

Read between the lines

In this age of *jumle-baazi*, it might take a *jumla* to beat all other *jumlas*. But still, what exactly did Samajwadi Party Chief Akhilesh Yadav mean when he told a TV channel in an interview: "The *chowkidar* is just a slogan, like the *chaiwala*. And *chai doodh ke bina nahin banti!*" (Tea cannot be made without milk). Given that Yadavs supply the *doodh*, and the *chai* is in the making, what was he hinting at?

Tit for tat

Say this for Priyanka: She always has an answer. Recently, a journalist in Uttar Pradesh pointed out that the Bharatiya Janata Party President (BJP) Amit Shah had stated that she was largely absent from the electoral battlefield. She just laughed and said: "I have not been to visit my grandmother in Italy for a while now. Maybe I should plan a visit soon".

Reminiscing Advani's words

Veteran journalist Pankaj Vohra has a lovely story about BJP senior leader L K Advani. Once, in the Parliament house premises, a British journalist asked Advani whether he intended to make India a Hindu nation, thus deviating from the principle of secularism. Advani retorted that India was a Hindu country in the same way Britain was a Christian country; just as in Britain, people could follow and practice any faith, in India too, it was the same. But, he added, India was secular only because it was predominantly Hindu.

DID THEY REALLY SAY THAT?



"The son-in-law of Azhar Masood has entered the constituency and speaks the language of a terror mastermind. You people have to ensure that the person who speaks the language of Masood is defeated in the Lok Sabha elections"

UP CM Adityanath about Imran Masood, the Congress candidate from Saharanpur, at a public meeting in Saharanpur, March 28

CHECKLIST

CONSTITUENCIES TO WATCH: MAHARASHTRA (48 LOK SABHA SEATS)

■ **Hatkanangale:** The politics in this constituency revolves around sugarcane and sugar prices. Cooperative sugar mills are owned by politicians, mostly Congress and Nationalist Congress Party, and they pay the farmers less than the government-mandated fair and remunerative price for sugarcane. The seat is currently held by Raju Shetti, the rabble-raising MP who heads the Swabhimani Shetkari Sanghatana and has been demanding a fair deal for farmers. In the 2014 elections, he was part of the BJP-Shiv Sena front, cornering 53.8 per cent of the votes. This time, he is playing coy, though his party has been organising massive rallies of farmers in the run up to the elections.

■ **Ratnagiri:** The most important seat in the Konkan region of Maharashtra could see a sea change. The Rane family led by erstwhile chief minister Narayan Rane controls the seat. It was held by the Congress when Rane's son Nilesh was

fielded as a candidate in 2009 and held the seat till 2014. But since then, the Rane family has quit the Congress and has now floated its own party called the Maharashtra Swabhimani Paksha that is neither with the NDA nor the UPA. Politics centres around the Nanar refinery that the Shiv Sena forced the BJP to withdraw robbing local seafaring communities of their livelihood. If the Rane stronghold over the constituency is destroyed, NDA might retain it.

■ **Madha:** After Sharad Pawar represented the constituency in the Lok Sabha 2009-2014, the most important family in the region, headed by Vjaysinh Mohite Patil (NCP) asked for the seat for his son. The request was rejected. His son joined the BJP and has announced his support for the BJP candidate, Ranjitsinh Naik Nimbalkar (who ironically joined the Congress two months ago but switched to the BJP recently). Nimbalkar is likely to win.



OPINION

COMMUNIST PARTY OF INDIA (MARXIST)

Economic policies need to be in the people's interest

The Congress-led UPA government has provided a bonanza to the corporates and the richer sections. From 13 billionaires (with net assets of ₹5,000 crore and above) in 2003, by 2012 there were 122 such billionaires. Between 2009 and 2013 a massive ₹21 lakh crores of central government tax revenues were given away as taxes forgone or in tax concessions. The government has resorted to massive disinvestment selling more than ₹91,000 crores worth of shares of public sector units between 2009 and 2013. The government has allowed the loot of natural resources of the country whether it be land, minerals, gas or spectrum. Windfall profits have been made by big business houses and private companies through this plunder.

The government did not take measures to tap the tax potential — either by raising effective rates or cracking down on massive evasion of taxes by the wealthy. The tax-GDP ratio has remained lower than they were in 2007-08. Instead of raising resources, the curbing of government expenditure became a priority. There have been cuts in expenditure bearing on the lives of people such as on agriculture and rural development (which includes MNREGA); health and education. Fertilizer, food and petroleum subsidies have been cut down. Subsidies on food and fuel were cut by ₹78,000 crore in the last three years.

The entry of Foreign Capital (FDI and FII) has been allowed in all spheres. FDI caps have been enhanced in the banking, infrastructure, real estate, defence production and agri-business. The FDI in multi-brand retail is a graphic example of how the interests of Walmart and other foreign supermarket chains supersede the livelihood and employment of 4 crore (40 million) people in retail trade in India.

Faced with an economic slowdown the UPA government seeks to woo foreign capital by giving more concessions and providing big business with further tax cuts and incentives. What is required is massive public investment in rural development, agriculture, infrastructure and social sectors. This would create demand and new jobs. But given its class bias, the government has refused to undertake this.

The pursuit of the neo-liberal policies by the six-year BJP-led government and the ten year Congress-led government, need to be reversed. What is required are alternative economic policies in the interests of the people and the country.

Food security

India ranks 94th out of 199 countries in the Global Hunger Index. The shame of chronic hunger and deprivation of food constitutes a damning indictment of the policies pursued by the UPA government and the earlier NDA regime. Both have steadfastly refused to introduce a universal public distribution system as it goes against the World Bank and market prescriptions. The Food Security law enacted by parliament is cited as a major step towards food security. This is not true. It continues with a targeted system. It provides for only 5 kg per individual per month. In urban areas 50 per cent of the people are excluded. The CPI(M) and the Left have consistently fought for a universal public Distribution System. We need to provide a minimum of 35 kg of foodgrains to all families at not more than ₹2 per kg. The citizen's basic right to food has to be ensured.

Corruption & Mega Scams

The last one decade of UPA rule has set an unprecedented record for corruption with one mega scam after the other from the 2G spectrum to the coal allocation and the KG basin gas pricing. The government's neo-liberal policies has spawned a nexus of big business-ruling politician-bureaucrats.

CAG has estimated that the 2G telecom has cost the exchequer ₹1.76 lakh crore while the coal scam around Rs. 1.86 lakh crore. The KG basin gas deal and the earlier concessions to Reliance for increased gas price had led to a loss of around Rs. 100,000 crore to the government. The current revision proposed by the government, is twice this amount. The Commonwealth Games scam was worth around ₹60,000 crore.

Contrary to the claim that privatization and free market reduce corruption, evidence shows that the "black economy" and the propagation of corruption has expanded under such policies, and is now almost 50 per cent of the GDP of the country. (Global Financial Integrity, 2010)

Resources that belong to the people are being looted through a range of corrupt practices. Illegal flows to tax havens and offshore accounts have grown rapidly along with black money; the post-reform annual flows are five times the pre-reform flows. The total accumulated capital and assets held by Indians abroad is estimated to be in the range of half a trillion dollars (₹25 lakh crore) to 1.4 trillion dollars (₹70 lakh crores).

The outrage among the people and the protest against corruption finally compelled the UPA government to bring an amended Lokpal legislation which was adopted in parliament. However, the Lokpal Act needs to bring within its purview the PPP projects and the contracts given out to corporates involving public funds. More importantly, the big business-politician-bureaucrat nexus spawned by the neo-liberal regime needs to be broken. The CPI(M) calls for the reversal of the neo-liberal policies which have spawned such a nexus.

Foreign Policy: Tilt to the US

The decade long UPA government has shifted the course of foreign policy towards a pro-US orientation. In the first term, it surrendered the independent basis of foreign policy by entering into a strategic alliance with the United States of America, military cooperation and signing the Indo-US nuclear deal. The consequence of these steps have unfolded in its second term. India acted against its own interests by curtailing its relations with Iran.

Edited excerpts from the manifesto of the Communist Party of India Marxist, released on March 28 in New Delhi



ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

With the Lok Sabha election two months away, Helena Lersch, global public policy director of TikTok is a busy woman. Lersch has working to set up a war room that will monitor Indian election related activity in real time, and keep all possible channels of communication open with not just the Election Commission of India but also other government agencies. In a conversation with Neha Alawadhi and Karan Choudhury, Lersch talks about the challenges facing the Chinese content platform and how it is here to stay. Edited excerpts:

'It is a decisive year for being in India'

How is it going for you in India?

It is one of our biggest markets (TikTok has a user base of 54 million users in India by some estimates). I honestly think we had an overwhelmingly positive response in India. Very excited to be here. We are building and growing a bigger team in India. It's a decisive year for being in India for us.

You have been in the news for a lot of issues around hate speech, porn, fake news, governments like Tamil Nadu considering a ban. How are you looking at these problems?

This is a problem of huge importance, and one which other platforms face as much as we do. We have robust measures in place. We have reporting mechanisms, community guidelines, and allow content that follows our community guidelines that forbid hate speech, violent content, pornographic content, minors. So the moment we are made aware of such content, we take it down with a team that

works on that 24x7.

We have a large content moderation team in place. In Tamil Nadu, we never got banned. I don't think they were even considering a ban. We have a grievance officer in place who is engaging with the law enforcement agencies across the country. So we are in close touch with the government on such issues

We think this is very important, and are working on getting this right.

How big are these content moderation teams and how regional?

Our content moderation team in India operates in 15 Indian languages. The teams in Delhi and Mumbai have grown 400 per cent last year. We are aware that our platform is hyperlocal and are ensuring we cater to local sensibilities.

Has the Election Commission of India (EC) raised any specific issues with TikTok?

We reached out to the EC proactively because it has one of the biggest jobs in this country — running elections. We wanted to let them know that we have an escalation mechanism. There are people they can reach out to 24x7. Further, we have also given them an explicit way to reach us in person.

They have not raised any issues with us. We are working on an election task force, which looks at all the issues across India — hashtags, news, what is going viral so we make sure that we can run a responsible election on the platform.

We also do not do political advertising. A lot of focus of the EC is on transparency in political advertising and we don't do political advertising at all. We are also not engaging with politicians or parties on their campaigns. So we don't do paid hashtag campaigns with political parties at all.

We are engaging with the nodal officers of the EC and are here to abide by the local laws and model code of conduct.

Could you please elaborate on the election task force?

We have a cross functional election task force, which means there is public relations, public policy, content moderation, escalation.

There are a lot of functions working on the India task force to ensure that the election is safe. That is a real time task for us. When the EC observes an issue on TikTok, they can reach out using an escalation email that is monitored 24x7. They have three nodal officers on the EC side, and we have opened up several ways of communication with them including my personal phone number.

We have been working on this task force for weeks and made sure everyone on the job has read the model code of conduct and understood them.

How much of political content have you noticed on TikTok?

We definitely have some political content on the platform. This is also user generated. So we are making sure (to monitor) especially the most popular political content that we know of. So we're monitoring popular political hashtags content and we look at it to make sure there is no hate speech and violence. If you look at the political content versus other content, it is very minuscule.

There have been protests by the right wing organisations about you being of Chinese origin, and this intensifies when tensions escalate in the neighbourhood due to broader geopolitical context. Do you see the Chinese tag becoming a liability?

We are really working on our Indian team. Our teams in India comprise of Indians. We are not commenting on the broader geopolitics but I am extremely positive about the broader

prospects in India.

You've been banned in Indonesia and fined in the United States. How are you looking at these issues. Why do you think this is happening?

Indonesia is a very interesting case. We were blocked for less than four days and then we had very good conversations with the government in Indonesia and by now we enjoy an excellent relationship with Kominfo (the IT ministry of Indonesia).

In Indonesia, the situation has turned around so much that now we are a fully government supported platform, and Kominfo actually is now on TikTok.

We are expanding our teams so we abide by the local laws and have escalation mechanisms in place.

The issue in the US comes from the Musical.ly days (which TikTok acquired), which we have settled with them.

We are a responsible player. We know we need to be ahead of these issues, we need to engage with the government and we need to understand the local challenges.

How are you engaging with the government in India?

We are engaging with the relevant ministries — the IT ministry, the Ministry of Home Affairs, and the Election Commission. We're making sure that they know how to reach us, and have a proactive strategy to engage with them. It is very important for us to be here. We have an India based grievance officer.

If someone reports certain content, how soon can you take it down?

Very soon. We have the task force looking at all that and the reason we reached out to the EC was exactly because of that. If someone flags some content to us, we take it down in a very reasonable time. We don't overly take down content, we only take it down if it violates our community guidelines.

How will you ensure the 48 hour no advertising guidelines are ensured on TikTok in different regions?

It is a real challenge and the EC has recognised it. If you look at the code of conduct (formulated by IMAI) doesn't involve that particular challenge because the EC and platforms recognise that it is extremely difficult.

Have you asked any Indian institution or the EC to join your platform?

These are all public institutions. The EC is a good example because they are a neutral body and I am actually going to ask them to check out our platform this week. However, we are not doing proactive outreach to the government institutions or parties. They are really not our focus. They can use our platform as any other user.

Teaching for a gender equitable society

This year's Martha Farrell Award for the most promising individual has been won by a teacher who's at the forefront of devising innovative pedagogic support for increasing girl child education, writes Sneha Bhattacharjee

Being a teacher for 15 years, Manu Gulati was always determined to bring a change in the lives of her students, especially girl students. Knowing the problems that came with educating a girl, Gulati devised innovative strategies for teachers so they could generate interest among girls to continue studies. Today, her efforts at creating a gender-neutral society by coaching boys and girls in Delhi schools have fetched her the 2019 Martha Farrell Award for Excellence in the most promising individual category.

Apart from being an English teacher at a Delhi Government school, Gulati is a mentor teacher with the Directorate of Education. She has been instrumental in helping young girls receive formal school education. Her efforts have also been extended towards working with boys and girls at government schools in sensitising them about gender neutrality and bringing a positive change in society.

Speaking to *Business Standard*, Gulati points at the marginalised sections of society where the school dropout rate is high especially among girls. "This is where it becomes important to generate critical thinking, question and challenge the existing norms, among the girls," she says. Reflecting on how important it is to get both the boys and the girls involved when it comes to building a gender equitable society, Gulati stresses the necessity of having a dialogue about every topic associated with a girl's life. For instance, awareness about menstrual hygiene. This topic, when it comes

up for discussion, often is dealt in hushed tones or draws laughter, says Gulati. Through her mentoring sessions, she has been trying to break that stereotype.

"Children with special needs, coming from poor background need to be dealt with more compassion. My challenge is how to make these girls self-sustainable," she says. So, she tries to incorporate creative art in her teaching methodology. "I teach music and dance or art and craft along with imparting English language training," she adds. One problem she encountered was that girls stopped coming to school months before any festival was to arrive. Why? Because they had to go with their parents to help them earn money. "So I would teach them how to make things that could be sold during those festivals, all the while also imparting process writing and speaking skills. The children would be taught to use waste materials such as bangles, ice cream sticks, CDs and utilise them to make items for sale," she adds.

With the thought that life is much beyond marks, Gulati is looking to inculcate in the children the awareness and resilience with which they need to lead their lives. Talking about the happiness curriculum being introduced in Delhi schools by the Aam Aadmi Party government, Gulati feels it encourages more interaction among students, teachers and parents. "Today, students and parents can have a conversation about how their child is behaving in schools and how they can be a part of raising them well," she says. She admires how girls are coming up and discussing issues as



WINNER ALL THE WAY Manu Gulati (fifth from the left) with her Martha Farrell Award

small as not being able to eat as well as their brothers because the parents cannot afford to feed both children well. "The curriculum has helped students connect with their own self, which I feel is very important. Marks can come and go, but if you are unable to speak your mind and be true to your self, it becomes difficult to face life," says Gulati.

Talking about the Martha Farrell Awards, Gulati says awards are just another way of recognition and does not mean one becomes complacent having been recognised. "Whatever has been done is just a drop in the ocean, we are working for a larger purpose. And, I shall continue on that journey with vigour," she adds. Gulati also collaborates with America India Foundation's "Market Aligned Skills Training Program", through

which she facilitates training programmes for beauticians, weavers, sales girls and the like in Jalandhar in Punjab, Betul in Madhya Pradesh and Baramullah in Kashmir.

The Martha Farrell Awards were first awarded in 2017. Instituted in the memory of Dr Martha Farrell, a prominent activist for gender equality and women's empowerment, the Award is co-sponsored by Rizwan Adatia Foundation and Participatory Research in Asia and supported by Martha Farrell Foundation. This year, the best organisation for Gender Equality category has been won by Mahila Jan Adhikar Samiti, a women-led organisation, which started as a collective of rural women and eventually transitioned into a registered organisation in 2000 to fight against Violence against Women.

Apple's new bite

Going off the beaten track won't be easy

In a long presentation on Monday, Apple Chief Executive Officer Tim Cook announced the consumer electronics giant was set to launch several ventures. These will piggyback the Apple brand and leverage the dedicated user-base while looking to make inroads into some new areas. Apple will launch a credit card this autumn, in partnership with Goldman Sachs and MasterCard; it will set up a cross-platform arcade gaming service which is also due to launch in autumn; it will launch a streaming TV service, with new content generated by icons like Oprah Winfrey; and it is rebranding and re-launching its news service. Apple being Apple, every

player in these diverse markets will sit up and take note. It is worth remarking that this diversification is alien to the company's corporate DNA since it has hitherto preferred to be narrow-focus. Changes will be required in the company's mindset if it is to make a go of such a portfolio of unrelated businesses.

All the new ventures rely on the global club of 900 million-odd "iManiacs" who swear by Apple devices. Apple will be looking to that dedicated user-group to generate initial signups to the new services and it must anticipate that the new services will, in turn, boost demands for its gear. Insofar as information is available, it is keeping users tied to its dedicat-

ed ecosystem. The games will work only on Apple devices, the credit card will be tied to the Apple Wallet and the streaming content will be available on Apple TV. The initial signup terms and conditions appear attractive. The Apple Card, for instance, will not have late fees or penal interest charges, and there will be cash-back offers for use within Apple Wallet, and for the purchases of Apple products and services. However, the card would also work anywhere that MasterCard does. The Arcade games library is new. Subscribers can download these games on to their Apple device of choice and play offline. The TV channel offers new content as well, while the news subscription services offer a wide range of magazines (though few newspapers seem to have signed up as yet).

The diversifications may seem unusual in isolation. But more broadly, the company is seeking new revenue streams as the smartphone and tablet segment slows. Apple's

iPhone sales have slowed. So have the sales of competing high-end smartphones. While this may be a cyclical phase, some analysts suggest the high-end smartphone market is now saturated, with few users seeing a pressing need to upgrade their current devices. Apple already has a significant presence in the services segment. In 2018, it generated roughly \$40 billion of its revenues of \$266 billion from services. The high growth rates of Netflix and Spotify clearly indicate that content generation and streaming present a big opportunity. Apple already has the popular iTunes service so this is, in one sense, an extension, though content generation represents vast new challenges.

Gaming is another high-potential area. Google is also entering the gaming arena, although it is using a very different model of streaming. Most gamers are youngsters in the 12-25 age cohort. Growth is expected to rise exponentially as Third World nations with

young populations enter the smartphone era. Apple must hope that gamers, who typically buy high-end expensive PCs, will opt for iPads and Macs instead. A lot depends on whether gamers think Apple Arcade plus the cost of devices presents a value-proposition versus high-end gaming PCs and more freely available games. That will depend on both content and subscription rates.

The new services are set to roll out over the next six months or so. This announcement creates a buzz but analysts will not have hard numbers until late autumn or winter. It will be interesting to see how the company manages the transition to becoming a more diversified entity. The going will be tough, no doubt, considering that the company, in an unprecedented retreat, on Friday cancelled its highly anticipated AirPower wireless charging mat and apologised to customers who were waiting for it.

Guaranteeing urban jobs

There is an urgent need to strengthen urban local bodies and re-imagine their functions as drivers of job creation, skill-building and ecologically sustainable development

RAJENDRAN NARAYANAN, AMIT BASOLE & MATHEW IDICULLA

Last year, more than 20 million people had applied for just 100,000 jobs in Indian Railways. This desperation for employment was further revealed through the leaked Periodic Labour Force Survey data, according to which India is witnessing its worst unemployment crisis in the last 45 years, with open unemployment of around 20 per cent among the higher educated. In addition to massive agrarian distress, we are also confronted with a shortage of dignified employment opportunities in Indian towns and cities. A large section of the urban workforce is informal and is hence exposed to a variety of risks and vulnerabilities.

This, in conjunction with rampant ecological degradation, loss of green spaces and crumbling urban infrastructure and services, presents us with a set of unique challenges. How do we create good-quality urban jobs and skills for educated youth? How do we improve urban infrastructure and public services, and reduce the ecological stress on our towns and cities?

Unlike big cities, small towns have largely been neglected in policy debates. Administration of towns and cities falls under the purview of Urban Local Bodies (ULB). However, most ULBs are severely understaffed and financially constrained. There is an urgent need to strengthen ULBs and re-imagine their functions as drivers of good-quality employment, skill-building and ecologically sustainable development. It is in these contexts that some members of the Centre for Sustainable Employment, Azim Premji University, have proposed an urban employment guarantee programme in a policy brief titled *Strengthening Towns Through Sustainable Employment*.

The proposed programme covers towns with a population of less than one million. There are about 4,000 such towns consisting of about 126 million people of working age. Five broad categories of works can be undertaken through this programme: (a) building and maintenance of public works; (b) creation and restoration of green spaces, rejuvenation of water-bodies and waste lands; (c) environmental monitoring, surveying, and community-auditing; (d) administrative assistance and (e) care work such as in creches and assisting differently-abled people.

Two categories of workers have been identified. Workers with varying levels of formal education up to class 12 would be eligible for 100 days of guaranteed employment a year. This may include construction workers, masons, plumbers, etc. And, workers who have acquired formal education beyond class 12 would be provided guaranteed apprenticeship and skill-building works in monitoring, surveying, and other similar tasks in public hospitals and offices for a contiguous period of five months. While the first category of work is used to address the question of low-wage informal work and underemployment, the second category is designed to address skill-building and internship for educated youth.

According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy's (CMIE) Consumer Pyramids Survey 2018, the median wages of urban casual labourers is ₹361 per day. Self-employed tradespeople reported median earnings of ₹462 per day, while clerical workers reported median earnings of ₹1053 per day. The overall median daily wage in urban India is ₹500 per day. More recently, the ministry of labour and employment (MoLE) has proposed a national floor minimum wage of ₹375 per day. Keeping the CMIE and MoLE regimes as reference, we propose a daily wage rate of ₹500 for the first category of workers and ₹13,000 per month as stipend for the second category of workers, i.e., educated youth. Based on the internship experience, this category of workers could later seek employment in the public or private sector.



The objective must be to generate quality urban jobs and equip educated youth with the requisite skills

Wages would be indexed to CPI-Urban and would be adjusted upward in some towns based on cost of living considerations.

Setting the wage scheme at the median of the wage distribution would raise the earnings of the poorest. While this may adversely impact the cost of labour for small entrepreneurs, we however posit that a rise in wages for the poorest workforce would increase the demand for goods and services. The debate over the effects of a rise in minimum wages in the context of the developed economies points to a strong positive role for demand, while the negative effects in terms of loss of jobs are either small or non-existent. Moreover, a multiplier effect resulting from reduced unemployment will create conditions for entrepreneurship in a distributed fashion.

The following essential features of MGNREGA can be retained. First, 60 per cent of the total budgetary requirement would be labour cost and the rest would be material and administrative cost. Second, this programme is demand-driven, so work would be available on demand and an unemployment allowance would be paid if work is not provided within 15 days of demand. Third, compensation would be paid to workers in case wages are not paid within 15 days of completion of work. Fourth, proactive disclosure of information under Section 4 of the RTI Act would be mandatory and periodic social audits and public hearings involving workers would be conducted.

Inadequate funds, massive delayed payments and a highly centralised wage payment mechanism have wreaked havoc in MGNREGA. For example, the Central government is yet to pay ₹950 crore worth of arrears to the government of Karnataka for over three years, and an unacceptably high proportion (about 70 per cent) of wage payments to workers have been delayed by the Centre. Keeping these in mind, we propose three significant departures from MGNREGA in funds manage-

ment and the mechanism of payment of wages.

First, the whole pool of Central funds would be transferred to the states at the beginning of each financial year. State governments in turn would transfer the Central and the state share of the budget to the ULB in four tranches of one per quarter so that funds are locally available. Thus the state government and the ULB would be the nodal agencies for ensuring decentralised payment of wages and implementation. Second, the Centre would bear 80 per cent of the labour cost and the states the remaining 20 per cent. Third, the Centre would bear 50 per cent of the non-labour costs and the rest would be split between the state governments and the ULB, depending on the size of the town. The sharing of monetary responsibilities is intended to increase decentralisation, ownership of all government levels and build local accountability. For participatory implementation, a "Right to Timely Grievance Redressal" has been proposed.

We propose two possible variations of the employment scheme. Considering employment of one person per household, we estimate about 30 million jobs created at a cost of 1.7 per cent of GDP. Considering employment of every adult, 50 million jobs would potentially be created at a cost of 2.7 per cent of GDP. Programme costs are potentially high but we emphasise the positive spillovers that will result from higher wage rates, increased productivity, skill-building, improved public services and reduced ecological degradation. As a comparison, World Bank researchers had estimated 1.7 per cent of GDP allocations for MGNREGA for it to run robustly, but sadly, at present, only about 0.33 per cent of the GDP is being spent on MGNREGA. Moving away from reductive debates of "less state" versus "more state", we propose a newly imagined state intervention. The crisis is real and so it's time to actually get people employed.

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Mission Shakti: Going beyond Pokhran

SHASHI SVEMPATI

The prime ministerial announcement earlier this week of a successful anti-satellite kill by India saw a curious comment from an international newspaper with the words "if confirmed", leading one to wonder who the newspaper expected to provide confirmation of the orbital strike — Thanos or Darth Vader?

The kinetic kill that saw a low earth orbit satellite being taken down by an indigenously built ballistic missile defence interceptor, also saw several shibboleths being taken down both domestically and internationally, as India announced its entry into an elite club of a handful of major global powers.

The operation code-named "Mission Shakti", which combined capabilities across DRDO and ISRO, among others, was a striking echo of "Operation Shakti", which saw India joining the club of declared nuclear powers in the late 1990s. Mission Shakti is however markedly distinct from the Pokhran tests, underscoring how a new India is carving out geopolitical space for itself in the global order.

While the nuclear tests of the past were conducted under the cloud of restrictive global treaties, the anti-satellite capability demonstrated by India comes ahead of such treaties being drawn up. India's entry into the club of declared nuclear weapon powers came belatedly, when significant costs were sought to be imposed by the early entrants to the club on later applicants. The sanctions that followed the Pokhran tests in the late 1990s and the global reactions that ensued were an attempt to stare down India into a submissive corner. An emerging India however stood its ground and weathered global opprobrium to chart a multi-decadal growth story. This time around the story is markedly different.

A new and assertive India learned its lessons well from Pokhran to act pre-emptively with time on hand, on demonstrating its anti-satellite capabilities rather than wait to react belatedly at a later time when its hands were likely to be tied. By acting now at a time and place of its choosing India has kept its options open rather than at a time when they would have been few and far limited after restrictive international treaties have been drawn up. In this respect, Mission Shakti goes beyond Pokhran to establish a new benchmark on the new India's will to assert itself geopolitically, while reserving a seat at the high table of space-faring nations. This demonstration by India while it remains committed to non-weaponisation of outer space adds tangible heft to India's ability to negotiate future treaties on space governance.

Predictably, much of the commentary in the wake of the anti-satellite test focused on the optics of the announcement rather than on the underlying strate-

gic calculus. Few strategic analysts, both domestic and international, have highlighted the implications from a deterrence standpoint with India's demonstration of ballistic missile defence capabilities through this test. Of particular interest should be the comments by Prof Vipin Narang, an associate professor of political science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), made on social media, where he draws attention to an earlier research paper on how India has been developing counterforce capabilities and on how the current anti-satellite test has "huge implications" for ballistic missile defence.

One other respect in which the geopolitical fallout of Mission Shakti is different from the fallout of Pokhran is in international reactions. Most significant among these is the statement from the United States State Department that saw a shared interest with India in space technology and continued collaboration in security and safety in space. Underscoring the strategic partnership with India, the US, it would seem, endorsed India's anti-SAT demonstration in a marked departure from its reactions two decades back to Pokhran-II. While legitimate concerns have been expressed on space debris, India reiterated its commitment to responsible development of defence capabilities by ensuring the target was a low earth orbit satellite with most debris expected to re-enter earth's atmosphere within 30 days.

The deterrence capability demonstrated by India through the A-SAT has another dimension to it beyond space and ballistic missile defence. Not too long ago, India was faced with the threat of a communications satellite hosting a foreign free-to-air DTH service with its footprint over large parts of India. The free-to-air nature of the service meant several channels could be downlinked and viewed within the land mass of India without the service having to be licensed in India. More significantly, it also meant several channels carrying anti-India propaganda were being beamed into India, posing a national security threat, with limited legal recourse. Deft diplomacy addressed the issue with the satellite provider ultimately shutting down the service, but the incident underscored the threat rogue communications satellites could pose in the future. The A-SAT capability is a credible deterrent against information warfare being waged through such rogue satellites.

In the wake of Balakot airstrikes, Mission Shakti sends a strong signal within the immediate neighbourhood and beyond that a new and assertive India has its eyes on the likely conflicts of the future, even as it sheds the strategic ambivalence in its response to conflicts of the past.

The writer is CEO, Prasar Bharati. The views expressed here are personal

▶ OTHER VIEWS

Pakistan's Pulwama probe findings on expected lines

Islamabad has no serious intention of tackling terror networks

Playing an all-too-familiar tape, Pakistan has claimed that no terror camps exist on 22 "pin locations" shared by India. A month after India handed over a dossier with details of Jaish-e-Mohammed's (JeM's) complicity in the Pulwama attack and the presence of JeM terror camps and its leadership in the neighbouring country, Pakistan says it has found no evidence to prosecute 50-odd persons who were detained in connection with the February 14 terror strike. After having denied access to the media to the area where the Balakot airstrikes took place on February 26, Pakistan has finally expressed willingness to allow visits — on request — to the locations. These spots have in all probability been duly sanitised over the past month.

Though these are "preliminary" findings, India can't expect the outcome to change once the investigation is complete. If Pakistan is sincere about taking its purported counter-terror operations to their logical conclusion, it should throw open the doors of its seminaries, some of which are notorious as breeding grounds for terrorists. Amid the jingoistic din raised by a section of the media, credible journalists with an unbiased approach could have shown the true picture to the world, but they were denied the opportunity. Creating a smokescreen



has laid bare Pakistan's agenda to shield the perpetrators of the Pulwama attack, for which the JeM had promptly claimed responsibility. India can go on providing evidence to Pakistan, but it will all be like water off a duck's back.

The Tribune, March 29

Spectacle in Panaji

Onus on BJP, Congress to raise the bar

The numbers game in Goa turned farcical yet again with two MLAs of the Maharashtra Gomantak Party (MGP) merging their outfit with the ruling BJP and the new chief minister, Pramod Sawant, dropping MGP leader, Sudin Dhavalikar, from his Cabinet, a mere five days after he was appointed deputy CM. With the MGP "merger", the BJP now has 14 MLAs in the 40-member assembly. But given the way things have been going, this may be no guarantee for political stability in the state.

Goa's polity has not settled down since the 2017 assembly elections threw up a hung assembly. The BJP was voted out but the Congress fell short of a majority by four seats. The MGP and Goa Forward Party,

which fought both the BJP and the Congress, ended up with three MLAs each and, along with independents, turned king-makers as the two national parties bid for allies. A favourably inclined governor meant that the BJP got to form a coalition government with Manohar Parrikar arriving from the Centre to run it. Politicians frequently crossing sides and constantly changing chief ministers have pointed fingers at the size of the state. The onus is on the two national parties, the Congress and the BJP, which now dominate the state's political space, to raise the bar, to ensure that fringe players do not get to hijack government formation or governance.

The Indian Express, March 29

Fake news: A wire trap

Digital media prone to politicisation

The digital media are increasingly being touted to be the future of information and communication. Along with this assertion, however, comes an important question: will such a digital future be both free and inclusive? A report by the Reuters Institute throws up some worrying figures in response to this question. Among other factors, it found that 55 per cent of Indians who read news in English are hesitant to air their political views online because they fear that doing so will "get them into trouble with the authorities". The implications of this are deeply worrying, for they indicate a steady erosion of the right to free speech and dissenting opinions that are fundamental to the health of

a democracy. In spite of the popularity of the digital medium, it remains vulnerable to politicisation. This is evident not only from the fears expressed by consumers with regard to airing their political opinions online but also by the actual number of times that punitive actions have been taken against citizens for doing so. A large section of Indian users rely on digital news. Given that the study also shows that 57 per cent of users worry about whether the news they read is real or fake, surely there is a case to be made for weeding out their anxieties while respecting citizens' online privacy and right to free speech?

The Telegraph, March 29