

ELECTION BLUES

This Lok Sabha election is particularly interesting for Jammu and Kashmir since this happens to be the first major election in the UT since the abolition of the special status of the erstwhile state and its division. For this reason, there is unprecedented campaigning from all candidates. Some are nervous over the somewhat changed profile of the constituencies due to delimitation. The narrative being set is about development on one side and some rag tag issues looking into the past on the other side. Nevertheless, the Lok Sabha elections seem to be a precursor to the Assembly elections and that has sent a wave of expectancy across the UT. The fielding of fresh faces by some parties in the elections is a happy augury. However, two major parties in Kashmir continue to be besotted with the dynasty. Whosoever wins, one thing is sure the election will set up a fresh narrative in J&K.

RAJOURI NEEDS ATTENTION

All is not well in the border area of Rajouri and Poonch as terrorists backed by Pakistan are still lurking around and can strike at will. The latest killing of a villager Mohd Razaq in Kunda village is a pointer to this. His killing surely is a case of revenge killing since his father was also slain in a gruesome manner by terrorists. Many incidents of this nature have come to the fore where terrorists have struck against hapless civilians with impunity. Now the J&K police announced a reward of Rs 10 lakh for anyone giving information on the Pakistani terrorist Abu Hamza, who is the kingpin in the gruesome killing of Mohd Razak. Such revenge killings by terrorists were common in Kashmir in hey days of terrorism. Rajouri-Poonch needs a focused approach by counterinsurgency forces. Also, it should be combined with a campaign to find out the Overground supporters and logistical managers of the terrorists.

Kumar Chellappan

As the Indian National Congress was burning midnight oil about the Lok Sabha constituency from where Rahul Gandhi would contest this time, The Pioneer has reported that the scion of the Nehru-Gandhi clan would not leave Wayanad from where he was elected with a mammoth majority of four lakh votes in the 2019 edition of the General Election. The report was prepared after speaking to a cross-section of the electorate in the Wayanad constituency who were unanimous in their opinion that Rahul Gandhi should contest from Wayanad itself.

Those who reacted to the queries posed to them included hardcore CPI(M) members and activists who made it known that Rahul should register a much bigger majority than that of the 2019 poll because the opponent happened to be Annie Raja of the CPI and K Surendran of the BJP. Annie, the spouse of D Raja, CPI's national general secretary, had

rubbed Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan in the wrong way and the CPI(M) cadres consider it as a cardinal sin. Raja too had publicly questioned the capability of Vijayan and this made the CPI(M) activists furious.

Had the Congress or BJP leaders criticized Vijayan, they would not have bothered but the CPI had crossed the Lakshman Rekha (it could be Stalinist Rekha since the comrades do not accept Ramayana). The CPI(M) comrades would certainly teach Annie Raja a lesson or two in the art of politics. The truth is that the CPI(M) leaders wanted Rahul Gandhi to contest from Wayanad so that the CPI would lose one seat for sure.

The decision to field Surendran, the Kerala State president of the BJP, was made much later. Surendran himself knows that he would lose by a big margin but he has to kowtow the party line. The information coming out of the BJP office is that he may be given a gubernatorial position even if he loses the security deposit. There are no suitable candidates in Ker-

ala BJP to challenge the supremacy of Rahul Gandhi and the Congress. The question being asked by Wayand voters is that how many people remember the names of the 2019 challengers to Rahul Gandhi.

What is interesting is that the animosity between the CPI(M) and Congress has come down drastically with Gandhi filing the nomination from Wayanad. Though the Congress leaders lambast the CPI(M), it is just a façade to convince the hardcore members of these parties that there is no alliance between them. But what the people of the State see in TV channels and newspapers is the video images and pictures of Sitaram Yechury and D Raja hugging and kissing Rahul Gandhi while in Tripura former CPI(M) Chief Minister Manik Sarkar openly campaigning for the Congress party's candidates.

Kerala is the only State where they act as if they are rivals and enemies. By the next election, one can see the Congress and the CPI(M) fighting it together in Ker-

ala against the BJP-led front (provided the Hindutva party leadership throws out all the rotten eggs from its basket). There is no difference between the Congress and the CPI(M) as of date.

Political pundits have been asking both parties to officially legalize the ties so that the entire secular parties could be arrayed under the flag of the Congress across the country against the "communal and fascist" forces. The secular parties include the Muslim League! In Marxist parlance, they say that whoever aligns with the CPI(M) is secular while the BJP is "communal and fascist". The CPI(M) does not have any issues in accepting the former NDA constituents as allies once they call off the marriage of convenience with the BJP. Telugu Desam of Andhra Pradesh, BJD of Orissa, BSP and JD(U) are some of the major political outfits whose secularist credentials depend on their ties with the BJP.

The press meeting addressed by A K Antony, the Bheeshma Pitamah of the Congress on 9 April

Ladakh's path to autonomy: Overcoming adversity

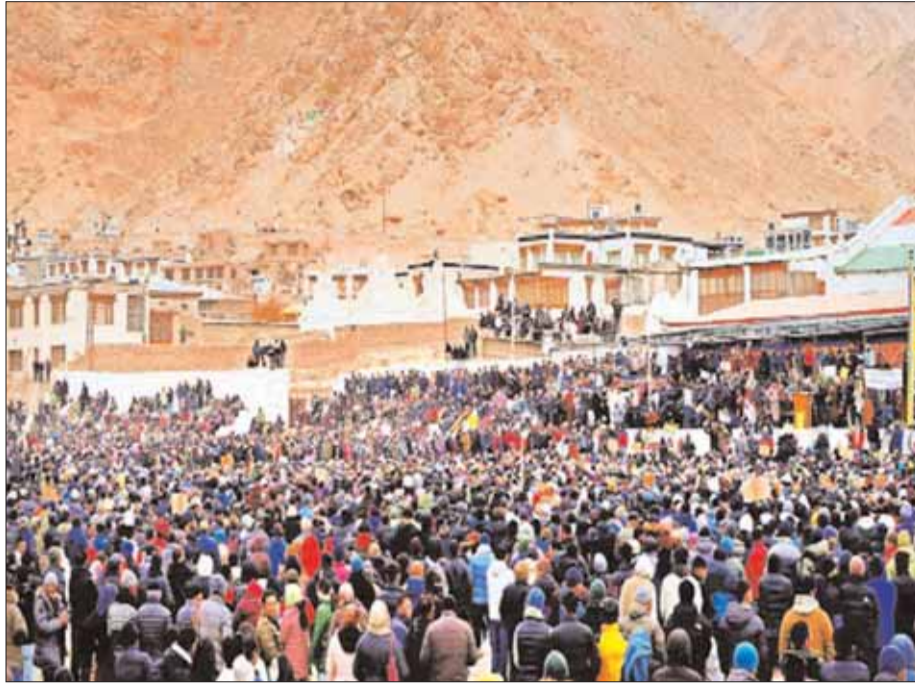
HARI OM

The accession of the erstwhile State of Jammu and Kashmir to India on October 26, 1947, inflicted significant socio-economic and political setbacks on the Buddhist-dominated Leh district in the strategic Trans-Himalayan Ladakh region, renowned as "the roof of the world" and "the land of the Lamas". Likewise, the predominantly Buddhist Zaskar tehsil in the Karil district of Ladakh bore the brunt of these consequences, enduring even greater hardships than its counterpart, Leh.

The genesis of the Muslim-majority Kargil district in 1979 under Sheikh Abdullah's leadership aimed at fostering discord between his co-religionists and the Buddhists, aiming to thwart the latter's aspirations for autonomy and union territory status for Ladakh. This move exacerbated the plight of the Buddhists, imperilling their religion, culture, societal fabric and demographic integrity due to two primary factors.

Firstly, successive Kashmiri-dominated administrations viewed Ladakh as an appendage to Kashmir, disregarding the political and economic aspirations of its Buddhist populace. Ladakh, akin to Jammu province, was seen as a colony by Kashmiri rulers, perpetuating a sense of marginalisation among the Buddhists.

Secondly, the pernicious influence of the Kashmiri elite over New Delhi's corridors of power further margin-



alised the Buddhists' voices, with central authorities consistently favouring Kashmiri interests and dismissing Ladakh's concerns.

In response to this systemic neglect, under the astute leadership of Head Lama Kushok Bakula Rinpoche, the Buddhists initiated protests in 1952, demanding meaningful political representation and autonomy. Despite their fervent appeals and warnings, both Srinagar and New Delhi brushed aside their grievances, exacerbating disillusionment among the Buddhist populace.

The culmination of discontent

erupted in October 1989, with widespread protests and clashes between Buddhists and authorities. The resultant Tripartite Agreement of October 29, 1989, brokered by the central Government, temporarily assuaged tensions by establishing the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC) at Leh.

However, this resolution faced vehement opposition from Kashmiri leaders, including Farooq Abdullah, who viewed it as a threat to Kashmiri hegemony.

Despite the establishment of LAHDC Leh in 1995, the Buddhists remained

dissatisfied due to continued interference from Kashmir-centric authorities, rendering the council ineffectual. Consequently, they intensified their agitation, advocating for Ladakh's Union Territory status and other demands, citing central rule as the sole recourse to address their grievances.

The turning point came after June 19, 2018, when the central Government assumed direct control of Jammu and Kashmir, embarking on a series of measures to appease the Buddhist community. These included the establishment of the University of Ladakh, granting divisional status to Ladakh and ultimately, separating Ladakh from Jammu and Kashmir to fulfil the long-standing demand for Union Territory status.

Additionally, substantial budgetary allocations were made to bolster Ladakh's development.

These initiatives underscored the efficacy of central rule in addressing the aspirations of the marginalised Buddhist population.

Rather than pursuing Statehood, the Buddhists are urged to strengthen LAHDC Leh and collaborate with the Modi Government to safeguard their cultural heritage and counter demographic challenges. The period between 2018 and 20

23 epitomises a transformative phase for Ladakh, wherein central intervention proved instrumental in redressing historical injustices and empowering its Buddhist populace.

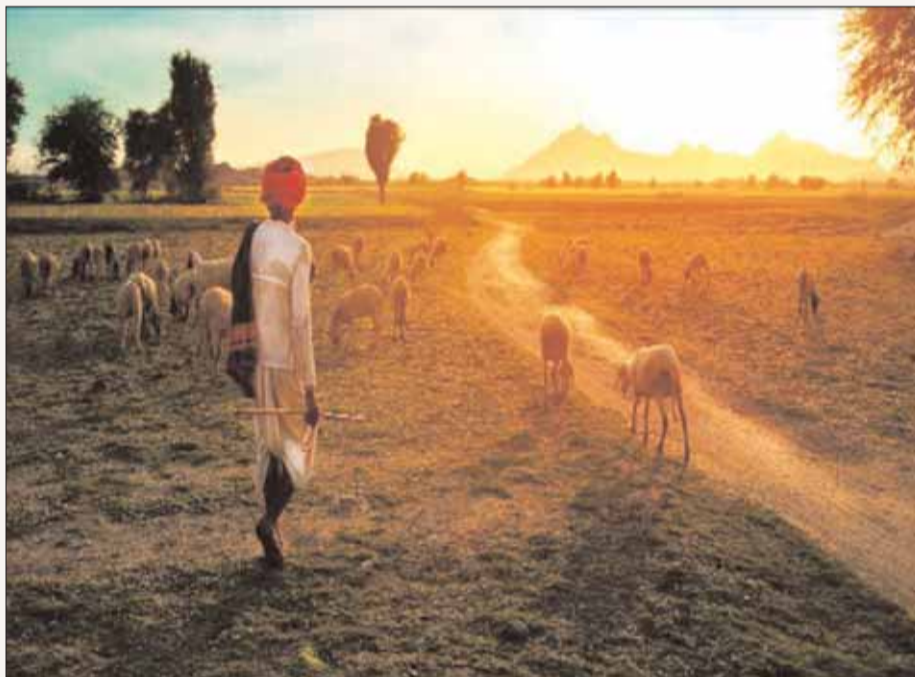
GOVT SCHEMES ARE TRANSFORMING LIVES IN RURAL RAJASTHAN

| MOHAN LAL GAMETI

We typically receive our ration between the 1st and 3rd of each month. If it's ever delayed, my grandchildren inquire why we haven't received it from the ration dealer. The younger generation in my household is quite aware. They've made sure that all the necessary ration-related documents are in order, ensuring a seamless supply. Also, my pension now arrives punctually. Thanks to various Government schemes, these youngsters are reaping benefits. They educate themselves about these schemes and then proactively apply for them at the Panchayat office," shares 76-year-old Amba Bai, residing in Loyara village within Udaipur district, Rajasthan.

Situated just 8 km from Udaipur, this village falls within the Badgaon tehsil. With a population of approximately 2500, the majority belong to the Scheduled Tribe community. Alongside the OBC Dangi community, there are various other castes. The village reflects the influence of its proximity to Udaipur city, evident in the transition of most houses to concrete structures. However, economically, the village still grapples with challenges. While individuals from OBC and general castes are involved in agriculture, trade, and animal husbandry, the majority of male members from the Scheduled Tribes work as labourers in marble factories surrounding Udaipur city. Some also engage in daily wage labour. Meanwhile, women in these households contribute to the family's income by working as domestic helpers in affluent homes within the city.

Economically, Loyara village may face



challenges, but socially and educationally, it has seen significant development. Consequently, awareness about Government schemes has risen among the villagers, leading to increased benefits. The younger generation in the village has embraced education, with even Scheduled Tribe boys and girls pursuing studies up to the 12th grade. This educational advancement has also fostered greater awareness within the community. For instance, the Public Distribution System (PDS), part of the Food Security scheme, has been embraced in the village. Shiv Lal, aged 45, attests to this positive change. Despite working in a marble factory in Bengaluru after completing his 12th grade, he re-

mains well-informed about Government schemes benefiting his family and the village. He recalls, "In the past, the ration dealer would often deny us ration with flimsy excuses. But now, thanks to education and awareness, such actions are no longer tolerated. Whenever we face ration shortages, we raise our concerns and seek information from the Panchayat office. Even in my absence, my children handle these matters diligently, ensuring the timely arrival of our ration."

Taru Bai, a respected elder at 70, sheds light on the changing face of education and Government support in Loyara village. "Back in my day, girls rarely pursued education," she recalls. "But now, over

half of the girls in our community are completing high school, and they're bringing back valuable information about Government programs. Their schooling has even helped smooth out the process for my pension, as they handle all the paperwork."

Looking back, Taru Bai remembers, "We used to hear about Government schemes, but getting clear information was a challenge, even after asking around at the Panchayat. But things are different now; the younger generation knows exactly how to navigate these programs and fill out the necessary forms."

However, amidst these educational strides, economic challenges persist. "The majority of the Scheduled Tribe families in the village are economically very weak. Most families do not have enough money to start a business, nor do they have enough land to do farming or vegetable production. Although the new generation has started studying, only a few people from this community are in Government jobs. But I think as the trend of education and awareness has increased among children, they will also soon start getting recruited in Government jobs."

In the same village, there is also the family of Mangi Lal and Tulsiram, who are deprived of the benefits of the PDS. Last year, the ration status of Mangi Lal's family which consists of seven members, was changed from BPL to APL. As a result, they stopped receiving ration. Similarly, Tulsiram mentions that due to missing documents, their family is unable to access ration benefits. For this, they've been in constant communication with the e-Mitra.

Rahul Gandhi holds on to Wayanad despite speculation

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2024 at Thiruvananthapuram was an indicator of how political marriages take place in Kerala. While Antony was cursing his son Anil Antony who is contesting from Pathanamthitta as a BJP candidate and asking the electorate to ensure the defeat of his son, he was waxing eloquence on Anto Antony, the Congress candidate who is pitted against Anil. The former defence minister lambasted the BJP as anti-nationals, communalists and dictators.

But what stood out was his silence on the CPI(M) candidates. Antony's ties with the CPI(M) are infamous as he had sailed with the Marxists for almost two years dur-

ing 1980-1983.

The CPI(M) and the Congress-led by Antony fought the 1980 general election together and ruled Kerala for almost two years. The Congress faction was pushed out of the LDF by the CPI(M) which demolished the offices of the Congress across the State with the police looking the other way. It is not without any reason political pundits say that politics make strange persons into bedfellows. Do we need more proof than A K Antony?

(The writer is special correspondent with The Pioneer; views are personal)