

12 IDEA EXCHANGE

NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

WHY MANISH KUMAR



CLOSELY linked to the employment debate in India is the question of skills — do we have the right people for the jobs on offer? Is job availability the issue, or salaries? Does a skill certificate boost your income? Manish Kumar's first task after he joined the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) in 2016 was to use

econometric modelling to map the job potential across sectors against availability of skillsets. In the NSDC, Kumar is refining systems to track if beneficiaries of skill courses are getting absorbed. The NSDC, in many ways is a private enterprise, but he understands that receiving government funds brings with it a set of obligations



“The belief that only 7% of Indians are skilled may not be accurate. Nearly 42% are skilled if hours they put in are taken into account. People may be doing well, but because of lack of a certificate, they are not considered skilled

It could be that surveys designed for quantifying jobs as traditionally defined are failing to detect jobs. Debate is needed on measurement methods, taking into account changing economic paradigms”

P V VAIDYANATHAN IYER: How do you view the unpublished NSSO report on employment that apparently shows joblessness has reached a four-decade high post-demonetisation? Is it related to lack of skills in the market?

I don't think it is lack of jobs. It's the youth perception about jobs being not to their liking given the low wages. It is also possible that a large number of youths are reporting themselves unemployed but are actually in higher education. We have noticed a desire among youth to be in employment part-time even while they are pursuing education. Apprenticeship is being promoted by the government to support this dual expectation of youth. And also, potentially, it could be that the surveys designed for quantifying jobs as traditionally defined are failing to detect and quantify jobs of the economy. There is need for a debate on measurement methods and quantification, taking into account the characteristics of changing economic paradigms such as online employment, self-employment in a shared economy.

P VAIDYANATHAN IYER: Has there been any change in the skill development programmes of the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) since you joined?

Skilling programmes in India are maturing. If you look at the past, since 1951, the ITIs (Industrial Training Institutes) have been skilling people. But around 2008-09, when the NSDC was created, the private sector was involved in a bigger way. So change has always been there. Since I joined the NSDC, there have been changes too. On the financial aspect, one of the major changes that took place between 2009 and 2015 is that while there was a lot of expectation regarding private sector investment, government investment has increased. Therefore, we now have two models. One is the 'Fee-based model', where the skill centre is run by fees paid by candidates... But when the government comes in with public money, the willingness to pay declines because of the alternative source of funding... But this occurs only in certain layers of the job market.

It is often debated whether skill should be funded by the government at all... But the private sector does not like skilling individuals because of the fear that the person will be poached the moment it becomes public knowledge. But this doesn't matter to the government. After skilling, whichever company the person joins, if it contributes to the national GDP, the country gains....

P VAIDYANATHAN IYER: Since demonetisation, there has been loss of jobs in the unorganised sector. Is there any data to show that the skilling programme of the government has managed to create jobs?

Skilling will not directly lead to job creation. It is something that contributes to jobs. When skilled individuals leave, companies fill up job roles frequently if there are more skilled people available... We have done some research to understand the reality. The NSDC is creating people who will be self-employed or join companies. We adopted an unusual method of estimating the potential for job creation given the investments in the last 10 years. We compared CMI (Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy) data for investments above Rs 1 crore in any sector — we took into account 26 sectors — to data on jobs from the 2011 Census... We found that there is a potential for 2.5 crore jobs being created especially in the logistics sector.

The problem is not jobs, it is wages. In his book *Rise of Robots*, Martin Ford writes about the period between 1920 and 1985 where, if a graph is plotted between the rate of return to capital and rate of return to labour, both go up. Which means I invest money and also give it to labour, so wages go up. The labour puts in more effort and everyone is benefited. But in 1985, when the rate of return to capital was high, the rate of return to labour plateaued. This is the period when computers were introduced. And when the Internet came in, the rate of return to capital spiked further. But labour was not getting a high wage despite high economic growth.

The onus is on private companies to pay more wages. During our sampling, we took into account a labourer with a wage of Rs 9,000. His expectation of receiving a salary of Rs 18,000 within a year is a mismatch. So, he will not be willing to stay in one place. He will only stabilise when he reaches Rs 19,000.

SANDEEP SINGH: How many people skilled by the NSDC in the last four years have successfully found jobs?

‘The market is not creating pressure on the private sector to work towards skilling people’

The NSDC CEO says the problem is not jobs but wages, puts the difference in salaries of individuals after skilling at Rs 12,000 annually, notes that while automation is leading to loss of jobs, it is also creating many, and stresses need to introduce skilling courses in schools



National Skill Development Corporation CEO Manish Kumar with Executive Editor (National Affairs) P Vaidyanathan Iyer in *The Indian Express* newsroom. Abhinav Saha

We have a database of 19 crore individuals who have enrolled in the NSDC since it was established. In 2018, we skilled 50 lakh people. About 25 lakh participated through the fee-based model and the rest through the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), which is a grant-based model. The fee-based model, where the participants or corporates pay the fees, is more market-driven and has greater chances of employment. In the PMKVY, training partners have reported that 50 per cent of the candidates have found jobs. The data, however, needs to be verified... We have found through impact evaluation that 30 per cent of the people don't want to go for jobs. After learning the skills, they pursue education. The improvement in the education system is attracting youths.

UNNI RAJEN SHANKER: Does the NSDC track individuals after they have been placed?

We track them for a year. But of late, we have been trying to use blockchain technology to track them for a longer period. This will give us a more nuanced understanding of what is happening. At the moment we have details of one year.

UNNI RAJEN SHANKER: What is the average spike in salary after they are trained by the NSDC?

When we compared people without training to those who were certified, we found that the difference in salaries was Rs 12,000 annually, which is a significant amount. This spike is equivalent to 15 per cent of their salary, with only a few months of training.

The popular belief that only 7 per cent of Indians are skilled may not be accurate. Nearly 42 per cent of the population is skilled if the number of hours they put in their work is taken into account. There may be people who are doing well, but because of the lack of a certificate, they are not considered skilled labour.

SANDEEP SINGH: What are the sectors that are doing well?

The transport and logistics sectors are rapidly expanding as new roads are being

constructed. A lot is happening in shipbuilding too. Retail and textile are also expanding. Another sector that is doing well is beauty and wellness because it has more disposable income. As a whole, the service sector is doing quite well.

PRANAV MUKUL: The NSDC also provides skills to the existing workforce of companies. What impact does this have on workers' wages and are individuals trained at the NSDC absorbed by these companies?

We don't conduct skilling programmes in companies. We have trained partners whom we motivate either by providing financial resources or knowledge. I don't think there is any study which shows how skilling impacts productivity. But such a study is critical for convincing the private sector to emphasise on skilling. In many countries, studies on productivity are conducted over a period of one or two years to understand the performance of the private sector. A meeting is then held between the government, the private sector and labour union, following which these bodies hold negotiations. We should try to move in this direction in the long-term.

PRANAV MUKUL: How will automation impact the job market?

Jobs are being lost and the trend will continue in the future as well. But many more new jobs are being created. Those who will gain are people at the bottom of the income pyramid. For example, the driverless cars in California are run by girls living in villages outside Bhubaneswar. Most of these girls have passed only Class 10 or 12 examination. They examine the streets of California on a computer, tag the medians of the roads and the speed limit. Every 10 minutes when a new picture is presented, they update the tags accordingly... There

are other examples where we find new types of jobs being created. So the worry is not about jobs not being there. What is clear is that we can't afford to have long training programmes. The whole concept is now moving towards modular learning.

ANIL SASI: Some skills are informal and geography-specific. For instance, plumbers in Odisha are known for their work. So how does Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a certification under the PMKVY) compete with informal credentials that are already there in the market?

There is no conflict between the two. RPL should be given out more frequently. Odisha plumbers, if they are known for their work, should be given RPL first. They are the ones who will benefit the most. Globally, some places will be known for the automotive sector and some for textiles. But we should not leave RPL merely because the branding is through some source. The informal credential along with RPL will make the individual more employable.

P VAIDYANATHAN IYER: What has been the job scenario in 2018 especially in the private sector?

We have the numbers as well as details of individuals and where they are currently placed. These details are available online. We want to ensure transparency of data. Documents uploaded by training partners contain names of individuals who have received training and where they are currently employed. They can be accessed by anyone. Some states have the potential to absorb more. For example, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka have the highest potential. In terms of cities, it is Mumbai followed by Delhi, Chennai and Bangalore. We should not only look at jobs but also their quality. Some jobs can be bettered

“Transport and logistics sectors are expanding rapidly as new roads are constructed. So is shipbuilding, retail and textile. Another sector doing well is beauty, wellness because it has more disposable income



with a bit of formalisation from our end...

P VAIDYANATHAN IYER: What has been your experience with the private sector? Have they been emphasising on skilling in the last three years when there has not been much investment?

The private sector has had a passive approach towards skills. They are happy if you send them skilled people... The government's interest in skilling people is much higher. This is probably due to the market structure. India is such a huge market that companies can afford to have unskilled people... This is because, even with inefficient products, companies have a market in some or the other part of the country. But if we were of the size of Finland, with just five million people, this would mean crossing the border (to find market). So workers would be paid well because companies need them to compete. But in India, companies can continue to pay low because there's a big market somewhere. It is the structure of our market that is not creating pressure on the private sector to work towards skilling people.

P VAIDYANATHAN IYER: Do you feel the need for regulatory changes?

One good change is the establishment of the National Council for Vocational Education and Training (NCVET). This happened as there was no centralised regulator. Recently, the concept of having a National Council for Vocational Training (NCVT) was cleared by the government. It will take shape in another six months... The expectation is that the move will send a signal to the market that there is a credible body which is concerned about quality and is going to look at both — those who deliver skilling as well as the quality of people who come out of the skill centres.

KARISHMA MEHROTRA: What is the NSDC doing to help people who have lost their job because of automation?

Digital changes are taking place due to the transformation of technologies of the Internet. This is going to impact all sectors. Therefore, we have created National Occupational Standards (NOS) specifies the standard an individual must achieve in the workplace) and Qualification Packs (a set of NOS aligned to a job role). We are working along with a small unit of the NASSCOM to imagine how retail might change because of the changes in IT systems and digital world. To give an example, one would say human resources is not a department that is usually impacted by digital change. But in a recent case, a third of the employees of a big industrial group suddenly

stopped withdrawing their salary. When the matter was investigated, it was found that the employees' IDs belonged to robots, which were not supposed to receive salaries... Now all this while the HR person had been taking into account the performance of robots while prescribing the requirement for ordinary people. So there is a need for reshaping HR also. We are partnering with Imperial College London through our Banking and Financial Services Institute in the Bombay Stock Exchange to understand disruptive technologies that will affect the established technology in short and long terms.

UMA VISHNU: How early should skilling begin? Do you think it should start in school?

We work in about 7,000 schools, impacting about 5,00,000 children. It is the right place to start skilling for several reasons. One is the aspirational value of skills. Across the world, I have noticed that skilling is done by someone who is not good in academics. But I have also seen countries which do not adhere to such thinking. Finland or Sweden, for example, integrate schooling and skilling in such a way that when children grow up, they realise that you are, for instance, a good carpenter... But unfortunately it not like this in India... Our perception of a carpenter would be of a typical carpenter whom we don't consider valuable.

In Haryana, we are introducing the Kunsapsskolan school model from Sweden in about 100 public schools. The idea is to see how the children react to it. In case the model is successful, we will expand it.

KRISHN KAUSHIK: In the past few years, have you noticed any particular trade rising the social value chain?

Many of the trades are changing. It's the power of IT and how we use it that makes the difference. For example, in the plumbing sector, you can find both — the typical plumber as well as a qualified one. So the question is of the quality of service that the person provides. If you look at a driver's job, you will find the change in perception. There are people with MBA degrees driving app-based taxis. You'll find plenty of such people abroad. So I think social changes are underway... But this will take time.

P VAIDYANATHAN IYER: The NSDC is working with several countries on matters of skilling. Can you tell us more about it?

There is a lot of interest in India's skilling programme. Recently, the Government of Morocco, through our ambassador there, wanted to know if the NSDC could help strengthen their training programmes in various sectors. Our team has visited Morocco and their team will visit India in March. The UNESCO's international project on technical and vocational education, UNEVOC, has about 25 to 30 centres across the world. Four such centres are in India and the NSDC is one of them. There has also been a request from the World Bank, Beirut, to help rehabilitate people who have been displaced by the Syrian and Iraq wars. The World Bank wants to skill the refugees to help them return to a normal life. They want to analyse India's skill programmes and find out what can be incorporated. There have also been requests from Japan for workers from India for specific sectors.

KRISHN KAUSHIK: Many graduates, postgraduates work as delivery boys. This is a mismatch of skills. Is underemployment not an issue?

The solution does not lie in creating jobs but creating entrepreneurial opportunities. We need to unleash the power of entrepreneurial capacity of youths and that will require a lot of imaginative funding from the private sector. Government funding has a very low capacity for risk — you cannot fail with public money. But in entrepreneurship, 70 per cent of the people fail. And it is okay to fail as long as one has tried and done an honest job. Take for example, Subroto Bagchi, who failed thrice before creating Mindtree, a multinational IT and outsourcing company. How we create opportunities for youths to avail loans to become more entrepreneurial is the big challenge.

ACROSS THE AISLE



P CHIDAMBARAM

We mourn the loss of 40 lives and share the grief and pain of the families. But, in the sound and fury, we fail to ask pertinent questions: Who is responsible for national security? Was there a failure of intelligence? Was the decision to move over 2,000 troops in a single convoy a grave mistake? Why did Adil Dar, a 22-year-old, pull the trigger, kill 40 jawans and kill himself? Unless we ask these questions and find answers, there will be no reprieve from history repeating itself

Grief, anger but no wisdom

THE AFTERSHOCKS of the release of Masood Azhar in January 2000 are felt regularly. Every aftershock should remind the people of India of the rude shock that the country felt when the BJP-led NDA government decided to release Masood Azhar in exchange for the passengers and crew of Flight IC 184 who had been taken hostage. The picture of the external affairs minister, Jaswant Singh, escorting Masood Azhar and two others to Kabul and releasing them to their fellow-terrorists is a painful memory.

Soon after, Masood Azhar founded the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM). The JeM mounted its first attack, using a suicide bomber, on April 19, 2000, on the Army's 15 Corps in Srinagar. Since then, at regular intervals, the JeM has launched terror attacks on several targets — the Jammu & Kashmir Legislature complex and Parliament, in Srinagar, and in Kupwara and Baramulla districts.

INFILTRATE AND RECRUIT

The JeM operates at two levels: one is by infiltrating terrorists into Indian territory and attacking specific targets. Examples are Pathankot, Uri and Nagrota. The other is by recruiting local youth and using them as suicide bombers. An example of the latter is Adil Ahmad Dar who, on February 14, 2019, rammed his SUV into a convoy of the CRPF, blew up a vehicle and killed 40 jawans.

The unpleasant facts are that the number of infiltrators and number of local recruits have been on the rise since 2015 (see table):

Year	Infiltration attempts	Net estimated infiltration	Number of youths joining militancy
2013	277	97	16
2014	222	65	53
2015	121	33	66
2016	371	119	88
2017	419	136	126
2018	284	*128	*164

* up to October; Source: Rajya Sabha Q and A, 27-3-2017 and 12-12-2018

My views on Jammu & Kashmir are well-known. The 'establishment' in Pakistan — weak civilian government, the army that has not learnt its lessons and non-State actors — have victimised J&K and dug the economic grave of Pakistan. At the same time, I am implacably opposed to the muscular, militaristic and maximalist position of the BJP-led Central government that has also victimised the people of J&K.

FAILING THE NATION

The NDA government has failed India in many ways but none with graver consequences for national security than its disastrous policy on J&K. On May 13, 2018, I wrote in this column that 'All that India, as a nation, has stood for — unity, integrity, pluralism, religious tolerance, a government accountable to the people, dialogue to resolve differences etc. — are on test in J&K. India, as a nation, is failing the test'.

After Pulwama, the government and the hyper-nationalists are erecting a demon to slay in the run-up to the elections. Even as they did that, traders and stu-

dents from the Kashmir Valley were attacked in Jammu and other cities of India. Kashmiri students were thrown out of their hostels and chummeries. Stray posts on social media were seized upon as acts of treason. Strident calls were made to ban exports to Pakistan and bar sports engagements with that country. The governor of Meghalaya, sworn to uphold the Constitution, said, 'Don't visit Kashmir, don't go to Amarnath, don't buy articles from Kashmiri tradesmen who come every winter.' These are unmistakable sounds of the drums of war.

We mourn the loss of 40 lives and share the grief and pain of the families. But, in the sound and fury, we fail to ask pertinent questions: Who is responsible for national security? Was there a failure of intelligence? Was the decision to move over 2,000 troops in a single convoy a grave mistake? Why did Adil Dar, a 22-year-old youth, pull the trigger, kill 40 jawans and kill himself? Unless we ask these questions and find answers, there will be no reprieve from history repeating itself.

SANE VOICES

Thankfully, more people are asking questions.

Retired Lt General Hasnain wrote: "India cannot achieve its strategic objectives if Kashmiris remain targets of physical abuse and harassment and minorities are vilified on social media."

Retired Lt General Hooda said in an interview: "We must not close our eyes to the problem in Kashmir, after all, the terrorist who did this was a local ter-

rorist... So, there is an internal problem." Retired foreign secretary Shyam Saran wrote: "Kashmir cannot be isolated from the rest of India and its alienated population brought to heel through imposition of ever stricter security measures... What we need is a strategy which takes into account both the domestic and external dimensions of the Kashmir issue."

Retired IPS officer Julio Ribeiro wrote: "...if the community to which the terrorist belongs is not won over, the latter will continue to receive 'oxygen' from co-religionists and one fallen terrorist will soon be replaced by one or even two or three emotionally charged men."

Even as these voices were being raised, the Army spoke the old language: Lt General Kanwal Jeet Singh Dhillon, Corps Commander, Chinar Corps, warned on February 19, 2019, that "Anyone who has picked up the gun in Kashmir will be eliminated, unless he surrenders."

As we rue the remains of the day amidst growing anger and despair, we cannot lose hope. The worst that the present government can do will be to drag the country further on the road to disaster that will result in more mutual distrust among the people, more alienation in J&K, more loss of lives and more distance from a solution. I am confident, however, that the sane voices will prevail and a future government will show better understanding, wiser leadership and a sincere search for a political solution.

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FIFTH COLUMN



TAVLEEN SINGH

Kashmir is a domestic problem

IT WAS too good to last. For a moment the horror of what happened in Pulwama made our political leaders put India's security above their own petty politics, but this moment did not last long. So even as ordinary Indians came into the streets to publicly mourn at the funerals of the 40 men who died so brutally, our main political parties went back to politics as usual. The Congress party accused Narendra Modi of shooting for a promotional film on the afternoon of the Pulwama massacre and the BJP blamed the whole Kashmir problem on Jawaharlal Nehru. Senior leaders in both parties hurled charges at each other without noticing that they were putting their own interests above the interests of India. Shame on them.

Nobody is interested in stupid accusations. Everyone is interested in knowing why we continue to be unprepared for the new kind of war that Pakistan has been waging on Indian soil ever since the defeat in Kargil proved that in a real war India would always win. Everyone is interested in knowing why the situation in Kashmir has gone from bad to horrible. If Narendra Modi must be blamed for not having a clear policy in the past four years, the Congress party must be blamed for creating the Kashmir problem in the first place. And, both parties must share the blame for not speaking out against the sickening attacks on Kashmiris since the Pulwama massacre.

Why is it so hard for senior leaders in both our main national parties to say clearly that these attacks shame India and must be stopped? I have found it hard to watch the videos on social media that show mobs of Hindu fanatics beating up Kashmiri students and tradesmen. This is not nationalism, it is extreme stupidity because these so-called nationalists have not noticed that they are proving that they do not think of Kashmiris as Indians. Certainly not Muslim Kashmiris. They have behaved disgracefully and harmed India with their perverted idea of patriotism.

They also seem to have forgotten that India is a country that has survived as a modern nation because of traditions that we should be proud of. Last week I was in Jodhpur for the World Sacred Spirit Festival and in a magical dawn concert I heard Muslim Manganari folk singers singing songs of exquisite beauty to Krishna. The compere explained that 'they follow Islam but they sing Hindu devotional songs'. He seemed to understand more deeply the ties that bind India than our political leaders do. But what is worrying is that our political leaders seem incapable even of understanding that Kashmir is a political problem that needs a political solution.

It is terrific that we have managed to get the UN Security Council to censure Pakistan for its support to jihadist killers. Terrific that so many countries have stood by India in this time of distress and disturbance, but unless we begin to admit that Kashmir is an unresolved domestic problem, it will continue to fester. Whenever there has been a clear policy to deal with our oldest political problem, there has been a measure of peace in the Kashmir Valley. It is when Delhi's attitude to Kashmir is muddled and weak that there has been violence instead of peace.

Narendra Modi has seemed unsure about what his Kashmir policy should be ever since he became Prime Minister. So first came that bungled attempt to bring lasting peace by making the BJP part of a government with the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). This alliance never worked because at the same time came hawkish statements from BJP leaders on ending Kashmir's special status (Article 370) and needing to deal harshly with Kashmiri separatists.

After Burhan Wani was killed and there was a sudden explosion of anti-India sentiments in the Valley, nobody in Delhi seemed to know what to do next. I recently participated in a panel discussion on Kashmir with some former Generals and the one thing they all agreed upon was that there was no strategy for handling Kashmir. They said it was as if everyone in Delhi forgot about the problem until there was some new act of terrible violence.

This is sadly true. So, for a few weeks more, there will be a lot of talk about Kashmir. Every major political leader seems to have an opinion on the subject. But, soon the suicide bombing in Pulwama will be forgotten and so will Kashmir. It is important that Pakistan be made to answer for promoting violent, secessionist groups. But, it is just as important to ask why they find it so easy to get local support and what has gone so wrong that young Kashmiri boys are willing to become suicide bombers in this war against India. Something has gone very wrong and nobody seems to know why.

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INSIDE TRACK



COOMI KAPOOR

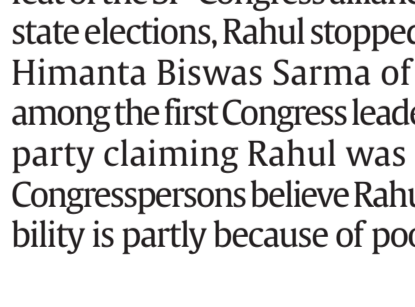
PULWAMA AND AFTER

DEFENCE MINISTER Nirmala Sitharaman was in Sweden when she heard of the Pulwama attack. She returned to Delhi the next morning to attend the Cabinet Committee on Security. The PMO issued a circular that Arun Jaitley was resuming charge as Finance Minister so that it was possible for him to attend the CCS meet. Later, Jaitley held a press briefing outside 7, Lok Kalyan Marg, instead of at the PIB, apparently to reflect the spontaneity of the nation's outrage. On the Prime Minister's instructions, Sitharaman, along with the IAF top brass, worked out arrangements for the coffins of the CRPF men to be sent back to their homes with suitable honours. Eighteen aircraft lifted the 40 coffins in Delhi and transported them to designated centres across the country. Central ministers accompanied the funeral corteges on the last leg. Amit Shah instructed BJP chief ministers to declare State mourning and ensure full State honours. The BJP hopes that the televised scenes of the farewells will work to its advantage in the elections, as was the case during the Kargil War.

RAHUL'S DISCONNECT

The buzz in Gujarat is that Alpeah Thakor, the Congress's high-profile recruit during the Assembly polls, may switch sides to the BJP. Thakor, who was riding high in 2017, is now disillusioned. When he first joined the Congress, he had a hotline to Congress president Rahul Gandhi and bypassed the local Gujarat leadership. Now Rahul has stopped taking Thakor's calls and the state Congress leaders want to cut him to size. Not being able to get through to Rahul is a complaint heard often. Recently, K C Deo, a five-time Lok Sabha MP from Andhra Pradesh, quit the Congress, protesting that he had been unable to get an audience with Rahul since November. Supporters of Akhilesh Yadav say that a major reason for the Samajwadi Party leader's disillusionment with the Gandhis is that, after the defeat of the SP-Congress alliance in the 2017 state elections, Rahul stopped calling him. Himanta Biswas Sarma of Assam was among the first Congress leaders to quit the party claiming Rahul was inattentive. Congresspersons believe Rahul's inaccessibility is partly because of poor secretarial

OUT OF MY MIND



MEGHNAD DESAI

EVEN A week had not passed after the February 14 attack before politics resumed. The Congress has charged the government with security lapses. There will no doubt be a lot more of this in the coming weeks. Even so, it is worth considering seriously why India remains a soft target for terrorism. This is not a party political issue. Just looking at the last 20 years un-

der both the NDA and UPA, India has had the airplane hijack which compelled the release of Masood Azhar, the attack on Parliament, 26/11 and now 14/2.

FATHER OUT OF HAND

Amr Singh left the SP because of differences with Ram Gopal Yadav, but he keeps his ear to the ground in his old party. His prediction that Akhilesh Yadav will not be able to keep his ageing father in check has proved prescient. First, Mulayam Singh Yadav embarrassed the SP by declaring in the Lok Sabha that he wanted Narendra Modi to return as PM. On Thursday, Mulayam again struck a discordant note when he announced to party workers and media personnel that Akhilesh had given far too many seats to the BSP in the tie-up and that the tickets were allotted too late. He suggested that he should handle SP ticket distribution. Amar Singh may not have formally joined the BJP but he is certainly in the RSS's good books. He was invited as chief guest for a Rashtriya Sewa Bharati function this month. Sewa Bharati is run by top RSS leader Bhaiyaji Joshi and Singh has donated his ancestral property in Azamgarh to the association. During the election campaign, the BJP is likely to widely circulate Parliament speech endorsing Modi. The party hopes it will create confusion among Yadav voters.

SECRET PARLEYS

The ground work for the BJP-AIADMK alliance in Tamil Nadu was done so secretly that senior leaders of both parties were taken by surprise. Amit Shah reportedly utilised the services of a Tamil-speaking Gujarati businessman from Coimbatore for the initial discussions. In the AIADMK, Deputy CM OP Panneerselvam and Deputy Lok Sabha Speaker M Thambidurai, once considered Jayalalithaa's representative in Delhi, were out of the loop, as was BJP state president Tamilisai Soundararajan. From Delhi, apart from Shah, only Piyush Goyal, the state's election in-charge for the BJP, was in the picture. Chief Minister E K Palaniswami was the chief negotiator for the AIADMK. The big coup was getting the PMK, with its caste-based vote bank. All the same, the BJP does not expect any major miracle from this alliance.

BUCKING THE TREND?

In his latest book, *Democracy on the Road*, poll pundit Ruchir Sharma has cited a statistic which could unnerve the BJP. He points out that since 1977, the Indian electorate has voted out the incumbent national or state government two-thirds of the time. His contention is that the term anti-incumbency was popularised, if not coined, in India. Will Modi be able to buck the trend?

Enchantment called Banaras

GAINED IN TRANSLATION



VYOMESH SHUKLA
व्योमेश शुक्ल

I WAS born in Banaras. I have lived my life here, and now, I am quietly growing old here. And I will die in this place. This life is an exemplification of "sansthapan", the desire to stay and build in one place — the stepbrother of displacement, of movement.

In the shopping mall of intellectual life, displacement and variety carry great value, and stability — a firm foundation — isn't worth the soil it's built on.

This stable life has robbed me of almost everything, except perhaps a modicum of confidence that I am a representative of a great culture and civilisation, and that my life's work will be seen in its light. Let's be clear, I have not earned this confidence, neither from talent nor effort. I am but a beneficiary of history, of a cultural tradition that long predates me. But the burden of history, let me tell you, is a weighty problem.

No matter what you do here, it's been done before. There is no space left to lay new foundations. In just one lane of the Kabir Chaura area in Banaras, you can find Padma awardees at a wholesale rate. Sidheshwari Devi, Sitara Devi, Gopikrishan, Kishan Maharaj, Samta Prasad and Rajan-Sajan Mishra are neighbours. A little way away, you will find the legacy of Ravi Shankar, Bismillah Khan and Chhannulal Mishra. Behind the police thana, there's Jayshankar 'Prasad' ki dukaan, and next door, Bhartendu Harishchandra's haveli. If one spot is where Agha Hashar Kashmiri was born, close by you'll find where Premchand died.

It's a saving grace that my memory only stretches back a couple of hundred years, and not back to the 16th century, when Kabir and Tulsī stood on the balconies and looked down, and looked ahead.

I am always surrounded, enveloped, by the clouds of this great geography. But a culture doesn't just touch great heights, it has its troughs and plateaus too. My life is one of those plateaus, and people like me are the khaad-paani (fodder) of this



Illustration: C R Sasikumara

great heritage. But remember, there is more khaad-paani in Banaras than most places. Yes, in Banaras too, a genius like Kishan Maharaj is a once-in-a-generation tabla talent, but in its streets, talented, competent tabalchis are available in numbers and densities unparalleled anywhere else in the country. The same holds true for dance, the sitar, acting, painting and even the written word.

There are enough middling talents, yes. But they are the ones that create the city's mahaul (ambience). If there are 10 houses in your neighbourhood where people are reciting the Vedas in the morning, rest assured that you will become a pandit, through the half-waking acoustic osmosis of those mornings. If someone's elder brother is an aspiring singer, you can be sure you will pick up the tanpura and tabla while just hanging out at his place.

What is a facility in other places, is a majboori (compulsion) in Banaras. I still don't know how or when I picked up the tabla hanging around the Durga Saptashati. Clearly, I had no choice in the matter. It was in this manner, in bits and pieces, that I learnt some things here, and did not learn many things. The hawa-

paani (atmosphere) of a place are great teachers.

Living in Banaras is being in the midst of a confluence between the infinite (anant) and the path of tradition (sanathan) and no art is possible without these elements. Without this confluence, art is bound to the moment, its breath is brief and its sounds do not echo among the great domes. Yes, a momentary excitement, or tinge of nostalgia is possible, but true sublime joy is not. And without that joy, is it even art?

It is under this feverish fervour that I quit JNU and returned to Banaras. The poems and the poets I loved — Alok Dhanva, Pash and Cherabanda Raju — still love and will always love, they were the poets I came to appreciate over there. The same posters, the same wall writings, all the identical jholas, the same spectacles and a uniform worldview. I came from the city of seven days and nine festivals, and in JNU, everyone drew even the same breath.

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Our urgent need

der both the NDA and UPA, India has had the airplane hijack which compelled the release of Masood Azhar, the attack on Parliament, 26/11 and now 14/2.

In each of these attacks, India was unprepared. The intelligence agencies failed to foresee any of these threats. There appears to be no effective counter-terrorism machinery which could deal with a threat even if it was foreseen. There has been no response to any of those terror events. There is shock at the attack, remorse for the loss of lives, outpouring of anger for the enemy and of feeling for the victims, but nothing else. There is no sign of any learning behaviour which can reassure us that the next time it happens (and it will),

the results will be any different.

This passivity is not just in the case of terrorist attacks. In the four encounters between the armies of Pakistan and India, except for 1971, the first move was by Pakistan — 1948, 1965 and Kargil. In 1965, Shastri changed the game by the counter-attack across the Punjab border. That apart, each time India was surprised.

It is time to ask whether this passivity is ingrained in the culture of the Army or the security forces or is it a political problem which makes the civilian authorities too cautious in giving the armed forces their lead. For decades, India followed Non-Alignment policies and paraded its moral superiority. The non-alignment was

asymmetric since India was friendly with left-wing dictators and with the USSR. When the China conflict flared up, none of the Non-Alignment Movement allies were with India. Only Israel and the US who had been reviled over the years came to aid.

There is similarly a naive belief in the Ministry of External Affairs that the international community is a source of strength for India. Endless efforts have been made to have x or y declared as a terrorist by the UN, as if it would make the slightest difference to the behaviour of terrorist groups. The UN is a pretty weak body when it comes to commanding obedience. Get resolutions passed if you like, but do not believe they will do any good.

There has been some realism in recent years. India's relations with the US have improved enormously and there is a mutual understanding about cooperation, if needed, by either side. India has a serious problem of its own security given two rival powers, Pakistan and China. India's armed forces, brave as they are, are not up to date in training and equipment. Each order for arms purchase abroad leads to a hysterical political quarrel: about money than about fulfilling the defence requirements. As if money is the problem rather than security.

India does not have to be a moral leader. It has to be smart, tough and prepared to be secure.