

Article 370

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<https://www.dailypioneer.com/2019/columnists/the-magic-of--370-suvs.html>

The cavalcade seemed unending- 10 am Sunday morning is an unusual time to be stuck in a traffic jam. The reason it turns out are a huge number of SUVs blocking the road. Each vehicle is adorned with big posters informing us that this is a rally being taken out by one of the prospective candidates for the upcoming Vidhan Sabha elections due in a month. The rally is to go to Rohtak to impress the party leader who is having his own roadshow there. Young lumpens wearing saffron T-shirts with the prospective candidate's photograph are energetically hanging out of the SUVs, *a la* Bollywood heroes. Going by the chaos and noise that is already being generated, I shudder to imagine what we are in for over the next few weeks.

I shouldn't have been surprised though. For the last couple of months, the whole city has been humming with election related activity. The number of ticket seekers for the ruling party's nomination, since that seems a no-brainer, has been growing every day. And each of these prospects is outdoing the other by showering the electorate with goodies as well as plastering the whole city with their hoardings. T-shirts, clocks, badges, caps and saffron scarves are all the rage it seems. Each of these items helpfully has the benevolent donor's photograph along with of course our leader's picture- as if it was not enough to have his face ubiquitously staring at us from billboards publicizing *Ujala, Ayushman Bharat* and other sundry schemes. It is the same story with hoardings- there is hardly an electricity pole, or a tree or even a fence left which does not carry multiple hoardings.

A novelty in this election is the use of social media. Almost all of them have bought advertising space from Google and Facebook. Open a search page and there you have the smiling mug shot of one or more of these candidates promising to turn the dusty

and dirty city into paradise. Fortunately no one is promising to make the pot holed roads as smooth as the cheeks of Bollywood actresses yet!

Goodies, hoardings and social media are not the only outlets being used to publicize. Some candidates have found innovative methods of luring the electorate. Organising religious sermons and body building contests seem passé- the latest one is religious tourism. One candidate organized an all-expenses paid trip to Vaishno Devi. Every day, for about a month, several air-conditioned Volvo busses would take people to Vaishno Devi. Their food, lodging and of course travel all taken care of. The busses carried huge banners with the suitably saffron attired candidate's photograph. It remains to be seen whether those who earned some religious merit courtesy the candidate's benevolence would reciprocate on Election Day.

And then there is another candidate who is going about all this with a precision which would make a management guru proud. This gentleman started his campaign early- hoardings with his mustachioed face, suitably air-brushed to soften the obviously macho image have been all over the city for more than two months. The gentleman in question is the scion of an immensely wealthy family- his father, who incidentally has also unsuccessfully contested many elections, owns large swathes of property in and around the city.

The candidate has obviously hired an image consultant as well as a political strategist to appeal to different segments. Thus, for instance, a music evening is organized with a popular singer to attract the teenagers while a program honouring ex-servicemen with several mustachioed generals is held to buttress his patriotic credentials. Since one of the largest communities now in the city is from *Poorvanchal*, a gala extravaganza was organized recently with performances by all the leading lights of Bhojpuri cinema. This event was meticulously planned with camera cranes and mega sized projection screens to showcase the candidate while the audience of migrant *Poorvanchalis* waited patiently for their favourite stars to make an appearance. These and other events are then also advertised through advertorials in leading English dailies.

Needless to say, all this costs a large amount of money. Of course the elections have not been announced and so the model code of conduct is not in force. But I wonder whether the sleuths of the tax department are taking note of tens of crores which are being so

obviously spent by the candidates? The next time I get an Income Tax notice to explain an income of a few thousand, I shall be recalling the ubiquitous mustachioed face!

I am pondering all this while sitting in the traffic jam while the SUV cavalcade inches along. I notice that the cars are all numbered sequentially and there is another number too on each of them- 370. It turns out that the candidate was so enamored of the recent heroic acts of the present dispensation that he decided to take a caravan of 370 SUVs to welcome the leader. For once I thanked our founding fathers of restricting the number of Articles in the Indian Constitution to 448 only.

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