## **8** ISSUES AND INSIGHTS

## **Goodbye freebies**

For companies in the telecom and aviation sectors, revenue is a top concern now and will remain so for some time

The annual tech bash made all the

right noises about 5G and a bit about

6G too. For India though, the narrative

was more about tariffs and market cor-

rection. While the two big players

Bharti Airtel and Vodafone hit out at



#### **NOT FOR PROFIT** NIVEDITA MOOKERJI

f 2018 was a year of deals and low prices, 2019 is all set to reverse the trend, at least in two sectors that we can't do without - telecom and aviation — both in deep stress yet holding out promise.

For telecom sector, the guidance came from the recently concluded Mobile World Congress in Barcelona, treated as Mecca for the new economy.

the current regulatory regime, which made headlines, the underlying story was about prices. Paying more hurts, especially so after getting used to freebies. So it's not good news for the consumer that the only way that telecom companies (telcos) can get their act together is through hiking prices for the services they offer. Top operators such as Airtel and Vodafone have already taken the first steps to raise their ARPU (average revenue per user), and much more will follow. If musings from Barcelona are taken seriously, chances of telecom bills shooting up for the Indian con-

sumer in 2019 are far higher than 5G auction taking off in the country. Sunil Mittal, founder and chairman of Bharti Enterprises, an industry

leader by subscriber numbers for several years, is now looking at a different kind of pecking order. He's fine with subscriber numbers going down and he's clear that he's focused on revenue and not very high-end customers, who typically are Netflix and Amazon Prime subscribers. His message from Barcelona was that the market must correct itself, and it will.

In aviation sector, the price message has played out differently. Jet Airways, which is in deep debt and looking for a financial resolution plan, is going through regular grounding of planes because of non-payment of dues. Indigo, possibly due to nonavailability of enough pilots, has been cancelling flights. These two, along with runway closures in Mumbai airport, have resulted in air fares rising to unheard of levels. While the runway closure is a temporary glitch, issues relating to Indigo's pilot crisis and Jet's plane grounding may not ease in a hurry and therefore, high air fares

may turn out to be a long-term reality for Indian flyers.

Not only have both telecom and aviation sectors seen closures as well as consolidation in the past, they have also sought government intervention in setting things right. In the case of telecom, the government has not given the operators any relaxation in taxes and levies, ignoring a long-standing demand of the industry. The thinking in the government is that telecom has gone through the highs and lows and knows very well how to come out of such cycles. That's not exactly how the government feels about the aviation sector at this point. A repeat of Kingfisher is not something that the government wants ahead of the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, and therefore state-owned lenders are at work to stitch up a resolution plan for Jet Airways.

We haven't heard the last word yet on the Jet deal and can't be sure of the extent to which the State will go to protect an airline from bankruptcy. Not just in India, even globally, airlines have shut down when faced with similar condition. Pan American World Airways, commonly known as Pan Am, was the largest international air carrier of the United States since 1927, till it filed for bankruptcy and

collapsed in 1991. Swissair, the national airline of Switzerland, founded in 1931, also went bankrupt in 2002. Trans World Airlines (TWA), a major American airline, is yet another example. TWA, one of the big four domestic airlines in the US, filed the third and final bankruptcy in 2001.

At a time when companies in the aviation and telecom industry are experiencing turbulence and the focus on higher revenue is unmistakable, a new stream may come as a ray of hope for both. With flight telephony being allowed in Indian skies, telcos and airlines can explore new business avenues, including around the much-hyped 5G. The US President Donald Trump may have tweeted recently that he wants 5G and even 6G as soon as possible, attracting much attention, but India too does not want to be left behind in the march of technology. The Department of Telecommunications has already indicated that the government would go ahead with the 5G spectrum auction later this year as planned. For the companies, however, revenue is a top concern now and will remain so for some time. That's bad news for the bargain-greedy consumer as prices will go north.

#### **CHINESE WHISPERS**

#### Lok Sabha via Rajya Sabha

The two leading Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu are using Rajya Sabha seats, which fall vacant in July, as a lever to forge alliances ahead of the Lok Sabha election. Six Rajya Sabha seats fall vacant in June and both All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam have offered one seat each to their small allies, Pattali Makkal Katchi and Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. With 21 seats in the Tamil Nadu Assembly falling vacant, the chances of these promises being kept would depend on the results of the by-poll for these seats. Meanwhile, actor-cumpolitician Vjayakanth's Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam (DMDK) delayed joining hands with one of the two possible partners presumably because there was no offer of a Rajya Sabha seat. Wednesday's talks between the leaders of the National Democratic Alliance and the DMDK remained inconclusive.

#### **Respect for opponent**



Despite heated argument between the government and petitioners during the hearing of the Rafale deal review petition in the Supreme Court, professional courtesy was not lost on the two sides involved. Former Union minister Arun Shourie, a petitioner in the case, was seen meeting and shaking hands with Attorney General KK Venugopal in the Chief Justice's court post lunch. In the pre-lunch session, the government had threatened the petitioners citing the Official Secrets Act and said the documents on which their petition was based had been stolen from the defence ministry.

#### Tit for tat

A viral video that caused much amusement among Opposition leaders on Wednesday showed two Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders exchange blows in front of journalists following an argument. The video began with a verba spat between BJP MP from Sant Kabir Nagar Sharad Tripathi and MLA Rakesh Singh Baghel of Mendhawal constituency, during a district coordination meeting in Sant Kabir Nagar, Uttar Pradesh, First Tripathi was seen asking why his name didn't appear on the foundation stone for a local road. Baghel responded that he had taken the decision to omit Tripathi's name. Soon, an agitated Tripathi was seen taking off a shoe and beating up Baghel. The latter responded by slapping Tripathi. The police and other leaders present in the room intervened to stop an escalation.

## The State versus gram sabhas

#### Or why the Forest Rights Act was never implemented efficiently

#### NITIN SETHI

he Supreme Court's sudden orders on the eviction of potentially 1.89 million tribal and other forest-dwelling families and its stay following a review petition has refocused attention on how poorly the Forest Rights Act has been implemented.

The 2006 law was meant to legally recognise the rights of tribals and others over forestlands they have traditionally inhabited. This included not only rights to live on these lands but also to protect forests and sustainably utilise the resources that these lands generate.

As the Union government admitted before the Supreme Court on February 28 while pleading for a stay on evictions, even the recognition of primary rights to inhabit these lands has been done so badly that many rightful claimants have been refused land titles.

In the court, the Union government said it had been asking the states for a while to address the "high rejection of claims, noncommunication of rejection orders, lack of reasons in the order (rejecting claims by tribals and others), rais-

ing of frivolous objections etc." It said that many of the so-called rejections that states claimed on their records were illegal and incorrect. The Union government admitted that in some states, the forest officials had evicted tribals without allowing them to appeal, as the law requires.

A detailed analysis by Land Conflict Watch lists the impediments states put in forms of additional conditions and regulations to deny claimants their legitimate rights. These included putting extra-legal and onerous burdens on the poor to prove their claims, such as providing documents that are more than 75 years old or rejecting claims without giving people the chance to either present their case, as required by law, or to go in appeal. The law permits two levels of appeal if the rejection occurs at the village council level.

The Supreme Court case filed in 2008 that led to the controversial interim eviction order was never meant to address these systemic lacunae to begin with. The petition-

ers in the case - select wildlife groups and some retired officers - had originally pleaded that the law itself is against the provisions of the Constitution. One of their pleas was that only states could distribute land rights and Parliament did not have the competence to pass a law doing so. But during oral arguments over the last

few years, the petitioners' and the court's focus shifted to the status of those whose claims had been rejected bypassing both the original challenge to the law and the question of



Once the Forest Rights Act came into force, allegations of corruption and proven cases of wrongful diversion of forest tracts through this process have emerged

whether the large-scale rejections were legally valid.

It is unclear if the Supreme Court intends to pursue the case for implementation of the law — the plea for which has been made by neither the petitioners nor the government — or tackle the question of who should be evicted. This would become clear only when the apex court hears the case again in July.

Experts on forest governance in India contend that the lackadaisical approach by the political leaderships, regardless of their ideologies, arose because the law provides for a fundamental shift in forest governance. It gave primacy to the communities. Under the Forest Rights Act gram sabhas (village councils) are made statutory authorities to regulate, protect and govern forests that they get claims over as commons. They also get veto powers to decide if these forestlands are then to be diverted by governments for any other purpose, such as setting up industrial projects or mining. Before the law was enacted, the forest bureaucracy and the political leadership had the sole discretion to decide which forest patches could be opened to such "non-forest activity". For large patches, the Central government held the veto and for smaller ones the state government.

Government data for the past 15 years shows that above 90 per cent of proposals for diverting these forest patches eventually did get clearance. Once the Forest Rights Act came into force, allegations of corruption and proven cases of wrongful diversion of forest tracts through this process have emerged. "This fundamental shift [in the Forest Rights Act] is discernibly observed in the states where gram sabhas have used Community Forest Rights (CFR) and ownership of minor forest produce in particular," says Tushar Dash researcher with CFR Learning and Advocacy group.

He pointed out that, "Gram sabhas have also used their authority to challenge actions by state agencies, forest departments such as illegal diversion of forest land, monoculture plantations, felling of good forest by forest development corporations and creation of land banks."

With empowered village councils coming up against vested politicalindustrial interests, the Centre and state governments dilute their powers in several ways. At times gram sabhas were bypassed summarily, at others the claims over the lands were not entertained to begin with and in yet others the regulations were amended to not require consent.

Tribal access to usufruct from the lands hit hurdles under other forest laws. In several cases, the governments interpreted the regulations and provisions of the Forest Rights Act in tandem with other forestry-related regulations and laws to retain a deeper say in the management of the forests with the forest bureaucracy. As several cases highlighted either in litigation or by the media show, the attempt to prevent claims being filed or processed for rights over forests that governments want for industrial and mining purposes has also been a practice.

#### **INFRA TALK**

## **River chiefs**

#### An unorthodox chinese solution to managing water



VINAYAK CHATTERJEE

ine dragons managing water" it's a metaphor that the Chinese have long used to describe how their country manages its water resources. Clearly not a compliment, the metaphor refers to overlapping and unclear responsibilities that different agencies and governments have over the country's aquatic resources. And it is a metaphor that, surprisingly, describes India very well too. In both countries, water management is split across ministries at the central and state level, and between different agencies handling different functions with regard to water management and water pollution.

The results of a complex and unclear system of management, coupled with rapid development and close-to-uncontrolled use of water resources has led to estimates that as much as a third of China's surface water may be unfit to drink (according to a Greenpeace report).

To combat this, China unveiled an unorthodox, yet ambitious "river chiefs" programme across the country last year.

The programme appoints a single

government official (a "river chief"), to manage water quality indicators for a given stretch of river or water body in their local area. Their performance and future career paths depend on how well those indicators improve over their tenure. According to a report in the *China Daily* newspaper last year, more than 300,000 river chiefs have been appointed across the country under different tiers of government. A further 7,60,000 have been appointed at village level as well, taking the total number of river chiefs to well over one million.

As China Water Risk, an organisation which promotes water conservation in China notes, the river chiefs programme means that local officials "face lifetime accountability for environmental performance in their jurisdiction." Contact information of the official is posted on a sign next to the river stretch they have responsibility for; and locals can call that official if they spot a person or a company dumping waste in the water, or if a stretch of water is overrun with algae and needs cleaning. The larger and more important the stretch of river, the more senior the official appointed as river chiefs. This ensures that the officer is powerful enough to get different departments to work together.

The river chiefs system was actually first implemented back in 2007 in Jiangsu province by local officials to combat a massive infestation of green algae in a local water body. A Greenpeace official quoted in the South China Morning Post newspaper says that the province (roughly equivalent to an Indian state), has seen a sharp turnaround in water quality since the ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

river chiefs system was established across the state following its initial success. The proportion of the state's surface water fit for human use increased from 35 per cent to over 63 per cent.

Would such a system work in India? We too share many of the same problems - massive water pollution problems coupled with different organisations and government departments tasked with responsibility for different aspects of water management. India already has a range of specific legislation to deal with pollution (including water pollution) and Pollution Control Boards at both the state and central level to set pollution standards and enforce them.

The key innovation in the Chinese case, has been the devolution of responsibility right down to the grass roots level and thereby making local officials directly responsible for pollution control with the powers to take action across government departments, Local inhabitants, the ones who have the most to benefit from improving water quality, in theory at least, have 'one throat to choke' to ensure that the water they use is usable. Making environmental improvement an explicit part of officials' targets and assessment, gives them a serious incentive to respond positively. Water quality improvement targets can be clearly set and monitored independently as well.

It is too early to tell what the results have been in China as the programme

was implemented nationally just last year. But while water quality has improved in some of the areas where it was introduced earlier, in other areas it has remained unchanged or even worsened. If the river chief does not have the power to penalise industries that discharge effluents into the water body, it matters little that they have been given targets.

Currently, the State Pollution Control Boards in India already have that power. What matters is the political will from the top — more specifically the state governments here, which have a crucial role to play in making any such measure successful. Forcing a local factory, whose owner may be politically well connected, to comply with pollution norms, is something that can only be done if the state government wants it, whether or not river chiefs or their equivalent, exist in India.

But the broader lesson of the river chiefs programme still stands. Perhaps the best chance of ensuring that political pressure exists to penalise polluters. is to make local communities responsible for, and put them in charge of, environment management. India's environmental policy has long had a top down approach with mixed results. A bottomup approach, where all the pressure for reform comes from those who are most affected, is what is needed.

River chiefs in China is one such approach.

The author is chairman of Feedback Infra

#### LETTERS

#### Move will hurt US

This is with reference to your article "US will end up hurting itself more, say experts" (March 6). It has been apparent since the present United States (US) administration assumed office in 2017 that commercial opportunism has been the fundamentals of its economy. However, it is more about revenue strengthening than trade diplomacy that is governing their current policies.

The imposition of duties on its imports will only increase inflation there especially as they constitute major industrial requirements. The US has two major partners in international trade - China and India. Its long standing trade dispute on the imposition of tariff on trade with China, though temporarily thawed, has already had a negative impact on the US economy. The scrapping of preferential trade treatment with India will not hurt us much as only 0.4 per cent of Indian exports are to the US. Accordingly, the impact on profits for Indian exporters on account of the reduction of margin is nominal. About 50 per cent of the products covered under the preferential trade treatment with India are actually in the US import market. There will also not be any negative impact on the internal economy of India.

The current US policy leans more towards financial profit than sustain long-term trade relations with nations. Its exclusive concentration on pricing

#### HAMBONE

LIFE BEGINS ) 50 DOES ARTHRITIS AND THE HABIT OF AT FORTY TELLING A STORY THREE TIMES TO THE SAME GROUP 

and attempting to substitute two major trading partners with a group of others will hurt its image, create customer dissatisfaction and inflict substantial economic damage in the long run. India is also well within its rights to move the World Trade Organisation.

C Gopinath Nair Kochi

#### Create value

This refers to "May the best man win" (February 19). I do not agree with the views expressed in the article. The author seems to suggest that India should not worry if our brands get taken over by foreign players. The recent spate of incidents is not a sign of Indian industry coming of age but of defeat and gradual surrender to foreign economic dominance. Our large market is getting exploited by every foreign brand and they do not create any direct value as all the value goes overseas. Why cant India have strong homegrown brands that can ensure more value creation in the country? We should work towards making Indian brands truly global and creating value forever.

Sumit Chadha via email

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## The IL&FS mess

Audit report shows collapse of governance norms

he new board of Infrastructure Leasing and Financial Services Ltd (IL&FS) has reportedly sent show-cause notices to as many as 14 former directors of IL&FS Financial Services Ltd (IFIN), asking why criminal action should not be taken against them in the light of an interim report submitted by Grant Thornton. The accounting firm had conducted a forensic audit of 12 companies, including IL&FS Ltd and IFIN, for the review period April 2013 to September 2018. The former directors have been charged with "facilitating money laundering," sanctioning loans without any security and "conspiracy and getting unlawful gains," among others. In its 166-page interim report, the accounting firm has flagged transactions worth around ₹9,000 crore as being linked to irregularities.

The report lays bare several irregularities in the way IL&FS group companies functioned. In all, the report found 29 instances of loans disbursed to borrowers which were in turn used by group companies to repay the existing debt obligations of IFIN. For instance, SKIL Infrastructure's Gujarat-Dwarka Portwest Ltd borrowed ₹253 crore in 2015-16 and in the year it also repaid ₹230 crore to IFIN. Similarly, IFIN distributed ₹365 crore to the Flemingo Group between 2017 and 2019; during the same period, the group companies of Flemingo repaid ₹407 crore to IFIN. In total, such episodes alone cost the group over ₹2,500 crore. There were 18 episodes — in all amounting to another ₹2,400 crore — where loans were given to borrowers against the advice of the teams concerned. Then, there were eight instances, involving ₹541 crore, where short-term loans were used for long-term lending. The auditing firm also found that many financial transactions amounted to a conflict of interest because of the executive relationships involved.

This is terrible news for the IL&FS group, which operates over a hundred subsidiaries and is sitting on a debt of ₹94,000 crore. The report provides an understanding of the work culture in IL&FS under the earlier dispensation and how it landed up in the mess it finds itself in. Though the report is interim, it provides several pointers to the collapse of governance norms in the IL&FS group. The fact that this was allowed to go on for so long is worrying. IL&FS did have a risk management committee as per the Reserve Bank of India's guidelines, but it is obvious that it was just an ornamental body and was not doing its primary job, which is to identify risks arising out of the business, assess them and to devise a strategy to resolve them. The forensic audit report has made it clear that none of that was happening. The IL&FS board had independent directors with wide industry experience, and it is difficult to believe that they did not appreciate the need for a robust risk management practice. As reported earlier, the committee never met after July 2015, even as the company's finances kept tumbling. This must be construed as a gross dereliction of duty by the independent directors. The IL&FS episode is also a wake-up call for the regulators, as it is by now obvious that conventional corporate governance norms on paper may not be sufficient to address specific concerns involving large financial institutions.

### Protect the Aravalis

#### Allowing commercial activities is indefensible

By throwing open a sizeable part of the Aravali hills for commercial activities after amending the law that protected their forest cover, the Haryana government has not only disregarded the ominous ramifications of its move but has also blatantly flouted the Supreme Court's injunctions against it. All non-forest activities in and along the Aravali hills have, for long, been barred to preserve the ecology of these mountains. The British had enacted a special law, the Punjab Land Preservation Act (PLPA), for this purpose way back in 1900. This pragmatic statute has now been attenuated to take away the forest status of large chunks of these hills. The environmentalists view the amendment as a death warrant for the Aravali hills. Fortunately, the apex court has been quick to stay its enforcement, dubbing the move as "obnoxious".

The 692-km Aravali range, spanning parts of Delhi, Haryana, Rajasthan and Gujarat, serves as the lungs for the highly polluted National Capital Region (NCR) besides acting as a natural shield against the creep of the Thar Desert. The obvious motive behind the amendment of the statute is to legitimise the illegal encroachments and misuse of the Aravali forests for realty, mining and other commercial purposes that have been going apace since the 1970s. Lakhs of dwelling units, commercial buildings and industries have already come up in this fragile mountainous track. Around 30 per cent of the Aravali area falling in the Faridabad and Gurugram districts and notified as protected forests under the PLPA now stands privatised. In Faridabad alone, at least five commercial entities, three unauthorised colonies and over 140 private farm houses and banquet halls, apart from two educational institutions, have sprung up. A 2017 study by the Wildlife Institute of India described the Haryana portion of the Aravali range as the country's most degraded forest. The rapid and unabated deforestation and development activities are further damaging this unique landscape, the report remarked. Indeed, the situation in the Rajasthan portion of the Aravalis is not much better. As many as 31 out of the 128 hills in this segment of the Aravalis have totally disappeared, flattened by the land and mining mafias. The ecological worth of the Aravali is immense. Apart from preventing the spread of desertification, it hinders the dust-laden winds from Rajasthan to enter the NCR where the air quality is already grievously poor. It also plays a critical role in recharging the groundwater of the region around it. Moreover, it is the source of origin of several rivers and rivulets, including Sabarmati, Luni, Chambal and Krishnavati, besides being the catchment of lakes like Damdama, Dhaui, Badkhal and Suraikund, More importantly, it harbours rich biodiversity. hosting numerous species of plants, birds and animals. It is the corridor between Asola Bhatti sanctuary in Delhi and Sariska in Rajasthan for several kinds of animals, including leopards, hyenas, jackals, mongoose and others.

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



# Recapturing the commons

Regulations that facilitate infrastructure with appropriate public resource use will enhance productivity

Growth in the third quarter was disappointing, but there are signs of a cyclical recovery, with a Purchasing Managers Index for manufacturing at a 14-month high. For a significant upward shift of our growth curve, however, apart from lower interest rates, policy-makers have to be constructive. What might we wish for? Here are some suggestions.

Accept the reality that investible funds in India are insufficient for our needs. These include our stock and net inflow of capital, and profits available for investment. We can try to increase our productive

capacity or choose business-as-usual, thereby staying below our potential. Why? Because our activities aren't profitable enough to induce and sustain investment. We need investment -in hard infrastructure, such as transportation and logistics, electricity, water and sewerage, and communications, and in second-order infrastructure, such as security and law and order, health care, education and training, banking, finance and insurance. There's also the need for reorganisation of markets and practices, e.g., in agriculture, infrastructure, and government procurement.



SHYAM PONAPPA

There's little doubt that digital connectivity is invaluable for all these. While the imperative is clear, the question is how to orchestrate achieving the desired results.

The telecom operators, alas, have low profitability, inadequate network coverage, and too much debt. Continuing as before means subpar access and productivity for all. We are all hamstrung, and even more so in rural areas. Because of the expanse and scattered users there, connectivity entails much higher costs with lower revenue potential.

#### Self-organising infrastructure – a conceptual flaw without regulatory support

Meanwhile, there are conceptual flaws in our approach. The National Optical Fibre Network (Bharat

Broadband Network Limited or BharatNet) was conceived as a countrywide fibre backbone. The plan was for optical fibre links to 250,000 gram panchayat villages covering India's approximately 600,000 inhabited villages. A major assumption, however, was that private operators would build access networks to villages and to users. This was unrealistic for a number of reasons. First, there's the cost of covering sparse users over large expanses with low revenue potential. Second, the supportive regulations for wireless technologies to build the access networks

were/are not in place. For example, even for the established 5 GHz WiFi range used globally for WiFi hotspots, restrictive policies meant that 5 GHz equipment could not be used effectively in India in urban or rural installations. This changed with new regulations for 5 GHz, but only four months ago in October 2018 (for details see https://organizing-india.blogspot.com/2018/11/agreat-start-on-wi-fi-reforms.html).

Other wireless technologies for intermediate- and last-mile links are still blocked, and need enabling regulations.

• The 700 MHz band: No operators bid for this given its high price, although it is very useful for covering distances of 5-10 km, and can penetrate walls and foliage. This band together with the 500 and 600 MHz bands could be used to connect gram panchayats to nearby villages. A study of inter-site distances in 14 states shows that most villages would be covered with this range (*https://tsdsi.in/wpcontent/uploads/2019/02/Krishna-Ganti-Day-1-5th-Session-1.pdf*).

• The 500 and 600 MHz bands are allocated for TV, and therefore are part of the "tragedy of the unused commons". Only a small fraction is used for broadcasting in India because of limited free-to-air TV and better alternatives. As they are earmarked for broadcasting, they are not used for telephony either. ■ The 70-80 GHz band (E-band) is effective for shortrange links covering more users at 3-4 km, but not permitted in India, although it is light-licensed in many countries with nominal fees, e.g., the USA, UK, Russia, and Australia. While ideally our regulations should align with global norms, there are exorbitant charges on operators (reportedly 37 per cent, plus corporate taxes), a debt overhang from spectrum auctions, huge investment needs, and relatively low revenue potential. Compelling arguments to let operators use the E-band with unlicensed access, with registry on a geo-location database to manage interference, to be reviewed after some years. The additional traffic will generate revenues from which government collections will increase.

The 60 GHz (V-band for distances up to 1.6 km): the Cellular Operators Association of India (COAI) opposes making it licence-free as in most countries, and wants it assigned to operators for access and backhaul. For the same reasons as for E-band, operators could be allowed unlicensed access, with a review after some years.

#### Market structure and organisation

A larger problem is that legacy structural and organisational issues need concerted efforts to take requisite policy initiatives. This is perhaps a greater, more urgent need for ubiquitous connectivity.

Successive governments have struggled with revival plans for BSNL and MTNL, somewhat analogous to Air India and Indian Airlines in aviation. Governments have not provided sustained support for ambitious connectivity objectives. There is sometimes inadequate understanding of fastchanging, technically complex enterprises, and episodic attention is given to large enterprises that need timely capital- and skill-intensive decisions (and decision-makers in place), and the upgrading of skills and operating practices. BSNL and MTNL are declining, with bailouts, market disruption through price-cutting, and inability to deliver profits. This is a huge opportunity cost on citizens. However, it is conceivable that with appropriate leadership, and organisational and capital backing, these enterprises could contribute effectively to ubiquitous connectivity, rather than being a drag and/or a disruptive factor. This could happen, for instance, if an alliance were possible with private sector operators providing leadership, organisation and capital, while state ownership concentrates on safeguarding the public interest.

Bharti Enterprises' Chairman Sunil Mittal has suggested an alliance with Vodafone for an optical fibre network. Bharti and Vodafone already have a joint venture, Indus Towers, providing passive infrastructure services to operators. If regulations enabled active infrastructure from a consortium including BSNL and MTNL, it would leverage the infrastructure while reducing the capital requirements, and increase delivery capability. The entire thrust of regulations could be oriented to facilitating service delivery, leveraging capital, equipment and human resources.

The regulatory approach should aim to facilitate access equitably to public resources that belong to citizens, and not to create obstacles.

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## In the mood with much fervour

State-owned Air India has accumulated losses of over ₹50,000 crore and debts of over ₹48,000 crore. Its financial position is so precarious that no private buyer stepped up to buy a 76 per cent stake in the airline when it was put on the block last year. Cost-cutting and more cost-cutting, you would think, should be the internal mantra for the airline in this ultra-competitive market.

Its owners and management appear to have oth

that a group has hit big time in the Indian business firmament. Sometime in the early 2000s, the management directed its employees to greet each other with the words "Good Sahara", accompanied by a US-style hand-over-heart gesture. Whether employees actually followed this instruction is unrecorded but Parvez Damania, formerly of Damania Airlines, who joined Sahara Airlines around that time (and later the now defunct Kingfisher Airlines) attested Hitler himself took the whole shebang seriously and even worked out every day to strengthen his right arm and shoulder so that he could hold it up at the prescribed angle for hours during party rallies or military parades — a feat that burnished his reputation in his followers' eyes. On most other occasions, he employed the foppish wave that became his trademark.

The Hitler salute became fodder for much snig gering among his European enemies. His Ambassador to Britain Joachim Von Ribbentrop scion through marriage of a liquor retailing business, the honorific "von" acquired by persuading an aunt to adopt him, became the butt of many jokes because of his obtuse projection of his boss's powers. After he chose to greet the British monarch with a Hitler salute, the papers dubbed him "Herr Brickendrop". By 1943, though, "Heil Hitler" came to acquire subversive connotations among besieged Wehrmacht soldiers as the Red Army surrounded them in the freezing bend of the Volga river at a city then called Stalingrad. That was the slogan they shouted in deep despair as they were taken into Soviet captivity, most of them never to return. The battle of Stalingrad was the beginning of the end of the Third Reich. The line between patriotism and nationalism is a thin one. George Orwell explained the first as an admiration for a way of life, reflecting loyalty to a set of values and beliefs. Nationalism, he added, was rooted in rivalry and resentment and was the enemy of peace. With India's economic growth slowing, unemployment high and exports in trouble, it is worth wondering to which sentiment the order to airline staff to repeat a fervent exhortation to the motherland (after a slight pause) is subscribing.

Considering that Haryana has the lowest forest cover in the country, barely 3.59 per cent, any action that would further curtail the forested land is indefensible. Hope the state government listens to the environmentalists and the apex court and rescinds the amendment to the PLPA. It should, in fact, take positive action to protect and rejuvenate the forest cover of the Aravali hills.

concerns — that the staff of this ailing airline must display patriotic fervour in a prescribed manner.

A March 5 advisory from the Director of Operations stipulated: "With immediate effect, all are required to announce 'Jai Hind' after every announcement after a slight pause and with much fervour." The advisory, officials explained without irony, was "in line with the mood of the nation". No surprise, social media exploded with corny jokes — what cabin crew would say in the event of air turbulence and so on. The news was certainly quirky enough for BBC to put out a news report on its website, helpfully adding the post-Balakot upsurge in nationalism as context.

It is easy to guess where the order originated and why. But perhaps nationalist stalwarts on Raisina Hill may want to pause and consider. Sloganeering-to-order has an unhappy history.

Let us look at the more immediate corporate record. The financial services-to-hospitality group Sahara, which was wont to call itself the Sahara Parivar in its heyday, saw its apogee in the late nineties and early 2000s. It even once sponsored the Indian cricket team, usually an infallible sign with some embarrassment to a *Business Standard* colleague that he did indeed greet his colleagues



SWOT

KANIKA DATTA

power with his own person to such a degree that "Heil Hitler" (or the variant "Heil, Mein Fuhrer") replaced the original Nazi salute "Sieg Heil" (Hail Victory). To be accompanied by an outstretched arm at an oblique angle (Roman style), it became the compulsory form of greeting among government functionaries. There were various state security institutions to enforce this command, though in the first flush of Hitler's victories even senior military commanders needed prompting (the greeting was not compulsory for the armed forces).

compliance and support. No one

understood this better than Adolf

Hitler, who aligned Germany's

## Very, very special memoir



**DHRUV MUNJAL** 

C ricket and statistics are inextricably linked. Any sport for that matter is about numbers, but this marriage is all the more rigid in the case of cricket. And that is why certain numbers just stick to certain cricketers — milestones etched in 24-carat gold that sometimes go on to define entire careers. With Chris Gayle, it will forever be 333; for Anil Kumble 10/74; for Brian Lara 400 not out, or perhaps 501, with another asterisk against the great Trinidadian's name. And in the case of VVS Laxman, that rarefied figure will always be 281.

Mr Laxman did some tremendous things with the bat throughout his semilegendary career — think the 167 against Australia in Sydney, the 73 against the same opposition in Mohali, a most improbable 107 versus Pakistan in a longforgotten one-day game versus Pakistan in Lahore — but the 281 that rattled and stunned the formidable quartet of Warne, McGrath, Gillespie and Kasprowicz in Kolkata 18 years ago this week will perennially be recalled with immense fondness, a walloping batting ballet that was the definitive denouement of Aussie supremacy in the new millennium.

It is little surprise, then, that Mr Laxman's autobiography, co-authored by cricket writer R Kaushik, is called 281 and Beyond. How far he went after the exploits of Eden Gardens 2001 is still disputed — his style sometimes delivered little substance in subsequent years, and there is a valid, underlying argument that Mr Laxman's career perhaps did not scale the heights his talent once so evidently promised. His status as an ordinary limited-overs players and a Test average of 45 — not middling by any standards — naturally denies him a spot among India's batting royalty: Tendulkar, Dravid, Gavaskar, Kohli, Sehwag et al.

But what Mr Laxman lacked in consistency and reliability, he made up for in manner of performance. An oldschool stylist in the Mohammad Azharuddin mould — the fellow Hyderabadi was also his hero growing up — Mr Laxman's shtick and artistry warmed the purists' hearts like nothing else. Giving the charge to the spinner and whipping him through mid-wicket, or dancing down and dispatching him inside-out through cover are the kind of

Laxman hallmarks that still trigger the most sublime imagery even after all these years.

281 and beyond is a special book on a few counts: it presents Mr Laxman, mostly reticent during his playing days, and insufficiently articulate as a broadcaster, in a new light. He is refreshingly eloquent and manages to recall every little detail of his life, right from the moment he had to choose between cricket and medicine as a 17-year-old to how he was feeling the morning he decided to announce his imminent retirement from the game. Mr Kaushik's writing, smooth and infused with some exquisite sentences, makes this all the more readable.

Somewhat ironically, the best parts in 281 and Beyond feature Mr Laxman's days as an ODI player, a format that his velvety skills never quite mastered. Talking about his infamous struggles in the field (he was a terrific catcher, though), Mr Laxman writes: "I would be the first to acknowledge that I wasn't the fastest man on the park, or the most naturally athlet-

ic... I also agree that I wasn't the quickest between the wickets. My body structure and various knee and back injuries played their part, but those are not excuses, merely an acceptance of the reality."

Mr Laxman may have belatedly accepted his embarrassing dearth of athleticism, but his exclusion from the squad for the 2003 World Cup, where India made the final, clearly left him a broken man. In hindsight, there is little denying that Mr Laxman was cut a rough deal. Dinesh Mongia, the man who took his place, obviously offered skipper Sourav Ganguly an additional bowling option at the time, but was devoid of the match-winning qualities that Mr Laxman — only 28 at the time — possessed in such abundance. Moreover, the two games that sealed his fate nine and 20 against New Zealand away in late 2002 — also saw the entire Indian batting line-up floundered.

Despite the acrimony, Mr Laxman appears as someone unwilling to hold a grudge. Towards the end of the book are moving, beautifully crafted passages about each of his famed batting companions: Sehwag, Dravid, Tendulkar and Ganguly, teammates that he should have been with on that plane to South Africa in 2003. Of the time when Sehwag still just four ODIs into his international career — boasted about how he would become the first Indian to notch up a triple century in Test cricket, Mr Laxman concedes: "My jaw dropped and I stared at him in astonishment. This guy wasn't anywhere close to Test selection, and here he was, making the most outrageous of claims".

And while 281 and Beyond may not be anything like Sehwag's bellicose batsmanship, it does have one very Sehwag trait: it is brutally honest. And that, coupled with the cuts and flicks that helped Mr Laxman become so famous, make it such a rare delight.

#### 281 AND BEYOND VVS Laxman with R Kaushik Westland Sport, ₹699, 309 pages