between India and Pakistan. Because if there was no war between us, my father would still be here” – has, however, not gone down well with Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders and certain celebrities, among others.

Kiren Rijju, Union Minister of State for Home, suggested that someone was “polluting this young girl’s mind”, which was soon supported by his party colleague and MP Pratap Simha with an equally disgraceful tweet. Statements by these two leaders and their supporters have displayed an appalling lack of nuance about the larger import and context of what Ms. Kaur was referring to when she said that it was war that killed her father. Such a ‘nationalist’ backlash against thoughtful comments should make us wonder if indeed war is profitable to some sections of society, and hence preferable to peace.

In a more fundamental sense, the prevailing understating of the nation state as “father”, “mother”, etc. has de-historicised and reified the true nature and context of the modern state, thereby condoning the many atrocities committed by states around the world. There is therefore a need to ‘de-anthropo-

morphise’ the nation state to gain insights into its historically appropriate character.

Role of violence

Modern states not only monopolise and organise violence, but more importantly, violence has played a central role in their historical evolution. War-making and the use of force are intrinsic to the modern state, and this deep-seated tendency of the state should be constantly mediated by popular resistance, reasoned debates and peace-building, lest those tendencies run amok. Nation states are not sentient beings to be revered, but entities often controlled by powerful interest groups, whose power and control should be constantly checked and interrogated.

Moreover, war is not always, as many of us believe, an undesirable evil thrust upon us by ‘immoral’ outsiders, but often something that our politicians and governments create through their actions and engage in for their own selfish political and other interests. As historian Charles Tilly reminds us, “Governments themselves commonly simulate, stimulate, or even fabricate threats of external war.” The argument here is not that we should do away with states altogether or that armed forces should be disbanded. But rather that the state’s so-called national security functions cannot be allowed to continue unquestionably, without critical public scrutiny. Notwithstanding Mr. Rijju’s advice that “we should stop this habit of raising doubt, questioning the authorities and the police,” we must make it a habit to question the security claims and functions of our state: for our own good.

States routinely use wars, or as Ms. Kaur puts it, “state-sponsored hatred”, for domestic political ends. Sometimes as diversionary war tactic – to divert our attention from domestic turmoil such as economic slowdown or rising unemployment – and sometimes for



NSAR AHMAD

political ends like how the BJP cleverly used the ‘surgical strikes’ for electoral purposes, while advising others not to do so. The sharp spike in ceasefire violations in the Jammu and Kashmir election in 2014 is yet another example.

As a matter of fact, ceasefire violations, terror attacks and military casualties have considerably increased ever since the BJP government has come to power: would it not be logical then to argue that the BJP’s political inability to make peace in Kashmir and negotiate the Kashmir dispute with Pakistan has become costly for the country? World over today, the link between conflict and huge costs to the economy is well understood.

The ‘nationalist war-mongering’ by the BJP and its supporters often sounds like a ‘protection racket’, one in which many national security threats are imagined, often created by its own actions, disagreements to its national security discourse are castigated as anti-national, and then political benefits are made from the resultant turmoil. Then there are deep-running business interests such as politically connected promoters of the defence industry who stand to benefit from conflict and war.

Myth of martyrdom

As a nation, we must value the sacrifices our soldiers make by serving in difficult conditions and even getting killed in action. And yet, cloaking their deaths in the hyper-glorified paraphernalia of martyrdom

is often a convenient excuse for waging wars, and not undertaking the difficult task of conflict resolution. Government reports and popular narratives typically talk of soldiers, even villagers on the border, embracing martyrdom when they get killed in firing, mine blasts and even vehicle accidents. How does a villager who had absolutely no intention of dying achieve martyrdom when he gets killed in firing between the two armies?

The hype around martyrdom and the talk about giving a befitting response to the other side are often used as convenient excuses to not take adequate measures for resolving conflicts which cost lives in the first place: why worry about the not-so-easy process of conflict resolution when soldiers are willing to be ‘martyred’, and they or their family won’t complain as doing so would be an insult to ‘Bharat Mata’ or the result of a ‘polluted mind’?

The talk of martyrdom is also misleading because it shrouds the sheer unnecessary of premature death in momentary glory, thereby diminishing the importance of a soldier’s life. The life of a soldier is worth far more than the monetary compensation or the honour of ‘shahadat’. Furthermore, it makes the rest of us, civilians, view it as their unavoidable fate: “Why join the military if you are not willing to die?” But why do they have to die if, as Ms. Kaur asked, we can “talk to each other and get the job done”? Why do societies have to “brainwash” (I use this word upon considerable reflection) youngsters to die so that others can live peacefully?

Young soldiers’ lives are no less expendable than ours, and that’s precisely why we should not let the ruling classes, who have historically benefited from wars and conflicts, glorify wars. The talk of martyrdom not only justifies getting our youngsters killed but also killing others, who are victims of similar circumstances across the border. When proudly, and even

hearteningly, counting the kills on the Pakistani side becomes a national pastime, we must know there is something wrong with our society.

Let’s make it somewhat simpler for politicians such as Mr. Rijju who take figurative expressions such as ‘Bharat ka namak’ too seriously. Devoid of cheap populism, Bharat is a modern state that requires better institutions, better leadership, and innovative tools for conflict resolution, none of which the BJP seems to be interested in. Problematising the concept of martyrdom is not about dishonouring our soldiers but emphasising that their lives are as sacred as ours.

Double standards

BJP leaders are adept at using ‘our soldiers and their sacrifices’ for their political ends, but when one of them (like the Border Security Force soldier, Tej Bahadur) or their relatives (like Ms. Kaur) decide to speak out, BJP leaders cry foul. Is that not a bit too convenient? It is increasingly becoming evident that the BJP is merely concerned about using ‘our jawans’ for its political ends: beneath such rhetoric, it is hardly concerned about their welfare (such as providing good working conditions), or ensuring that the country’s national security is robust (institutionally and materially) or resolving the conflicts that kill our soldiers.

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Lahore to make peace with Pakistan (after years of accusing the Congress party of being soft on Pakistan), BJP leaders hailed it as innovative diplomacy, but when people like Ms. Kaur call for making peace with Pakistan, BJP leaders suggest they have ‘polluted minds’. This is a classic definition of a politically convenient double standard.

Happymon Jacob teaches Disarmament and National Security at the School of International Studies, JNU

The road to China is through Kabul

New possibilities on regional cooperation are emerging, which India should not hesitate to explore



HARSH V. PANT

Afghanistan has again emerged as a platform providing new possibilities on the India-China cooperation front. After the restructured ‘Strategic dialogue’ between India and China last week, Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar said: “On Afghanistan, they certainly seem to suggest to us that their approach and policies are in tandem with us, not on different page.” The strategic dialogue, which was divided into five sub-groups of which Afghanistan was one, focussed significantly on the country. China expressed admiration for India’s developmental work in Afghanistan amidst a broader understanding that New Delhi and Beijing need to strengthen the government in Kabul.

This development comes against a backdrop of the growing threat of the Islamic State (IS) to China. The

IS released a video this week of Chinese Uighur Muslims vowing to return home and “shed blood like rivers” even as the Chinese military displayed its military might as a show of force in Xinjiang. A rattled China is calling for greater global cooperation against the IS, which is also a reason why China has joined ranks with Russia in a bid to engage the Taliban in Afghanistan.

China has for years blamed exiled Uighur “separatists” for violence in Xinjiang and has warned of the militants’ potential to link up with global jihadist groups. It is worried about the spillover effect of continuing instability in Afghanistan. The impact of Afghanistan’s destabilisation will be felt not only in Kashmir but also in Xinjiang where the East Turkistan Islamic Movement is active. Moreover, China’s mega investment plans in Pakistan are predicated on a measure of regional stability.

With the Donald Trump administration yet to clarify its position on Afghanistan, and with it looking unlikely to add more American troops to the depleting reserves of Western forces in the country, it is not sur-

prising that China is keen to engage India, the one country that has built a reservoir of goodwill in Afghanistan and has demonstrated some ability to deliver concrete results on the ground.

Divergences on Afghanistan

But there remain some fundamental divergences in Sino-Indian positions on Afghanistan and broader counterterrorism postures. Just last December, Mr. Jaishankar said that India and China were not able to “cooperate as effectively” as they should in countering terrorism. His statement had come in the wake of China putting on hold the inclusion of JeM chief Masood Azhar’s name in the United Nation’s list of global terrorists.

Even after last week’s strategic dialogue, the Foreign Secretary was careful to underline the differences. On the Taliban, for example, he suggested that “their [China’s] characterisation was that there were elements of Taliban which are very extreme. In their view there were also elements of Taliban that can work with international community and Afghan government.”



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK PHOTO

For long, India sought to include Afghanistan in its discussions with China on counterterrorism. The Sino-India counterterrorism dialogue was initially viewed as a promising bilateral initiative for dealing with terrorism. But nothing of consequence emerged from these dialogues. For India, the main source of terrorism is Pakistan where the state machinery continues to view terrorism as a legitimate tool of national policy. For China, Pakistan is an important asset in its South Asia policy and an all-weather friend. As a consequence, where New Delhi had, somewhat audaciously, expected to make common cause with Beijing vis-à-vis Islamabad and Rawalpindi, there was only disappointment at the out-

come of these dialogues.

But as concerns started rising in the region about the consequences of the withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan in 2014, China reached out to India. This too couldn’t go far as China continued to emphasise that its relationship with Pakistan was far more important than a regional approach on terrorism with India. In this context, New Delhi should not expect Beijing to change its Afghanistan policy significantly to suit Indian interests. The road to stability in Kabul lies through Rawalpindi, and China has few incentives to challenge the Pakistani security establishment’s traditional adversarial mindset vis-à-vis India that continues to look at Afghanistan for some chimerical ‘strategic depth’. But the fact that China is interested in working with India on Afghanistan suggests that new possibilities on regional cooperation are emerging, which India should not hesitate to explore.

Harsh V. Pant is Professor at King’s College, London and Head of Strategic Studies at the Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Thaw in relations

The fact that India has agreed to attend a meeting of the Permanent Indus Commission in Lahore on the Indus Waters Treaty and the selection of a Pakistani official as Secretary-General of SAARC are hopeful signs of relations improving between India and Pakistan (“India to attend Lahore meet on Indus Waters Treaty” and “Key SAARC post for Pak. official”, March 3). It is time to begin a new chapter with our neighbour, even while it is important to keep vigilance on the border. India should start this new chapter by relaxing visa rules for ordinary Pakistani citizens coming into India. Hopefully, Pakistan will reciprocate this gesture. New border trade posts should be opened and sports and cultural exchanges should commence gradually.

D.B.N. MURTHY, Bengaluru

Sorry state of discourse

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh leader Kandan

Chandrawat’s speech, in which he declared a bounty on the Kerala Chief Minister’s head, was disgusting (“RSS leader’s remark on Pinarayi draws flak”, March 3). The political discourse in India is touching a new low every day. Only a couple of days back, a Minister encouraged a crowd to attack the Prime Minister’s photo. Such comments have unfortunately become par for the course in Indian politics. From communal slurs, to gender-insensitive and casteist remarks, to personal insults, it’s become a free-for-all. We are supposed to be a mature democracy. We often talk about cleaning up politics, but we must also speak about the importance of the language of discourse.

P. ARIHANTH, Secunderabad

Victory for civil society

This is a great story about the success of a movement by the people (“Karnataka drops steel flyover project”, March 3). That the protests

were peaceful is appreciable. Our country needs more such mature peaceful movements that challenge the decisions of governments that are not in the public interest.

KOUSHIK H.R., Bengaluru

I am a proud Bengalurian today and I congratulate the people for their sustained campaign against the steel flyover project. I also appreciate the State government for its decision to cancel the project. At a time of drought, and before a harsh summer, the fact that a city has prevented around 800 trees from being felled is some comfort.

S. ARJUN PRASANNA, Bengaluru

Politics of Aadhaar

Before it came to power, the Bharatiya Janata Party had called the Aadhaar scheme a “fraud”. It promised to review it once the party came to power. But after coming to power, it has made Aadhaar mandatory

for final pension settlement, LPG subsidy and even for a temple darshan! (“Rlys. to make Aadhaar mandatory”, March 3). It appears that the dual standards of political parties have no bounds and the BJP is no exception.

KSHIRASAGARA BALAJI RAO, Hyderabad

Unrest on campuses

This refers to the views put forth by Professor Aswini Mohapatra (“Are our campuses under siege?” March 3). By going back to some mythical past to define his version of Bharatvarsha, the author exposes himself to a lot of uncomfortable questions. Who are the people who occupied this land? Did they all practise the same religion? Did they all speak variants of the same language? How far back do you go to define Indian identity? According to some historians, the subcontinent was originally inhabited by native tribes who spoke languages of the Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto-Burman families and not by

the dominant strain that now claims to be truly Indian. Even the example he quotes of Ram and Ramaswamy is only partly true. There are innumerable names of people in Tamil Nadu that have no North Indian equivalent. Just one example will suffice to prove my point: Pugazhendy. As for the physical boundaries of this mythical land, what do you include and what do you leave out? Do you include Afghanistan because it was part of the Gandhara province of Ashoka’s Mauryan empire? By the same token, do you leave out South India and large parts of the Northeast because they were not part

of this empire? To avoid such problems, one has to start with the most recently created and internationally accepted entity – independent India – and the Constitution. In fact, perhaps unwittingly, while spelling out the nature of the constructivist model of the Western historical perspective of nationalism, the author has spilled the beans on the methodology being used by the present political dispensation – the use of narratives based on selective manipulation of facts by the political elite for mobilisation and capture of state power.

S. BHASHYAM, Bengaluru

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS: >>>Penicillin mould created by Fleming sells for ₹ 97.5 lakh, read a Life page story (March 3, 2017) headline. The figure ₹ 97.5 lakh – which was there in the text as well – was erroneous. It should have been ₹ 9.75 lakh.

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Ear to the ground

Can a village, with its specific caste complexity, local dynamics and cross-pollination of allegiances, hold pointers to the rest of the State during election season? **Smita Gupta** reports from Kalan in Uttar Pradesh's Sultanpur district as the 7-phased Assembly elections draw to an end on March 8

The sprawling village of Kalan is set in 1,200 bighas of fertile land in the south-eastern corner of Uttar Pradesh's Sultanpur district. An early spring sun filters through the trees onto the ruins of Somit Pratap Singh's hereditary home. He is supervising the building of his new home, as the mountain of bricks before which he sits suggests. Somit has just completed his MSc from the Shri Vishwanath Degree College nearby and hopes to become a primary school teacher, once the Assembly elections conclude and recruitment is resumed.

Three days before polling in the Kadipur Assembly constituency (February 27), in which this village falls, we talk about the electoral prospects of the parties in the fray. It's BJP versus BSP here, he says confidently. His vote, like that of his fellow Thakurs, will go to the *kamal ka phool* (lotus, the BJP symbol). He suddenly rushes off and returns with a large notebook, flips it open and shows me a family tree he has drawn up painstakingly. It goes back two centuries. "It's important that future generations know who their ancestors were," he stresses.

The Thakurs, BJP loyalists

Indeed, pride in their heritage is a recurring theme with the Thakurs who dominate the village politically, own the largest tracts of land, and are patrons of education. Kalan has many shortcomings, but it has an array of educational options in its immediate vicinity from the government school and degree college to the swish Shivbrat Children's Academy and an engineering college: it ensures that virtually every child here is getting an education. The last named is administered by Uma Shankar Singh, the former pradhan of Kalan, who studied at Mumbai's K.C. College and the Mafatal Institute before embarking on a 25-year-long career in textile quality control that included a stint at Subbu Textiles in Tamil Nadu's Erode district.

Rajendra Bahadur Singh, a primary school teacher in a neighbouring village, claims his family's arrival in these parts predates Rana Pratap — a Thakur icon — who ruled in the sixteenth century. His ancestors, he says, came as horse traders from Amer in Rajasthan, overthrew the Rajbharas who were the local rulers at the time and settled down in the village of Khanpur Pilai, less than five km from Kalan. "Today," he proclaims proudly, "Our clan of Kachwaha Thakurs is spread over 52 villages and the Rajbharas work on our land. But we don't have any social relations with them."

The cycle is looking at its community, the elephant at its community. We are trying something new: we'll vote for the kamal (lotus).

MOTINATH

It's a given that Rajendra and his family, including his elder brother who holds a PhD in sociology from Lucknow University and has done research work at Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University, will vote BJP. "It is the only nationalist party — all educated people will vote for Narendra Modi," he says.

And then he adds, "This time, the Rajbharas, who are traditional BSP supporters and even voted for the party in 2014, have shifted to the BJP." The reason? A brand-new Rajbhar party, the Bharatiya Samaj Party, that takes its inspiration from Raja Suhel Dev, ironically enough the Rajbhar king who was defeated by the Thakurs, has allied itself with the BJP this time.

Rajbharas shifting right?

In Kalan, the Rajbharas, an OBC community, are numerically larger than the Thakurs but, barring the Musahars (earlier rat catchers but now landless labourers), are the poorest in the village. Its members largely live below the poverty line. A handful are marginal cultivators not even growing enough to feed their families, while the vast majority are landless labourers here.

The Rajbhar quarter in the village is a tongue of land surrounded on three sides by lush green fields of paddy and mustard. But most of it belongs to another OBC community, the Badhais, traditionally makers of agricultural tools, but whose secondary occupation is cultivation.

The crowded mud hovels in which the Rajbharas live are a far cry from the well-lit havelis and whitewashed bungalows of the Thakurs, equipped with modern conveniences. Some have laid out their string beds outside their homes. To protect themselves from the elements and the mosquitoes, they have opened out used fertiliser bags and stitched them into mosquito net-like canopies for their beds.

"Our ancestors left us no land," says Sanichara sadly, "so we work on the lands of the Thakurs and the Badhais." Rajpati and Mala join in the conversation to complain they have the "lal rang ka card" (BPL card) but don't get any of the welfare benefits that others seem to enjoy. "No one cares whether we are alive or dead," says Mala. "We have no proper drains or toilets, and a *kucha* (unpaved) road leads to our dwellings." Her nephew, Munna, is a mason who



Appraising the vote: "In Kalan, numerically there are roughly the same number of Dalit families as there are Thakur households, adding to their sense of power." Susheela Devi (far right) stands with her neighbours in the village. (Below) An old Thakur house. R.V. MOORTHY

has seen a bit of life outside the village. "Look at Bihar: have you seen the pitch (tarred) roads there?" he says enviously. "Here we were told that everyone with a red BPL card would get a free bulb, and pay ₹25 on electricity. But we are being made to pay ₹270." In the hand-to-mouth existence that they live, that makes a big hole in their meagre earnings.

So has anyone come to seek your votes, I ask. Yes, says Rajpati, someone from the BSP. But when I ask who they are voting for, the women say, "Kono palan nahin (We haven't decided yet)." Mala adds, "Jahan public jutegi wahan jayenge (Wherever the majority is going, we will follow)."

Sanichara's father-in-law, Motinath, with matted long hair and a straggly unkempt beard, is more forthcoming: "The cycle [the SP symbol] is looking at its community, the elephant [the BSP symbol] at its community. We are trying something new: we'll vote for the kamal."

As I turn to leave, there is a surprise. Sanichara, Rajpati and Mala follow me. As soon as they are out of earshot distance from their menfolk, they grab my arm and whisper in my ear: "We like Mayawati: we have attended her rallies in the past. We are going to vote for her. Don't you think that's a good idea?"

Camp BSP: the Dalits

If the Thakurs of Kalan have memories of military triumphs stretching over several centuries that gives them the self-confidence to take on the challenges of life, the BSP phenomenon has empowered the Dalits over the last 25 years. Indeed, though Akbarpur, the birthplace of the socialist leader, Ram Manohar Lohia, is less than 40 km away, only old-timers in the village have fleeting memories of him, with a statue and a few educational institutions named after him there. Instead, with BSP founder Kanshi Ram making this region — of which Kalan is a part — one of his social laboratories, it is the BSP that continues to have influence here.

In Kalan, numerically too there are roughly the same number of Dalit families as there are Thakur households, adding to their sense of power. As I walk to the Dalit quarter, right at the heart of the village, this is immediately visible, especially among the women and the younger generation.

Uneducated Dalits like Ramachal and his wife Usha are marginal farmers, who supplement their income by carrying bricks at building sites. But they have nothing left at the end of the month. Ramachal's ailing father gets a pension, but that's about it. They complain about *notebandi* (the demonetisation exercise) and are a bit subdued, but their eldest child, Sonu, who is in Class XI at the local government school, is not. He says he wants to be an engine driver and see the world. His mother butts in to say sourly, "Where will we get the money for the bribe?" But Sonu remains cool and instead explains the Pythagorean theorem with aplomb — a tribute both to him and the school where he studies.

At 17, he doesn't have a vote but clearly takes an interest in politics, for it is he who says that his parents will vote for the elephant. "Behenji [BSP chief Mayawati] ran a very good government and the BSP is our party. We are all elephants," Sonu stresses.

Like Sonu, one of their neighbours, Sunita Devi, who works at an Anganwadi, has her own world view. An attractive young married woman, she is the mother of three little girls, and has studied till Class X. "Modi had said *ghar ghar sauchalaya* [a toilet in every house], but we have no toilets yet," she says. "We will vote for Behenji because she gives the most benefits. When my eldest child was born, she was in power and the government gave ₹1 lakh insur-

Our grown-up sons are considering Akhilesh Yadav because he has given cycles and laptops.

MEERA

Kalan is the last village in Sultanpur district at its southeastern end. It shares a border with Jaunpur and Azamgarh districts and is very close to Ambedkar Nagar district



- Population: **4,500**
- Number of voters: **2,600**
- Biggest community: Rajbharas (100 families)
- Thakurs and Dalits have roughly 65 families each
- Smallest community: Musahars (1 family)

ance for the baby. When my daughter turns 18, I can use the accrued money for her marriage."

I tell Sunita I had heard that a BJP representative visited the Dalit quarter, and ask her what she thinks of the Prime Minister. "Yes, Rajesh Kumar [a BJP activist] came here and said, vote for *kamal ka phool*. I told him we are *haathi* [elephant] people, so forget about it." And then she takes off on the Central government: "I was expecting my third child last November and had gone to my parents' home in Azamgarh district. Thanks to *notebandi*, my parents had such a tough time raising the ₹5,000 for me to have the child at a private hospital."

So what does she expect of the Prime Minister? "When we choose a Prime Minister, we do it in the hope that he creates a harmonious atmosphere, and works for the welfare of all the people. Then everyone will be happy. We don't expect *notebandi* — everyone sitting at

home and crying," she says.

If the Dalit women are committed Mayawati supporters, some of the men are considering other options. Ramprakash, a bus conductor who earns ₹4,000 a month, says, "We are *haathiwaleen* but it's not necessary that we will all vote BSP. Modi has done some good work: let's try him once." His fiery young wife, Shashikala, and their neighbour, Meera, turn on him: "Rubbish! He has done nothing. We women at any rate will vote BSP."

And then comes another surprise. Meera says, "Our grown-up sons are considering another option — Akhilesh Yadav [of the SP], because he has given cycles and laptops."

The split backward vote

But Mayawati has other admirers among the backward castes. In Kalan, there are half-a-dozen homes of the Lohars, traditional blacksmiths, but who have now turned to carpentry, with many moving to Mumbai. The Lohars have some land, but it is not enough to feed them. Saroja Surajlal Vishwakarma, the young daughter-in-law of one Lohar household, is an ardent Modi admirer. But her aunt-in-law, Parvati, who lives in Mumbai and is here on vacation, hates the Prime Minister. She had to pawn her jewellery to get her husband treated after demonetisation devastated their carpentry business. "Someone who begs for your votes should not oppress you. Life was best for women under Mayawati. I have been to her rallies," she says firmly.

But not all communities who vote BSP have been empowered. Take Kalan's only Musahar family. Ram Chander, his two brothers, and his wife Lakshmina, who suffers from a nervous disorder, live on the edge of the village. Three decades back, they lived in a small room in the nearby *kasba*, and would travel to Kalan for work. One day, a Thakur said that he would give them a piece of land in exchange for which they would have to make sal leaf *pattals* (plates) and clear away the soiled plates. Now no one eats from those plates and they do odd jobs to eke out an existence. They also have a little stall on the main road where they sell chewable tobacco, potato crisps and toffees.

If the Lohars are divided, another backward caste, the Chaurasias, traditional betel growers and a community that has social relations with the Thakurs, are firmly with the BJP. Kalan's current pradhan Bimla Devi was away in Mumbai to attend to her husband Chotey Lal, who is admitted in a hospital there after he sustained a heart attack. They have a thriving betel leaf and motor parts business in that city. That is evident from the imposing three-storey house they are building in the village, with tiered, carved balconies that curve around the structure.

Their younger son, Krishna, who has a BSc degree, is standing in for his mother. He reels off all the improvements he has made to the village — drains, roads, electricity — and says he hopes to contest the seat when it is reserved. His elder brother Mukesh, who is going to sit for the entrance exams for a government job, and he are both BJP supporters. Mukesh says he

"Behenji [BSP chief Mayawati] ran a very good government and the BSP is our party. We are all elephants."

SONU

likes the BJP but wishes the party would not try and divide society — also he makes it clear that reservation for OBCs must continue. But Krishna likes the party for its anti-Muslim stance: "They tease our girls in Muslim-dominated areas and the SP gives them protection," he says, adding, "I want Yogi Adityanath to be Chief Minister."

In Kalan, however, the Muslims are a minuscule minority, no more than six families, two of whom live on one edge of the village. But the two — related to each other — have quarrelled over land, and a wall separates their homes. Tabassum is a young widow. She and her daughter live with her mother and sister-in-law. They have no land, so her brother who works in Mumbai sends home money to support them. "My daughter, Saina Bano, has friends at the private school she attends, but none in the village." For much of the year, they live in splendid isolation: "Most people don't know we are Muslims, so we go and play Holi," she says and then adds, "We invite people for Bakrid." Yes, she will vote, she says. "I hear people are voting for Mayawati. I'll do the same."

Akhilesh's Yadavs?

The Yadavs in Kalan are predictably supporters of the SP: they are largely educated and financially on a stable footing. Sangeeta, a young housewife who also works at an Anganwadi, lives in a joint family. Her brother-in-law Rajesh has an MA degree and is looking for a job. But the family has enough land to not only to feed itself but also sell in the open market. Everyone here says they are voting SP, but it is the younger members who answer the difficult questions. The cherubic-looking Saurabh is only 16, but clearly sharper than his elders: when I ask the family what they have to say about the Yadavs cornering all the benefits, it is he who responds, measuring his words carefully: "Do only OBCs walk on the roads or benefit from the ambulances and police vans? Are they the only ones who get pensions? Yes, there may be many Yadavs in the police and forces because we are a martial people. But the bureaucracy is dominated by Kayasthas and Brahmins. Why not talk about that?"

And then Saurabh springs a surprise. He will be of voting age by 2019 and he says: "I am very impressed by Modi's personality. I think many in my family will vote BJP in 2019." His uncles demur but he has let the cat out of the bag. After SP patriarch Mulayam Singh Yadav came to power, through the 1990s and the 2000s, political power helped the Yadavs prosper materially and enter the middle class. Their aspirations have changed and many no longer wish to be associated with a party associated with lathi-wielding musclemen. If the advent of the polished Akhilesh Yadav has held them back, the results of the current elections could well determine the future voting patterns of the community.

