

International

India's watchmen question whether Modi embrace will improve their lot

'Main bhi chowkidar or I am also a watchman' campaign

NEW DELHI: For over a decade Arvind Singh has worked as a watchman in New Delhi, doing the rounds of the streets with a whistle and a wooden stick to keep vigil at night. Watchmen like him are so ubiquitous in India, guarding everything from offices to homes and stores to factories, that their presence goes almost unnoticed. But over the past week, the watchman has dominated India's headlines.

That's because the latest campaign to be launched this week by Prime Minister Narendra Modi just before a general election beginning on April 11 is the "Main bhi chowkidar" or "I am also a watchman" campaign. He tied an appeal to tens of millions of often poorly paid watchmen to the priorities of his own job, following a suicide bomb attack that killed 40 paramilitary policemen in the northern region of Kashmir last month. "We both work day and night. You guard homes and I guard the nation," Modi said in an audio speech addressed to watchmen on Wednesday.

"The watchman has become a symbol of the country's nationalism," he said, equating everyone from teachers and doctors to watchmen guarding the coun-

try in their own way. The campaign came in response to the opposition Congress party's slogan "chowkidar chor hai", or the nation's "watchman is a thief", which it began using late last year to refer to Modi in connection with allegations of irregularities in the awarding of a defense contract. Modi has denied any wrongdoing.

In recent days, leaders and supporters of Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have launched a coordinated effort to popularize his watchman campaign, with many changing their social media names to add the prefix 'chowkidar'. But for many watchmen, who are among the millions in India's vast informal economy where workers are often poorly paid and barely protected by labour laws, Modi's campaign is a political gimmick that is unlikely to improve their lives. "I don't know why they started it," said Rakesh Yadav, a 37-year-old watchman from India's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh.

"In the last four years they have done nothing for us," he said, looking up from a newspaper while on duty outside a residential complex in New Delhi. "If PM was a chowkidar, would Nirav Modi run away?" said

another watchman, Mohammed Nayyar, referring to a billionaire jeweler who fled to Britain last year before an alleged \$2 billion loan fraud he is accused of being involved in came to light. The jeweler is not related to the prime minister. The cash-based economy suffered a serious hit from the Modi government's shock move to ban high-value currency notes in 2016.

'Done a lot'

Singh remembers being unable to feed his children for some days and standing in long queues at the banks to exchange the voided currency for new notes. "What has changed in our lives? We are doing the same duty we were doing some years ago," he said, adding that his salary had not increased from about \$130 a month in three years.

The chowkidar campaign is a distinct reminder of Modi's 2014 "chaiwallah" campaign in which he flaunted his past working for his father as a chaiwallah, or tea vendor. It may be a gimmick, but such things have worked for Modi in the past, said Priyavandan Patel, a veteran political scientist from Modi's home state of Gujarat and scholar at the Lokniti research program of

Delhi's Centre for the Study of Developing Societies. "The chaiwalla campaign worked in a big way," Patel said. Such connections with the common man helped the BJP to gain a big parliamentary majority, the likes of which had not been seen in three decades in India, in 2014. But that's unlikely to be repeated this time. Polls predict Modi might win a second term but with a much smaller majority, amid concerns about a lack of jobs growth and millions of farmers dissatisfied over depressed crop prices.

Some of the most challenging battleground states for Modi's party are those that depend on the farm economy. "The chowkidar campaign may not work in such areas," Patel said. One of those states is Bihar, where the watchman Singh migrated from 12 years ago. He said he wouldn't go back because working on the farm back home was not profitable. Yet, he said he believes in Modi, and praised him for air strikes on neighboring Pakistan in response to last month's bomb attack. "I feel like Modi ji has done a lot," he said, using a suffix that denotes respect. "And I think he will do a lot more in the coming years." —Reuters

Pakistan shows off military might, calls for peace with India

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan wants peace with India and they should focus on health and education, the Pakistani president said yesterday during a parade to show off its military might following a tense standoff between the nuclear-armed neighbors. Conflict between the rivals erupted last month following a suicide bomb attack claimed by a Pakistan-based militant group in the Indian part of the disputed and divided Kashmir region that killed 40 paramilitary police. "We do not believe in war and want to solve problems through dialogue," President Arif Alvi said in his Pakistani Republic Day speech. "Instead of war we should focus on education and health."

Pakistani warplanes engaged in a dogfight with Indian aircraft over Kashmir on Feb. 27, a day after a raid by Indian jets on what it said was a militant camp in Pakistan. In their first such clash since their last war, in 1971, Pakistan downed an Indian plane and captured its pilot after he ejected over Pakistan-controlled Kashmir. The pilot was later released by Pakistan as a peace gesture. The president, who largely holds ceremonial duties, said India had blamed Pakistan for the suicide-bomb attack without evidence, which he said was irresponsible.

Yesterday's military parade included an air show featuring the Pakistani-built JF-17 fighter jet. One of the aircraft shot down the Indian plane last month. "Today's parade is sending the message that we are a peaceful people but we will never be oblivious of our defense," Alvi said. The parade



ISLAMABAD: Pakistani President Arif Alvi (center) arrives at the Pakistan Day parade in Islamabad yesterday. —AFP

was attended by Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who was invited to attend as the chief guest, and Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan.

Khan said on Twitter earlier that he had received a message from Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi with his best wishes for Republic Day and calling for peace and regional cooperation. "I welcome PM Modi's message to

our people," Khan said. "I believe it's time to begin a comprehensive dialogue with India to address and resolve all issues. The dispute over the former princely state of Kashmir sparked the first two of three wars between India and Pakistan after independence in 1947. They fought the second in 1965, and a third, largely over what became Bangladesh, in 1971. —Reuters

Italy, China ink new 'Silk Road' protocol

ROME: Italy yesterday signed a "non-binding" protocol with China to take part in Beijing's new "Silk Road" of transport and trade links stretching from Asia to Europe. In doing so, Italy became the first G7 country to sign up for the massive project which has sparked unease in the US and the European Union as China aspires to a greater world role. Visiting Chinese President Xi Jinping and Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte both attended a ceremony for the signing of 29 memoranda of understanding which Italian media said were worth 5.0 to 7.0 billion euros (\$5.6 to 8.0 billion).

Also signing the accords were the chairman of China's National Development Commission He Lifeng and Italian deputy prime minister and Minister of Economic Development Luigi Di Maio. Italian financial daily Il Sole 24 Ore said the value of the Chinese investments could rise to 20 billion euros but would for now be limited to the strategic ports of Genoa and Trieste. Italy has rolled out the red carpet for Xi, who Friday sought to allay Western unease over his transformational infrastructure initiative by emphasizing the \$1 trillion project's mutual benefits.

Italian firms to benefit include the Ansaldo group, which wins a contract for making turbines, and the Danieli group, which lands a 1.1 billion euro deal to build an iron and steel plant in Azerbaijan. The accords also foresee the opening up of the Chinese market for Italian oranges as well as a

partnership for Chinese tourism giant Ctrip, notably with Rome's airports. Cultural tie-ups including town twinnings are also on the agenda while Beijing is pushing to have several Serie A football matches played in China - although that would currently contravene regulations of the game's governing body FIFA.

'Opportunity - and risk'

"We are well aware, with this memorandum of understanding, that there is risk as well as opportunity," said secretary of state for the economy Michele Geraci, who spent a decade working in China. Italy has made a point of giving a full welcome to Xi, despite the misgivings in Washington and Brussels. Critics say Beijing's ambitious maritime, rail and road venture is "predatory" and overwhelmingly favors China and Chinese companies. —AFP

China factory blast death toll jumps to 64, man rescued

BEIJING: The death toll in a chemical plant explosion in China rose to 64 yesterday but rescuers found a survivor among more than two dozen still missing in the debris of one of the country's worst industrial accidents in recent years. Thursday's explosion in the eastern city of Yancheng injured hundreds and flattened an industrial park. The local fire brigade pulled a man in his 40s from the rubble of the destroyed chemical plant around dawn yesterday, according to a statement on the city government's official Weibo account.

He was taken to hospital for treatment, the statement said, without giving further detail of his status or injuries. Rescuers are looking for 28 people who are still missing. Yancheng mayor Cao Lubao said in the statement. "The identities of the dead and the missing are being confirmed through interviews with family members, home visits and DNA tests," Cao said. More than 600 people have received medical treatment following the blast, according to the city government.

Among them, 21 are critically injured and 73 are seriously injured, the statement said. The explosion toppled several buildings in the industrial park and caused a huge fire that raged through the night, while rescuers scrambled to find survivors in the plant's wreckage. Hundreds of rescuers were dispatched to the scene, local authorities said, and some 4,000 people have been evacuated from the blast site.

The force of the explosion - which was so powerful that it apparently triggered a small earthquake - blew out windows and dented metal garage doors of buildings as far as four kilometers from the site. Nearby residents - many of them elderly - were seen sweeping up glass, and in some cases appeared to have abandoned their homes entirely. The city government said some 89 houses were damaged beyond repair and families were resettled after demolishing those structures.

The government said it was also repairing blown-in doors and windows in 10 school buildings near the site so that all schools in the area can resume classes Monday. Local authorities investigating the cause of the accident said an unspecified number of people were taken into police custody on Friday. —AFP

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