



Sharing, and not caring

The SP-BSP tie-up poses a challenge to the BJP, but does little for pre-poll opposition unity

Sometimes, it is impossible to make new friends without making new enemies. In reaching an early agreement on seat-sharing in Uttar Pradesh for this year's Lok Sabha election, the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party have thrown a serious challenge to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party in a State that could well determine which political formation forms the next Central government. In the process, however, they may have alienated the Congress, which, given its pan-Indian footprint, can be the only national-level force in an emerging anti-BJP coalition. The two biggest parties in U.P.'s opposition space have equally carved out 76 of the 80 seats between themselves, leaving four to the Congress and the Rashtriya Lok Dal, which has a support base in the western region of the State. Whether the seat sharing is final or just a bargaining tactic is difficult to say. But for now, the Congress has been pushed into a forlorn corner in India's most populous State. The party may have to strike out on its own in sheer desperation at being denied a reasonable number of seats. It is doubtful, or at least by no means certain, whether it will be content with contesting in only a few seats to prevent a split in the anti-BJP vote in the others. It will be difficult for a party in revival mode in other parts of the Hindi heartland to give up U.P. without putting up a serious fight. As for the SP and BSP, it will be odd for them to be locked in a fight with the Congress in the State, while pushing for a Congress-led alternative at the national level.

The Congress does enjoy additional support in a Lok Sabha election; it demonstrated this in 2009, winning a surprise 21 seats in U.P. However, the SP and the BSP have probably calculated they are in a good space following the BJP's poor showing in three Lok Sabha by-polls, one of them in Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's political backyard, Gorakhpur. They may well also be banking on the history of strategic voting in the State, which leaves little room for a third player. For all the talk of beating back the challenge of the BJP, regional parties know it is easier to do business with a weakened Congress than with a resurgent one. If the Congress is kept out of the alliance, then any alternative to the BJP will have to emerge from a post-poll coalition of disparate parties. This will hand a campaign point for Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is already projecting the choice in 2019 as that between a strong government and a motley post-poll coalition united by no more than a shared aversion for the BJP. The strategy of the SP and the BSP and some other regional players to defeat the BJP without making the Congress win is high-risk, and tactically difficult to implement on the ground.

Change in Congo

A contentious election may lead to the country's first transfer of power via the ballot

After last month's general election, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo) is anxiously awaiting the first ever transfer of power via the ballot since gaining independence in 1960. President Joseph Kabila, who had already deferred the polls by two years, postponed them again by a week days before it was scheduled in December. He cited the Ebola outbreak in some provinces and the destruction of electronic voting machines in a fire in the capital Kinshasa as reasons for the latest delay. But Mr. Kabila's critics dismissed these excuses as coming from a President in denial of his impending defeat after 17 years in power. Their suspicions appeared to be justified, as prominent opposition leaders were barred from the contest by partisan courts and the election commission. Meanwhile, the UN has voiced concerns over the quality of voting machines and the deployment of the state machinery to obstruct opposition campaigns, adding to the sense of uncertainty. Soon after polling closed on December 30, rival camps began to pronounce victory for their own sides. When the election commission last week announced Felix Tshisekedi, leader of the Union for Democracy and Social Progress as the winner, it predictably created a controversy. Mr. Kabila's candidate, former Interior Minister Emmanuel Shadary, was expected to romp home. In the event, Mr. Shadary, who faces accusations of human rights abuses, was ranked third. The outcome triggered intense speculation that Mr. Kabila had cut a deal to back Mr. Tshisekedi, son of a deceased opposition leader. The candidate who came in second, Martin Fayulu, a political outsider, has challenged the results.

DR Congo's Catholic church, which runs an independent poll observation mission, has questioned the official result and has even threatened to legally challenge it. It is but natural that DR Congo's vibrant civil society groups should expect the judiciary to assert its independence, as did the court in Kenya following that country's disputed 2017 elections. There are real fears that without genuine attempts to uphold the rule of law, the central African nation could slip into protracted political uncertainty and social unrest. The U.S. has cautioned Mr. Kabila against attempting to doctor the popular mandate. But with an eye on the country's lucrative mineral wealth, which is needed to power electric cars and the robotics revolution, there are limits to the pressure Western nations will want to exert on Kinshasa in the months ahead. The role of Mr. Kabila, who is just 47 years old, in the coming days will be important to watch. He has emphasised that by stepping down, he is merely respecting the constitutional mandate. The intent behind that assertion will be tested in the ensuing months.

A way out of the morass

The U.S.'s plan to pull out of Afghanistan is an appropriate time to re-examine the idea of enabling its neutrality



C.R. GHAREKHAN & HAMID ANSARI

In an article published in *The Hindu* (Editorial page, "Another Approach to Afghanistan", December 24, 2003), we had suggested that the only way out of the morass in Afghanistan would be to re-place Afghanistan in its traditional mode of neutrality. For that, two things were essential. The Afghans themselves must declare unequivocally that they would follow strict neutrality in their relations with external powers, and the outside powers must commit themselves to respect Afghanistan's neutrality. In other words, external powers must subscribe to a multilateral declaration not to interfere in the internal affairs of Afghanistan together with an obligation on Afghanistan not to seek outside intervention in its internal situation.

We further put forward the idea that the agreement on the Neutrality of Laos, concluded in 1962, could provide a model for the neutralisation of Afghanistan. The present might be an appropriate time to revisit that proposal.

U.S. President Donald Trump has announced his decision to reduce American troop strength in Afghanistan, 14,000 at present, by half. Though Mr. Trump has not laid down a deadline for this reduction, it is safe to assume that he will make this happen well in time before the next U.S. presidential election in 2020.

This development has ener-

gised the principal stakeholders in Afghanistan to make calculated efforts to place themselves in as favourable a position as possible in an Afghanistan post-American withdrawal. India should also be thinking of what steps it should take to protect its interests in that situation.

Engage with the Taliban
One thing that should already have been done and must be done is to engage in dialogue with the Taliban. There is no doubt that the Taliban will be a major player in the politics of Afghanistan in the coming months and years. They already control more than 50% of the country and are getting stronger and bolder by the day. They are also engaged in direct talks with China, Russia, the Central Asian states and others. The Americans, represented by former diplomat Zalmay Khalilzad, have begun sustained dialogue with the Taliban. The Taliban have refused to talk to the Kabul government so far, but as and when the Americans pull out, as they are justified in doing for reasons of their own national interest, they might agree to engage with the Ashraf Ghani government. In any future scenario, the Taliban are guaranteed to play an important, perhaps even a decisive role in the governing structures of the country.

New Delhi has so far refrained from establishing formal contacts with the Taliban out of sensitivity for the Kabul government not wanting to talk directly to the Taliban as long as the Taliban refuse to acknowledge its legitimacy. However, India must look after its own interests. Will a Taliban-dominated government in Kabul necessarily pose a serious security threat to us? While we are in no



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position to prevent such an eventuality, we would have alienated the Taliban by refusing to talk to them during the present phase. Even Iran, a Shia regime, has established official dialogue with the Taliban, a staunchly Sunni movement. It would not be difficult for our agencies to establish contacts that would facilitate initiating an official dialogue with Taliban; if needed, Iran could help in this even if it might displease the Americans. After all, the Americans have not always been sensitive to our concerns, in Afghanistan or elsewhere and Mr. Trump has publicly shown unawareness of our substantial development assistance to it.

A regional compact

The international community ought to, at the same time, think of how to establish a mechanism which might offer a reasonable opportunity to the Afghan people to live in peace, free from external interference. And perhaps the only way in which this could be done is to promote a regional compact among all the neighbouring countries as well as relevant external powers, and with the endorsement of the UN Security Council, to commit themselves not to interfere in Afghanistan's internal af-

airs. The most important country in this regard is Pakistan. Pakistan is highly suspicious, perhaps without any basis, of India's role in Afghanistan. A multilateral pact, with India subscribing to it, ought to allay, to some extent at least, Pakistan's apprehensions. India will need to talk to China about cooperating in Afghanistan; Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi already agreed in Wuhan, in April 2018, on working on joint projects there.

Pakistan should have no objection to formally agreeing to Afghanistan's neutrality. There is the most relevant precedent of the Bilateral Agreement on the Principles of Mutual Relations, in particular on Non-interference and Non-intervention, signed in Geneva in 1988 between Pakistan and Afghanistan. In that agreement, the parties undertook, inter alia, to respect the right of the other side to determine its political, social and culture system without interference in any form; to refrain from over throwing or changing the political system of the other side; to ensure that its territory was not used to violate the sovereignty, etc of the other side, to prevent within its territory the training, etc of mercenaries from whatever origin for the purpose of hostile activities against the other side.

As a document on non-interference, it could hardly be improved upon. Pakistan probably would agree to a document with Afghanistan in whose governance its protégé, the Taliban, will play an important role, which would broadly be similar to the one it had concluded with an Afghan regime which it did not approve of.

The Bonn Agreement of 2001,

which made Hamid Karzai the interim chief of Afghan government, contains a request to the United Nations and the international community to 'guarantee' non-interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan, a request not acted upon so far.

Some concerns

A regional pact on non-interference and non-intervention ought to be welcomed by all the regional states. Russia has reason to worry about a lack of stability in Afghanistan because of its concerns regarding a spread of radicalism as well as the drug menace. China has even stronger concerns, given the situation in its western-most region. The U.S. might have apprehensions about China entrenching itself in strategically important Afghanistan, but there is little it can do about it; a regional agreement on non-interference might give the U.S. at least some comfort.

It is early days to conclude whether the situation in Afghanistan has entered its end game. In any case, it would be prudent to assume that the U.S. will definitely leave Afghanistan in the next two years, likely to be followed by other western countries. No other country will offer to put boots on the ground, nor should they; certainly not India. The only alternative is to think of some arrangement along the lines we have suggested. May be, there are other ideas; we would welcome them.

Chinnmaya R. Gharekhan, a former Indian Ambassador to the United Nations, was also a Special Envoy for West Asia as a UN Under Secretary General. Hamid Ansari was the Vice-President of India (2007-17), a former Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan and a Permanent Representative to the UN

Basic income works and works well

India has the technological capacity, the financial resources, and the need for a simple, transparent basic income scheme



GUY STANDING

In 2010-2013, I was principal designer of three basic income pilots in West Delhi and Madhya Pradesh, in which over 6,000 men, women and children were provided with modest basic incomes, paid in cash, monthly, without conditions. The money was not much, coming to about a third of subsistence. But it was paid individually, with men and women receiving equal amounts and with children receiving half as much, paid to the mother or surrogate mother. The pilots involved the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and financial assistance from UNICEF and the UNDP.

The outcomes exceeded expectations, partly because everybody in the community, and not just select people, received their own individual transfer. Nutrition improved, sanitation improved, health and health care improved, school attendance and performance improved, women's status and well-being improved, the position of the disabled and vulnerable groups improved by more than others. And the amount and quality of work improved.

Critics said it would be a waste of money, but they were proved

wrong. Above all, the basic incomes improved the community spirit and were emancipatory. Those who do not trust people wish to retain paternalistic policies despite decades of evidence that they are woefully inefficient, ineffective, inequitable and open to ridiculously extensive corruption. The tendency of elites to want to have common people grateful to their discretionary benevolence has blocked sensible economic reform.

As commentators know, in the 2017 Economic Report tabled by the government there is a chapter on how a basic income could be rolled out across India, and is affordable. Its main author, former Chief Economic Adviser Arvind Subramanian, and others such as Professor Pranab Bardhan have proposed ways of paying for it — primarily by rolling back existing wasteful, distortionary, and mostly regressive subsidies. This should not be an issue to divide the left and right in politics, and it would be wonderful if the main political parties and personalities could come together on it. That is too much to hope. But in this wonderful country, now is a moment of transformative potential.

A ripe idea

The international debate on basic income has advanced considerably in the past five years. Experiments have been launched in countries of different levels of per capita income, which include Ca-



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nada, Finland, Kenya, Namibia, the Netherlands, Spain and the U.S., with plans being drawn up in England, Scotland, South Korea and elsewhere. India could take the lead. It has the technological capacity, the financial resources and, above all, the need for a simple, transparent scheme to liberate the energies of the masses now mired in economic insecurity, deprivation and degradation.

However, as I wrote after the pilots in Madhya Pradesh were completed, planning the phased implementation of basic income will be a serious but manageable challenge. It will require goodwill, integrity, knowledge and humility about what will be inevitable mistakes. As we found, if properly planned, it is possible to introduce a comprehensive scheme even in rural or urban low-income communities, without too much cost. But it is essential to obtain local cooperation and awareness at the outset, and the backing of key local institutions. It is strongly recommended that if the government is to go ahead, it should phase in the scheme gradually, rolling it out from low-income to

higher-income communities, after local officials have been trained and prepared.

It is also recommended that the authorities should not select particular types of individuals and give it only to them. It is tempting to say it should go only to women, low-income farmers, or vulnerable social groups. That would be wrong. It would involve expensive and corruptible procedures, and risk evoking resentment in those arbitrarily excluded, who would probably be equally in need, perhaps more so. The same applies to means-testing targeting. That would be a terrible mistake, for the many reasons reiterated in a recent book on basic income.

What administrators often do not appreciate enough is that money is fungible. If money is given only to women, men will demand a share; some women will give in, some will resist; it will be divisive. We found in the pilots that if men and women all have an equal individual amount, it promotes better and more equal gender relations. Moreover, giving to all in the community fosters solidarity within households and the wider community, apart from enabling multiplier effects in the local economy.

Farm loan waivers

The contrast is bound to be made with the Congress's promise of farm loan waivers. No doubt this policy would lessen the burden on a hard-pressed social group, and lessen rural poverty, but it is a po-

licist measure. It will be popular, but will not alter structures and is bad economics. Suppose the principle were generalised. If one type of loan could be declared non-repayable, why not others? Unless one can show that a debt is odious or illegal per se, it would be a dangerous precedent to declare that one type of debt and not others need not be repaid.

In the long term, financial institutions would be less likely to extend loans to small-scale farmers. Is that the aim? If the loans were made on fair rules, it would be better to enable the debtors to pay them back less onerously. That is why a basic income would be a more equitable and economically rational way of addressing what is undoubtedly an unfolding rural tragedy.

The beauty of moving towards a modest basic income would be that all groups would gain. That would not preclude special additional support for those with special needs, nor be any threat to a progressive welfare state in the long term. It would merely be an anchor of a 21st century income distribution system. Will the politicians show the will to implement it? We need to see.

Guy Standing is Professorial Research Associate, SOAS University of London, and is co-founder and honorary co-president of BIEN, the Basic Income Earth Network. His most recent book is 'Basic Income: And How We Can Make It Happen'

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Opposition moves

Excluding the Congress from the Samajwadi Party-Bahujan Samaj Party combine's alliance in Uttar Pradesh has been the subject of lively media debate soon after the announcement by the respective party leaders, Akhilesh Yadav and Mayawati. The consensus in these debates has revolved around a landslide win awaiting the SP-BSP alliance. Media discourse, however, seems to have overlooked one important determinant of the poll outcome, namely, the Congress's role as a vote divider. Although the Congress hardly created a ripple in the State in the 2014 Lok Sabha as well the 2017 Assembly elections, 2019 is unlikely to turn out to be another dismal event for the party. Elections in Madhya

Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh seem to have heralded the resurgence of the national party. The formation of an alliance-led government in Karnataka has boosted the morale of its cadres. Party president Rahul Gandhi has also been on a propaganda juggernaut. In U.P., the party is sure to have a respectable share of votes in most constituencies particularly those with pockets of minorities. The division of votes will definitely hurt the gathbandhan to the advantage of the BJP.

K.R. KRISHNA IYER, Palakkad, Kerala

■ The Prime Minister's line at the BJP's national council meet criticising the alliance politics of the Opposition says much about the political realities. The newfound friendship between arch

rivals, the SP and the BSP, in Uttar Pradesh has left the Congress cold. The alliance in West Bengal is in the doldrums. An enthused TRS chief and Telangana Chief Minister K. Chandrashekar Rao is leaving no stone unturned to form a federal front against both the BJP and the Congress. One does not know what the situation will be like in Kerala and in Andhra Pradesh. The big question many want to know is who will head the coalition of Opposition parties and what their agenda for the nation is other than defeating common enemy, Narendra Modi and his party, the BJP. Except DMK chief M.K. Stalin, all other non-Congress Opposition parties are tight-lipped about their prime ministerial candidate. The nation is bound to pay heavy price if there is an unstable and weak

government formed by parties lacking cohesion. N. SADHASIVA REDDY, Bengaluru

Be transparent

In a democracy, people have a right to know what is happening in the country. The strange happenings at late Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalithaa's estate in the Nilgiris must be probed. Blacking out a media report and making the threat of legal action are odd reactions by the State government (Tamil Nadu, "Those behind Kodanad video will be exposed" and "Kodanad case: Oppn. demands probe, Edappadi's resignation", January 13). The way in which it is rushing to gag things leads to suspicion that there is more to the incidents than what meets the eye. R.M. MANOHARAN, Chennai

Rat hole traps

It is obvious that there is a lack of major employment opportunities in the northeast States ('Ground Zero' page, "Meghalaya's rat hole traps", January 12). How else can one explain why young men are forced to look at the very risky option of extracting coal from rat hole mines? What the entire northeast region is blessed with in abundance is natural beauty. Perhaps ways should be explored to have sustainable and eco-friendly models so that tourism becomes a major revenue earner in the region. RADHIKA KUMAR, Bengaluru

Fading Urdu?

Urdu has played a major role in the success story of many an Indian film. What is unfortunate now is how film producers are now biased against this otherwise

Taking back control? Not really.

Less than 80 days before Britain is due to leave the EU, the future remains as uncertain as ever



VIDYA RAM

Last week, over a million people tuned in to watch *Brexit: The Uncivil War*, a long-awaited television drama on the successful Leave campaign in Britain. In the film, Benedict Cumberbatch stars as Dominic Cummings, the controversial political strategist who masterminded the successful strategy, including the micro-targeted political advertising campaign that has come under scrutiny in recent months. The drama, which attempts to capture the perspectives of both sides, has still unsurprisingly divided public opinion, with many believing it presents too sympathetic a picture of the other. This reflects the highly charged nature of the debate. On the show, even Mr. Cummings, giving evidence to an inquiry, displays his frustration with where things are headed. "It's gone wrong," he declares, launching a rambling attack on "flawed people" and the need for a system reboot, which has failed to happen. It's unlikely that even the most ardent supporter of Brexit would disagree with that analysis – less than 80 days before Britain is due to leave the European Union, the future remains as uncertain as ever.

Two significant votes
On Tuesday, MPs are due to vote on Prime Minister Theresa May's controversial Brexit plan, and despite the decks being stacked clearly against her, Mr. May has plodded on, insisting her deal is the right one for Britain. The willingness of MPs from across the political spectrum to vote against her became abundantly clear over the past week, as they came together to defeat the government on two significant, if not game-changing, Brexit votes. First, MPs, including 20 from the Conservative Party, voted in favour of an amendment to the Finance Bill to limit the government's ability to levy taxes if Britain were to crash out without a deal. Second, the (Conservative) Speaker of the House, John Bercow, controversially allowed MPs to pass an amend-



"Britain PM Theresa May is resting her hopes on persuading MPs across the political spectrum to have a last-minute change of heart to avoid exiting the EU without a deal." A public gathering, 'Think Anew, Act Anew: a Convention on Brexit and a People's Vote', in London on January 11. **AP**

ment that gives the government three days to come up with a Plan B in the event that Ms. May's proposal is shot down on Tuesday. The amendment caused outrage among Brexiteers and the right-wing tabloids. The Prime Minister said she was "surprised" that Mr. Bercow allowed MPs to vote on the amendment and called on him to explain himself to Parliament. The anger over this highlights the extent to which British politics has descended to the farcical: the amendment merely requires the government to swiftly offer an alternative if, as expected, there is a negative vote on the withdrawal deal. This is what a sensible government would have done in any case in order to avoid a cliff edge.

Garnering support
What has become increasingly clear is that a cliff edge is precisely what the government is counting on to garner support for its deal. With little sign from Europe of any substantial change in the deal, Ms. May is resting her hopes on persuading MPs across the political spectrum to have a last-minute change of heart to avoid exiting without a deal, which, observers agree, would severely damage the

economy and create short-term logistical chaos, including at Britain's main ports and road networks. Labour has accused the government, which delayed the vote from December after it became clear that it was set to lose, of running down the clock in an attempt to force the vote through by focussing on wavering MPs, dissatisfied with the Prime Minister's deal but more anxious of a no-deal exit. Other methods have been deployed to garner support too. *BuzzFeed*, the news website, reported that a government source warned that Conservative MPs who sided with Labour and opposition parties could have their whip withdrawn and be deselected as party candidates at the next election. The veteran Euro sceptic, John Redwood, received a knighthood in the New Year honours list, which led to suspicions that the honours route was being used by Ms. May to drum up support. There is now even talk that the Prime Minister has reached out with more workers' and environmental protections to trade unions, traditionally supporters and allies of Labour, to test whether these concessions will encourage them – and Labour politicians – to back the deal.

Still others within government circles have attempted to persuade their colleagues that not backing Ms. May's deal would thwart Brexit entirely and, as one person warned, even trigger a surge in the far right.

Preparations for a no-deal exit
The government is also making preparations to face the worst. It is attempting to strike a balance between demonstrating its preparedness for a no-deal exit, while making clear the many grievous repercussions of such an exit. For instance, the Health Secretary made a throwaway remark about becoming the world's biggest buyer of fridges as Britain stockpiles several weeks' supply of crucial medicines. There was also a recent test run of a contingency traffic plan to avoid congestions at the port of Dover, which went off well enough for the government to claim success but involved few enough vehicles for the test to be dismissed by the Road Haulage Association. *The Times* reported that thousands of civil servants are being asked to abandon their day jobs this week and prepare for a no deal.

The government can count on one thing, however: for all its struggles to garner support, there is no other position that can claim outright certainty either. While it appears that most MPs agree that they don't want to crash out without a deal, neither of the two leading political parties support the option of a second referendum. In a speech last week, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn made it clear that his priority remains securing a fresh election, which, if his party won, would enable it to hold talks anew with Europe, in the hopes of a new deal. However, there is little hope of a new election (a two-thirds majority of Parliament would be required to hold an election before 2022 and neither the Conservatives nor their allies, the Democratic Unionist Party of Northern Ireland, would vote to jeopardise their already vulnerable political position). This of course increases the risk of Britain crashing out, with nothing else agreed on. The ignominious process is a long way from the message of "taking back control" that the real Mr. Cummings ingeniously, if deceptively, sold the country.

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FROM THE READERS' EDITOR

Reflections from within

Two books provide insights into the changing media landscape



A.S. PANNEERSELVAN

Literature festivals are democratic sites to discuss ideas. They grapple with a whole gamut of issues and they use books, not violence or intimidation, as entry points to unpack complex realities and understand our societies better. Veteran journalist Arun Shourie declared at *The Hindu Lit for Life*: "There is a darkening cloud of intolerance. Persons have been killed, prosecuted and cases have been filed for what they have written or their views." For most participants, the sense that space for the media is shrinking was real. A young researcher asked, if the freedom of expression is under such severe attack, what are the responses from within the journalistic fraternity?

Understanding tectonic shifts

Two recent books look at contemporary media, its relationship with commerce and what it means for freedom and democracy. Written by journalists who carved a name for themselves in the media as fine reporters, these books provide insights into the reality today of a digitally disrupted media environment and a changing public culture. Pamela Philpote, Public Editor of *The Wire*, in her book *Media's Shifting Terrain: Five Years that Transformed the Way India Communicates*, tries to explain the changes using some crucial media-led, or rather media-fed, mobilisations. These include the 2011 India Against Corruption protests, the spontaneous demonstrations of public outrage over the gang rape of a young student in a bus in Delhi in December 2012, the arrival of the Aam Aadmi Party in 2013, and the 2014 general election that saw the Bharatiya Janata Party emerge with a massive and unprecedented majority. The focus of her study is to document "the deceptively discreet way in which media has brought about tectonic shifts in our lives."

She establishes how the very "fabric of human-to-human interaction is increasingly woven on the looms of communication technology". Most significantly, she captures the sequence of events that led to the activism of the "politics of anti-politics". Going through

the details of various scams that marked the two terms of the United Progressive Alliance – the Commonwealth Games, the coal block allocation, the 2G spectrum allocation, and the murky real estate deals concerning Adarsh Cooperative Housing Society – Ms. Philpote argues that none of these were directly broken by the mainstream media. They were "largely the outcome of leaked reports from the offices of the Comptroller and Auditor General or the Chief Vigilance Commissioner, and information gathered by activists through RTI applications".

Restoring trust

Sukumar Muralidharan, a journalist and an advocate of press freedom, has come up with a comprehensive study titled *Freedom, Civility, Commerce: Contemporary Media and the Public*. In the hardcover book that is just shy of 500 pages, Mr. Muralidharan covers a vast domain. He looks at the philosophical foundations of free speech, the theories of journalism from the early years of print media to television, the Internet, and social media. He situates journalism in a wider political context and looks at the manner in which nationalism, global politics and the rise of corporate power in the media are addressed. In the complex interlocking of the right to free speech, the media as an industry and its regulation as a public utility, he tries to understand the importance of the ethics of journalism and its future as a part of democratic discourse.

Mr. Muralidharan looks closely at the legal framework that made journalism different from other professions. He examines the contestation of the Working Journalists Act of 1955, which was significantly amended in 1973, by the newspaper industry in the Supreme Court as a dilution of the Press Commission doctrine that the newspaper is a "public utility". Asking for a reaffirmation of core values, Mr. Muralidharan reminds us that though there has never been a golden age of journalism, we should be aware of the difficult realities of today. He points out that information overload has not led to more democratic access to information. Instead, information overload points to a future of robotic forms of information aggregation and dissemination that could serve little else than corporates. He rightly places emphasis on the importance of restoring public trust in journalism.

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SINGLE FILE

For whom the TikToks

Indian companies are unable to hold their own against the Chinese in the content-centric app market

G. SAMPATH



Chinese apps are making huge inroads in the Indian market. According to the tech news portal FactorDaily, two of the top 10 mobile apps in India in December 2017 were Chinese-owned; this increased to five as of December 2018. And leading the charge is TikTok, an addictive viral video app owned by ByteDance, a \$75 billion cash-rich behemoth.

The app, which allows users to make short videos of up to 60 seconds, is a rage among teenagers not just in India but around the world. TikTok seems to have cracked the code of combining stickiness, sociality, and user-generated content better than any of the Silicon Valley giants. It is already being spoken of as something that could render YouTube irrelevant, thanks to the algorithmic superiority of its video-making/video-sharing interface. Some believe it could make Instagram obsolete, given its more aggressive indulgence of users' craving for selfie-powered micro-celebrity. In terms of the audio-visual genre, TikTok is unabashedly meme-driven. As for its USP, it has positioned itself as the first port of call for adolescent self-expression, knowing well that if this demographic cares for anything at all, it is fun-filled, creative self-expression meant to impress one's peer group, and the more problematic the manner of self-expression, the more likely they are to embrace it.

A user who downloads the app and opens it for the first time is instantly greeted by an endless avalanche of snazzy videos that, if you are not careful, can turn your brain to mush before you can say "TikTok". The videos, by and large, fall into three categories: comedic skits, lip-synch songs or dialogues, and teens dancing suggestively to popular music. Many videos feature just one person, and are evidently shot in the user's home, often the bedroom. The teen-heavy user base either doesn't understand privacy or doesn't care for it.

TikTok has drawn flak in many countries, including Australia, France, Hong Kong and the U.S., for its laxity in privacy protection and enforcement of minimum age norms. Parents have flagged the danger of paedophiles contacting minors on the platform. In India, PM leader S. Ramadoss recently called for a ban on TikTok on the grounds that the app was causing "cultural degradation" by allowing youngsters to upload "suggestive sexual dance choreography".

There is little doubt that TikTok raises the burden of parental anxiety, especially at a time when their wards are least likely to be appreciative of parental supervision. But the app's mass popularity among India's youth is something that begs for serious analysis, not just among sociologists and cultural critics, but also the ubiquitous advocates of Digital India who must answer how, soon after the abject surrender in the smartphone sector, even in the content-centric app market, Indian companies are unable to hold their own against the Chinese onslaught.

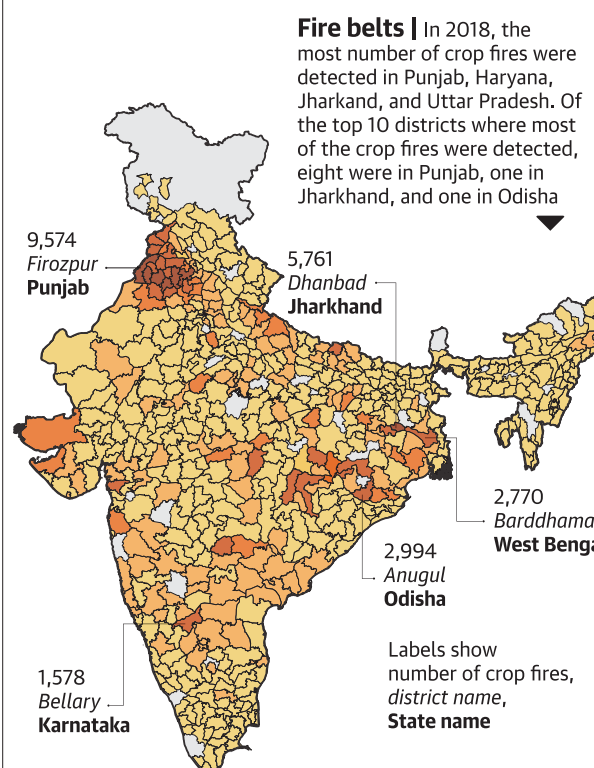
The writer is Social Affairs Editor, *The Hindu*



DATA POINT

A burning issue

Stubble burning is a pan-Indian problem but is most acute in Punjab and Haryana, which together account for 46% of the crop fires in the country. In 2018, stubble burning picked up in November after a six-year low in October in these two States. **Vignesh Radhakrishnan** and **Varun B. Krishnan** analyse the data processed from satellite images



Lows and highs | The table shows the number of crop fires detected in Punjab and Haryana over the last six years. The darker the shade, the higher the number of fires detected

Month	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Jan.	496	373	335	354	322	562
Feb.	472	507	518	878	820	588
Mar.	871	387	404	422	503	624
Apr.	21565	23075	18711	14126	17039	20166
May	1097	599	751	5917	1896	1679
June	230	962	419	411	458	612
July	43	86	28	28	91	70
Aug.	59	33	23	18	41	29
Sep.	577	1027	314	544	342	151
Oct.	31932	29642	24763	41545	34557	21353
Nov.	38506	50709	46278	58136	33271	44256
Dec.	818	522	690	890	950	881

■ Crop fires initially peak in April, when Rabi crops are harvested and Kharif crops are sown

■ The second peak is in Oct.-Nov., when Kharif crops are harvested and Rabi crops are sown. There was a dip in the no. of fires in Oct. 2018

■ However, the number spiked in Nov. 2018, bringing the two-month total to almost the same as the previous periods

Data from LANCE FIRMS, NASA/GSFC/ESDIS and processed by **Raj Bhagat Palanichamy**

FROM THE HINDU ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JANUARY 14, 1969

Delhi student to be released in exchange for Pakistani

Trilok Chandra, 17-year-old Delhi student, who is in an internment camp in Pakistan after serving a two-year sentence, is to be released in the next few days, it was officially learnt here [New Delhi] to-day [January 13]. He will be exchanged for a Pakistani national, Gulzar Hussain Shah, who has just completed his term of imprisonment in India. The release of Trilok Chandra, who strayed into Pakistan on the Wagah border in January 1966, follows protracted efforts on the part of the Government to secure his return to India. The Governments of India and Pakistan have agreed to exchange these two persons at the Wagah border on a date yet to be decided. Trilok Chandra was sentenced for alleged spying. His term expired last year, but Pakistan refused to release him until India agreed to release a Pakistani of its choice sentenced to jail in India.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JANUARY 13, 1919.

Mr. S. Kasturi Ranga Iyengar. Arrival in Madras

Mr. S. Kasturi Ranga Aiyangar, leaving Dhanushkodi last evening [Jan. 10], stayed at Ramnad in the night as the guest of the Hon'ble the Rajah of Ramnad and resumed his journey this morning by Boat Mail for Madras. He passed through Madura this afternoon when a very large number of prominent gentlemen of the town were present on the station platform to meet the distinguished editor, now returning from England. The train steamed in at 2.15 and as soon as it stopped, the crowd rushed to his carriage, cheered him and shouted Vandemataram. Mr. George Joseph and the Hon'ble Mr. K. Rama Aiyangar exchanged greetings with Mr. Aiyangar and extended to him a hearty welcome on behalf of those present. Mr. T.S. Sankaranarayana Aiyar garlanded him, after which he was taken in a motor car to the Victoria Edward Hall where a reception had been arranged by the citizens of this place in his honour.

CONCEPTUAL
Hayflick limit

BIOLOGY

Also known as the Hayflick phenomenon, this refers to the natural limit that exists on the number of times a normal human cell population divides before cell division stops. After each cell division, the telomeres at the ends of the cell decrease in length slightly. This process continues until the cell becomes so short that it cannot divide further. The phenomenon is named after American anatomist Leonard Hayflick who first proposed the idea after conducting a study of human fetal cells in 1961. It was earlier believed that cells can divide forever and are thus immortal. The Hayflick limit differs across various organisms with the human cell dividing about 50 to 70 times over its lifespan.

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Andy Murray from then to now: career highlights

<http://bit.ly/MurrayCareer>