

# When Fair Is Foul, Voters to The Fore

Violating popular mandate runs into a wall

In India's electoral history, it is hard to recollect an instance where a poll for one seat in the Rajya Sabha (RS) attracted as much media attention and political manoeuvring as the contest between Congress' Ahmed Patel and BJP's Balwant Singh Rajput in Gujarat, for the third seat besides the first two assured for BJP president Amit Shah and Union minister Smriti Irani. Some sections of media portrayed it as if Congress president Sonia Gandhi was contesting against Shah. Patel is the political secretary to Gandhi and Shah is billed as a genius who can turn outcomes to favour the BJP, even when the popular mandate is not in its favour, a skill demonstrated in Goa and Manipur in March and, more recently, in Bihar.

That is why Patel's victory is significant. He has stalled, if not stopped, the relentless march of the BJP in state after state where it lacks the electoral mandate. The latest instance is the defection of Nitish Kumar of the Janata Dal (United) to form a government in Bihar with



BJP, when people voted overwhelmingly for the mahagathbandhan with Lalu Prasad and the Congress. Earlier, it had tried to topple Congress-ruled regimes in Arunachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, a move that was annulled in court. If buying up the support of MLAs who got elected on opposing platforms gets legitimised, democracy would be the worse for it. The Gujarat Rajya Sabha contest saw much cross voting, but produced a result that would have emerged smoothly, had the original mandate of the voters remained unbreached.

The BJP has acquired a style that is reminiscent of the way Indira Gandhi used Central authority to topple popularly elected governments in states. In a democracy, the will of the voter, not a market straying members of Equus Caballus, must decide poll outcomes. Politicians will try to pretend that the ends justify the means. It is up to the people to pronounce how much trouble will brew for politicians if they pretend that fair is foul and foul, fair. The Election Commission can help, introducing electronic voting in Rajya Sabha polls as well.

# India's Gender Chasm Retards the Economy

Women hold up half the sky. This is not a moral or social argument — it is essentially an economic fact. But women are largely absent from India's workforce. With a gender gap of 52.1%, the International Labour Organization has ranked India 121st among 131 countries on the basis of female labour force participation. Multiple reports and studies point to the positive impact that increased participation of women in the labour force would have on the economy. If India could close the wide gender gap in employment by 2025, the economy could gain by as much as \$1 trillion.

Women are central to making growth more inclusive, to reducing income inequality, thereby making growth more sustainable. Women can be game changers. To actualise this potential, the focus must be on empowering women in general, education, easing entry into the workforce and providing support to balance work and family. While schooling is a fundamental right for all, more must be done to reduce the dropout rate among girls and help them complete full 12 years of schooling. Improved access to schools, and better sanitation are essential to achieve this goal. Labour markets should be more flexible — easing the move from the informal to the formal sector. Financial inclusion and improved access to credit will allow women to pursue economic opportunities.

The gendered privileging of women in raising families must give way to participative effort by both parents, who should both be eligible for childcare leave. Government, policymakers and workplaces must work together to provide affordable and high quality childcare. The government's "beti bachao, beti padhao" campaign must move beyond slogans to empowerment in practice. Popular culture must change, not just state policy.

# Artificial Intelligence vs The Real Thing

It is not funny anymore. Artificial Intelligence, we are told, can now make out when its interlocutor is being sarcastic. That AI can be smart was evident when two chatbots created their own coded language that left humans fuming, while guessing. It is precisely these smarts that finally could end up in the kind of scenario in which Arnold Schwarzenegger tells us, against a background of fiery destruction, that he will be back. Of course, we cannot run scared of AI. We positively love it, when it is used to make life simpler, as when an insurance startup in the US deployed AI to process a claim and settle it in a matter of seconds on a holiday. But the worry that what is sauce for insurance might be one's goose getting cooked in another context continues to niggle. The trouble is not just that machines are getting smarter. Smarter machines allow humans to get dumber as well. The multiplication table became a chore, if not entirely redundant, with the advent of the calculator. Phones that can store thousands of contact details have drained human memory of its previous ability to store numbers by the dozen. Usain Bolt might run but the aam aadmi prefers machines for locomotion. But there is a catch. The brain gets dumber only when the machine remains subservient; when it rebels, it would be the brain's turn to say, 'I will be back.'

Ahmed Patel's Rajya Sabha victory will change equations within the Congress

# The Hand Shakes Things Up



Neerja Chowdhury

Never in recent times has an election to the Rajya Sabha seen so much drama and political parties in a state of convulsion as this week's re-election of Ahmed Patel, political secretary to Congress president Sonia Gandhi, to the Rajya Sabha. The reason for such excitement was that it was made into a prestige issue by both the BJP and the Congress.

In normal due course, the seat for Gujarat, held by the Congress, should have gone to Patel, given that till three weeks ago, the party was comfortably placed with 57 MLAs. When voting took on Wednesday, it was left with 42 MLAs, 15 having jumped ship, not a very happy omen for the Grand Old Party.

Patel has to thank JD(U) leader Sharad Yadav for ensuring him the support of the party's lone MLA, despite Nitish Kumar's recent return to the NDA fold. That shows that Kumar's writ runs in Bihar, but not in other states. The other Sharad, Pawar, of the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), in his inimitable style, managed to strike the 'middle path', with one MLA voting for the BJP and the other for Patel.

It was a do-or-die battle for Patel. A defeat meant walking into the sunset for a man who was the UPA's mover and shaker for ten years and ran the Congress system for Sonia

Gandhi. It would have led to the collapse of an already demoralised Congress, particularly in assembly poll-going Gujarat later this year and beyond.

BJP president Amit Shah walking into the Rajya Sabha and Patel walking out would have had its own message: an unstoppable BJP on the ascent and the sun setting on the Congress empire. This would have hastened the rush of fence-sitters into the BJP all over the country.

Patel scraped through, thanks only to the disqualification of two Congress MLAs by the Election Commission (EC). The Congress demonstrated its old deft touch in raising a procedural issue, which could not be ignored by the EC.

## Celebrations

It is understandable for the Congress wanting to celebrate, given that this is the first piece of good news the party has had in three years apart from the Punjab assembly polls victory in March. And yet, it is also symptomatic of the Congress' current crisis — of clutching at straws without addressing the core issues.

The party still has to squarely face the reasons for its successive defeats, and why it hasn't put correctives in place. Senior Congressman Jairam Ramesh's critique a day before the poll was dead on: the Congress is facing 'existentialist', as opposed to 'electoral' crises — even as the timing of his interview was curious. But the points Ramesh raised warrant brainstorming, instead of the usual attempt by other Congressmen to push the issue under the carpet, especially now after Patel's win.

The Gujarat Rajya Sabha poll has demonstrated that senior Congressmen and state satraps can fight, and



Madam, can you now tell him not to eavesdrop?

even win, battles — when they set their minds to it, particularly if pushed to the wall — be it Ahmed Patel, Amarinder Singh, Siddharamaiah, or BS Hooda.

## Power Balance

The Patel victory will change the power balance in the Congress, with the old guard reasserting its authority. The empire can be expected to strike back. Will it lead to the continuation of Sonia Gandhi as the party chief till 2019, instead of Rahul Gandhi taking over in October? Whether or not he takes over as party president, it will be that much more difficult for Rahul now to sideline Patel — and the system he represents.

The Patel victory also shows that the Congress still retains (at least the remnants of) the killer instinct for which it was once known. And that it has not completely lost its old touch, for which it was known as the party of 'Raj kaaj', to manage things even in adverse situations.

It would be premature to conclude that this result could make a difference to the outcome of the forthcoming assembly polls in the state in

December. But it can give new heart to Congress workers, particularly in Gujarat.

While it is true that Rajya Sabha elections are about MLAs voting, and need not reflect sentiments on the ground, it is a fact that in the last ten years, the Congress has shown a lack of will to pluck the low-hanging fruit called Gujarat. Patel's victory may trigger a will to fight and win.

Will it dent the infallible image that BJP president Amit Shah has come to acquire, since the party and the man put everything in winning this contest? His 'defeat' may make some people in the BJP happy. But Shah, given his track record, has shown a tendency to bounce back with greater vigour after setbacks, something that was evident in the way he set about winning elections after the BJP's Bihar defeat.

'Operation Rajya Sabha' will go on to strengthen Ahmed Patel, and the Congress' old guard. To that extent it will contain Rahul Gandhi. But the party's turnaround will take a lot more than a Rajya Sabha victory, no matter how high profile the candidate and how bitterly it was fought — and won.

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## GENDER & INDIA INC

# A Little Help from Our Men



Elizabeth Broderick

Gender diversity is attracting increasing attention from India Inc. Companies are competing for industry diversity awards, increasing their parental leave provisions and setting gender equality targets for recruitment to attract and retain female workers.

This attention is well deserved. The economic and business case for gender equality in the world of work is clear. Evidence shows that more women on boards and in senior management is associated with better performance, including higher financial returns and stronger innovation outcomes. Increasing India's low rate of women participation in formal paid work would also drive GDP growth upwards.

Australia, like India, is reaching gender parity in educational attainment, and in some cases girls are overtaking boys. But we are not seeing this translate into equal outcomes in the workplace in either of our countries.

There are three points in the talent pipeline where women are affected disproportionately. They fail to enter, are stuck in the middle or locked out of the top. Just as in India, Australian women remain under-represented in leadership positions and are much more likely to be in insecure jobs in low-paid industries.

The slow pace of change means that equality remains a distant goal. The World Economic Forum estimates that at the current rate of incremental change, it will take decades to reach parity in all economic participation. Accelerating the pace of change, in all countries, will require innovative and disruptive solutions.

For too long the responsibility for making progress on gender equality has sat exclusively on the shoulders of women. Yet, the reality is that in most countries men largely occupy the seats of power and, therefore, are a critical part of the solution. We need influential men to step up beside women so that promoting gender equality and women leadership becomes everyone's business.

In 2010, I started the Male Champions of Change initiative. The importance of leadership from the top in achieving organisational change is well established. We formed a group of powerful male



No more waiting for an appointment

leaders from the private and public sectors to take practical action and to be accountable for making progress on gender equality in their own companies and beyond.

These leaders commit publicly to real, disruptive action to change the status quo. They challenge each other to be accountable for their commitments. They take a listening, learning and 'leading through action' approach. This means that they listen within their organisations and partner with leading women's organisations to ensure they are deepening their understanding of gender equality issues. They experiment, learn, set targets and measure progress. Today, the Male Champions of

Change are a group of 160 men, including the heads of iconic Australian companies such as Telstra, Rio Tinto, Commonwealth Bank and Qantas, and of major sporting leagues, the army and federal police. Together these organisations employ around 600,000 people, or 5% of Australia's workforce.

The UN has highlighted the initiative as worth global scaling, and Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe led the establishment of a similar group in 2014, now numbering over 100 Japanese CEOs and companies.

Big businesses in India, especially in sectors such as IT and finance, are increasingly displaying leadership in addressing gender inequality. I look forward to hearing about innovative solutions such as women-only factory floors, opening supply chains to women micro-entrepreneurs and customising leadership development programmes.

Gender equality and women's representation in leadership are not women's issues to be addressed by women alone. They are key economic and societal issues. We all benefit from a more gender equal world.

The writer is global co-chair, Women's Empowerment Principles (UN Global Compact)

## SEN & SENSIBILITY

# Belated Happy Raksha Bandhan



Rajyasree Sen

We've known for a while now that this is no country for women. Especially in North India. First, you're lucky if your parents actually allow you to live once they discover that you are a girl. And if you survive female infanticide, there are other horrors to follow.

Last week, women's plaits were being mysteriously lopped off by 'ghosts' and 'shape-shifting cats' in Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi and Rajasthan. Plait-cutters aside, on Saturday morning, a video surfaced of a crowd in the driveway of what turned out to be a gated condominium in Gurugram, Essel Towers. A man was shouting in English, "You are supporting prostitution in the society!" Because why else would a single woman want a male visitor to come to her home? Aap hi bataiyen! On Friday night, around the same time that unmarried women tenants were being accused of being

prostitutes, Varnika Kundu was driving home at midnight in Chandigarh. Her car was chased for over 7km by Vikas Barala and his friend, Ashish Kumar. Both were drunk. They tried to block the car's path with their SUV. Kundu managed to drive away and filed an FIR.

But then it gets interesting. Barala is the son of Subhash Barala, the Haryana BJP president. Both Vikas and Ashish are law students, which is, if you're the sort you gets ironies, is quite ironic.

What followed in the Kundu case



No big brother this

explains why the lot of urban women is not going to change in this country in a hurry. The police dropped the charge of abduction. The charges were reduced to 'stalking' and 'wrongful restraint' — two crimes that are bailable. Yes, Barala and his friend were released on bail and an 'investigation' is now on. I would request you to not hold your breath.

It's bad enough that the law seems to think that stalkers and men who chase women in cars to accost them on empty streets should be let off with a rap on their knuckles. What's worse is the Barala family — and some members of the BJP — defending Barala's behaviour. Because what else could Kundu be but a woman of 'loose morals' — an unmarried woman who was out on her own at night. That was so obvious.

On Monday, Chandigarh BJP vice president Ramveer Bharti stated, "Such cases tend to occur... and the probability is higher for girls being stalked if they are out at odd hours." And parents must ensure "girls should not be seen roaming on roads after a certain hour in the evening". Yes, locking up men out to harass and worse is such an impractical thing to do. 'At odd hours'.

Subhash Barala's nephew, Kuldeep Barala, posted an image on social media of Kundu standing between two male friends from 2012. Why? Because any woman with male friends is a woman who deserves unwanted sexual attention from men. Kuldeep's lack of understanding of women's safety or free will is not perplexing. After all, he himself has abduction charges against him in an ongoing case. Baralas of a feather flock together.

Subhash Barala, after maintaining a studied silence, said on Tuesday that Kundu is "like my daughter". God help us from people 'like our fathers' then. The next evening, BJP spokesperson Shaina NC, who happens to be a woman, posted the same picture of Kundu with her two friends on Twitter and Facebook. After a backlash on Twitter, Shaina claimed her Twitter account had been hacked.

The hacker, it seems, had kindly deleted the 'mischievous' tweet before handing the account back to her. Shaina seemed to have forgotten that the same picture had been posted on her Facebook account as well. Perhaps, the hacker is the same person chopping off people's braids.

Belated Happy Raksha Bandhan!



## Brahma Sutras

KAILASH VAJPEYI

The Vedas are the wellsprings of Indian literature and philosophy. The Upanishads are like secret doctrines contained in the Cedars. Inspired by the content of the Upanishads, philosopher Badarayana wrote Brahma Sutras. Since they were unintelligible to most, they were redefined by Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhwacharya.

Shankaracharya formulated the doctrine of advaita or non-dualism — that only the ultimate principle is real and all other phenomena are ephemeral. For Shankara, the apparent reality is illusory and the only recourse to dispel this illusion is self-realisation with the help of knowledge. Ramanuja's Shribhishya is a classic Vaishnava text. According to him, Brahman is the cause of all apparent reality. The material world is achit or unconscious, but because of being an integral part of Vishnu, apparent reality including the human soul, can never be separated from Brahman. The means to salvation is not knowledge but faith or love of Vishnu. Madhwacharya propounded the theory of dualism. According to him, though Brahman is the cause of the world, he is essentially different from the individual soul.

As long as one is caught in the cycle of birth and death, it is fallacious to think that the jiva or the individual soul is identical to the Brahman. They cannot be coupled as long as the individual soul is engaged in the pursuit of material happiness. However, once 'jiva' has transcended all the ordeals of worldly desires, a reunion becomes possible.

## Chat Room

### Let The Healthy Keep Working

This refers to 'FDs' Grandpa Needs More' by TK Arun (Aug 9). It raises genuine concerns faced by the ageing population of the country. With FD rates going down and ordinary people having limited knowledge of other financial instruments, it becomes difficult for them to earn extra income. The opening of NPS Tier 2 account for people above 60 is a policy suggestion doing the rounds. That's sensible. For a better living, the government should also consider retaining productive employees beyond superannuation if their health permits them to work. This is good for the economy as well.

MOLISHREE  
Byemail

### Need A Change In Mindset

Appropos 'Yes, Opinions Can Be Harmful' by Malika Rodrigues (Aug 9). Undoubtedly, gender discrimination hurts the self-worth of women employees. But punishment including dismissal does not strike at the root of the problem, and is only a temporary relief. The root cause of discrimination is the mindset of the male, and that must change. A strong organisational culture together with regular drive for social awareness and respect for all colleagues are as important as quick punishment, but its not easy to ensure this.

YG CHOUKSEY  
Pune

### Why Not A Secret Ballot?

Some of the procedural protocols of the Rajya Sabha election are mystifying. Why should an MLA show his vote to his own party's polling agent as permitted? Evidently to know which member has crossed-voted so that his name can be reported to the high command. But why should an MLA show his voting slip to a polling agent in the Opposition? That is the million-dollar question. Why are parties shy of secret balloting? The answers are linked to the necessity for a change in the Anti-Defection Law.

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