



The Indian EXPRESS

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RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

In praise of khichdi

Or, as the general election draws closer, in defence of politics



ALOK RAI

A DISMAL PATTERN

Acquittals in Samjhauta blast case raise serious questions about NIA's capacities, politicisation of terror

ALL FOUR PERSONS accused in the high-profile 2007 Samjhauta Express blast case were acquitted by a trial court last week. The court said the National Investigation Agency (NIA) had failed to prove the conspiracy charges and gave the benefit of doubt to the accused — among them former RSS activist Naba Kumar Sarkar alias Aseemanand. The failure of the prosecution to secure convictions in a terror case which claimed the lives of at least 68 persons including 43 Pakistani nationals, shows the agency, set up primarily to probe acts of terrorism, in poor light.

But the acquittals in the Samjhauta Express case are not exceptional. There seems to be a pattern in these terror cases, where the prosecution has been found wanting in securing convictions. Investigators have held that the Samjhauta Express blast was part of a string of six cases, in which Hindutva groups and activists allegedly conspired to target Muslims and their places of worship. The terror strikes included bomb blasts in the Ajmer Dargah and Mecca Masjid in Hyderabad in 2007 and Malegaon in 2006 and 2008, and among the accused were Sadhvi Pragya Singh Thakur and Shrikant Prasad Purohit, a lieutenant colonel in the Indian Army. Twelve years since the incidents took place, the prosecution has managed to secure convictions only in the Ajmer case — a special court sentenced two RSS pracharaks to life while Aseemanand was acquitted. Last year, a special court acquitted all the accused in the Mecca Masjid blasts case, in which nine persons had been killed. In all these cases, a large number of witnesses turned hostile during the long-winded trial. In the Malegaon case, NIA special prosecutor, Rohini Saliyan, had told this newspaper that she was under pressure from the agency to go slow. In fact, the NIA had dropped all charges against Pragya Thakur in the Malegaon blasts case in 2017. It was left to a special court to reinstate charges against her and Purohit under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, a year later.

Since the regime change at the Centre in 2014, there appears to be a marked difference in the approach of the NIA to the cases in which Hindutva activists have been chargesheeted. The prosecution has seemed lenient towards bail pleas filed by the chargesheeted and unperturbed about its failure to secure convictions: In the Samjhauta Express case, Home Minister Rajnath Singh has said there would not be an appeal against the acquittals. The government must desist from politicising these cases and ensure that the law takes its course. The NIA and the prosecution cannot let these cases fall apart at the trial stage, for that only weakens India's battle against terrorism. Moreover, it's not just the credibility of the NIA that is at stake, but the government's resolve to ensure justice — independent of the religion of the victims or the ideology of the accused.

THE FALL OF IS

But it may be premature to declare victory. There is no room for complacency, India must not let down its guard

THE MILITARY DEFEAT of the Islamic State, declared with the capture of Baghuz in Syria, the last sliver of its territory, had been in the making for months. Since 2016, when Iraqi forces started a determined push to take back territory usurped by the post-al Qaeda "Caliphate", the group has steadily lost territory. The fall of Mosul in mid-2017 marked a significant milestone. Around the same time, a US-backed coalition had started retaking IS territory in Syria. Raqqa, the self-declared capital of the IS, in Syria, and the last big city it held in that country, was freed from the IS in October 2017. There was a terrible civilian toll and to this day, the city remains uninhabitable, while Iraq struggles to rebuild Mosul. At the height of its power, the IS controlled almost a third of Syria and a long boot-shaped piece of territory in Iraq, like a dagger through its heart, stopping just north of Baghdad. In these areas, the self-styled "Caliphate" attracted thousands of young people from across the world, including to the great shock of those countries, from North America and Europe. It also attracted donors from which it raised billions of dollars. Plus it sold oil from the large fields in Syria and some in Iraq under its control to a shadow world of clients. It inflicted great brutality on all that lay in its path — people, architecture, libraries and museums.

However, the IS as an ideology had long crossed over the steadily shrinking geographical borders of the so-called Caliphate. In that sense, declaring victory over the IS may be premature. While thousands of IS fighters and their families have dispersed from their strongholds in Syria and Iraq into the deserts, the group is present in Afghanistan where it is known as the Islamic State of the Khorasan. In the manner of al Qaeda at its height, the IS now has independently operating franchises across the world, and individuals and small bands of individuals ready to carry out terrorist attacks in several parts of the world.

Only a handful of IS-inspired youngsters have been detected in India, some after they had left for Syria, but fortunately, most as they were being radicalised by online mentors. Earlier this month, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj told the OIC foreign ministers that India's multiculturalism and diversity had ensured that extremist ideologies had not taken hold. But there is no room for complacency. Religious co-existence has been undermined much in recent times, and the situation in Kashmir has deteriorated. The IS is sure to react to its defeat, and to see the multiple faultlines of this region as an opportunity. India cannot afford to let down its guard.

GROW UP

If age is but a number, say scientists in the UK, let us be liberal and give ourselves 30 for fun and games

A CAMBRIDGE SCIENTIST speaking ahead of a meet on brain development at the Academy of Medical Sciences in Oxford has made headlines worldwide by suggesting that we don't grow up until our thirties. The excitement is unwarranted. Compelling data from thousands of years of juvenile behaviour establishes that on average, humans never grow up at all. Just six months ago, speaking at the Leverhulme Centre for the Future of Intelligence at Cambridge, Stephen Hawking, who was a professor there, defined the discipline of history as the study of the history of stupidity. The human race has worked for centuries to create civil society, to stave off a life that looked "nasty, brutish and short", in Hobbes' (the gloomy political philosopher of Malmesbury, not the cartoon tiger) memorable phrase in Leviathan. Having largely achieved that aim, it now seeks salvation in many countries in the search for a lost golden age, guided by strong men. It's unbelievably juvenile.

The headlines that scientists made at Oxford were ridiculous, but what they actually said was not: That the minds of people mature at different rates in a continuous process, and that we do not all suddenly become adults either at 18, or 21 or 30. Watersheds for attaining adulthood are illogical compacts that have been agreed upon by interest groups that must administer justice, deliver education and health, sell alcohol and tobacco or conscript for military service. In reality, the brain keeps rewiring itself throughout the first half of life, and does not reach a steady state until the age of 30.

So now we know that while the exhortation to "act your age" is illogical, the demand that you "grow up" is not. And also, that you have at least a decade extra to run wild. Life is short, and it's always nice to have a margin.

IN THE RUN-UP to the impending parliamentary election, a pointed contrast is being sought to be drawn between the high-gledy-piggledy chaos of Opposition "unity" — "khichdi" — and the trenchant "vision" that Narendra Modi represents. Well, that "vision" deserves independent consideration. Its blustering muscularity possibly has some adolescent appeal. Certainly, the moustaches of superannuated generals in TV studios have become noticeably fiercer. But my subject is rather more modest today — simply, the simple "khichdi".

Now, khichdi is universally loved as a convenient comfort food. It can be rustled up easily, it feeds the hungry, and nourishes the ailing. I daresay even the macho Modi — ab tak chhappan — at least in his more modest incarnations as chaiwalla and chowkidar, must relish khichdi. But in the political sphere, as metaphor, khichdi is generally looked down upon. So, my theme is political khichdi.

All politicians routinely seek to deny that they are acting for political reasons, and correspondingly accuse their rivals of doing so. This is manifestly paradoxical, but we should pause and reflect a little on this paradox. All politicians represent, or seek to represent, constituencies — which are both electoral spaces and demographics. They act — and should act — to advance the interests of those constituencies. This contending of interests is precisely the stuff of democratic politics — the jostling and the clamour, the deals and the compromises, is the very soundtrack of democracy. But it is typical that all politicians pretend that the "special interests" that they represent — the particular groups, classes, castes — in fact, stand for the "general interest". Such a claim is invariably deceptive, and it is important to call out this deception.

Mercifully, this is easily done in most cases. Thus, the samaj of the Samajwadi Party is mainly Yadav; Mayawati's bahujan are mainly Dalit. But the hypocrisy of the BJP is of another order. They claim — claim vociferously, aggressively, threateningly — to speak for the "national interest". And — this is the clear, intended, dangerous implication — if

they speak for "the nation", what need is there for anyone else to speak at all? But the necessary question is the old, familiar one — what is the "special interest" that is being sought to be camouflaged in this angry "national" claim, so that all those who think differently are deemed "anti-national"?

So, here's my thesis. There is ultimately no shame in being accused of advancing the interests of the Dalits or the OBCs — because both of these groups, albeit in different ways, can credibly be said to be disadvantaged, deprived of a fair share of the social good: Property, education, status. Jat and Patel leaders can afford to speak in their own name, and do so freely. But the "special interest" represented by the BJP is the one "special interest" that dare not speak its name. The Hindu-savarna class, sheltering behind "nationalist" rhetoric, enjoys almost complete dominance over the aforementioned social good, but its moral claim to that social good has been hollowed out completely.

There are complex historical reasons underlying this development — different regions, different stories — but the fact is that the moral legitimacy of that dominance has been irretrievably lost, even in their own eyes. The tireless efforts of the Hindu social reformers, Dayanand, Gandhi, Vivekanand; the progressive legacy of the freedom movement; the global trend in favour of equality — all this has ensured that overt "Brahminism", an ideology founded on hierarchy and discrimination, on institutionalised inhumanity, can have few defenders. The "Hindu nationalism" of the BJP-RSS is the mutated form of this toxic ideology. The political party is merely a front organisation for a secret society that has been plotting, for nearly a century, to buttress the privileges of the Hindu upper castes, and their associated corporate sector, and will go to any lengths in pursuit of that goal.

The resentment of these super-privileged savarna elites is a fertile theme, and will bear detailed examination. But for my limited purpose, it is sufficient to note that its frightening outlines have become clear to all but the wilfully blind — blind to the itin-

erant gangs of gaurakshas (sic) who perpetrate grotesque acts of public violence, blind to the official and unofficial apparatchiks who feel emboldened to voice the foolishnesses and defend the outrages that reassure the faithful — ah pushpak-vimaana, ah vedic internet!

Hence the desperate camouflage. The Hindu-savarna "special interest" mutates into "Hindu nationalism". The only way that that Brahminical "special interest" can seek to further extend and consolidate its dominance is by shutting down the clamour, the very possibility of competing "special interests". It is important, therefore, that the clamour of apparently incommensurate special interests, committed to democratic negotiation, be denigrated as "khichdi" — to be contrasted with serene "nationalism". It follows from this that all political parties other than the BJP — precisely because they have no common ideology beyond a shared commitment to the continued practice of democracy — must come together in a khichdi-coalition or different coalitions in different geographies. The forming and reforming of such coalitions in the process of democracy is in fact the only true reflection of that dynamic coalition of "special interests" which is the "nation" — and not the muscular fantasy being peddled by Sanghi ideologues.

Of course, there will be problems. And today's allies will contend with each other tomorrow, and form new alliances, discover new adversaries. Political parties will — and should — continue to compete, and jostle, and clamour, and do all the messy things that are internal to the practice of democracy. As they say, tomorrow is another day — provided that there is a tomorrow. Provided that the one self-proclaimed "nationalist" party is not allowed to shut down politics altogether. Our democratic polity is seriously ill, and coalition-khichdi is just what it needs to get better again. Another round of Gujarati mixture may well kill the patient.

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MISSING IN THE POLLS

For ruling regime and Opposition, healthcare doesn't seem to be an issue



SHAH ALAM KHAN

AS ABOUT 900 million voters prepare to elect their next government, the agenda for the Indian elections is supposedly decided. But there is an eerie silence on part of the political class and the general public around issues of health. In most elections in Western countries, the healthcare policies of a political party are an important agenda. During the May 2015 general elections in the UK, the prestigious medical journal, *Lancet*, called the UK's National Health Services (NHS) a "political hot potato" for parties in that country. Unfortunately, in India, despite a dismal healthcare setup, health still does not figure in the imagination of the rulers or the ruled.

Six days after the terrorist attack in Pulwama, the World Health Organisation (WHO) released its report on the global health expenditure, that not only reveals ground realities on health economics but also helps governments to prioritise future health expenditure. The report revealed that the global spending on health increased in low and middle-income countries by 6 per cent and in high-income countries by 4 per cent. It showed that both India and Pakistan have populations which are one of the highest in the world when it comes to spending out of pocket on health. However, its stark findings got lost in the din of a near-war between the two countries.

The current infant mortality rate (IMR) in India stands at 44 per 1,000 live births and the country stood 12th on a UNICEF list of 52 low-middle income countries with the high-

est IMR in the world (2016). India's neonatal mortality rate (NMR), at 25.4 per 1,000 live births, was higher than that of Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh. Only Pakistan and Afghanistan fared worse than us in the subcontinent.

Considered to be a sensitive indicator of the quality of healthcare delivery, the maternal mortality rate (MMR) for India is 130 per 1,00,000 live births. The average global MMR hovers around 216 per 1,00,000 live births. What is startling is the fact that the so-called electorally most sensitive state of the country, Uttar Pradesh, has an MMR of 201 per 1,00,000 live births. UP also happens to be the electoral state of the PM.

It is interesting to note that the word "health" or "healthcare" appeared 83 times in the election manifesto of the BJP and 42 times in the manifesto of the Congress party during the run-up to the 2014 elections. Despite this, health did not become an election agenda. Even today, the Opposition does not want to make the Gorakhpur hospital children's deaths (from 2017) a pivotal point for their campaigns.

It is important to analyse why something as important as the health of a nation remains undiscussed during elections here. Illiteracy, lack of awareness, diversionary communal-caste discussions by the political class, lack of political will, and, poor electoral ethics are some of the reasons which come to mind. It would, perhaps, be preposterous to believe that the people would seek health from their rulers when

basic survival issues like hunger, unemployment and education go unaccounted. Even as the country with the highest number of malnourished children in the world, our expectation for good healthcare seems like a pipedream.

In view of the WHO report, however, the least we can expect from our political class is a general consensus on increasing public health funding. At present, we spend just around 1 per cent of the GDP on health. This is less than what even countries like Ethiopia and Bhutan spend on the health of their people. Most experts believe that we should be spending, at least, 3 per cent of the GDP on health. For achieving universal health coverage, it is imperative that domestic spending on health be increased. It is known that a health system with high government funding provides accessible and more affordable healthcare to its people, also ensuring financial protection of its citizens.

The Swiss medical historian, HE Sigerist once said that "the problem of public health is ultimately political". As a mature democracy, there is an urgent need to make state-sponsored healthcare a crucial component of political campaigns during elections. As citizens of the largest democracy of the world, it is our duty to accept an electoral agenda that is as per our needs, not as per the wishes of politicians for whom hubris, rhetoric and hollow promises are routine.

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MARCH 26, 1979, FORTY YEARS AGO

PEASANT REVOLT

IN A SHOW of strength, landless peasants in thousands today gathered at Ladhpur-Khanjhwala to remind the government of their centuries-old exploitation by landlords. The response of the peasants to the call by the Bhumihheen Sangharsh Samiti for the rally was spontaneous with large contingents coming from all the northern states as well as from different parts of the city. Speakers of the Uttari Bharat Bhumihheen Sammelan emphasised the need for unity of peasants. They and the landless, who worked the most and helped the landlord reap the harvest, were the most exploited. They said there were about 19,000 bonded labourers even now

with Jaunsar Bawar, in Dehradun alone.

MERGING BOUNDARIES

THE FORMER PORTUGUESE enclaves of Daman and Diu are likely to be merged with Gujarat, according to an exercise now being conducted by the Union ministry of home affairs. The exercise also entails that the outlying regions of the union territory of Pondicherry be merged with the nearby states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. According to this scheme, the former French enclaves of Mahe, Karaikal and Yanam are to be merged with the adjoining states. It is not clear what timeframe officials conducting the exercise have in mind. The

Centre apparently feels that the merger of outlying enclaves with states closest to them would lead to administrative tidiness.

VIOLENCE IN JAMMU

BHIM SINGH, CONGRESS MLA, and over 200 youth and students in various parts of the Jammu region were arrested in an early morning swoop today as a measure to "improve" the law and order situation in the city and other towns of the region. Students and youth soon took out processions and fought pitched battles with the police at City Chowk, the Dak Bangalow area and Gas Mandi. The police resorted to lathicharges and fired several rounds of teargas shells to disperse them.



13 THE IDEAS PAGE

Among the believers in Bengal

Long known as the state of Marxists-radicals, why Bengal is responding to the BJP's overtures



JAYANTA GHOSAL

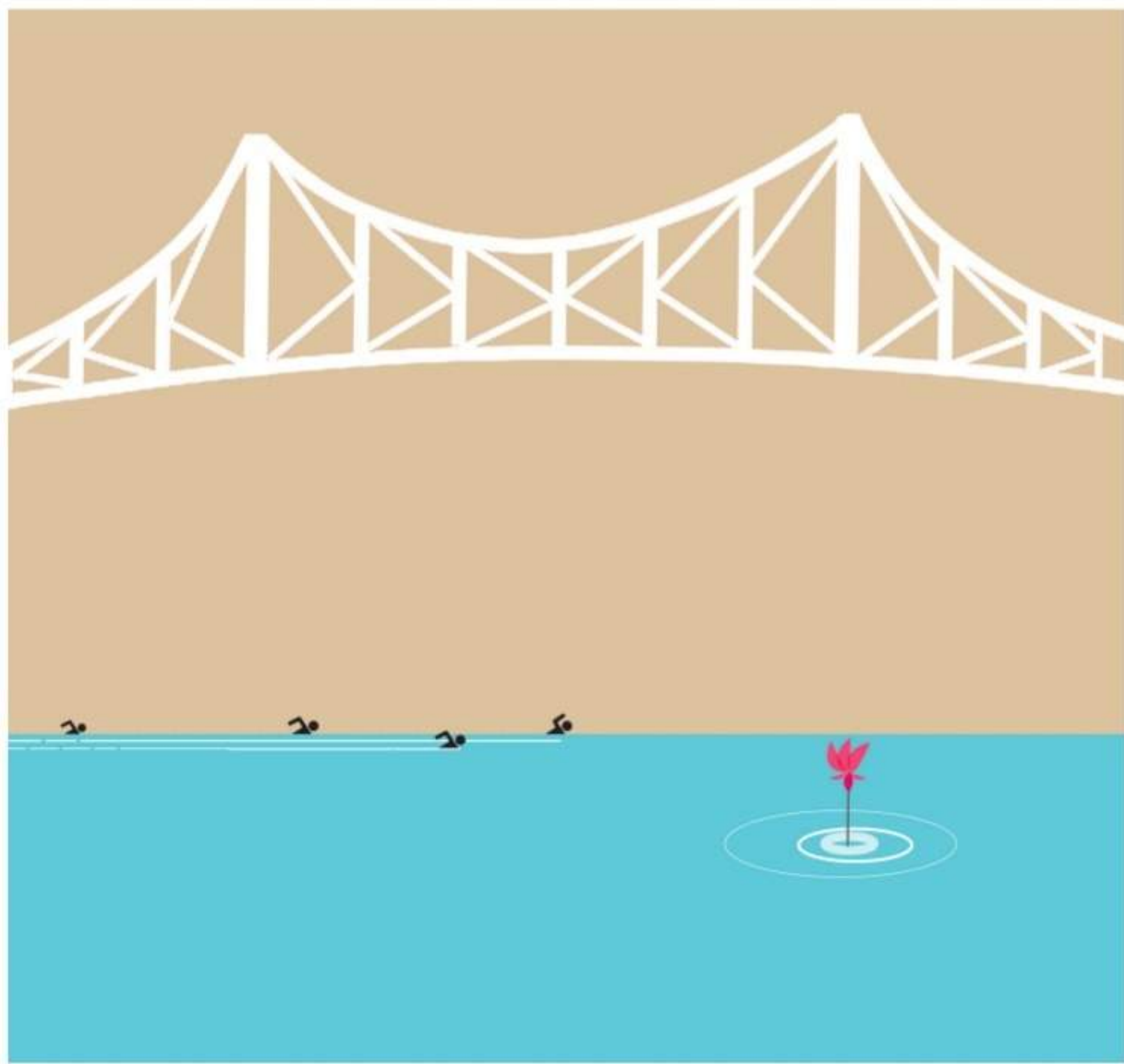
"ARE YOU A Bengali?"
"Yes."
"Then you must be a communist."
 This was a conversation I had with a senior bureaucrat 35 years ago, soon after I moved to Delhi. It was a popular perception — that the DNA of a Bengali is essentially Marxian-radical. When we were in university, a popular, tongue-in-cheek adage that did the rounds was that in school we Bengalis were influenced by Swami Vivekananda and Subhas Chandra Bose, only to become Marxist in college, and, finally, devout followers of Ma Kali in old age. The RSS-BJP ideology and school of thinking remained very difficult to grasp, let alone embrace, for those who studied in Calcutta University. Instead, their politics was essentially radical and revolutionary, inherently anti-Delhi and against a strong Centre.

Today, as I look at Bengal in 2019, I am reminded of Karl Marx again. Sitting in the British Library, Marx had pointed out that the world is constantly in a state of flux, that the only constant is change. I realise Marx's observation applies to Bengalis and to the left-wing radical Bengali DNA as well. An undeniable change is taking place.

Bengalis were never atheists. They have always been believers and devotees. Bengal remained alienated from forms of Hinduism and cultural practices in north India. But now, thanks to television, popular culture and the all-pervasive social media, that gap is shrinking. From Facebook to WhatsApp, cinema to television, the influence of north Indian festivals and culture has seeped through the very fabric of society.

Recently, I was at the wedding of a relative in a small district town in Bengal, away from Kolkata. The wedding had a sangeet ceremony — something that was unheard of in Bengali families till recently. The question is: Why? Such ceremonies are perhaps common in Punjabi weddings. But, increasingly in the state, the younger generation is embracing such customs. If the daughter wants a sangeet at her wedding, the parents are not going to say no. Similarly, in religiosity, there are new trends. One may or may not like them, but they can't be denied. Of late, Ganesh Puja or Ganesh Chaturthi, along the lines of Maharashtra, has become popular. Dhantaras has also become increasingly popular, with jewellery shops across the state revelling in this hitherto unavailable marketing opportunity. There are advertisements galore as queues form outside the shops. The queues include many Bengalis.

There is a distinct change in Bengal. Public intellectuals and left radicals in the state argue that the BJP-RSS combine is "manufacturing" this change, and that they want to change Bengali culture. The anti-BJP argument goes that Bengalis were never known as great devotees of Lord Ram or Hanuman. Instead, they have been *advaitabadi*. They follow the Upanishads. It is important to remember that Swami Vivekanand floated the idea of neo-Vedanta and that he was not a Brahmin but a Kayastha by birth. His philosophy was fundamentally against Brahminical hegemony.



CR Sasikumar

There is another take on this. The BJP and the Sangh Parivar haven't changed Bengali culture. Instead, it is a form of cultural diffusion, where the north, south, west and east have intermingled. Cultural practices are no longer isolated within a certain region. What we are seeing is a form of cultural and religious osmosis. In time, it is bound to have social and political implications. Bengal is not alone. Chhath Puja and Durga Puja have become big celebrations in Delhi, for instance. This was not so a generation ago.

In 1989, at the time of L K Advani's Ram Janmabhoomi movement — when the entire Hindi heartland was captivated by it — Bengal didn't see much enthusiasm. But today, it is not a mandir movement that is resulting in political gains for the BJP. Instead, the state and its people are shifting from left-wing soft radicalism to right-wing soft Hindutva. The reason: The state has a 30 per cent Muslim population and Mamata Banerjee's consolidation of the Muslim vote bank — from allowances to imams to the latest controversy over polling dates during Ramzan — has become an issue for the Bengali bhadralok. The charges of Muslim appeasement are becoming louder. Hindu chauvinism, long dormant in Bengal, is coming to the fore. The BJP's central leadership has understood and leveraged this change in Bengal's political DNA. So Ayodhya isn't the issue in the state. Instead, it is that of a strong nation and a strong India — that Bengal shouldn't be alienated from the national mainstream. And through this, the Bengali society is gradually accepting

Latent Hindu chauvinism, long dormant in Bengal, is coming to the fore. The BJP's central leadership has understood and leveraged this change in Bengal's political DNA. So Ayodhya isn't the issue in the state. Instead, it is that of a strong nation and a strong India — that Bengal shouldn't be alienated from the national mainstream. And through this, the Bengali society is gradually accepting the BJP. The opposition space vacated by the Left and the Congress is ready for the taking.

the BJP. The opposition space vacated by the Left and the Congress is ready for the taking.

There is a school of thought that Bengalis are followers of Shakta — so as subalterns and non-conformists with the worship of Goddess Kali, political violence follows. But Ramakrishna Paramahansa's father was a Raghuvir pujari, a worshipper of Lord Ram. He endorsed the Ramayan path and Hanuman. There are many such stories in his gospel, the *Kathamrita*. There it is called Gaudiya Vaishnavism and is very different from the Vishnu form you see in Tirupati. The Ramayan remains very popular in the state. Even Rabindranath Tagore writes in his autobiography about the influence of the Ramayan in his childhood days.

In the past four or five decades, communism preached atheism — but ultimately failed. Keep in mind that Jyoti Basu's wife was a devotee of Ma Kali, as were several ministers in the Left Front cabinet. They visited Kalighat regularly. The BJP is exploiting this sentiment — and Bengalis are beginning to gravitate towards what Narendra Modi and Amit Shah are positioning as the political expression of a pan-Indian ethos. Is this good or bad? I am not casting value judgements. But the fact is, the BJP has successfully injected, into the families and *paaras* (neighbourhoods) of Bengal, a debate about the pros and cons of the national mainstream versus Bengali exceptionalism or even chauvinism. This debate is helping the BJP grow in the state.

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WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

There was no need to call for recognising Israel's annexation of the Syrian territory.

— NEW YORK TIMES

Why foreign policy needs consensus

If political class makes problems in the neighbourhood the subject of domestic contestation, Delhi's adversaries will gain



RAJA-MANDALA
BY C RAJA MOHAN

ONE OF the interesting foreign policy ideas that Prime Minister Narendra Modi unveiled early in his tenure, was to enhance the role of states in India's engagement with the world. His long stint as Gujarat Chief Minister and his interest in the diaspora had probably something to do with it.

Five years later, there has been some progress on the margins. The NDA government created a "states division" in the Ministry of External Affairs to facilitate the international interactions of the state governments on a range of issues — from promoting trade and tourism to attracting foreign investments. It has also hosted visiting dignitaries in state capitals.

But the problem of finding common ground with state chief ministers on developing effective neighbourhood policies has not disappeared. The decade-long UPA rule had seen some states wrestling unprecedented control over foreign policy towards the neighbours. In West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee wrecked, in her spectacular way, a carefully prepared visit by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Bangladesh in 2011. Although the state government officials had participated in the negotiation of an agreement on sharing the Teesta river's waters, Banerjee vetoed the agreement hours before the PM's meeting with Sheikh Hasina. It was probably one of the worst moments for Indian diplomacy. It brought into stark relief Delhi's inability to deliver on initiated agreements and exposed the profound domestic weakness of the UPA government.

If Mamata played the spoiler on Teesta, the UPA government could not muster the necessary support in Parliament for the ratification of the other main achievement of PM Singh's visit — the land boundary agreement with Bangladesh. It was a miracle that ties with Bangladesh survived these twin setbacks. If the Indian leadership looked diminished in Dhaka, Sheikh Hasina, who kept faith with the agenda of improving ties with Delhi, emerged as the Subcontinent's tallest leader.

That Delhi was being run by a coalition government was one part of the problem. That assertive leaders like Banerjee were willing to play fast and loose with national interest was the other. The UPA government had neither the power to persuade the state leaders nor the political will to challenge the state leadership. It was far too afraid of losing future electoral support.

In Tamil Nadu, the imperative of keeping the Dravidian parties happy made it hard for Delhi to pursue a sensible policy towards Sri Lanka. The worst moment came in 2013. Under pressure from Congress leaders in Tamil Nadu, including senior figures like P Chidambaram, PM Singh cancelled plans to attend the Commonwealth Summit in Colombo.

Delhi's decision to not attend an international conference in next door Colombo, in order to appease whipped up sentiment in

Tamil Nadu, once again exposed PM Singh's weak hand in the conduct of foreign policy. He was apparently eager to attend the meet and understood the diplomatic costs of not doing so. Media reports suggested that the Congress leadership had overruled him.

Modi won an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha in 2014 and has had a stronger say in shaping the ruling party's policies. This had an immediate positive effect on foreign policy, for example, in relations with Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Modi overruled internal opposition in the BJP to the ratification of the land boundary agreement with Dhaka and ensured its early passage in Parliament.

As part of his early tours in the neighbourhood, Modi travelled to Sri Lanka and launched intensive dialogue with both the Sinhalese and Tamil communities. A majority in the Lok Sabha helped Modi to prevent the Sri Lanka policy becoming a hostage to Chennai politics.

Will that remain true if Delhi returns to the era of coalition governments in 2019? Can the next government pursue productive engagement with Colombo if its survival depends on support from the Dravidian parties? Can a weak coalition in Delhi balance the explosive political dynamic in Assam on the citizenship issue with the need to strengthen the partnership with Dhaka? Can the next government consult the chief ministers of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand to improve strained ties with Nepal?

In 1996, the then West Bengal CM, Jyoti Basu, lent strong political support to the H D Deve Gowda government to wrap up the agreement on sharing the Ganga waters. Banerjee, locked in a perennial scrap with the Centre, has refused to facilitate the implementation of the Teesta waters agreement negotiated during the tenure of Manmohan Singh, and backed by PM Modi.

Over the last decade, the sustained improvement of ties with Bangladesh has been the single most important regional advance for India. If Delhi had Kolkata's support in engaging Dhaka, the transformation of the eastern Subcontinent could have been sweeping. Affiliation to rival parties has not always been a barrier for collaboration between the states and the Centre. During his earlier tenure as the Congress Chief Minister of Punjab, Captain Amarinder Singh, worked with the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government at the Centre in launching sub-national diplomacy with the chief minister of Pakistan's Punjab province, Chaudhry Pervez Elahi. Today again, he has taken a responsible approach on the issue of Sikh pilgrimage to Pakistan.

Prospects for a sensible neighbourhood policy can't rest solely on having single-party governments at the Centre and "responsible" CMs in the border states. India needs a measure of political consensus on regional policies. If the political classes choose to turn every problem in the neighbourhood into a domestic contestation, Delhi's adversaries will continue to gain ground in India's neighbourhood. The current intense politicisation of ties with Pakistan might seem like an exception. But similar dangers lurk on all of India's frontiers.

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GOPAL KRISHNA AGARWAL

Congress's Rafale delusion

The party has failed to come up with any proof to implicate the government

THE CONGRESS Party's conduct in the affair pertaining to the procurement of combat jets shows a complete disregard for national security and preference for private illicit enrichment over national interests. In the din over the Rafale deal, it was almost forgotten that the Indian Air Force needed to bolster its squadron strength in view of the obsolescence of some types of its fighter jets — the in-flight approval for the procurement of the fighter jets was, in fact, given way back in 2001.

Congress President Rahul Gandhi's attack on Rafale deal is based on lies. He first alleged that there was no Indo-French secrecy clause in the Rafale deal. This was denied by the French President. He then went on to say that the deal was with Dassault Aviation. He also attempted to put a fake audio tape during the debate in Rafale in Parliament. When asked to vouch for its authenticity, he withdrew it. Rahul Gandhi also referred to his conversation with the late Manohar Parrikar, which took place during his brief courtesy meeting with the ex-defence minister. The fact is no such conversation took place during that meeting.

The details on pricing have been reported by almost every defence reporter. During negotiations with Rafale for a Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft (MMRCA), the basic price mentioned was Rs 550 crore plus inflation and exchange rate fluctuations. The adjusted price of a basic aircraft under the MMRCA would have been Rs 737 crore whereas the price negotiated under the current deal is Rs 650 crore per jet. The defence ministry has this time and again said that total cost and number of aircraft is already in the public domain and can be for any product covered under the confidential and covered by the Indo-French security agreement of 2008. Disclosing details of arms and ammunition fitted in these jets will defeat the purpose of purchasing the high-end fighter planes. The government has also negotiated a better maintenance and serviceability deal with Rafale. The Congress is also misleading people by the offset clause as the procurement under this clause is based on a payment schedule and can be for any product covered under the deal. It is not for Rafale spare parts alone. The frivolous challenges of the Anil Ambani group of companies makes him an easy target now. However, it was the Congress-led UPA government which had allowed the Anil Ambani group to commercially sell coal from mines that were allotted to it under the Ultra Mega Power Project (UMPP) for captive use. This exception was given to him when coal prices were going through the roof. All the details pertaining to the Rafale deal were shared with the Supreme Court in a sealed cover. It was also informed that the

CAG had been given access to all the files related to Rafale deal. The CAG report will be placed before the Parliamentary Committee. After going through the details of pricing and other terms and conditions, the Court had said that due process of procurement was followed and refused to order an investigation as sought by petitioners. Review petitions filed in the matter are likely to meet the same fate. Even the CAG report has given a clean chit to the government.

Recently, a newspaper article quoted details that are not even part of the official Rafale file. They were actually explanation notes on the matter after some media outfits carried reports on Rafale. There is also the question: Why only 36 jets? But then when did the government close the option for additional Rafales? The government is also being questioned on the missed opportunity to make full use of the leverage provided by the new offer from the Eurofighter Consortium. It has rightly said that entertaining the new offer at that stage was impermissible under the DPP and a violation of the CVC guidelines. It would have further delayed the procurement.

A lot of noise is also made about the deal being given the go ahead by a four-three decision. This dissent within the Indian negotiating team was answered by Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in Parliament: She said that in the highest traditions of the

civil services, all views were aired and recorded and a collegiate decision taken after considering such opinions. All the decisions were taken after due process of inter-ministerial consultations as per defence procurement process.

The biggest irony of the Congress's campaign on Rafale is that an inter-governmental agreement (IGA) is being compared to a tender process that did not materialise. One can insert a number of supposedly "favourable" conditions in the tendering process, the final outcome of which is subject to negotiations. To compare negotiable terms under such a "non-deal" to an actual agreement is unreasonable. IGA also eliminated middlemen and commission agents who had become a bane of all defence procurements through an open tendering process.

The Congress demand for a JPC to investigate the deal is unfair as the Supreme Court has already given a clean chit — and the review petition is pending. The CAG report is already with the Parliamentary Standing Committee and as such presently there are no adverse reports on evidences except unsubstantiated allegations.

The Congress and its sympathisers have failed to come up with any proof that could implicate the government.

The writer is national spokesperson, BJP

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

REGULATE AVIATION

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Flying low' (IE, March 25). Management issues including lack of a model for costing services are weighing down the aviation sector, which is not under any clear regulations. Taking a cue from the telecom sector, we must recognise the need to form an aviation regulator. Open and regulated norms are required to boost this sector, and to create an enabling policy environment which can result in economic growth, employment and transport ease for service consumers.

H Upadhyay, via email

A FAMILY WRONGED

THIS REFERS TO the article, "No justice yet for Pehlu Khan" (IE, March 24). Even the then chief minister of Rajasthan, Vasundhara Raje, had declared that the culprits wouldn't be spared. However, all these promises have now come to naught. The present Congress government's apathy to the family is most appalling.

SS Paul, Nadiya

ON GUARD

THIS REFERS TO the article, "Main nahin Chowkidar" (IE, March 23). This party campaign could be a political gimmick, like "chaiwala" in the last general elections, by the prime minister. Who really

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

wants to become a chowkidar? Quality education eludes their children, too. What is needed are actual policies such as the fee reimbursement scheme of Y S Rajasekhara Reddy so that the hundreds of children of chowkidars and chaiwalas stand a chance to become engineers and even get high-end jobs in various industries.

Sunil Premi, Greater Noida



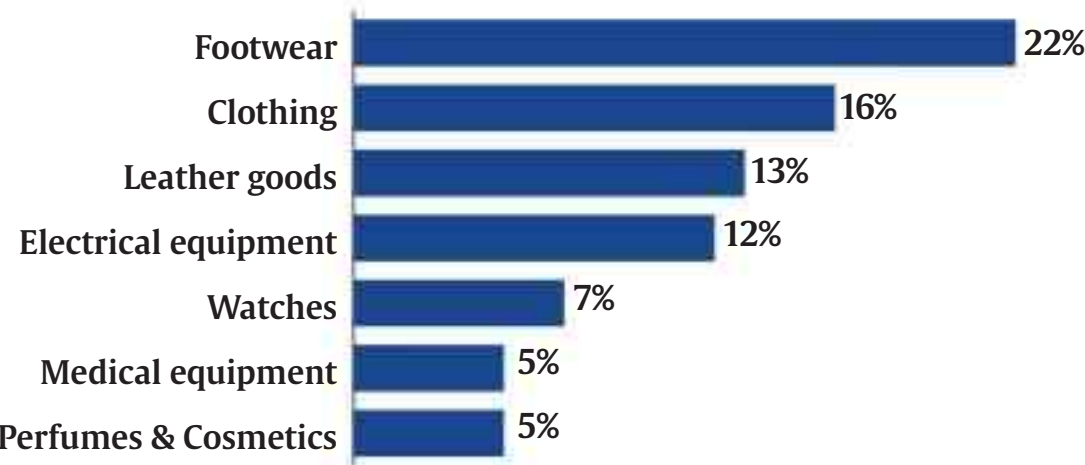
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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@expressindia.com

TELLING NUMBERS

Shoes and clothes make up bulk of world trade in fakes

INDUSTRIES HIT BY TRADE IN FAKES
(Share in value of seizures)

Source: Trends in Trade in Counterfeit & Pirated Goods, OECD

CHINA AND Hong Kong are the source of 63% of counterfeit and pirated goods, followed by India at a distant third with 3.4%, according to a new report by the OECD and the EU's Intellectual Property Office. These three economies, along with the UAE and Singapore, together exported nearly 73% of fake goods exported worldwide in 2016, the report said.

Based on customs seizure data, the report put trade in counterfeit and pirated goods at 3.3% of global trade in 2016, and the value of imported fake goods worldwide at \$509 billion. These figures do not include domestically produced and consumed fake goods, or pirated products being distributed via the Internet.

The goods making up the biggest share of 2016 seizures in dollar terms were footwear, clothing, leather goods, electrical equipment, watches, medical equipment, perfumes, toys, jewellery and pharmaceuticals. Small parcels sent by post or express courier are a prime and growing conduit for

WHERE THE FAKES CAME FROM, 2016

Economy	Share in world export of fakes	Value
China	47.0%	\$239 bn
HK	16.4%	\$83.2 bn
India	3.4%	\$17.4 bn
UAE	3.0%	\$15.5 bn
Singapore	2.6%	\$13.1 bn

Source: Trends in Trade in Counterfeit & Pirated Goods, OECD

counterfeit goods. Small parcels accounted for 69% of total customs seizures by volume over 2014-2016 (57% via post and 12% via courier), the report said.

The countries most affected by counterfeiting in 2016 were the United States (24% of fake products seized), followed by France (17%), Italy (15%), Switzerland (11%) and Germany (9%).

SOURCE: OECD

FACT CHECK, GROUND REALITY

WHY ARE SOME BABIES BORN WITH A TWIN STUCK INSIDE, HOW RARE IS IT?

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, MARCH 25

IN FEBRUARY, a baby was delivered by doctors in Colombia with her twin stuck inside her. The baby, who was operated on immediately to remove her partly formed twin, is now doing well. This has brought into focus a little known condition, *foetus in foetu* (FIF), in which twins are formed post fertilisation but, because of a quirk of nature, one twin becomes a "parasite" of the other - it starts growing inside the body of its twin.

While FIF is unusual, and very few cases have been documented in literature, it is not extremely rare - it is estimated at one in every 5 lakh births. In February 2018, *The Indian Express* reported a successful surgery in Ahmedabad that removed a malformed foetus from a seven-month-old boy. In 2017, Malaysian doctors reported in *The BMJ* the case of a 15-year-old boy who

had an abdominal mass since infancy that was later found to be a case of FIF.

There is still an element of debate on whether a FIF mass is really a parasitic twin or just a tumour made up of different kinds of cells that is so well organised that it gives the impression of a malformed human foetus. It is usually a benign condition, which is why babies often survive into adolescence with the mass still inside. FIF is most commonly found in the abdomen, but there have been some cases where it was located in the head, sacrum, scrotum or mouth.

"The term *Fetus in fetu* was coined by (German anatomist Johann Friedrich Meckel during the late 18th century... FIF usually occurs as a single lesion however multiple FIF have also been reported, highest being 5. FIF is always a curiosity and to date about 200 cases have been reported in literature," Pakistani researchers reported in the *APSP Journal of Case Reports* in 2012.

SIMPLY PUT

Assured income, balance sheet

Congress has announced Rs 72,000 a year for poorest 20%. What are the arguments for and against such schemes, and what will it take to implement it? A look at the economics, precedents & challenges ahead

SHAJI VIKARAMAN
CHENNAI, MARCH 25

ON MONDAY, the Congress announced a minimum basic income guarantee scheme, which envisages providing Rs 72,000 annually to the 20% most poor of the country's families. That would mean five crore families and 25 crore people will benefit directly, the Congress said.

This one-of-its-kind scheme in the world, announced by party president Rahul Gandhi as a key step towards the eradication of poverty, could come under attack for the fiscal costs involved for ensuring its rollout. But can it be a game-changer? The idea recalls a key precedent in welfare politics.

Midday meal

In 1982, the Budget of the M.G. Ramachandran government in Tamil Nadu announced a midday meal programme for all children, named the Chief Minister's Nutritional Meal Programme. Bureaucrats initially dug their heels in when it came to taking its implementation forward. At a meeting in the state secretariat in Madras, now Chennai, MGR sensed the resistance of bureaucrats. He asked them whether any of them knew what it felt to go without meals, and told them he had experienced it personally in his family, and was determined to introduce a scheme which would ensure that children would not go hungry. The message was that the programme would have to be implemented, irrespective of the costs involved. The scheme was also much criticised by the central government then. Years later, the Centre, the World Bank, economists and governments have showcased the midday meal scheme as a classic study of successful welfare politics.

UBI & minimum income

A minimum guaranteed income scheme is one where a set of the population - in this case the poorest 20% - get an assured amount in their bank accounts, which could help them meet their basic needs. Such schemes can be unconditional, meaning that the beneficiary is free to spend the cash without any strings attached, but that is not yet clear in the one announced by the Congress.

The income support scheme is being spoken of in the same breath as a universal basic income (UBI) scheme, an idea that is gaining popularity in many parts of the world.

At best, the kind of income support schemes proposed, such as the one by the Congress in India Wednesday, is a quasi-UBI. That is because a UBI by its very definition reaches out to all citizens of a country or territory, irrespective of income levels.

What the proposal envisages is a minimum monthly income of Rs 6,000 for poor



Identifying the beneficiaries among the poor is a key challenge. Abhinav Saha

households, with the scheme being capped for those with a monthly income of Rs 12,000. Schemes like these hold the potential of boosting farm gate prices and also consumption.

How it helps

Primarily, it address the issue of income inequality or poverty. According to those who make a strong case for such schemes, these are the best form of social justice for those left behind in an economy, as they offer a safety net to the poor against shocks such as income fluctuations, lack of employment and health issues.

Additionally, the scheme comes with the promise of easing the burden on the government, which implements multiple social welfare schemes that have not quite helped in reducing poverty. What that means is that if the government were to eliminate some of the current subsidised schemes (for food, fertiliser and fuel) and allow the beneficiaries to exercise their own choices on how to spend the minimum guaranteed income, then it would be able to focus on providing other public goods and better delivery. Other benefits being cited are greater financial inclusion, with more among the poor accessing banking services, which can lead to greater penetration of financial services.

The downside

The primary resistance to such schemes is about the costs involved. Some economists,

such as Vijay Joshi, a distinguished professor of Oxford University who has worked with both the government and the RBI, especially during the early part of liberalisation in 1991-92, believe that a UBI will work in India. Other fiscal experts fear that this is feasible only when other subsidies are eliminated. Politically, that is not easy as India's experience in cutting subsidies for fertiliser or fuel has shown.

There is also the challenge of identifying the beneficiaries, targeting, leakages or misallocation. The Tendulkar Committee identified 269 million as below the poverty line, or 21.9% of the population in 2011. The committee headed by C Rangarajan estimated this at 363 million. There has been debate as to how much of a decline there has been in these numbers since then. There is concern about whether the government has the capacity to implement these programmes. Economists also cite the issue of "moral hazard" - assured income leading to reduced incentives to work, or failure to build or create durable assets. Such criticism had been directed at MNREGA, introduced by the previous government.

Fiscal costs

In his book *India's Long Road - The Search for Prosperity*, Vijay Doshi estimated the cost of providing a basic income for 2014-15. To raise the average income of the poor to the poverty line, the uniform transfer of funds required would be Rs 17,505 for each household annually. This meant that the cost of un-

derwriting that for 21.9% of the population would be 0.76% of GDP; for 100% of the population, 3it would. 49% of GDP.

Former Chief Economic Adviser Arvind Subramanian, who fuelled a debate on UBI in the 2016-17 Economic Survey, reckoned that a quasi-UBI for 75% would work out to 4.9% of GDP.

Assuming full coverage, the tab for the government could be Rs 3.6 lakh crore. That can impact the fisc, especially in a slowing economy and when revenues aren't buoyant, and lead to macro-instability.

Experiments elsewhere

Other countries are experimenting with such schemes. Finland, one of the world's richest countries, kicked off a trial programme targeting 2000 of its unemployed. Scotland has started a basic income pilot scheme spread over the next two years, in a few areas, to look at different options. So have the Netherlands, Spain and Kenya.

Challenges ahead

In many ways, these guaranteed income schemes are an implicit recognition that generating jobs is becoming progressively difficult. India too is finding it difficult, given its resource constraints and with private investments yet to revive. Such schemes can be financed either by fresh taxes, which is virtually impossible, or by raising resources - by monetising assets such as land, selling state-owned firms, eliminating major subsidies, or withdrawing tax giveaways.

One argument, made by the Pune International Centre in a policy paper for the upcoming polls, is that rather than spend money on a UBI, the state should focus on supplying public goods and using resources better for ensuring delivery of quality primary education, health and law & order.

Where a proposal such as a guaranteed minimum income scheme could score, however, is on grounds of equalisation. Empirical evidence gathered by the 14th Finance Commission showed that in terms of share of Plan outlay, government investments and exemptions, it was the country's richer states that gained. That imbalance may be addressed this time.

The big issue, however, is the potential for another imbalance - on the macroeconomic front; in other words, the cost of underwriting or implementing the scheme efficiently on a pan-India basis over a five-year horizon. That will count politically. Or it could run the risk of backfiring.

Identifying the beneficiaries with an income of below Rs 12,000, and the benchmark for that in terms of assets or income streams or metrics, could be a stiff test. On these challenges will depend whether the scheme can be a game-changer like MGR's midday meal scheme.

THIS WORD MEANS: NOTE VERBALE

One of many forms of communication, govt to govt

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
MUMBAI, MARCH 25

AS REPORTED in *The Indian Express*, India has raised with Pakistan the alleged abduction of two minor Hindu girls in that country and their alleged conversion to Islam. The government raised the matter through a *note verbale* sent to the Pakistan Foreign Ministry.

A *note verbale* is a diplomatic communication from one government to another, delivered through each other's diplomatic representatives. Like many other diplomatic terms, *note verbale* is French, and literally means a verbal note, because it was meant

to be delivered orally to the recipient. In modern times, it is a written note.

A *note verbale* is written on the sending entity's letterhead, and stamped with that entity's seal, but not signed. It is written in the third person. A note from the Indian government has a set diplomatic beginning: "The Ministry of External Affairs of India/Embassy/High Commission of India presents its compliments to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of..." The ending too follows a fixed template: "The Ministry of External Affairs of India/Embassy/High Commission of India takes the opportunity to assure the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of... of its highest considerations."

Notes verbales are the commonest method

of formal diplomatic communication. They are used to convey information or requests of all kinds. However, there are more formal types of diplomatic communication.

A *demarche* is a more formal type of communication of one government's official position, views, or wishes on a given subject to an appropriate official in another government. According to the US Department of State, "*demarches* generally seek to persuade, inform, or gather information from a foreign government. Governments may also use a *demarche* to protest or object to actions by a foreign government".

A *note verbale* is also much less formal than a *demi official* (DO), for instance, which

is a first person communication that begins with a "Dear..." and is signed by the writer, usually a high representative of the sending entity. DOs are used only when the addressee and the representative know each other extremely well and occupy high office.

There are less formal kinds of communication between governments, such as non-papers and *aide-memoires*, which are summaries of discussions between two countries. A non-paper is written on a blank sheet of paper with no signatures and is addressed to no one, giving those party to the discussions deniability; an *aide-memoire* has to have an addressee, and indicates the sender's identity, usually with an initial.

How rocks in Meghalaya cave connect Northeast monsoon to El Niño

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
PUNE, MARCH 25

A NEW study led by researchers from a US university, on the rock formations in a cave near Cherrapunji in Meghalaya, has found new evidence to suggest that India's winter rainfall could be influenced by the state of the ocean waters in the faraway Pacific. What is that connection, and how do the rocks provide evidence of it?

El Niño & monsoons

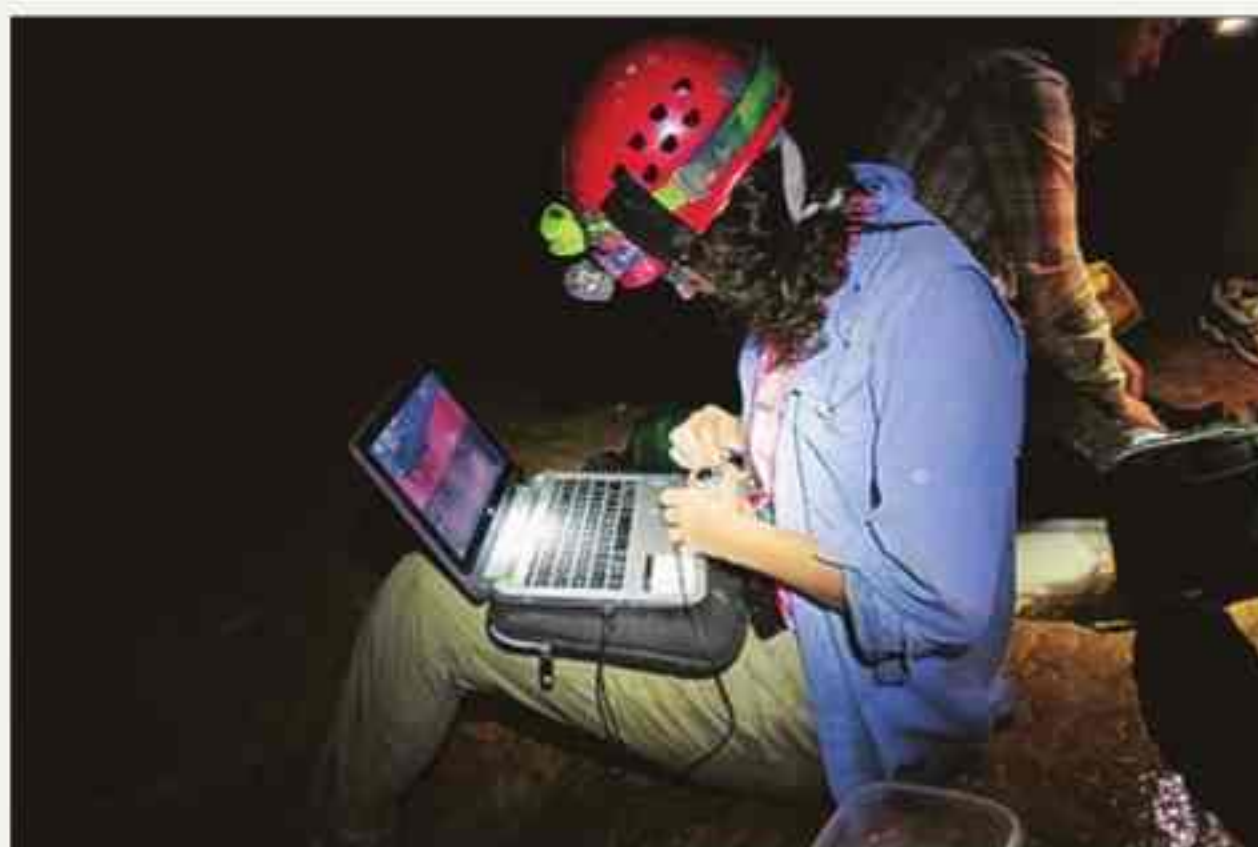
India's summer monsoon, in the months of June, July, August and September, which brings in about 70% of annual rainfall in the country, is already known to be heavily influenced by the variability in sea-surface temperatures of Pacific Ocean, a condition referred to as El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO). A warmer than usual Pacific Ocean, off the coast of South America, is known to suppress the monsoon rainfall in India.

This relationship is not so strongly established with the winter monsoon, also called as the northeastern monsoon, which occurs during the months of October, November and December and is vital for several regions in the Northeast and India's eastern coast. More than 50% of the annual rains in coastal Andhra Pradesh, Rayalaseema, Tamil Nadu, south interior Karnataka, and Kerala comes during these winter months.

ENSO is known to have an impact on the winter monsoon as well but is weaker and opposite. The warming of sea-surface waters, for example, is seen to help winter rainfall rather than suppressing it. The impact varies in time and space. The influence is weaker in October and stronger in November and December. Similarly, the rainfall over southeastern peninsula India and Sri Lanka is strengthened with warming ocean, but is diminished over Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines.

Unexpected connection

The latest study, led by researchers of



Ph.D. student Elli Ronay studies a stalagmite in Mawmluh Cave, Jessica Oster/Vanderbilt University

Vanderbilt University in Nashville, US, claims to have found new evidence to suggest that the state of Pacific Ocean do indeed impact the winter rains. It says the "unexpected connection" between winter rainfall amounts in northeast India and climatic conditions in the Pacific Ocean, could help in predicting the rainfall during the winter months.

The researchers, Jessica Oster of the Vanderbilt University, and Sebastian Breitenbach of Ruhr University Bochum in Germany, have published their findings in the journal *Scientific Reports*. Their findings are based on more than three years of research on stalagmites (mineral deposits, mainly limestone, in caves) of the Mawmluh Cave, near Cherrapunji, in the East Khasi Hills district. These solid stalagmite structures, or mineral deposits, are the result of slow but steady water dripping in the caves, and contain several thin layers of different kinds of minerals that that get picked up while the water is flowing.

From a careful study of the composi-

tion of these stalagmites, scientists can deduce the amount of rainfall that could have happened over the caves in the past, or even whether the water was a result of local rainfall, or had flown in from a different place.

Using such techniques, the researchers in this case were able to estimate local variations in rainfall in the past, and then correlate it with old ocean records of the Pacific Ocean.

"These new results... suggest that potentially powerful information about annual rainfall variability in northeast India has gone unnoticed in stalagmite records thus far," Vanderbilt University said on its website.

The stalagmites indicate the recurrence of intense, multi-year droughts in India over the last several thousand years, the university said. It added that stalagmite records from monsoon regions, including India, are vital to understanding past variability in the global climate system and the underlying reasons for this variability.