

POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA

THREE cheers. Hip hip Hooray!!!! Finally Indians have come to their senses; we as a nation have matured and are keen to put behind the bitterness of the past and march into the future with confidence. Really? On the surface, it would appear so considering the muted response to the Ayodhya verdict. Barring the likes of Maulana Mulayam, the political class has reacted with remarkable restraint. Even the rabble-rousers in the Sangh Parivar seem to have discovered a stroke of common sense. Instead of celebrating the victory of faith, constituents of the Parivar showed grace and in refraining from declaring the verdict a victory for Hindutva.

But has the Parivar really shifted stance? Or is it a tactical retreat in preparation for a strategic move? In the coming weeks, all frontal organisations of the Parivar will hold small closed door meetings in various parts of the country. They will raise a quiet toast to celebrate the fact that Lord Ram has finally got a certificate attesting his place of birth, from the judiciary no less. They will then approach other cultural, social and religious leaders from other communities to prevail upon Muslims to see reason in the verdict. Sangh leaders have advised the BJP to desist from turning the verdict into a subject of political discourse.

The idea is to retrieve RSS's image of being a disciplined organisation, which seemed lost forever. During the late 80s and early 90s, the Ram Mandir movement was massively endorsed by both the rural and urban middle and elitist class. Despite the shameful destruction of the Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992, the BJP won 161 seats in the Lok Sabha elections four years later and India got its first swamyamsewak prime minister in Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

But 2010 is not 1996 and those who rooted for the BJP then are its most trenchant critics now. Since being voted out of power in 2004, the BJP has been on a rapid downhill slide. The verdict affords the party the chance to claw its way back but nobody is in a hurry to hop on to the nearest parked rath and rabble-rouse his way across the country. At least not now.

It is BJP President Nitin Gadkari's firm belief that the issue must be revived but in a manner that is in sync with the Hindu psyche which wants Ram lalla but unaccompanied by death and destruction. Gadkari's move is strategic. He and his team would mount indirect pressure for the handing over the site to the Hindus but has sent feelers to government emissaries that the party would support any government move which paves for the construction of a Mandir and a Masjid nearby.

His expectation is that the government would float the idea of a trust on the pattern of Somnath Temple. PV Narsimha Rao, who fiddled while the Masjid was razed had announced a ₹100 crore grant for rebuilding the Mosque but didn't find any takers from the Muslim community. Gadkari feels it's a win-win situation for his party. His assessment is that even if the Congress takes initiatives to settle the issue, it will be his party that reaps the political dividends. Already, Muslim MPs of Congress cutting across age, gender and region have backed the Court verdict. And Digvijay Singh, the self appointed keeper



Small step, giant leap

of minority faith in the Congress has said the Ayodhya verdict should form the basis of a negotiated settlement. All this serves Gadkari well. That's why he has extended his new "all-in-good-time" policy to Bihar where elections begin later this month.

When Nitish Kumar said neither Narendra Modi nor Varun Gandhi were welcome to campaign in Bihar, Gadkari shot back that it was the BJP's prerogative to decide its campaigners.

The same Gadkari has had a change of heart and asked the two to stay at home, though to ensure that Modi is not ruffled, he may ask other BJP chief ministers to stay away from Bihar.

The campaign will thus be spearheaded by central leaders, many of whom are not known for their ideological commitment to the cause and are merely part of the party's Urban Social Alliance (USA) whose chattering sessions are mostly about corporate battles and the politics of sport.

By keeping Modi and Varun out, Gadkari wants to give voters a chance to choose between Laloo and Nitish and not have them get caught in a Mandir-Masjid spat. The mantra, for now is Live and Let Live. We will wait for the results from Bihar to see if they sing a different tune in future.

Upper House tries to go one-up on LS

WHAT the Lok Sabha can do, we can one better, seems to be the message that the elders in the Rajya Sabha seem keen to convey. Sometime next month, the Upper House Chairman and Vice president Hamid Ansari is planning a "soft launch" of the Rajya Sabha TV. This comes four years after the last Lok Sabha Speaker Somnath Chatterjee launched Lok Sabha TV, the best thing about which can be said is that the live feed doesn't stop even if rival members engage each other in fisticuffs.

Like Lok Sabha TV, the Upper House channel will not be in the race for TRP ratings but quite unlike the Lok Sabha's, the new channel has some very innovative programming. For the first time perhaps, there will be five simultaneous languages broadcasts in the RS TV and each MP will be given a chance to don the anchor's role, which I assume is to give them a chance to speak directly to their states/constituencies. Also, there will be a weekly call-in from the public where the House Deputy Chairman Rahman Khan will take the presenter's chair and answer questions posed to him by the public.

Once every month, Chairman Ansari will also take the anchor's seat to discuss parliamentary traditions and procedures as well as take video calls from Speakers of State assemblies. Like the LS TV, the RS TV will also use the period between sessions to telecast cultural and educational programmes.

The LS TV has often been seen as a drain on the public exchequer. But on the flip side is the fact that it is a refreshing change from private TV: there are no megalomaniac anchors taking on the role of the nation's conscience keepers and breathing down at panel guests; the discussions may be subdued, but had substance.

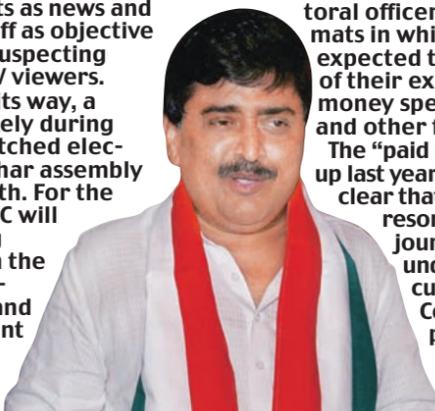
It is to be hoped that the RS TV emulates the House of the People and not the house of horrors that many private TV studios tend to resemble.

"NEWS", Lord Northcliffe once said "is what something somebody somewhere wants to suppress. All the rest is advertisement". The good Lord had obviously not heard of the phenomenon of "paid news" which rocked the Indian media during the last Lok Sabha elections when it became known that many media organisations, including some of the largest publications and TV channels, had disguised paid advertisements as news and passed them off as objective reports to unsuspecting readers and TV viewers.

If the EC has its way, a repeat is unlikely during the keenly watched elections to the Bihar assembly later this month. For the first time, the EC will be monitoring "paid news" in the print and electronic media and has already sent to the Bihar chief elec-

Save elections from the evil of envelope journalism

toral officer the revised formats in which candidates are expected to file daily reports of their expenditure including money spent on advertising and other forms of marketing. The "paid news" issue cropped up last year when it became clear that many candidates resorted to paying off journalists/newspapers under the table to circumvent an Election Commission rule that puts a cap on a candidate's expenditure.



Ashok Chavan

ture. A media watcher had authoritatively stated then that newspapers had different rate cards for varying types of coverage—interviews, rallies and a higher tariff to trash opponents.

The most blatant of them was the Maharashtra chief minister Ashok Chavan. His reported spend on advertising was a paltry ₹5000, while stories that hailed him as God's gift to Maharashtra appeared for days together in newspapers that are otherwise ideologically diametrically opposite. If these had been advertisements and Chavan had to pay for them, it would have cost him a fortune. The EC has taken a close look at the phenomenon of "paid news" and decreed that the cost of such news is included in the expenditure of the candidates. The Election Commission has also taken up the matter with all political parties and is currently collating precise data to ensure that the election process is not undermined by the menace of envelope journalism.

□ **THOUGH** eight months remain for his tenure to end, India's longest serving cabinet secretary seems to have decided that enough is enough. Five months ago, KM Chandrasekhar was given the his third extension and the reason given was that the government felt the need for continuity at a time when the Commonwealth Games was mired in a mess and serious doubts were expressed about it taking off at all.

Otherwise healthy, KMC has however not been keeping well of late and I suspect that may have something to do with the many visits to the filthy environs of the CWG village to oversee the progress of work. Sources say he is keen to put in his papers once the games are over a fortnight from now.

Speculation now mounts about his possible next destination. In the UPA dispensation, old officers don't fade away, they simply move on to plum new assignments. Where could KMC be headed? The Raj Bhavan in one of the larger states or an Ambassadorship? My hunch is the latter in which case it could only be Washington because retired CabSecs are accommodated nowhere else. PK Kaul and Naresh Chandra were both CabSecs and after retirement were appointed envoy to the US capital. KMC is expected to take the same route.