

ACROSS THE AISLE



P CHIDAMBARAM

As I write this essay on Friday, the buzz is that among the measures under contemplation are interest-free crop loans and a cash transfer to small and medium farmers. Even if the government directs public sector banks to provide the money for crop loans, how will it find the money for cash transfers? The fiscal deficit at the end of November 2018 was 115 per cent of the target

It is 'Fail' on the report card

I AM writing from Delhi, one of the world's most polluted cities. It is still winter. The spring that I mentioned last week is still many weeks away.

Notwithstanding its loss in all five states that held elections recently, the BJP's leadership is still combative, contemptuous of Parliament and disdainful of institutions. In an interview to ANI on January 1, 2019, Prime Minister Modi said, "No one gave the BJP any chance in Telangana and Mizoram. In Chhattisgarh, a clear mandate was given — the BJP lost. But in two states (Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh) there was a hung Assembly."

DECISIVE VERDICT

A hung Assembly means that no party is in a position to form the government. In three states, there were only two real contestants. After the results, the party that had absolutely no chance to form the government was the BJP; the party with a chance was the Congress — and it did form the government in the three states with practically no hurdles on its path. I would call that a *decisive verdict*, not a *hung Assembly*.

In Chhattisgarh, the BJP lost 34 seats (from 49 to 15), in Madhya Pradesh 56 seats (from 165 to 109) and in Rajasthan 90 seats (from 163 to 73). That was a decisive rejection of the BJP.

Mr Narendra Modi's analysis of the election results has few takers. For example, the RSS's internal view is that it

was a big defeat; hence the RSS is cranking up the engine of *Hindutva* and demanding an ordinance to build a Ram temple at Ayodhya, notwithstanding the appeals pending in the Supreme Court.

The Modi interview was dubbed by the media — and seen by the people — as an end-of-the-tenure report card. It was significant in two respects: for what the prime minister said and for what he did not say.

MENTIONS AND OMISSIONS

Let's begin with the subjects on which the Prime Minister spoke: demonetisation, GST, surgical strike, lynching, Dr Ujjit Patel's resignation, Sabarimala, triple talaq Bill, Rafale, farm loan waiver and the *mahagathbandhan* (alliance of opposition parties). True to his character he gave nothing away, he admitted no mistake, he maintained that his government had done everything right, and "Modi is just a manifestation of public love and blessings".

I am wary of persons who do not admit their mistakes. Demonetisation was a monumental error, the GST was deeply flawed and was made worse because of faulty implementation, the surgical strike was not unique nor did it put an end to infiltration or militancy, the triple talaq Bill is an overkill and biased, the Rafale deal short-changed both the Air Force and Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd and, thanks to wrong policies, the farm

loan waiver has become an imperative. The people seem to agree with this analysis but the Prime Minister has taken a contrary view.

Now, let's list the subjects on which the Prime Minister did not speak: mounting unemployment, farmers' distress and suicides, women's security, vigilante groups, growing impunity, Jammu & Kashmir, economy, closure of MSMEs, stalled projects, insolvent companies, likely failure to achieve Budget targets of revenue and fiscal deficit, and departure of distinguished economists from the government.

I got the impression that the Prime Minister was like a person driving a car looking only at the rear-view mirror. He spoke about the past and not a word about the future. He is not able to look forward, and he has nothing to offer to the people that will lift their spirits or lift the economy. The report card has 'Fail' written on every page.

DESPERATE MEASURES?

Nothing seems to have changed in the new year. On January 2, there was an acrimonious debate on the Rafale deal in the Lok Sabha, the Prime Minister was absent, the Defence Minister was a spectator, and Finance Minister Arun Jaitley (the man with all the reasons) answered none of the key questions (see my column *She wanted reasons*, here are 10, *Indian Express*, October 7, 2018).

There are 10 weeks before the dawn of spring. What can be expected before the notification of the elections? I can only speculate.

The narrative that is playing out among the people is that there is change in the offing. It is clear that the government has to do *something* if it wants to alter the narrative. As I write this essay on Friday, the buzz is that among the measures under contemplation are interest-free crop loans and a cash transfer to small and medium farmers. Even if the government directs public sector banks to provide the money for crop loans, how will it find the money for cash transfers? The fiscal deficit at the end of November 2018 was 115 per cent of the target. Yet, a desperate government may announce the 'reliefs', borrow the money, indulge in creative accounting, and hope to reverse the political tide. Failing these measures, the government could promulgate an ordinance to facilitate the construction of a Ram temple on the disputed site. That will be an act of contempt of the Supreme Court, besides being highly provocative and divisive.

Usually, anything that a government does in the 10 weeks before elections is viewed by the people with suspicion and scepticism. It will not be easy to erase the word 'Fail' on the report card.

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FIFTH COLUMN



TAVLEEN SINGH

Paper aeroplanes

THE DEBATE on the Rafale deal in Parliament has been disgraceful. The lowest moment came when Congress MPs started throwing paper aeroplanes at the treasury benches while the Finance Minister was speaking. The Speaker, in the tones of a schoolteacher, stood up and said, "Did you not fly enough paper planes when you were children? Are you not adults now?" She should have been less indulgent and ordered them removed physically from the House for reducing debate in the Lok Sabha to the level of a ridiculous farce.

The Congress president then went on to hold a press conference to declare that the Prime Minister had run away from the debate. I am ready to debate him, he announced grandly, but he is too scared to face the House. It is the Prime Minister's prerogative to decide which debate he wishes to participate in. It is certainly not the place of a man to order the prime minister around who has so few seats in the Lok Sabha. He is not even officially leader of the Opposition. But, ever since Rahul Gandhi managed to win three vital Hindi heartland states last month, he has begun to fly high without noticing that he is on a paper aeroplane.

There is no sign yet that he is going to become India's prime minister this year. The media has fooled him with a false narrative. He has been on the cover of important political magazines as Modi's 'only challenger'. Eminent political commentators have started writing paeans of praise to his 'great family and his great heritage'. It is contemptible political analysis but there is something about our Imperial Dynasty that makes fine journalists reduce themselves to fawning sycophants.

So the Congress president, drunk with the exhilaration of flying high for the first time in his political career, insulted a woman journalist who got the first interview that the Prime Minister has given this year. Smita Prakash asked Narendra Modi some very difficult questions, but in the eyes of Rahul Gandhi, she was 'pliable'.

Meanwhile, at his numerous beligerent and often incoherent press conferences he continues to behave as if the Rafale deal is going to bring Modi down, just as Bofors once brought his Daddy down. He forgets that even though he repeats '*desh ka chowkidar chor hai*' every time he is in public there is no hint that ordinary Indian voters have begun to perceive Modi as corrupt.

The difference between Rafale and Bofors is that in the case of Bofors it has still not been explained why Bofors bribe money was traced to the numbered Swiss accounts of Ottavio and Maria Quattrocchi. The only reason that makes sense is that they helped Bofors sell their guns to a prime minister whose wife was one of their closest friends. They holidayed together, Sonia Gandhi's parents stayed with the Quattrocchis when they came to Delhi and two very pliant Congress prime ministers helped the Quattrocchis flee. Nothing like this has happened in the Rafale deal. When Rahul Gandhi and Arvind Kejriwal banged on about 'Ambani-Adani' in the 2014 election campaign, the Ambani they were talking about was the other one. In any case, to charge the Prime Minister with personally going to Paris and insisting that Dassault give Anil Ambani special favours is irresponsible. It actually demeans India. If there is proof of his intervention, produce it first.

Last week, at his press conference, the Congress president said once more that Modi had 'stolen' Rs 30,000 crore from young Indians and farmers and given it to his 'friend Anil Ambani'. It has been explained more than once by BJP ministers and spokesmen that Ambani's company is among 72 Indian companies chosen to participate in the production of Rafale fighter jets when they start being produced here. It has been explained that this was done as part of a new policy to use the private sector to take India towards self-sufficiency in defence production. Public sector companies have failed abysmally to do this.

The facts do not seem to matter to the Congress president. Nor does it seem to matter to him that the Indian Air Force has needed a new generation of fighter aircraft for decades. The reckless charges that he now makes against the Prime Minister daily will certainly ensure that it will be a few more decades before these fighters come. Having said this, may I add that I believe it is time for the Prime Minister to answer the charges of corruption and theft that are now being thrown at him every day. His ministers have done a good job in Parliament, but this is something that really needs the Prime Minister's intervention because the charges are directed at him personally.

The stupidest lies told over and over again can begin to sound like the truth. So please speak Mr Modi.

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HISTORY HEADLINE

What it takes for the INA cap to fit



SUGATA BOSE

ON DECEMBER 30, 2018, thousands of mobile flashlights lit up to honour Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose at the spot where he had hoisted the Indian Tricolour in Andaman 75 years ago. Prime Minister Narendra Modi led the enthusiastic crowd in full-throated chants of "Netaji Zindabad". "When it comes to heroes of the freedom struggle," he said, "we take the name of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose with pride."

The Prime Minister must be commended for performing his duty of honouring the heroism and sacrifice of Netaji and the INA (Indian National Army). Yet donning the cap of the Azad Hind Fauj carries with it the responsibility of upholding the ideals and values held dear by India's army of liberation.

Netaji's visit to Andaman was the culmination of an extraordinary year of superhuman effort. My father Sisir Kumar Bose's 1943 diary opens with this entry: "23 Jan. Sat. '43: Rangakakababu's birthday. What an auspicious day for our people! A sacred day for all of us. Forty-six years — lived as life should be lived."

Sisir was not alone in feeling immense pride in Netaji's achievements. But the most glorious phase in his uncle's life was yet to begin.

A perilous 90-day submarine voyage between February and May 1943, including a mid-ocean transfer from a German to a Japanese submarine, brought Netaji and his aide Abid Hasan from Europe to Asia. On July 2, 1943, when Subhas Chandra Bose arrived in Singapore, he was greeted with a Hindustani song composed by Mumtaz Hussain: "Subhas-ji, Subhas-ji, woh jaan-e-Hind aa gaye, woh naaz jispe Hind ko, woh shan-e-Hind aa gaye." "Asia ke Aftab" — "the light of Asia", the song concluded, had now arrived in Asia.

On July 4, 1943, Subhas Chandra Bose rose to accept the leadership of the Indian freedom movement in Southeast Asia. In ringing tones, he told those who were prepared to follow him that he could offer "nothing but hunger, thirst, privation, forced marches and death". When the sun rose next morning over Singapore harbour, it was "the proudest day" in Netaji's life. The soldiers of the INA stood

in front of him on the padang, the expanse of green, that stretched from the steps of the city hall towards the sea. It had pleased Providence, their supreme commander told them, for him to be able to announce that India's army of liberation had come into being. Netaji gave his soldiers the slogan "Chalo Delhi". He introduced the inspiring national greeting "Jai Hind".

In the months that followed, Netaji electrified massive audiences of soldiers and civilians with his speeches. Thousands of civilians, mostly from south India, deemed non-martial by the British as part of their mythology about martial races and castes, enlisted in the INA. They received military training alongside professional soldiers from the northwestern regions of the subcontinent. On my visits to Punjab and Kerala last month, I witnessed the deep reverence for Netaji to this day in north and south India alike. During his submarine journey Netaji had dictated a speech to Abid Hasan, which he planned to deliver to a women's regiment of the INA of his dreams. The speech was given on July 12 to the first recruits of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, which eventually enlisted a thousand young Indian women from Malaya and Burma.

In August, Subhas Chandra Bose tried to send rice from Burma to Bengal, which was being decimated by a man-made famine, but the British in India nervously suppressed his offer. On September 26, 1943, a ceremonial parade and prayers were held at Bahadur Shah's tomb in Rangoon to signal the INA's determination to march to the Red Fort of Delhi. The first division of the INA was put under the command of Mohammad Zaman Kiani. Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian soldiers dined together in a striking departure from the British custom of having separate messes. A warm camaraderie developed among soldiers drawn from different religious communities and linguistic groups. Netaji urged Hindus to be generous towards religious minorities.

"He never even once spoke his God in public," his colleague S A Ayer has written. "He lived him."

On October 21, 1943, in Singapore, Netaji proclaimed the formation of the Provisional Government of Azad Hind, which guaranteed religious liberty, as well as equal rights and equal opportunities to its citizens. It declared its firm resolve to transcend "all the differences cunningly fostered by an alien government in the past". What was notable about the composition of the cabinet was the strong representation given to members of religious minorities and the diver-



Netaji walks out of Cellular Jail on the Andaman Islands on December 30, 1943. Credit: Netaji Research Bureau

sity of regional backgrounds.

Netaji achieved remarkable success in forging a spirit of unity and solidarity among different religious communities and linguistic groups. When priests of the main Chettiar temple in Singapore had come to invite Netaji to a religious ceremony earlier in October, they had been turned away because of their inegalitarian practices. He acceded to their request only after they agreed to host a national meeting open to all castes and communities. He went to that temple gathering flanked by his Muslim comrades — Abid

Hasan and Mohammad Zaman Kiani. "When we came to the temple," Hasan has written, "I found it filled to capacity with the uniforms of the INA officers and the black caps of the South Indian Muslims glaringly evident."

The Azad Hind government inculcated this spirit of unity with a subtle sense of purpose. A simple Hindustani translation of Rabindranath Tagore's song *Jana Gana Mana Adhinayaka Jaya Hai* became the national anthem. A springing tiger, evoking Tipu Sultan of Mysore's gallant resistance against the British, fea-

tured as the emblem on the Tricolour shoulder-pieces on uniforms. Gandhi's *charkha* continued to adorn the centre of the Tricolour flags that INA soldiers were to carry on their march towards Delhi.

The scale of Netaji's success in forging Hindu-Muslim unity at a time when divisions along lines of religion were looming large within India cannot be exaggerated. Netaji forged an innovative path to a cosmopolitan anti-colonialism by nurturing a process of cultural intimacy among India's diverse communities. To truly honour Netaji, the Prime Minister must take an unambiguous stand against his followers who are spreading the poison of religious hatred. If his symbolic gesture of donning the INA cap is to have any meaning, he must uphold the Azad Hind Government's unwavering commitment to equal citizenship. The Citizenship Amendment Bill that the Modi government is trying to railroad through Parliament negates the fundamental principles on which Netaji's Azad Hind movement was based.

For Netaji, territory was not the be-all and end-all of sovereignty. People were more important. The provisional government gave Indians domiciled abroad the option of accepting Indian citizenship. Before the INA entered India's north-east in early 1944, the Azad Hind government acquired *de jure* sovereignty over the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Indian Ocean in much the same way as De Gaulle's Free French had done over some islands off the French coast in the Atlantic. Netaji redeemed his promise of setting foot on the soil of his motherland before the year's end by arriving in Port Blair on December 29, 1943, for a three-day visit to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which he renamed Shaheed and Swaraj. He paid tribute to the revolutionaries who had suffered there and likened the opening of the gates of Cellular Jail to the liberation of the Bastille.

The final entry in my father's 1943 diary reads as follows: "29 Dec. Wed. '43: *Ma janani* passes away — midnight." In early January 1944, wireless contact was established between revolutionaries in Calcutta and Netaji in Burma with the help of secret agents who had landed by submarine and made contact with Sisir. One of the earliest messages transmitted did not contain any valuable military intelligence. It conveyed the news of Prabhavati's death. "You look tired," Debnath Das said to Netaji that evening. "No, I am not tired," Netaji replied. "I heard today that I have lost my mother."

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OUT OF MY MIND



MEGHNAD DESAI

THE NEW year started with a bang. A talking Prime Minister taking questions, giving long answers and holding forth for 90 minutes! Those who complained that he does not talk to the media had to find new grounds for criticism: Only one interviewer. Questions no doubt cleared in advance. Too much about Me, My and I. But then if you ask a Prime Minister

A new game

about matters of State, he can hardly use third person singular. If Modi had said, "That was not me. That was my Cabinet colleague", howls of protest would have resulted. The central issue of the interview was the Prime Minister as he is of the forthcoming election. Indeed there has been no other issue occupying the Opposition. So the manner in which Modi responded could hardly be a surprise. By giving interview to ANI, he also ensured that all the channels carried it simultaneously and each carried on analysis for the rest of the evening. A press conference would not have been carried that extensively. If nothing else, the Prime Minister understands how to get TRPs.

There were surprises. He did unequivocally denounce lynchings. He showed real passion speaking about his worries in the morning after the surgical strikes. But above all, the surprise was that the interview happened at all. It may presage a different approach by the Prime Minister to politics in the next few months. Thus, he knows that he will have to be accommodating to his NDA allies. He cannot do the emollient act but he can be patient, as he is being with the Shiv Sena. This may mean approaches to new allies such as the TRS. It may mean more press encounters. It will mean wrong-footing the Opposition, which has made Modi the sole issue. A little-noticed signal was issued by the

NCP last week. With support from NCP corporators, the BJP won the posts of mayor and deputy mayor in the closely contested Ahmednagar municipal elections. Sharad Pawar has lost neither his guile nor his ability to play power politics. Here again is the great uncertainty as to which side some parties will end up with between the two alliances. By making Modi the issue rather than policy or ideology, the Congress has freed its possible allies from any guilt if they join the NDA. If the issue is personal, who cares one way or another? The sole consideration of small parties led by the Big Beasts will be: What is in it for my party and me? Sharad Pawar is not finished yet.

The interview was also quite categorical about the Temple. The Parivar was told in no uncertain terms that the government will not move until after the Supreme Court verdict. In a not-so-subtle way the Prime Minister told the Congress not to delay the proceedings of the Court. Here is the perfect alibi. If the Supreme Court cannot declare its verdict till after the election date has been announced, the ground is ready for Modi to blame the Congress for thwarting the desires of millions of Hindus. Rahul Gandhi will no doubt counter by promising the Temple if the Congress is voted in power, but then who will the public believe in that issue? Get real. You think you know your Modi. You ain't seen nothing yet.