

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Square pegs, round holes

Possibly the most problematic aspect of evaluating the budget is the opaqueness of the underlying data



AMARTYA LAHIRI

WELCOME STEP BACK

Whatever be its motive, VHP lowering the Ayodhya heat opens up space for issues less polarising

FOR ONCE, THE Vishva Hindu Parishad is making news for holding back, not rushing forth. It will not agitate or mobilise for the construction of the Ram temple at Ayodhya for the next four months, or till Lok Sabha elections are over, it declared on Tuesday. The announcement is immensely welcome. It is also a retreat. After all, the outfit had been holding "dharma sabhas" across the country demanding that the government bring in an ordinance to enable construction of a temple. As recently as last week, it held a "dharma sansad" at the Kumbh mela on the issue. And days ago, BJP president Amit Shah urged the Opposition not to get in the way of the temple. Of course, this sudden discovery of scruple and compunction over the politicisation of the sensitive matter does not quite ring true. It may be that the VHP decision has actually been forced on it by the belated realisation that the fervour which framed the Ram temple issue in the early 1990s has dissipated, cannot be worked up again. Or it could be that the Sangh Parivar "fringe" has bowed to counsel from more mainstream shades of political saffron looking at the prospect of courting allies after the elections to make up the numbers. Whatever the reason behind it, the VHP announcement can free up valuable space for the parliamentary poll campaign to focus on the less polarising issue.

The country has changed since the time the Ram temple mobilisation dominated the polity in the 1990s, altered the language of politics, and shifted its centre of gravity rightward. It is even possible to argue that in its success lay the seeds of its irrelevance. The fact that it changed the larger political narrative and conversation has also made it all the more difficult for political actors to use it as a pretext for a new mobilisation. Also, a new generation of voters has come of age after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992. For them, the temple is a less immediate, less pressing narrative, or at the very least, one that must compete for their attention with other claims and stories of national politics. In this context, therefore, the VHP's step back is a good omen for the impending election campaign which can concentrate on matters such as jobs and agricultural distress, the competing models of growth and welfare, the health of federalism and institutions. Even if these issues do not become the stuff of election campaign — unfortunately, they seldom do — a calmer, less inflamed run-up to the election will itself be a good thing.

The fringe has spoken, and this time the mainstream must follow. The Centre has moved the Supreme Court, seeking its permission to return the 67 acres in Ayodhya adjacent to the disputed site to the original owners, including the Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas. The government must let the matter rest there — and wait for the court.

THE INTEREST IN this year's Union budget had been high for obvious reasons. It being an election year, there were expectations of a major spending package focused on struggling sectors such as agriculture. The budget didn't disappoint as the finance minister announced an income support programme for farmers, raised the tax-free income ceiling, handed out sops to the real estate sector, and others.

So how is all of this going to be financed? The budget has assumed that total tax revenues are going to grow by 13.5 per cent in 2019-20 on the back of GST and corporation tax revenue growth of around 15 per cent each. Since taxes are levied on nominal incomes, the realism of these assumptions rests on the realism of the Rs 210 lakh crore nominal GDP figure which has been assumed for 2019-20. The government arrived at this number by assuming 11.5 per cent nominal GDP growth in 2019-20.

This is where things start becoming a bit strange. On January 7 of this year, a CSO release stated that nominal GDP for 2017-18 was Rs 167.7 lakh crore. Further, it projected the 2018-19 nominal GDP to be Rs 188.4 lakh crore, a nominal growth rate of 12.3 per cent. Since the CSO was forecasting 7.2 per cent real GDP growth in 2018-19, this implied a GDP deflator inflation rate of 5.1 per cent for the year. The problem, though, is that all the inflation numbers that have come out this year which indicate that the 2018-19 CPI inflation rate may be well closer to 3 per cent. While inflation computed by the deflator and the CPI methods are different, they typically do move together.

A lower inflation rate would, of course, lower nominal GDP in 2018-19 which has fiscal implications. As an example, a two percentage point reduction in nominal GDP growth in 2018-19 would imply a reduction

in nominal GDP of over Rs 3 lakh crore. Since tax revenues are about 12 per cent of GDP, this translates to a Rs 40,000 crore decline in tax revenues, or a fiscal deficit of 3.65 per cent of GDP in 2018-19. Clearly, the assumption on nominal GDP matters.

Are the nominal GDP numbers going to hold up with subsequent releases? Given the surprising upward revision of both real and nominal GDP growth for 2016-17 and downward revisions in other years, it is hard to predict. But this is risky budgeting since the downside risk to the deficit is huge.

A second factor that kept the fiscal deficit from deteriorating too much was the reduction in the states' share of tax revenues by Rs 27,000 crore. This compensated for the Rs 23,000 crore shortfall in gross tax revenues this year, giving the government windfall gains of Rs 4,000 crore during a period of aggregate revenue scarcity! Of course, the states are now short by Rs 27,000 crore and will, most likely, borrow to keep their spending programmes going. The relevant deficit number for the country is the combined central and state deficit to GDP ratio, which should now rise by another 0.12 percentage points.

As the two examples showed, small adjustments to budgetary assumptions can have massive effects on the fiscal deficit. The central government fiscal deficit would have come in closer to 3.7 per cent absent these two adjustments. Put differently, there has likely been a large fiscal slippage this year that has been camouflaged, for now. Indeed, the combined public sector deficit including central, states and PSUs is above 8 per cent.

Will the announcements have the intended political dividend, particularly from the distressed agrarian sector? The announced support of Rs 500 per month for those with land holdings below 2 hectares

seems rather low to have a tangible electoral payoff. The budget is also silent on the issue of jobs which has been a second major talking point of the Indian economy. The budget is thus unlikely to satisfy either the middle-class urban voters anxious about jobs for their children or the distressed agrarian sector.

Possibly the most problematic aspect of evaluating the budget is the opaqueness of the underlying data. The government budgets on a cash basis, which implies that expenditures can be pushed into the next financial year so that they do not count against the current year. There is no way of determining the quantum of such postponed expenditure items. In addition, the assumptions underlying the 2018-19 and 2019-20 GDP numbers are themselves now the subject of much debate. In this environment, we have an unhappy situation where markets, agencies, the media and foreign investors are all making their own assumptions regarding the fiscal deficit and GDP growth.

This is a dangerous situation for any country, leave alone an emerging economy. The crying need of the hour is the creation of a constitutionally mandated Central Budget Office (along the lines of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India's office) which would be tasked with certifying budget numbers that the government puts out. In addition, restoring the sanctity of the CSO and the National Statistics Commission in collecting and disseminating data should become a priority for whichever government is elected in the upcoming election. The Niti Aayog should not become the nodal office for official Indian statistics.

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SAME OLD BULL

The cow appears to be the great equaliser, as a Congress government in MP fails to leave behind excesses of BJP

BETWEEN 2007 AND 2016, the BJP government of Shivraj Singh Chouhan in Madhya Pradesh had booked at least 22 people under the National Security Act for suspected cow slaughter. The state has changed hands since then, but Kamal Nath's Congress government seems to be just as enthusiastic about using maximum legal force on this issue. The state party spokesperson has stated that the Congress is sensitive to bovine matters, and indeed, during the election campaign, it had promised to establish a cowshed in every panchayat. Meanwhile, the BJP has approvingly noted that its successor in Bhopal is continuing its policies with the forthcoming general elections in mind. The use of the NSA, which represents maximum legal force, is deplorable twice over. First, the MP Prohibition of Cow Slaughter Act is specific, but the NSA, a draconian law, was invoked because it allows detention for upto a year. Second, it appears to have been a response to a threat of public unrest by the Bajrang Dal. By all accounts, one group of people was arrested to placate another group, which is outrageous.

Madhya Pradesh is not the only state where the Congress has been showing its commitment to the cow, and taking forward the legacy of a BJP government. In the last week of December, the cow welfare department of the Congress government of Rajasthan passed an order encouraging people to adopt indigent cows. Again, the BJP pointed out that this was a routine step initiated by its government before it was voted out of office. It was blocked by the imposition of the model code of conduct, and the BJP was happy to find the Congress finally doing its bit for cows. This could actually have been a humane initiative for bettering the lives of unwanted cattle and preventing them from damaging standing crops, rather than a continuation of Hindutva policy. But the Congress's sudden and excessive zeal for bovine welfare is bound to invite speculation over its political motives.

In seeking to electorally encash the cow, the Congress may fail to distinguish itself from its main opponent. And anyway, it must know that the cow is not an infallible investment. Chouhan had announced the establishment of a cow ministry days before the model code of conduct for the assembly election kicked in, but it did not appear to help his prospects.

BEYOND BLACK & WHITE

Oscars have done well to increase diversity in the awards. More needs to be done

THERE IS LITTLE DOUBT that since 2015-16, when there was an outcry over #OscarsSoWhite, the Academy has taken steps to ensure that its overwhelming bias towards Caucasian men is addressed. Most significantly, the pool of members that select the nominees and winners has been expanded to become more representative in terms of both race and gender. And, on the face of it, the initiatives seem to be working. Both *BlackKkklansmen* and *Black Panther*, for example, are up for Best Picture, as was *Get Out* last year and *Moonlight* the year before that.

But does nominating and awarding films that have minority and immigrant themes and settings at their core mean that the Oscars are now truly progressive? It is obvious that the Academy's great diversity push came as a reaction to sustained bad publicity rather than a genuine desire to reward artistic diversity. Second, apart from a handful of exceptions, minority actors tend to be nominated and awarded for minority roles, where there is a danger of exoticisation in the name of diversity and representation. Finally, on the matter of gender, the Academy has miles to go. Apart from women-only categories (Best Actress, Best Supporting Actress), there is a gross under-representation of women. For example, over the Oscars' 90-year history, only one woman has been awarded Best Director and just five have been nominated.

The Oscars are, of course, an easy target. An award show is easier to attack than an entire industry which has long lived with the mindset that "unconventional" equals unprofitable. In recent years, though, with films like *Black Panther* and *Ocean's 8* becoming commercial successes, that logic is no longer justifiable. As films are made by more diverse casts and crews, more and more of them will be up for the Golden Statue.



VINAY KAURA

A CROSSROADS IN KABUL

With US withdrawing from Afghanistan, India must find ways to maintain presence

INDIA'S AFGHAN POLICY is at a crossroads. A period of adjustment has become essential following US President Donald Trump's unilateral announcement that he is pulling US troops out of the conflict-ridden country. Another development is the "framework" deal between the US and Afghan Taliban after six days of discussions at Doha. Washington's hasty timetable — 18 months — to disentangle itself from the Afghan quagmire has narrowed the US's options. India too is trapped in a strategic blind-spot in Afghanistan.

Trump is the third, and perhaps the last US president, to try to wind up America's costly military involvement in Afghanistan. But the announcement of a drawdown before the final peace deal with the Taliban is concluded was certainly a blunder. More fighting and political instability in Afghanistan would be damaging, as much for Indian interests as for regional stability.

For Pakistan's security establishment, Trump's frustration at the current military stalemate in Afghanistan is a godsend — it can re-engage with Washington, largely on its own terms. Trump has frequently criticised Pakistan for turning a blind eye to the Taliban's insurgency. But he now appears reconciled to Pakistan's centrality to the endgame in the region. The role of Pakistan is going to expand significantly, with the US depending upon it to implement the interim deal. This will be a diplomatic victory for Pakistan.

James Mattis, who was forced to resign as secretary of defence following irreconcilable differences with Trump, was against the pull-out. The head of the US Central Command, Lt General Kenneth McKenzie, had argued that Afghanistan would be doomed to a downward spiral if abandoned by the US at this critical juncture. But Trump decided to ignore Pentagon's advice.

Fully aware of the deadline, the Taliban are playing their hand well, trying to secure maximum concessions from Zalmay Khalilzad, the US special envoy, without offering anything meaningful in return. The Kabul government is nowhere in the picture. The Taliban's determined refusal to engage the Kabul regime constitutes the biggest obstacle to a meaningful intra-Afghan dialogue.

In all probability, the Trump administration is going to finalise the deal with the Taliban without consulting President Ashraf Ghani, leave alone taking into consideration New Delhi's concerns. All talk of an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process has vanished. The Afghan presidential election, originally scheduled in April, stands postponed till July. But if Trump expects a positive outcome from the Khalilzad-led negotiations before July, he seems to have set an unrealistic target.

Despite being an important stakeholder in Afghanistan, India finds itself increasingly marginalised in negotiations involving the key regional players. New Delhi is concerned about the vital role that all the powers are giving to Pakistan. Iran and Russia, two of India's closest allies during the Northern Alliance's battle against the Taliban regime in the 1990s, seem out of sync with New Delhi's interests.

Since the Taliban's ouster, Washington's financial, diplomatic and military support to the Kabul regime has allowed New Delhi to avoid direct military involvement in the Afghan conflict. India's developmental approach has earned it immense goodwill among the Afghan people. However, the "soft power" strategy has limitations. The manner in which Trump hit out at India's contribution towards Afghan stabilisation is largely symptomatic of his fundamentally transactional view of India's relationship with the US. India cannot send troops to Afghanistan

since there is a domestic consensus against it. But ironically, without any military footprint, India cannot convincingly push for Pakistan's exclusion from the peace process. New Delhi today has little influence over Afghanistan's future.

An emboldened Taliban is sure to impinge on security scenario in India's troubled Kashmir Valley. The outfit seems positioned to emerge as the ideological bulwark of Kashmir's renewed insurgency. Pakistan's security establishment, in cahoots with the Taliban, will likely project a potential American exit from Afghanistan as a vindication of its policies.

Trump is unlikely to be bothered even if America's disengagement in Afghanistan is viewed as a strategic defeat. Trump's criticism of India's Afghan policy and his plans to exit could cast serious doubt on the US's role as a strategic ally for India. Trump's ill-conceived strategy gives India a chance to reconsider its long-standing belief that it has the US's backing in Afghanistan.

Drawing attention to the ongoing diplomatic manoeuvres over Afghanistan, India's army chief, General Bipin Rawat, recently asserted that India "cannot be out of the bandwagon" because if "you are not sitting on the high table you will not know what is happening". It is time for New Delhi to engage the Taliban to secure its interests. India also needs to reassess its policy choices in close coordination with Russia and Iran, constantly reminding them that a complete surrender to the Taliban's demands will be detrimental to their own security.

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FEBRUARY 7, 1979, FORTY YEARS AGO

BHUTTO TO HANG
THE PAKISTAN SUPREME COURT, in a 4-3 decision, upheld the conviction and sentence of death by hanging against the deposed Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. The court then rejected an oral request by Bhutto's lawyer for a 30-day stay of execution to carry out a final legal review of the case. The highest court assured, however, that Bhutto will not be hanged during the standard one week allowed for clemency petitions and advised the defence to file a formal request for more time. Chief Justice Anwar ul Haq wrote the decision upholding the March 18, 1978 verdict of the Lahore High Court convicting Bhutto and four co-defendants of conspir-

acy and arranging a political murder, and sentencing all five to hang. Three judges concurred with his decision.

TURKEY AND BHUTTO
IN 1960, ZA Bhutto was sent by General Ayub Khan to Ankara to plead for the lives of Turkish civilian leaders who had been condemned to death following a military takeover. General Gersel, the then president, told Bhutto that "the problem will be solved by executions". Bhutto replied: "The problems of Turkey will begin with these executions." Little did Bhutto realise then that his words would one day be relevant to the situation in Pakistan. It is apparent that his execution will

only aggravate the country's difficulties. The problem before the military junta, which ousted Bhutto nearly two years ago, will be how to meet the situation if the execution is carried out. Not that Bhutto has become popular, it is the military regime which has become unpopular. In the absence of an opposition, Bhutto has filled the void.

INTERNAL AFFAIR: PM
PRIME MINISTER MORARJI Desai and the External Affairs Minister A B Vajpayee declined to comment on the Pakistan Supreme Court verdict on Mr Bhutto. "It is their internal affair and I do not want to interfere," Desai said.

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WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

“China and the US couldn’t resolve all the disputes. But the consensus between the two countries’ leaders has provided the political and strategic momentum to overcome differences.” — GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA

The unexamined collective life

Case against Mallikarjun Kharge, arrests of Hindu Mahasabha members, leave untouched a fundamental problem — the legal recourse forestalls a debate on national ideals



SANJAY SRIVASTAVA

THE FOUNDATIONS OF a well-functioning society are laws that reflect socially-just but flexible notions of right and wrong. However, when laws become the first resort towards dealing with social fractures, we are likely to end up with a society that refuses to deal with its most deep-seated regressive attitudes. Two recent events and the reactions to them point to our tendency to assume that the quick-fix of the legal route is the best way to deal with matters that might be considered socially reprehensible. The law, however, can only deal with symptoms. The habitual reduction of complex social issues to legal ones, in fact, lies at the heart of our desire to lead an unexamined collective life.

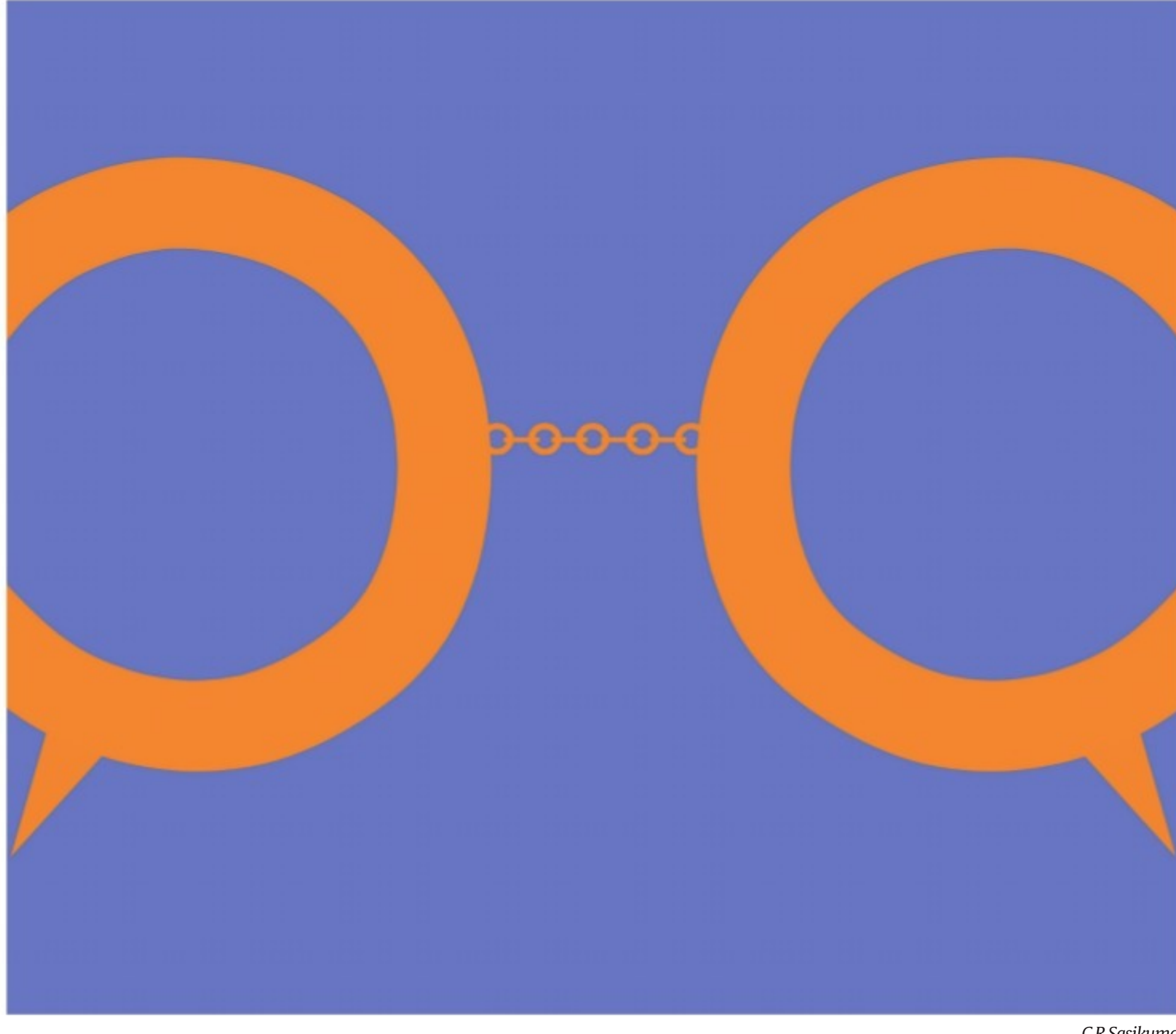
On January 26, the great Assamese singer Bhupen Hazarika was conferred India’s highest civilian award, the Bharat Ratna. Soon after, senior Congress leader Mallikarjun Kharge criticised the conferment, suggesting that a more deserving awardee might have been the recently-deceased Lingayat religious leader, Shivakumara Swami. The latter, Kharge seemed to imply, was a person of greater substance than someone whose fame lay in his skill as a singer. Soon after, acting on a complaint by the head of an Assamese socio-cultural organisation, the police registered a case against Kharge for “hurting the sentiments of the Assamese people”.

On January 30, the date of Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination in 1948 by Nathuram Godse, members of the Hindu Mahasabha’s Aligarh unit announced and re-enacted the murder. Media images showed a cheery saffron-clad woman pointing a pistol at an effigy of Gandhi. She was surrounded by a seemingly like-minded group that looked on as if inspecting an ice-cream menu at a pushcart at India Gate. The insouciance, fostered by the distance that time imposes and nurtured by hate, is a thing to behold. Subsequently, a group of so-called seers came out in support of the act, a variety of commentators unequivocally condemned it and a tweet by TV personality Ravish Kumar implied — somewhat confusingly — that the faux murderers were the actual “anti-nationalists” and their not being branded thus was a victory of Gandhian values.

Following a public outcry — given the glib relationship to Gandhian values nowadays, the depth of such feelings is difficult to determine — the police arrested some participants of this contemporary Danse Macabre. The Indian Penal Code’s provisions invoked for the purpose include those that deal with acts which promote “enmity between different groups”.

A recourse to legal procedure has thus been the response to acts that sullied the memories of two significant public figures. A discussion on the mindset behind Kharge’s comments or the processes that produce actions like those of the Hindu Mahasabha activists has been forestalled by the apparent salve of a police case.

Our public culture oscillates between hagiography and vilification. There is no middle ground upon which we can question the



CR Sasikumar

thoughts and ideas of our “great men”. We either raise them to saintliness or condemn them as pure evil — but do not explore their ideas in all their frailties. For Kharge, Bhupen Hazarika was a “mere” singer and singing does not carry a value that is equal to that represented by the life of a religious leader. For Hazarika’s followers, on the other hand, he is beyond questioning, a god-like figure whose divinity proscribes inquiry into his role as, say, a political figure. Kharge’s simplistic evaluation (a singer is too insubstantial a figure for the Bharat Ratna) is met by an equally uncritical response (anything but a deferential attitude towards Hazarika is an insult to an entire culture). Hazarika was a remarkable artist, but he was also a very significant figure within the 1960s and 1970s politics of “authentic” Assamese cultural identity, particularly in relation to “tribal” claims of the significance of their life-ways. We needed a debate about what we consider valuable human attributes and the complex nature of a public figure’s legacy. But all we are left with is a police case.

Similarly, the arrest of the Hindu Mahasabha activists does away with the need for any discussion about Gandhian-ness in our present time. As mindless as their re-enactment was, the reaction to it also eradicated the possibility of a public debate: Why is our only response to such acts via an unchanging “Father of the Nation” approach? The re-enactment is only the end-product of a series of contexts and processes. These include the normalisation of violence in public life (television ads are full of pretend-soldiers selling tiles and cars), an unquestioning atti-

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tude towards Gandhi (recent objections by African scholars to his attitudes on race narrate another story), the cynical use of “Gandhigiri” to sell products and entertainment and the hierarchy of ideas that such events demonstrate — over the past two years, western UP has witnessed a rash of vandalism of Ambedkar statues, without garnering similar publicity.

Filing a police case and making arrests have, sadly, if unwittingly, become methods through which genuine public debate is forestalled. Is there not greater value to thinking about the place of art in public life and Bhupen Hazarika’s role as a political figure than filing a case against Kharge? And, if those who disrespect the memory of the “Father of the Nation” are sent to jail, should we countenance similar action against those who, at other times and places, question what is done in the name of the nation?

The problem with invoking a law under which the Mahasabha’s members have been arrested is that we close off the possibility of developing a public discourse that can, without fear, interrogate issues of national identity. For, in this case, those who oppose the Mahasabha and its ideology may feel satisfied that a national offence has been rectified. However, they leave untouched a fundamental problem: It is dangerous to invite the law to define ideals of national life. That task is best left to open public debate.

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A labour of law

Constituent Assembly debates were full of disagreement, humour and hope. Will the dreams of the founding fathers come true?



SOLI J SORABJEE

ON DECEMBER 9, 1946, the first meeting of the Constituent Assembly was held. The business was formal. Sachchidananda Sinha, who was elected as temporary chairman, concluded his excellent inaugural address with an apt Biblical quotation — “where is no vision the people perish”.

The next meeting was on December 13, 1949, when the Objectives Resolution was moved by Jawaharlal Nehru, during which he said “the Declaration is a pledge and an undertaking. A time comes when we have to rise above party and think of the nation, think sometimes of even the world at large of which our nation is a great part”. Thereafter Dr Radhakrishnan in a moving speech said “this declaration, which we make today, is of the nature of a pledge to our own people and a pact with the civilised world”.

The next meeting was on August 14, 1947, at 11:00 pm. The first item on the agenda was the singing of the first verse of Vande Mataram which, was rendered by Sucheta Kripalani. Thereafter, Nehru made his celebrated “tryst with destiny” speech.

The subject of fundamental rights was crucial. It was debated for 38 days, during which M Ananthasayanam Ayyangar plaintively asked, “Is there a single word in the Constitution that imposes on the future governments the obligation to see that nobody in India dies of starvation?” The main problem that loomed large was whether these rights should be unqualified, or be subjected to restrictions, and the nature of the restrictions. Most important: Who should have the final word in determining the necessity for the restriction? The legislature or the judiciary?

Quite a few members felt that the guaranteed freedoms were hedged in with so many restrictions that, according to P S Deshmukh, “they are neither fundamental nor have much of rights in them”. Muhammad Ismail bemoaned that “the exceptions have actually eaten up the rights”. Several members complained of the legislative legerdemain of giving fundamental rights with the right hand and taking it away “by three or four or five left hands”. Algu Rai Shastri drew inspiration from the arts: “Freedom is a great art — even greater than the art of music and dancing. He (an artist) cannot sing and dance out of tune and time, in an unrestricted manner. He remains fully bound to the rules.”

An irreconcilable gulf seemed to divide the two sides, which was overcome by the suggestion of Thakurdas Bhargava, who advocated that the word “reasonable” be inserted before the expression “restrictions”. B R Ambedkar readily accepted the proposal and the vital principle of judicial review implicit in it.

Provisions relating to preventive detention generated sharp controversy. Bakshi Tek Chand condemned them as most reactionary, and according to Mahavir Tyagi, the business of the Constitution makers was to guarantee the rights of people and not to

make laws to deprive them. The debates had their lighter side. Lawyers were a frequent butt of ridicule and sarcasm. Lok Nath Mishra referred to the profession as one which “feeds on fat fees and forged facts”. H V Kamath moved an amendment for the insertion of the words “in the name of God” in the beginning of the Preamble. Rohini Kumar Choudhary explained that he belonged to the Shakti cult and protested that “if we bring in the name of God at all, we should bring in the name of Goddess also”. Rajendra Prasad was not amused.

The founding fathers did not mince words when it came to criticising one another. Ambedkar got it in the neck because of his remark that “democracy in India is only a top dressing on an Indian soil which is essentially undemocratic” and also for his disparaging references to the village as a “sink of localism, a den of ignorance”. Kamath described Ambedkar’s attitude “as typical of the urban highbrow”. N G Ranga retorted that obviously Ambedkar had not studied Indian history “with as much care as he seemed to have devoted to the history of other countries”.

Tempers did run high on occasions. During the debate on official language, T T Krishnamachari complained that “hon’ble friends from UP do not help us in any way by flogging their idea of ‘Hindi imperialism’”. Abdul Kalam Azad indignantly said that he “was totally disappointed to find out that from one end to the other, narrow-mindedness reigned supreme” and “that with such small minds we cannot aspire to be a great nation”. The arch protagonist of Hindi, Govind Das, thundered that the passing of the Constitution “in a foreign language after the attainment of independence would forever remain a blot on us.”

Ambedkar, in a sombre mood, delivered many home-truths. He declared that “on the 26th of January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life? If we continue to deny it for long, we will do so only by putting our political democracy in peril. We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of democracy which this Constituent Assembly has so laboriously built up.” He cautioned people “not to lay their liberties at the feet of even a great man, or to trust him with powers which enable him to subvert their institution. Bhakti in religion may be a road to the salvation of the soul. But in politics, Bhakti or hero worship is a sure road to degradation and to eventual dictatorship”.

On November 26, 1949, we came to the end of the Constitutional Yatra. Rajendra Prasad’s words on that day have a ringing appeal. “If the people who are elected are capable and men of character and integrity, they would be able to make the best even of a defective Constitution. If they are lacking in these, the Constitution cannot help the country. India needs today nothing more than a set of honest men who will have the interest of the country before them.”

Is it utopian to expect these words will become a reality?

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Missing the gender-infrastructure link

Why Niti Aayog’s evaluation of Sustainable Development Goals has room for improvement

SIMRIT KAUR, SANCHITA JOSHI, VAIBHAV PURI

THE NITI AAYOG should be complimented for releasing the “SDG India Index Baseline Report 2018”. The document tracks India’s progress at the sub-national level on 13 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The launch of an index that maps India’s endeavours at sustainable development is significant in several ways. The performance of the world’s second-most populous country would have a great influence on the success or failure of the SDGs. A rigorous evaluation of India’s performance is thus critical to ensure that the UN’s Agenda 2030 does not remain on paper.

The report classifies states as “achievers” (index score = 100), “front-runners” (score: 65-99), performers (score: 50-64), and “aspirants” (score < 49) based on their performance on 13 indices, each representative of an SDG. The country’s performance has been exemplary with respect to “life on land” (Goal 15), “reduced inequality” (Goal 10) and “peace, justice and strong institutions” (Goal 16) with scores of 90, 71 and 71 respectively. However, the performance has been abysmal on goals pertaining to industry, innovation and infrastructure (Goal 9, henceforth Infra-9), sustainable cities and communities (Goal 11) and gender equality (Goal 5), with scores of 44, 39 and 36 respectively.

The performance on gender equality is particularly lamentable, given the intrinsic and instrumental importance of this SDG. The sub-indicators adopted by the NITI Aayog to formulate the gender equality index are based

on sex ratio at birth, wage-gap, domestic violence, women in leadership, labour-force participation and adoption of modern family planning methods by women. At the state-level, Kerala (50), Sikkim (50) and Chhattisgarh (49) have emerge as the top performers, while Uttar Pradesh (27), Manipur (25) and Bihar (24) trail far behind. Kerala’s lead can possibly be attributed to its legacy advantages, including high literacy rates and low gender literacy gap. To assume that “expenditure” creates a distinction between front-runners and under-performers is not necessarily true since the gender budget allocation of Kerala is a fraction of that of Bihar. In such respects, governance matters as well.

Gender inequality is determined by an interplay of complex economic, demographic and socio-cultural factors such as income, health, education and religion. Several studies, including the World Bank’s *Engendering Development* (2001) and *World Development Report on Gender Equality and Development* (2012) and the Asian Development Bank’s *Sectoral Perspectives on Gender and Social Inclusion* (2011) point out that infrastructure development has a significant bearing on gender equality. The Niti Aayog’s report too underlines that Infra-9 is closely intertwined with gender equality. Our findings, however, do not indicate a strong positive relationship between gender equality and Infra-9 scores in the agency’s report (a correlation of -0.3). This raises two queries. How representative is the Infra-9 index as compiled by NITI Aayog

vis-a-vis the UN’s comparable description of “industry, innovation and infrastructure”? Second, how representative is the term “infrastructure” in Infra-9 a-vis the generally acceptable definition of infrastructure?

The Niti Aayog considered only two sub-targets (9.1 and 9.2) under Infra-9 pertaining to physical and wireless connectivity. This negates the importance of sub-targets related to financial inclusion, sustainability of industrial activities and research and developments (sub targets 9.3 to 9.5). The scope of the Niti Aayog’s targeting exercise would be enhanced by the addition of the relevant sub-indicators for the missing targets.

With respect to targets pertaining to physical connectivity, the Niti Aayog’s exercise uses only the data pertaining to all-weather roads under schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana. And with regards to targets under wireless connectivity, the exercise covers only mobile tele-density, internet connectivity and e-governance through BharatNet. In both respects, therefore, Niti Aayog’s exercise covers “infrastructure” under Infra-9 partially. This limitation can be overcome if the exercise evaluates the country’s performance on Goal 6 (clean water and sanitation), Goal 7 (affordable and clean energy) and Goal 11 (sustainable cities and communities). Exercises like the Asian Development Bank’s report, *Meeting Asia’s Infrastructure Needs* (2017) and the World Economic Forum’s *Global Competitiveness Report 2017-18* underscore the salience of in-

corporating these SDGs in any evaluation of infrastructure.

Our analysis, which links a single un-weighted composite-index of Goals 6, 7, and 11 with gender equality, establishes a significant and positive relation (correlation of 0.6). Schemes like Swachh Bharat, Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, AMRUT and Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana are progressive steps in strengthening such plurality of relations. So SDGs pertaining to energy, water-sanitation and sustainable cities must be aligned with Infra-9 in order to establish the linkage between gender and infrastructure comprehensively.

Despite paucity of disaggregated data, the NITI Aayog has done a commendable job in compiling the “SDG India Index Baseline Report 2018”. Constant review and monitoring of the progress in achieving SDGs is important not only for honouring the country’s commitments in this respect but for effective policy-making as well. We hope that Indian statistical organisations take cues and work towards capturing and collating comprehensive micro-level data sets that cover the SDGs in all their facets.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

CHANCE IN A CRISIS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Writ in snow’ (IE, February 6). The ICIMOD study on the receding Himalayan glaciers is a wake up call for the developing countries in the Hindu Kush region. The Paris Climate Pact is only an humble attempt to stave-off climate change and it may not save the Hindu Kush Himalayas. South Asian countries and China depend heavily on coal. Clean energy options have not fructified yet. Scientists have warned of water scarcity in this region. The International Solar Alliance spearheaded by India is a step in the right direction but the alliance needs to rope in China.

Nishant Parashar, Chandigarh

CARIBBEAN REVIVAL

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Falling in love again’ (IE, February 6). The West Indies is, indeed, everyone’s second favourite cricket team. For all those who started watching the game in the late 1990s and saw the fall of a once mighty side, the West Indies’ recent victory over England brings hope. The 2004 Champions Trophy victory, the World T20 wins and the odd test wins against Australia, South Africa and England have raised the bar for the West Indies fan — as has the individual brilliance of some modern players. Jason Holder has led the side well and one hopes the recent series win is not a flash in the pan. The ban on Holder is unjustified.

Shubhomoy Sikdar, Delhi

LETTER OF THE WEEK AWARD

To encourage quality reader intervention, The Indian Express offers the Letter of the Week award. The letter adjudged the best for the week is published every Saturday. Letters may be e-mailed to editpage@expressindia.com or sent to The Indian Express, B-1/B, Sector 10, Noida-UP 201301. Letter writers should mention their postal address and phone number.

THE WINNER RECEIVES SELECT EXPRESS PUBLICATIONS

ARAB SPRING

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘A visit, a milestone’ (IE, February 6). Pope Francis’s visit to the UAE, at a time when the Arab World is grappling with multiple problems, is significant. No matter what religion people follow, it is time that the world comes together and helps the Arab world in freeing itself from the grip of terrorism and other problems.

Anish Esteves, Mumbai



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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@expressindia.com

TELLING NUMBERS

92,000 schools have single teachers, 1/3 of them in 2 states



Photo for representation only. Archive

STATES WITH 3,000+ SCHOOLS WITH SINGLE TEACHERS

Madhya Pradesh	18,307
Rajasthan	12,052
Uttar Pradesh	8,092
Jharkhand	7,564
Andhra Pradesh	7,483
Karnataka	4,767
Assam	4,624
Telangana	4,587
West Bengal	3,756
Bihar	3,483

Source: HRD Ministry reply in Lok Sabha

AS MANY as 92,275 elementary and secondary schools in India are running with a single teacher, the Ministry of Human Resource Development stated in reply to a question in Lok Sabha during the ongoing budget session. This is as per provisional figures of the Unified District Information System of Education (UDISE), 2016-17. Under UDISE, the pupil-teacher ratio at national level should be 23:1 for primary, 17:1 for upper primary, and 27:1 for secondary schools, the government reply said.

Madhya Pradesh (18,307) and Rajasthan (12,052) have the highest number of single-teacher schools, to-

gether accounting for nearly one-third of the total of 92,275. When these two are counted together with Uttar Pradesh (8,092), Jharkhand (7,564) and Andhra Pradesh (7,483), the five states add up to more than half of India's total.

In contrast, Delhi has 5 schools running with a single teacher. There are no such schools in Odisha, Tripura and four Union Territories — Chandigarh, Andaman & Nicobar Islands, Dadra & Nagar Haveli, Lakshadweep, Sikkim has 1 single-teacher school while Daman & Diu has 3. Other states with less than 100 are Nagaland (31) and Mizoram (66).



SHYAMLAL YADAV
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 6

AT ITS Dharma Sansad in Prayagraj last week, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) passed a resolution that it will not launch any new programme on the Ram Janmabhoomi issue for the next four months, until the Lok Sabha elections are over. A look at the events leading up to the decision, and what it could mean for the Lok Sabha elections:

What reason has the VHP given?

It has said it wants to prevent the issue from being exploited politically. The resolution states: "An election is the national festival of democracy... The *sant samaj* shall not give the pseudo-secular pack the opportunity to drag this holy and important movement of Sri Ram Janmabhoomi into a political vortex and swamp. Therefore, we are not announcing any new phase of the movement now." It adds that its ongoing programmes will continue.

Has the move come as a surprise?

It was sudden. The VHP has, however, justified it on the basis of a recent petition to the Supreme Court by the BJP-led government seeking permission to return 67 acres in Ayodhya to the original owners, Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas. The VHP resolution acknowledged this: "The Dharma Sansad welcomes this effort of the central government and expresses confidence that with this undisputed land, it will also make every possible effort to hand over the alleged disputed land to the Hindus promptly."

Until the VHP announced its decision, the BJP was under pressure going into the elections. The leadership of the BJP as well as the RSS, besides the government, had come under criticism in a meeting of around 200 top functionaries of the RSS and frontal organisations at Mantralayam in August-September last year. The RSS itself was putting pressure on the government. On October 18, at the annual Vijaya Dashami speech in Nagpur, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat asked the government to consider introducing legislation for construction of a Ram Temple. RSS leaders including *sar-karyawah* Bhaijaji Joshi have made this demand on several occasions. The

Why is VHP now lowering the Ayodhya heat?

A govt petition as ground, a party under less pressure

A strong temple agitation could have made campaign tough for BJP. Besides, VHP has its own struggles



BJP, RSS, VHP leaders at an event in memory of VHP leader Ashok Singhal. Archive

government petition in the court has served as a face-saver for both the BJP and the RSS.

What can the move mean for the BJP in the election campaign?

An agitation for a temple during the campaign could have created divisions among cadres of various Sangh Parishad units. It could have embarrassed the BJP, especially when NDA partners such as Lok Janshakti Party have clarified that Ayodhya is not an issue for them. The VHP move eases the pressure on the BJP, and allows it to focus on development and other issues. It also preempts criticism from opposition parties about why the temple issue was being revived just before the elections. As Bhagwat said at the Dharma Sansad: "Whatever programme we take in the coming days, it will impact the election atmosphere."

What can it mean to the VHP?

The essential message from the resolution appears to be that the VHP will support the BJP in the elections and will take up the mandir issue only after that. Its move comes at a time when its leadership has eroded. No present VHP leader carries the clout of the late Ashok Singhal, while the assertive Praveen Togadia has now been removed from the VHP. Both of them were bold enough to take on for the BJP. Besides, VHP cadres are divided into two camps, and its programmes are often marked with low turnouts.

The VHP, however, may now have to watch while other groups make efforts to

seize the temple narrative. A day before the Dharma Sansad began, a Param Dharma Sansad organised by religious leader Shankaracharya Swaropanand Saraswati concluded, with a resolution to lay the foundation stone for a Ram temple on February 21. The Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad has extended support to the proposal.

How has the Sangh Parishad's relationship been with the present government and BJP leadership?

During the previous NDA government headed by Atal Bihari Vajpayee, prominent Sangh Parishad leaders like Dattopant Thengadi and Singhal often questioned the Prime Minister. Then *sar-sanghchalak* K S Sudarshan had even said that some "inefficient people" were sitting in the PMO.

Not many leaders in Sangh Parishad organisations today raise questions about the present government and BJP leadership. One exception was K C Mishra, Sangathan Mantri of the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, an RSS frontal organisation. On June 1, 2015, he told *The Indian Express* that Prime Minister Narendra Modi does not know the real meaning of *garibi* (poverty) and suggested that he look at eastern India to understand what it means. A few months later, Mishra went on leave and has since been "taking rest" in Bhubaneswar. While RSS chief Bhagwat wields influence, he has rarely been heard attacking the government and BJP leadership.

Throughout the present regime, Sangh

Parivar leaders have been largely silent on issues such as uniform civil code and Article 70. On Ayodhya, events have compelled them to take a public stand. With the Supreme Court having declined to hear the Ayodhya matter on a regular basis, and with the government having made it clear that it would go by court orders, Sangh Parishad organisations have issued statements from time to time to pacify their cadre. Although BJP Rajya Sabha MP Rakesh Sinha announced on November 1 that he would bring a private member's Bill on Ayodhya, he has been silent since then.

How has this relationship been historically?

At a national level, various Sangh Parishad units have defined roles. The RSS is the fountainhead. The BJP was formed in 1980, when Balasaheb Deoras was RSS chief; its earlier version, Bharatiya Jana Sangh, was formed by a group of RSS *pracharaks* such as Deendayal Upadhyay. The VHP was founded in 1964 as an outfit "to organise-consolidate the Hindu society and to serve-protect the Hindu Dharma". It took up the Ram temple movement that year, when former Congress leader Dau Dayal Khanna passed a resolution in the then Dharma Sansad for the "liberation" of the temples of Ayodhya, Mathura and Kashi.

On the ground, workers and activities of these organisations are often closely linked. The RSS deputed its *pracharaks* to work in the BJP and the VHP. After the formation of the BJP, the RSS initially maintained a little distance, until the temple movement brought them more visibly together. After VHP *rath yatras* in 1984 and 1985, the BJP passed the Palampur resolution in 1989 at its national executive meeting: "People's faith must be respected and Ram Janmabhoomi should be handed over to Hindus. It should be resolved through mutual dialogue between the two communities or, if this was not possible, through an enabling legislation. Litigation is in no way a solution for this matter."

NEXT

#10 Can Cong showing in Assembly polls translate to Lok Sabha?
PART 1: MADHYA PRADESH

TIP FOR READING LIST

MORAL VALUES OR MATERIAL GAIN? HOW THE BRAIN MAKES THE CHOICE

WHEN A person donates to charity or does volunteer work, the action is guided by moral values. In other words, such persons are putting someone else's needs before their own, and forgoing their own material interests in favour of material values. What goes on inside the brain when it makes the choice? Neuroeconomists at the University of Zurich have investigated in which area of the brain the conflicts between moral and material motives are resolved. Their study is online at <https://elifesciences.org/articles/40671>.

Led by UZH professor Christian Ruff, the researchers focused on the right Temporal Parietal Junction (rTPJ) — an area of the brain that is believed to play a crucial role in social decision-making processes. In an experimental set-up, participants had to decide whether and how much they wanted to donate to various organisations. Through electromagnetic stimulation of the rTPJ, the researchers were then able to determine what kinds of considerations are processed in this area of the brain. The researchers found

that people have a moral preference for supporting good causes and not wanting to support harmful or bad causes. However, depending on the strength of the monetary incentive, people will at one point switch to selfish behaviour. "If we don't let the brain deliberate on conflicting moral and monetary values, people are more likely to stick to their moral convictions and aren't swayed, even by high financial incentives," Ruff said on the UZH website.

Although people's decisions were more social when they thought that their actions were being watched, this behaviour was not affected by electromagnetic stimulation of the rTPJ. This means that considerations regarding one's reputation are processed in a different area of the brain. In addition, the electromagnetic stimulation led to no difference in the general motivation to help. Therefore, the authors concluded that the rTPJ is not home to altruistic motives per se, but rather to the ability to trade off moral and material values.

Source: University of Zurich

THIS WORD MEANS: STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS

When the US President speaks to the people

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 6

PRESIDENT DONALD Trump's State of the Union (SOTU) Address to Congress in Washington DC on Tuesday night was his second, and the 96th in-person Address/Annual Message in the history of the United States. Franklin D Roosevelt's 1945 address was read to a Joint Session of the US House and Senate — since the President did not deliver it himself, it is not officially counted as an in-person address.

ORIGINS: According to a historical note on the website of the US House of Representatives, the formal basis of the State of the Union Address lies in the US Constitution: Article II, Section 3, Clause 1 states the President "shall from time to time give to the Congress Information of the State of the Union, and recommend to their Consideration such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient".

From 1790, when President George Washington delivered the first of these messages, to 1946, the address was formally known as the Annual Message. Between 1942 and 1946, it was informally called the "state



(Left) On December 13, 1913, Woodrow Wilson gave the first in-person Annual Message since President John Adams on November 22, 1800; President Donald Trump speaks on Tuesday night in Washington, DC. Library of Congress/Reuters



of the Union" message/address; since 1947, when President Harry S Truman gave his message to Congress (January 6), it has been officially known as the State of the Union Address.

CONTENT: Annual Messages by earlier Presidents included agency budget requests and general reports on the health of the US economy. Subsequently, Congress required more in-depth reports on these aspects, separate from the Annual Message. The Budget Message was instituted by a 1921 law, and the Economic Report by an Act of 1946.

Since 1913, when President Woodrow Wilson revived the practice of speaking to Congress in person after a gap of 113 years, the SOTU has served as a platform for the President to rally support for his agenda.

President Calvin Coolidge gave the first SOTU address to be broadcast on radio (1923), President Truman presented the first televised address (1947), and President George W Bush delivered the first address that was webcast live (2002) — consistently enabling Presidents to speak directly to increasing

numbers of the American people. **WHERE, WHEN:** Modern SOTU addresses have been delivered in the House Chamber. Prior to the move of the Capitol to Washington, DC, the Annual Message was often delivered in the Senate Chamber. A House concurrent resolution sets aside the day and time for a Joint Session to receive the communication. Until 1934, the Annual Message was delivered every December; since then, the Annual Message/SOTU has been delivered every January or February.

LONGEST, SHORTEST: The longest written address was by Jimmy Carter (33,667 words) in 1981; the longest spoken address was by Bill Clinton (9,190 words) in 1995. The first address, by George Washington in 1790, was the shortest — 1,089 words.

The average address in the 19th century was about 10,000 words; from the late 20th century, it has been about 5,000 words.

FDR gave the most Messages/Addresses — 12, of which 10 were personal appearances before Congress. President Zachary Taylor delivered only 1, and Presidents William Henry Harrison and James A Garfield, none.

All information: US House of Representatives

Tougher scanning, looser encryption: what new Rules want from Web firms

SHRUTI DHAPOLA
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 6

THE GOVERNMENT on Wednesday published 609 pages of suggestions and comments from a range of relevant parties on a new set of guidelines for intermediaries that it issued at the end of last year. The Intermediaries Guidelines (Amendment) Rules, 2018 could have far-reaching impact on the way social media websites, and the Internet as a whole, operate in India. Counter-comments will be accepted until February 14.

The Rules, read under Section 79 of the Information Technology Act, 2000, make 'intermediaries' such as Facebook, Google, WhatsApp, and others responsible for actively monitoring the content they host. They also ask the intermediaries to allow the tracing of information on their plat-

forms by government agencies — a requirement that could create difficulties in the India operations of global end-to-end encrypted products like WhatsApp or Signal.

Internet companies with more than 50 lakh users will be required to register themselves in India, and have an office in the country.

Changes in content

The Rules notified by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) on December 28, 2018 ask for greater due diligence from intermediaries on the regulation of the content they host.

First, all intermediary companies will have to "deploy technology based automated tools or appropriate mechanisms, with appropriate controls, for proactively identifying and removing or disabling public access to unlawful information or content".

Open-source companies like Wikipedia,

GitHub, and Mozilla have formally protested to IT Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad. They have argued that it would not be possible for them to employ automated tools to monitor "unlawful" content. GitHub is an online repository of code, Wikipedia content is generated, edited, and moderated by users, and Mozilla's Firefox is a popular open source browser.

For many startups in India, monitoring and removing content might not always be viable or possible, given the resources that would be required. Plus, companies will have to inform their users "at least once every month" that in case of non-compliance, their accounts and content would be removed. Exactly how this will be achieved is unclear.

In addition to the earlier stipulation about content that is grossly harmful, defamatory, obscene, etc., they must now also filter content that "threatens public health or safety;

promotion of cigarettes or any other tobacco products or consumption of intoxicant including alcohol and Electronic Nicotine Delivery System (ENDS) & like products that enable nicotine delivery..."

Any content which "threatens critical information infrastructure" is not allowed under the new Rules.

Question of encryption

Companies will have to help government agencies in locating the origin of content, if required to do so by law. For many, this could mean choosing between breaking their end-to-end encryption in India, or stopping the service in the country altogether.

The new Rules say that if there is a lawful order, "then intermediary shall, within 72 hours of communication, provide such information or assistance as asked for by any government agency or assistance..." The lawful order could be in matters of state se-

curity, cyber security, investigation of any offence.

Also, "The intermediary shall enable tracing out of such originator of information on its platform as may be required by government agencies who are legally authorised."

For apps like WhatsApp, Signal, etc., tracing the originator of information could create problems, besides forcing them to go against the core of what their product stands for.

End-to-end encryption on WhatsApp or Signal ensures that no one can read the messages shared between two users — no government, no third-party, no cyber criminals, not even the company itself. The Rules then, could amount to making it impossible for these firms to work in India in their current avatars. Would the services be banned for non-compliance? That isn't clear so far.

Registration in India

All players with more than 5 million users in India have to be incorporated under The Companies Act. This will touch more companies than just the well-known ones. The companies will need to have a "permanent registered office in India with a physical address". Also, these norms, although currently applicable to only the 5 million-plus firms, can be "extended to any intermediary, which is specifically notified by the Government of India", according to the Rules.

Again, the Rules only say "fifty lakh users in India" — it is unclear whether they mean monthly active users or daily active users, which are the key metrics that Internet companies use to define their user base. A service that has 5 million monthly active users in India — i.e., users who log in once a month — might not see the sense in having an office in the country.