

GOVIND SINGH AND
ARMIN ROSENCRANZ

All-weather road project now under the weather

People from all over the world come to India seeking spiritual enlightenment. One among the many pilgrimage circuits in India is the Char Dham (four abodes) journey, which includes visiting four holy sites located in four corners of the country. The sites are Badrinath (Uttarakhand), Dwarka (Gujarat), Rameshwaram (Tamil Nadu) and Puri (Odisha). Another set of Char Dham, sometimes referred to as Chota (smaller) Char Dham, is an equally important pilgrimage circuit located in the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand. The Chota Char Dham includes Badrinath, Kedarnath, Yamunotri and Gangotri.

For centuries, people of India and the world have undertaken the Char Dham yatra (journey). The Chota Char Dham yatra is also undertaken by many, even though the difficult Himalayan terrain makes this circuit quite challenging. In recent times however, roadways development has made the Chota Char Dham circuit much more conducive for pilgrims. Approximately four million pilgrims visited the four abodes or shrines of the Chota Char Dham circuit in 2019.

In December 2016, the Government of India launched a Char Dham Highway Project in Uttarakhand. The objective of this project is to improve connectivity to the shrines at Gangotri, Yamunotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath. The project has been under construction, developing around 900 km of the national highway with an approximate cost of Rs 12,000 crore. The project was contested in the National Green Tribunal and the Supreme Court of India, resulting in a committee for reviewing its ecological impacts. Environmental groups and local NGOs have expressed serious concerns over the validity of this project which has increased the vulnerability of the region to natural hazards.

The Himalayan Mountains are also a globally recognized biodiversity hotspot. A biodiversity hotspot is a technical term given to an area which has high endemism (having at least 1,500 plants not found anywhere else) and where over 70 per cent of the original ecology has already been destroyed. An almost 100 km stretch of this highway project near Gangotri lies within a noti-



fied Eco-Sensitive Zone. At the same time, the Himalayan landscape in Uttarakhand is located in a seismic zone, making it highly vulnerable to earthquakes. These facts ensure that any large-scale construction activity in Uttarakhand must be carefully scrutinized lest it destroy the region's remaining ecology.

But environmental consequences of this construction project are not the only concern. The year 2021 so far has changed our understanding and perception of climate change and its impacts. The prolonged heat wave in North America, floods in most parts of Europe and

Asia and forest fires around the world have come as a stern warning to humanity. These impacts have upset our climate change-induced disaster prediction models and have challenged our ability to prepare for averting natural hazards and for saving human life and property. The events of 2021 have increased the disaster risks of already vulnerable ecosystems.

The all-weather road project has created a two-lane road which passes close to the base of the mountains and along the course of the rivers. It is also constructing bridges, tunnels and at least one flyover near the base

of the mountain close to River Ganga. At places, the Himalayas have been cut so deep for road widening that the stability of the slope has been compromised. Adjoining green cover has been felled which has further reduced slope stability. The 2021 monsoon has already led to road cave-ins and collapse of walls made alongside roads to prevent falling rocks and landslides.

The all-weather road project seems outdated. Any such project in Uttarakhand now needs to be all-climate. It needs to be developed in harmony with nature, without cutting a single tree and without altering

the slope of the fragile Himalayas. An underlying objective of the all-weather road seems to be to scale up economic growth of Uttarakhand by attracting pilgrims all year round. But we cannot forget the fury of the 2013 Kedarnath disaster that killed thousands of people and left a trail of devastation.

The all-weather road project should be abandoned and replaced with a much more eco-sensitive alternative.

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NOW AND AGAIN

Inspiration for a writer

RANGANATHAN SIVAKUMAR

Opportunity knocks on the doors of many, but not often. And when it knocks, you should grab it gleefully with both hands. Thirteen years ago, when I was working with a leading publication group at Chennai, I hardly would have imagined that a sunny morning in June would prove propitious for me.

Minutes after I reached the office, my boss called me in such a booming tone that I was prompted to ask myself if I had committed any blunder. However, it was altogether a different scenario when I entered his cabin. He said, "If I hadn't called you with my robust voice, you being a lazy fellow, wouldn't have come immediately." He then threw a pleasant surprise at me. "Today we have a meeting with Chief Minister Karunanidhi at his Gopalapuram residence at six in the evening, as he is releasing the special off-line issue, *Kaaviya Payanam* ('epic journey') that we have just published on him. You are also joining us, so schedule your work for the day accordingly."

I was on cloud nine for a moment as one would rarely get an opportunity to meet a VVIP. The excitement and bliss naturally didn't allow me to focus on my work that day.

A team of four, including the copy editor and the production head were present at the Chief Minister's residence, prompt at 5.45 pm. There were only a few security personnel guarding the red porcelain-roofed portico at the front, an image of which most of us would have seen on television any number of times. We were asked to sit in the main hall on the ground floor, and moments later were served with tea and biscuits. As the clock ticked, there appeared the CM's secretary Shanmuganathan, the man who was always seen standing in civvies behind Mr. Karunanidhi at meetings and functions.

"Sir, there will be a delay of 30 minutes, as CM will have his hair-cut and come. So, please wait", said Shanmuganathan with a hint of a smile. In fact, the half-hour wait proved to be a welcome time for us as it enabled us to shed our nerves. After exactly 30 minutes, we were led up the stairs to the first floor meeting room.

As we entered the meeting room, Mr Karunanidhi, taking us by surprise, stood up and welcomed us with folded palms. After ensuring we had had our tea and snacks, he enquired how the publication group was doing, and if any new magazines were in the pipeline. He then gently unlaced the ribbon tied over the special issue, and posed for photographs. Flipping through the pages, he said the issue looked fascinating and heaped praise on our copy editor and his team for their hard work.

After the simple launch, the CM made us sit, and much to our surprise started asking questions of each one of us. My turn came last. And when it did, I told him of my passion for writing and that I had been writing in newspapers and periodicals for over three decades. He was delighted and engaged me in conversation for a little more time. He then advised me to have the zeal and unflinching desire for writing, and not to give it up until I breathed my last. When I sit and write everyday, those inspiring words from the amazing man keep ringing in my ears.

100 YEARS AGO

SUNDAY GOLF ON THE MAIDAN

To The Editor Of The Statesman

SIR, - In spite of the warning of the Commissioner of Police some little while back, that golf is prohibited on the Maidan on Sundays, there were two couples playing this (Sunday) morning. It is the unfairness of the thing that is so unpleasant. Many of us are tennis enthusiasts, but it would be practically impossible for us to have a Sunday morning game without being warned off by the police. Moreover if all the tennis players that the courts on the Maidan could accommodate were to play on Sunday mornings, they would not be a danger to the ordinary pedestrian, as is even a solitary golfer. Golfer have courses to play on other than the Calcutta Maidan. Why then in common fairness should tennis players be kept off the Maidan on Sunday and golfers be allowed on? If the Golfers this morning were playing on the sly, then for once the police were evidently caught napping.

WALKER.
Calcutta.

RETURNED EMIGRANTS

To The Editor Of The Statesman

SIR, - There is a real opportunity for social service workers to visit the old emigration lines at Matiabrooz and see the work that is being undertaken there. Mr. C.F. Andrews got scent of the awful straits to which the immigrants were pushed. Being very ill himself, it seems he asked Mr. E.E. James, of the Y.M.C.A., to investigate and help if possible. Mr. James and Mr. H.K. Mookerjee, both Secretaries of the Young Men's Christian Association, have since been hard at the work. It must be said that it is very kind of Mr. Gourlay to take upon himself the responsibilities of the work as Chairman of the Committee. We have seen the appeal for the small sum of Rs 5,000 for this great welfare work. The work is being carried on excellently under the guidance and supervision of the Y.M.C.A. Secretaries by the men of the 2nd Division, St. John Ambulance Brigade.

ONE WHO KNOWS.
Calcutta.

POLITICAL DIARY | KALYANI SHANKAR

Will the Opposition ever be able to unite?

Will too many cooks spoil the opposition unity broth? There are at least three serious claimants to be the face of the Opposition before the 2024 Lok Sabha polls. They are NCP supremo Sharad Pawar, West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee and ex-Congress chief Rahul Gandhi. The three have come out openly to unite the Opposition indicating that whoever gets more seats could be the prime ministerial candidate. While Banerjee continues with her "Khela Hobe" slogan at the national level, she is indeed reckoning for a larger Opposition gambit. Other leaders are equally interested in leading the opposition block.

Pawar is the most experienced among the opposition leaders, but age and health are not on his side. Pawar had several chances to become the prime minister in his long political career but missed them by a whisker. Trinamool MPs want Mamata to emerge as the undisputed leader of the Opposition. Congress, of course, thinks that it is the party's birthright to rule. Rahul is engaging with the opposition leaders for the first time even though it is restricted to devising a parliamentary strategy.

Interestingly, all three leaders are preparing their strategies separately. The irony is that while all three talk about unity, finding an acceptable candidate will not be easy with the egoistic regional satraps and the Congress party staking claim. Mamata Banerjee had sidestepped this issue by saying that it would be decided later. Also, it is doubtful whether opposition parties will manage to remain together till 2024.



Polls have different political compulsions for various parties.

They had also exhibited their strength by inviting opposition leaders for meals - Sharad Pawar for tea, Mamata Banerjee for lunch and Rahul Gandhi for breakfast. Most invites attended all three, but Congress kept out of Pawar's tea and Trinamool Congress out of Rahul's breakfast meeting. This itself shows the reservation of these parties on a common Opposition candidate.

Some say that it is too early to think of the 2024 polls. Mamata

insists that to defeat BJP, opposition parties would require to prepare much in advance. Mamata also does not want to keep Congress away from the conglomeration of opposition parties. That is why she called on Sonia and Rahul Gandhi at 10 Janpath, during her recent visit. Mamata has momentum with her now. She knows her own shortcomings. Is she playing to be the Queen or the Kingmaker?

Rahul's own position in the party is tenuous. The youngest among the three, he has followed in

their footsteps. He is presently actively engaging with opposition leaders inside Parliament and outside, something he is doing for the first time in his political career. He rarely participated in joint meetings of opposition leaders during parliamentary sessions. Such arrangements were generally attended by the then Leader of Opposition in Rajya Sabha Ghulam Nabi Azad and his deputy Anand Sharma.

Even in the ongoing monsoon session of Parliament, the parties chalked out their own strategies to

take on the government. Almost when the session was about to end, Rahul Gandhi woke up to

chalk out a joint plan against the BJP in Parliament.

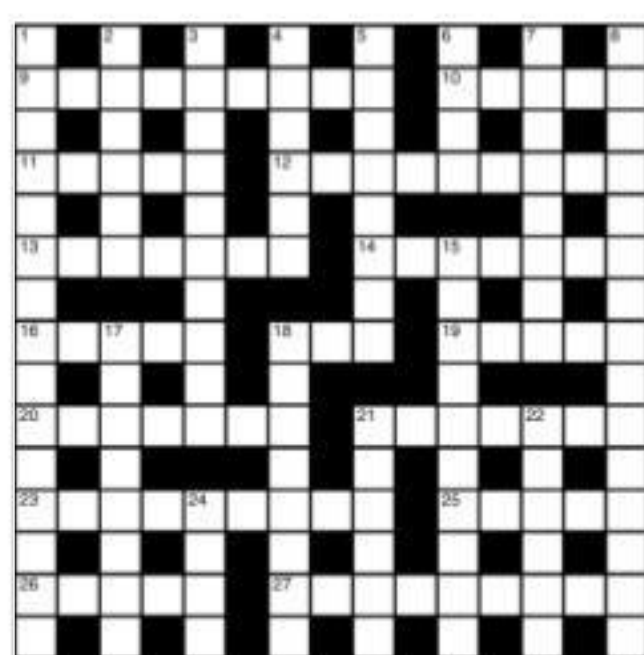
At the breakfast meeting this week, attended by MPs from 14 opposition parties, Rahul said, "The most critical thing in my view is that we unite (against) this force. The more this voice unites, the more powerful it will become, the more difficult it'll become for BJP-RSS to suppress it. Within the foundations of unity, we can have a few discussions and arguments, but I think it is important for us to come up with the principles of the foundations of our unity."

A new entrant in preparing for the unity move is the political strategist used by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Mamata Banerjee and Sharad Pawar and some regional satraps. Prashant Kishore carefully chooses winning sides - Jaganmohan Reddy, Mamata Banerjee, Arvind Kejriwal and DMK. This is precisely the astuteness that has kept him afloat. He has been meeting opposition leaders, preparing the ground for a unity move. He is also expected to join the Congress as a paratrooper.

A democracy needs a strong opposition. A divided opposition only helps the ruling party. It is a lame excuse to claim that the Opposition does not have the strength. Did not half a dozen leaders like Madhu Dandavate, K P Unnikrishnan, S Jaipal Reddy, Inderjit Gupta and Somnath Chatterjee manage to extract a joint parliamentary probe for the Bofors gun deal? At that time, the Rajiv Gandhi government had 420 members. What the opposition needs is a strategy, a new narrative and solid communication skills. Disruption of Parliament is no option.

CROSSWORD

NO 28997



SOLUTION FOR 01 AUGUST



ACROSS

- 9 See two newspapers coming round for church feature (5,4)
- 10 Longer and shorter periods reversed in final letter (5)
- 11 Excellent daughters returned to home land (5)
- 12 Designer makes Catholic dose with ecstasy during play (9)
- 13 Artist seen in every echo? Listener's smart! (7)
- 14 Recline to consume honeyed drink and quencher (7)
- 16 Fine beer to be sent round for beast (5)
- 18 See 20
- 19 Correlation shown where moon follows rodent (5)
- 20/18 It needs treatment, rough, for

- backing protocol row (7,3)
 - 21 By it one develops feeling for character (7)
 - 23 Hearings in case due to be rescheduled (9)
 - 25 Money short, then endlessly given in tax (5)
 - 26 Fish served with duck's tongue (5)
 - 27 Oil producers lie and cut pay anyway (9)
- DOWN**
- 1 Busy work mounting bugs famed oil worker (6,9)
 - 2 Aura surrounding old tribe in Moroccan location (6)
 - 3 Lark circling sailor caught - a bleak prospect? (10)
 - 4 Gypsy turning up with beer and spirits (6)

- 5 Large adhesive label covers disciplinarian (8)
- 6 Here camels roaming spit on one (4)
- 7 Material about eastern Mediterranean region (8)
- 8 Reproduction Stonehenge assembled in capital (15)
- 15 Tees upset about hypocrisy concerning trade (10)
- 17 Notice six-footer eating cake that's rich (8)
- 18 Deeply impressed after heartless 18 Across, but miserable (8)
- 21 Split in religious group that goes both ways? (6)
- 22 Reprieves ram trapped among the French (3,3)
- 24 Poet's black book one that's devious keeps (4)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)

