

Happy, or unhappy, New Year

NOTES FROM DELHI

By M.J. Akbar

ONLY one Indian, as far as I know, is apprehensive about the new year, a friend who comforts himself with a droll form of piquancy. This could be either because he is from Calcutta or he is in advertising; although I suppose a combination of the two would be a guarantee of such self-indulgence. His Gross Domestic Contentment has been sharply affected by some calendar-gazing.

Do you know, he informs me through e-mail, that May Day in 2004 falls on Saturday. That means one less holiday. Independence Day comes on Sunday: another holiday gone. Onam (28-29 August) will be celebrated on Saturday-Sunday: damn, two substantive holidays disappear! As if this was not enough, Gandhi Jayanti is on a Saturday as well, as is Vijaya Dashami (23 October).

Just to prove that such woes can be multi-ethnic, Christmas and Boxing Day also take up a weekend. Since this is going to be such a wretched year it is entirely in character that its impact will cross over: January 1 and 2, 2005 will also cover the weekend. That means a good ten holidays lost from our brief lives.

On the other hand, this must be upbeat news for finance minister Jaswant Singh. With ten extra days of productivity, the economy, which has shown remarkable bounce under his watch, should be doing a pole-vault next year. If he can convert feel-good 2003 into a feel-better

an image it sought to reinforce through a series of party-chief minister conferences.

As for its claimed plank of secularism, the party lost considerable credibility over its handling of Gujarat. There was much initial lip-service, but no serious effort to mount a decisive attack on the government in Delhi. More ridiculously, Sonia Gandhi was persuaded that the only way to defeat Narendra Modi was to imitate him.

She believed that "soft Hindutva" could be sold softly, without anyone else hearing about it. Such naivete would be inexcusable, even in a

urban, but that energy is infectious and travelling fast into semi-urban India.

In one of the more astonishing bits of national trivia, Vajpayee, who is nearly 80, won the most votes in an MTV poll this year!

In contrast, the Congress under Sonia has retained the dubious virtues of a weary brand name, selling Polson's butter from the 1950s when Amul of the 1980s is determined to stop Kraft from taking over the 2000s.

An old brand name is not necessarily a liability, but you have to know how to re-invent yourself for an ever-evolving market.

The profile of the voter is always in forward flux, and a political party must be relevant to changing demographics. The better-managed old brands know that this is the only way to keep alive.

Lux and Colgate are still selling. But you cannot sell Lux today by showing Nimmi in the ads. In my own newspaper business, *The Times of India* used to be called "The Old Lady of Bori Bunder" in Mumbai when I was a trainee there in the early seventies. No one equates old ladies with the *Times* anymore.

A political party is a much harder sell, because it must address a whole beehive of needs in a complex, huge and very often irrational, market.

It must fuse heritage, and contemporary compulsions to a horizon. Personality can help, but only if that person is a team leader with chemistry — neither a saint nor a dictator will do in a democracy.

It is probably too late to do anything about the Congress in time for the

Vis-a-vis Pakistan, Mr Vajpayee has drawn a larger line beside a small one. The small line divided us; the larger line could extend to a circle that includes the whole of South Asia and puts it collectively into a world where prosperity is much more in demand than hostility. Hostility hardens India and Pakistan; peace melts us, and we return to our natural selves. The sentiment on either side when the first

2004, he will have launched our country towards the cyberspace of developed-economy nationalism.

One person whose Gross Domestic Contentment may have been affected by thoughts of 2004 is Sonia Gandhi. She is looking not just at 10 less holidays in 2004, but 30 less seats in the Lok Sabha.

Nearly six years ago a Congress clique that wanted to rescue the party from the clutches of a generally emotional Sitaram Kesri anointed her Joan of Arc. In her first electoral test, Sonia Gandhi startled everyone by dipping far below the Kesri bottom line.

Her party was, however, generous. Every resurrection needs time. Sonia Gandhi's undisputed leadership and innate dynamism would bring its rewards in 2004.

Well, 2004 is here, and elections are only some weeks away. She should have been discussing an alternative Cabinet, according to the hopes of her loyalists. Instead, she is busy acquiring a new "image" and making telephone calls for help.

Only Muhammad Ali could float like a butterfly and sting like a bee. After behaving like a 'Queen Bee' for six years, it is a bit meaningless to try and float like a butterfly for three months. It certainly is not enough to create political alliances. While Sonia Gandhi is looking for allies, most of her potential allies are looking the other way.

Image, in fact, is not the real issue. Indira Gandhi could be as icy as Kailas, but everyone knew where she was coming from; and she herself, at least most of the time, knew where she was going. And whether icy or not, Indira Gandhi could communicate with the voter — an essential and non-negotiable requirement in democratic politics. Even if Sonia Gandhi had something to say, she simply does not know how to communicate it.

In five years, the Congress has identified itself with only two ideas. One was to make Sonia Gandhi prime minister. The second was good governance,

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novice.

In the meantime, the BJP took the measure of the Congress on both leadership and good governance.

In an extraordinary political turnaround, Atal Behari Vajpayee led his party away from Gujarat memory and made it the standard bearer of all the issues that the Congress was identified with in its best days: economic progress for the poor ('Bijli, Sarak, Paani'); a vibrant foreign policy that has turned India into the emerging international star; and a vision for the subcontinent, with a rational approach towards Pakistan — which Islamabad reciprocated. Vajpayee changed the agenda for India, certain that this would persuade the BJP to follow.

Vis-a-vis Pakistan, Mr Vajpayee has drawn a larger line beside a small one. The small line divided us; the larger line could extend to a circle that includes the whole of South Asia and puts it collectively into a world where prosperity is much more in demand than hostility.

Hostility hardens India and Pakistan; peace melts us, and we return to our natural selves. The sentiment on either side when the first civilian planes landed in Islamabad and Lahore and Delhi and Karachi was neither artificial nor ephemeral. It came from a sense of what we were and what we could become.

There was one constituency that the Congress could have cultivated in the last five years, if anyone had thought about it: the Indian young. This is now an increasingly non-casteist, non-ethnic, non-communal class. It is not yet wholly so, and there are many cases of slippage into old, lethal attitudes, but generation next is clearly heading in that direction.

Its primal energy is still

next election. Time a lot of patience, h out. The pre-Sonia lem of the party has not been rectified: the party is still absent in UP, Bihar, Bengal and Tamil Nadu, which means that it is not even at the starting gate

in 200 seats.

Throw in the fact that it will be wiped out in Maharashtra, and the party is over in some 250 seats. There are losses looming in the north-east, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Karnataka, Kerala and Haryana. There are only two states where the Congress will do better than last time, Andhra Pradesh and Haryana; and in Hyderabad it has to deal with the formidable political skills of Chandrababu Naidu.

What else does 2004 offer? I am looking forward to one war between India and Pakistan that could break out in March, if we are lucky: a genuine six-week conflict that will answer two questions. The first is an old one — which cricket team is better.

Pakistan have a lean, mean side shaped by not the docile, gifted Inzamam, but by that old, gifted rabble-rouser Javed Miandad. Their bowlers are cobra-cheetahs: the ball rises like a venomous hood at blurring speed.

What a contest it will be between the fire of Shoaib and Sami and the arson of Sehwag, Rahul, Sachin and Laxman. Both sides are on a high with inspirational performances in Australia and New Zealand; they will be at their best when they meet on the killing fields of Lahore and Karachi. We do not bowl as well as they do, although Kumble fancies Pakistan in quite the way that Laxman prefers Australians. But they do not bat as well as we do. The umpires, thank God, will be neutral.

But the question I really want answered is this. Which of the two Indians will turn out to be more popular in Pakistan in 2004 — Sachin Tendulkar or Atal Behari Vajpayee?

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