THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE

THERE CAN BE NO FAITH IN GOVERNMENT IF OUR HIGHEST OFFICES ARE EXCUSED FROM SCRUTINY.

— EDWARD SNOWDEN

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

BONDS AND BINDS

SC interim order on electoral bonds is also a message to political class to find creative solutions to problems of political finance

ON FRIDAY, THE Supreme Court took the first step towards resolving the controversy over political funding that erupted after the government introduced the electoral bonds scheme last year. The Court refused to accede to the request of the NGOs, Common Cause and Association for Democratic Reforms, and the CPM for an immediate stay of the new mechanism to fund elections. But the key message from the three-judge bench's decision underlines the complexity of the issue: "Rival contentions by the parties and respondents raise weighty issues which have tremendous bearing on the sanctity of the electoral process." The court has decided to examine the issue in detail.

Electoral bonds are bearer instruments like promissory notes and can be purchased by an Indian citizen or a body incorporated in the country. The identity of the donor will be known only to the bank, and it will be kept anonymous. Given that political funding used to be a way to whitewash black money, the switch to a mechanism that operates through the banking system is undoubtedly a step forward in ensuring clean political funding. However, questions over the issue of donor anonymity were raised even before the scheme was notified. In May 2017, the Election Commission (EC) had argued that the proviso that exempts political parties from disclosing the names of donors militates against "greater transparency" in political funding. The Commission's concerns were also linked to the amendment to the Companies Act in 2017, which lifted the cap on the amount corporates could contribute to political parties. "This opens up the possibility of shell companies being set up for the sole purpose of making donations to political parties," the EC had noted in a letter to the law ministry two years ago.

The government contends that the anonymity provision is necessary to prevent donors from being victimised, in case they turn out to have supported the losing party. "If you back the wrong horse, then tomorrow an industrialist who is bidding for a dam will get victimised if the opposite party came to power," Attorney General K K Venugopal pointed out during the hearing of the case. But the fact also is that with most of the bonds being issued and encashed at public-sector banks, the party holding office at the Centre can always access these particulars. The SC's order on Wednesday is alive to these concerns. It has directed all political parties to furnish details of the funding received through electoral bonds, including the identity of the donors, to the EC by May 30. But this, as the Court pointed out, is only an interim measure. Wednesday's verdict is also a message to the political class to debate more thoroughly the long-pending issue of political funding in order to resolve the anonymity vs transparency impasse.

LIGHT AND DARK

Arrest of Julian Assange brings up questions of press freedom. And transparency, and its limits, in an inter-connected world

IF JULIAN ASSANGE, the co-founder and self-described "editor" of WikiLeaks, is extradited by the United Kingdom to the United States, he could face up to five years in prison on charges of "conspiracy to commit computer intrusion". The way the case unfolds will, of course, have a profound impact on the freedom of the press and the degree to which governments can criminalise those who expose their working and the accompanying hypocrisies. It may also be an occasion for looking at the unintended consequences of the era that WikiLeaks ushered in and typified.

The WikiLeaks' release of classified documents in 2010, detailing alleged war crimes, government surveillance and diplomatic correspondence, called public attention to the US administration's apparent callousness about lives, both civilian and military, in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and how it spied even on allied countries. In 2016, WikiLeaks released then US President-hopeful Hillary Clinton's private emails, and has been accused by the Democrats, including Clinton, of acting for Donald Trump with the aid of Russian interests. The attack on Assange has been two-fold: First, it is claimed that he helped hack into US military databases and should therefore be prosecuted for this action. This argument is problematic. WikiLeaks received the information from a source within US military intelligence — Chelsea Manning — and provided evidence of war crimes and of incidents like the atrocities at Guantanamo Bay. That "hacking" may have been used to obtain such information cannot be used as an excuse to curb the publication of documents that tell truth about power — the essence of a free press. There is also a second charge against Assange — that he helped usher in the age of populist neo-nationalism. While there is no evidence yet connecting WikiLeaks to Russian intelligence, it could be said that WikiLeaks contributed to erosion of public confidence in western liberal democracy. By demolishing the credentials of the leaders of the liberal, pro-market, pro-globalisation order, many believe Assange paved the way for a corrosive and populist nationalism — it may not be incidental that Trump said "I love WikiLeaks" during the US presidential campaign.

To his admirers, Assange is a Robin Hood of the digital age: He democratised the currency of our time — information — and was painted a traitor and villain for his efforts. His asylum has been revoked by Ecuador on seemingly flimsy grounds, and the video of him being dragged away from the embassy in London showed what being trapped in a room for much of seven years can do to a person. In a cruel irony, it appears that there is no refuge in an inter-connected world for an advocate of transparency.

WHEN DHONI SAW RED

His display of anger on the field raises questions the day after

THE UMPIRING STANDARDS, in particular of Indians, in the IPL, haven't been good and this led to a situation where MS Dhoni, known to be unflappable, lost his temper and marched out of the field. The main umpire had raised his hand to suggest the ball from Ben Stokes was a no-ball but it was ruled as legal by the square-leg umpire. The outstretched right hand had triggered the siren to blare around the ground and Ravindra Jadeja, one of the two batsmen, protested before Dhoni decided to cross the metaphorical line.

There are questions the day after. What if it was someone like Virat Kohli who had done this, with, let's say, David Warner the captain on the field? Two strong heads could have led to a more explosive situation. What if it was an international game and the sight of an angry Dhoni provoked a hostile parochial crowd into creating chaos in support of him? A mini-riot at Eden Gardens has been seen in the past when the crowd felt Sachin Tendulkar was unfairly run out in a game against Pakistan. What if there was a weaker umpire in the midst, would he have yielded to Dhoni's outburst and called it a no ball?

Seen in that light, the 50 per cent fine on match fee is a rather light rap, but yet again, the cricket laws don't cover for human nature. IPL's code of conduct is unprepared for such a "crime" — there is nothing in Article 2.1.5 or Article 2.1.6, which deal with excessive disappointment with an umpire's decision, to account for outrage coming from a player outside the boundary lines. It's time it's reviewed especially in the T20 world with dugouts inches from the boundary. It also says something about the pressures of franchise cricket that even Dhoni is stirred into crossing lines he wouldn't normally breach.

Citizens into supplicants

Parties promise goods, without assuring functioning public institutions and equality of opportunity

A R VASAVI

THE MAJOR POLITICAL parties have all released their manifestos for the parliamentary elections. Each manifesto represents the political angst of the parties — the repentant tone of the Congress, the assertive stance of the BJP, the negotiated compromise of the SP as it aligns with the BSP and RLD, the hesitant political ideology of the CPM, and the brash declarations of the TMC. Amid long declarations of intent that range from foreign policy to the rights of children, each party promises governance that seeks to alleviate all our national problems. What none of the parties tells us is how they would themselves subscribe to the norms of democracy — how would they uphold the rule of law, and check the ongoing spread of the culture of impunity?

In their political enunciations that relate to specific policies, institutions, programmes and allocations, they overlook the democratic processes and commitment that must emanate from the parties themselves to ethics, accountability, transparency, and engagement with people. Persons with criminal records (who constitute 34 per cent of the 16th Lok Sabha according to the ADR reports), continue to be big political players and yet none of the parties commits to identifying and supporting worthy candidates who would be above the charges of corruption, violence and criminality.

In their pronouncements, the Congress and BJP face the challenge of performing an economic balancing act — of creating wealth and also alleviating poverty. How will the wide range of social welfare and income transfer schemes and subsidies be delivered without regulating private and capital interests?

Although it was the CPM that mobilised farmers across the nation and tabled agrarian distress to become a national issue, their enunciations for the rural and agricultural sectors are largely broad-based and without attention to detail. The Congress and BJP, on the other hand, offer a plethora of sops and incentives that make it seem like they would put the kisan back on the centrestage of national development. The BJP seems to be toeing the RSS's line and asserts its Hindutva agenda through proclamations that a temple will be built in Ayodhya, a common civil code implemented, and Article 370 abrogated. Focusing on making India a deeply defence heavy state, the BJP is silent about the AFSPA, while the CPI asserts it will scrap it and the Congress assures that it will be reviewed. Seeking to appease the small traders who were burnt by demonetisation and GST, the BJP promises to establish a national traders' welfare board, a national policy for retail trade and credit cards for merchants.

> Missing in all the manifestos are alternative imaginaries for social, economic and political justice and rights that would enable a viable democracy. Each fails to address the dark shadows cast on the nation by those who have become victims of the failure of the state to assure the right to a life of dignity and well-being: The cleaners who have suffocated to death in drains and man holes; Rohith Vemula and the injustice within educational institutions; the brutalised child victim at Kathua; all the farmers who have committed suicides; the victims of demonetisation and the stifled rights of Sudha Bharadwaj and other activists who now languish in jail.

All parties seem blind to the declining quality of education even as all promise the expansion of educational institutions, and the BJP dreams of a "University for Foreign Policy", which we can assume will have Narendra Modi's foreign visits as their texts! And to hide its shame of the Rafale deal, perhaps, it proclaims a "Made in India in Defence" initiative.

The Congress, BJP and SP-BSP-RLD promise a flood of supply-side incentives that include income support, support for pregnant women, farm loan waivers, midday meals, scholarships, free laptops, pensions, housing, and even subsidised sanitary napkins. And yet, the foundational premises of assuring functioning and equal access public institutions and equality of opportunities (through access to resources and to education) are largely missing.

As a result, what is emerging is an unusual form of competitive populism that seeks to render citizens into supplicants who in exchange for their votes will receive a range of goods. That such transactions have not only political and economic costs but also social implications is not reckoned with. The rise of a new class of political entrepreneurs who mediate between the political/administrative system and the masses and who in many ways now distort the very possibilities of democracy is only one of these concerns.

Similarly, none of the parties takes a position against mega-projects (dams, high-speed rails, statues) which have been the source of mega corruption and the degradation of the environment. Although climate change trends have now reached emergency conditions and India is, and will be, one of the most adversely affected regions, all the manifestos indicate how little attention is paid to this by the various parties. While credit must be given to the Congress for recognising and citing climate change in the context of environmental and natural disaster issues, it provides no details as to how it will be addressed in all the key sectors (which is what is required), the BJP only mentions it, the TMC endorses the Paris Agreement, and the CPM completely overlooks it.

Missing in all the manifestos are alternative imaginaries for social, economic and political justice and rights that would enable a viable democracy. Each fails to address the dark shadows cast on the nation by those who have become victims of the failure of the state to assure the right to a life of dignity and well-being: The cleaners who have suffocated to death in drains and man holes; Rohith Vemula and the injustice within educational institutions; the brutalised child victim at Kathua; all the farmers who have committed suicides; the victims of demonetisation, the farmers at Mandsaur who fell to police bullets, and the stifled rights of Sudha Bharadwaj and other activists who now languish in jail. In each of these, we have been witness to the erosion of democratic norms, the dilution and distortion of constitutional values, and the denial of the basic rights of citizens.

In contrast to these political platitudes, whose content and intent are all debatable, there are now manifestos by various organisations such as those by the Safai Karamchari Aandolan and "Reclaiming the Republic" by a range of activists. It is perhaps these that should be the guiding posts to addressing our myriad problems and also realising the potential of a plural India.

The writer is a social anthropologist based in Karnataka

WHEN TRAVEL CLOSES MINDS

Pakistanis are returning from abroad radicalised, not anglicised as before

KHALED AHMED

MY HERO, JOURNALIST ROBERT Fisk of *The Independent*, has chastised the West for maltreating expat Muslims, and praised New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern for the way she reacted to the killing of 50 Muslims in Christchurch last month. Fisk was disgusted by Australia's racist senator, Fraser Anning, who blamed the Christchurch bloodbath on "the immigration programme that allowed Muslim fanatics to migrate".

The Muslim world was impressed and grateful for how Ardern handled the Christchurch massacre. But many didn't know how to process the actions of this unorthodox prime minister. Turkish prime minister Recep Erdogan's reaction was savage. He threatened to send Australian and New Zealand nationals home "in coffins" after hearing about the killings.

There was a time when Muslims went to the UK and came back "anglicised", speaking English in an accent unfamiliar in Pakistan. Today, they return transformed into what a medieval Muslim man would have looked like — bearded and clad midway between Saudi Arabia and India, a total stranger to spoken English. The Muslim, now, goes abroad but refuses to assimilate, an unspoken condition once observed by all immigrants. Compared to non-Muslim expat communities, the Muslims are clearly singled out and attacked in the UK and EU.

In 2016, a Muslim lawyer of Pakistani descent was convicted in the UK of promoting the cause of the Islamic State and luring British Muslim youth into terrorism. Instead of the maximum 10 years, he received five-and-a-half years in jail without receiving much comment in Pakistan. In the past, this was how Anjem Choudary, leader of now-defunct radical outfits, Al Muhajiroun and Al Ghuraba, tweeted: "Eventually the whole world will be governed by Sharia & Muslims will have authority over China Russia USA, etc. This is the promise of Allah. Under the Sharia, the false Gods that people worship instead of Allah will be removed, like democracy, freedom, liberalism, secularism etc."

> There was a time when Muslims went to the UK and came back "anglicised", speaking English in an accent unfamiliar in Pakistan. Today, they return transformed into what a medieval Muslim man would have looked like — bearded and clad midway between Saudi Arabia and India, a total stranger to spoken English.

His previous statements also included, "Allah said very clearly in the Koran 'Don't feel sorry for the non-Muslims.' So as an adult non-Muslim... if he dies in a state of disbelief then he is going to go to the hellfire... so I'm not going to feel sorry for non-Muslims."

Choudary asked UK Muslims to quit their jobs and claim unemployment so that they could "have more time to plot holy war against non-Muslims". He believed that this was a form of *jizya*, a punitive tax that Muslims are supposed to impose on non-Muslims.

Reportedly, in 2010, Choudary took home more than £25,000 ($39,000) a year in welfare benefits. He received £15,600 a year in housing benefits to keep him in a £3,20,000 ($4,95,000) house in East London. He got £1,820 council tax allowance, £5,200 income support, and £3,120 child benefits. Since welfare payments are not taxed, he pocketed the equivalent of a £32,500 ($50,000) salary. By comparison, the average British worker in Britain gets £26,936 ($41,000) per annum.

Choudary's boss, Syrian Omar Bakri, founder of the now-banned Al Muhajiroun, gouged the UK for £3,00,000 as benefits before being exiled to Lebanon: The money supposedly helped raise his six children including a daughter. Al Muhajiroun was active for a time in Pakistan during the early 2000s.

In Pakistan, the "mainstream" Muslim is growing up under the influence of "radical" clerics spawned by over 25,000 madrassas, most of them funded by the United States and Saudi Arabia, as the madrassa youths took part in the jihad in Afghanistan. They have the money today and they are powerful. The nation is "mainstreamed" by these radicals and converted away from the values still enshrined in Pakistan's "modern" constitution, which is often rebuked by the Council of Islamic Ideology for allowing modern banking and for disallowing underage girls' marriages.

The state wrongly thinks that the now-disabled jihadis can be "mainstreamed" after being "forgiven" for their violence, which the Paris-based Financial Action Task Force (FATF) says would be disastrous for Pakistan. Prime Minister Imran Khan has come out saying that Pakistan has to get rid of the country's jihadi organisations, which are still functional. Pakistan actually set up a National Action Programme (NAP) in 2014 to cleanse the country of elements that trespass on the "monopoly of violence" of the state. But the state has been "NAPPING" since then, refusing to accept that the nation has been "mainstreamed" by its tormentors.

The writer is consulting editor, Newsweek Pakistan

APRIL 13, 1979, FORTY YEARS AGO

INDIAN EXPRESS

New Govt to take over on Amin's capture

NEW UGANDAN REGIME

THE POLICY OF the new Ugandan government is likely to be non-aligned with a slight tinge towards the west. The delay in the announcement of the new government, members of which have already been chosen under the leadership of academic Yusuf Lulu, 67, is because President Idi Amin has not yet acknowledged his defeat. Today, Amin said in a radio broadcast that he is still in command of the situation as president of Uganda. Until Amin is captured, dead or alive, or his escape to some other country — probably to Libya where Colonel Gadaffi has promised him asylum — is confirmed, the new government will not be installed.

INDIRA CHARGED

SENATOR DANIEL MOYNIHAN'S special assistant, Ken Russert, declared yesterday that Moynihan "stands by everything that is in the book" — *A Dangerous Place* — which the senator wrote on his experiences in Delhi as ambassador. Moynihan revealed in the book that on two occasions the American government gave money to the Congress party, and, on one of these occasions the money was given personally to Indira Gandhi, who was then a party official.

DELHI POWER CRISIS

DELHI'S POWER STATIONS continue to be precariously placed with respect to coal stocks despite repeated assurance by the minister for energy, supported by the minister for railways. The Union Minister for Energy, P Ramachandran, told the consultative committee of MPs on December 19, that there was "a comfortable stock of coal for power houses". A week later, on December 26 last year, both the energy minister and the railway minister, Madhu Dandavate, assured the executive councilor, M L Khurana, that regular supply of coal would be maintained for running the power houses in the capital. But, a visit to the Badarpur Thermal Power Station revealed that the coal situation is far from satisfactory. Only two of its three workable units are in operation for the last four months due to coal shortage.

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The WikiLeaks founder (Julian Assange) must be held accountable for skipping bail. But extradition to America over this case would be wrong."

—THE GUARDIAN

A statistical embarrassment

Data claiming 45-year peak in unemployment is misleading. Indian institutions are still operating with the technology and outlook of 70 years ago

NO PROOF REQUIRED

BY SURJIT S BHALLA

THERE IS AN old saying — no, it is not a Chinese proverb — which says, "Be careful what you wish for, it might come true". At present, the political Opposition has made jobs and unemployment their number one issue to unseat the Narendra Modi government. If I were a Congress strategist, I would do exactly what they are doing. Jobs, and the economy, is where the BJP maybe the most vulnerable. And the perception of vulnerability is enhanced by the BJP's misguided stubbornness to not release the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data on the labour market. These data were for the period July 2017-June 2018, and this is the last official government survey on the labour market — it yielded the result that unemployment, at 6.1 per cent, was at a 45-year high.

Statisticians and economic experts, who should know better and probably do, are also siding with the Opposition with the belief (wish!) that the government will be intransigent enough not to release the data and thereby allow the perception to continue that the economy is really as weak as indicated by the PLFS data. This is where being careful of what you wish for comes in; once released, the PLFS data is likely to show that its conclusions are extremely flawed, and embarrassingly inaccurate.

In the next few paragraphs (and table) I report on labour market data for 2011-12, and 2017-18. As the reader peruses the evidence, she will realise that the PLFS data, and results, are in a class of their own — they don't conform to any known economic behaviour. But we won't know that until the data are released.

While the media (obviously!) has concentrated on the reported 45-year high in the unemployment rate (6.1 per cent in 2017-18 vs the 2.2 per cent in 2011-12), it is prudent to interpret in a detached manner other economic trends contained in the "leaked" report.

Count the inexplicable anomalies as we list them. First, some background about labour-market reports in India. The NSSO believes (erroneously) that the ratios obtained are sacrosanct, but not the survey method on which they are based. For example, to derive the important data on jobs, NSSO documents advise users to use the ratios that they provide (labour force participation rate, worker participation rate, etc.) and multiply the ratios by census-based population. Good advice, but how do you believe the building blocks of the survey-based ratios? For example, first the PLFS reports an urbanisation rate (a ratio) in 2017-18 of 29.3 per cent compared to an estimated 31.2 per cent in the NSSO's own survey for 2011-12. A decline of 2 percentage points, when the reality (yielded by every other observer) is an increase in urbanisation. How did this cross-check escape the NSSO or its oversight body, the National Statistical Commission (NSC)?

Second, the estimate for overall population in 2017-18 is off the charts — it is too low. The NSSO 2011-12 survey reported a population of 1,088 million; in 2017-18, it reports a population that is 14 million less. On a survey/census ratio (since the NSSO and NSC are fond of ratios) basis, the 2017-18 ratio of 82 per cent is the lowest observed for the last 40 years, if not ever. This is both an Indian and world record for population under-estimation.

Third, what explains this statistical junk? As lucidly pointed out by Avik Sarkar ('Unemployment in India: The real reason behind low employment numbers', *Financial Express*, February 28), it is the sampling technique, stupid. Inexplicably, and seemingly without much consultation with outside experts, the NSSO decided to radically change their sampling method — it was to be now based on educational attainment rather than household per capita consumption. It is one of the biggest statistical no-nos to select a sample based on a criteria that affects the behaviour you are trying to explain. Education affects labour market participation — the last thing you want to do is "select" on the basis of education. James Heckman got a Nobel prize in 2000 for obtaining reliable results when the sample behaviourally selects itself. And here we are imposing a selection bias.

Simply put, the PLFS 2017-18 survey is a huge statistical embarrassment and someone should inquire as to how it passed all the statistical checks and balances of the experts. My best "recovery" of what happened — the expert masters felt that the radical change in sampling method would not make much difference to the results.

A large number of households with lower educational attainment (with no member of the household having more than the secondary level of education) were missed out in the PLFS survey. These households are likely to be poorer, and more at work than members of the middle class. Missing them means that you are likely to skew the wage pattern in unbelievable directions. For example, poorer casual workers (those working on daily wages, including agricultural wages) show a big decline in their share in the work-force — a 20 per cent decline from 30.5 per cent of the work force in 2011-12 to 24.9 per cent in 2017-18. The higher income salaried workers show a large increase in employment share — from 19.3 per cent in 2011/12 to 22.8 per cent in 2017-18 — again, a near 20 per cent increase. Both these increases are unprecedented and suggest that contrary to the unemployment rate jump, the economy is doing very well.

But wait, there is more to "release" — all puns intended. Let us look at what has happened to the real incomes (wage) increase for the two sets of workers comprising almost half the working population (the rest are self-employed, like farmers, from whom the NSSO abstains from collecting any income data.

The higher income middle-class-salaried workers show a cumulative 18 per cent decline in their real incomes. Again, unprecedented. Well, there can be an explanation — look, everybody is getting educated (the sample selection is based on education), there is excess supply of educated people, and demand hasn't kept pace. Ostensibly because of GST and demonetisation. But wait, the real wages of the poorer casual workers, the ones who are out of jobs because of demonetisation, GST and lack of demand, have increased by 29 per cent.

If true, the PLFS data would indicate that the Modi government has unleashed the most inclusive growth anywhere, and at any time in human history. There should be a special Nobel Prize for this achievement. Forget farm distress — you are not counting income right. All the farmers have become farm labourers, in order to enjoy these high wages. And inequality-wallahs please note — Modi has engineered the highest inequality decline in history — and in just five years.

The PLFS results can be described in two words — shockingly untrue. The statistical masters who passed the PLFS data report with a "good house-keeping seal" should hang their heads in statistical shame. All the data are presented in the table — all the data are from the much leaked (and vaunted) media reports. Please, will any of the concerned citizens who have voiced shame, shame, censorship of government data, decline of public institutions, explain the array of evidence presented.

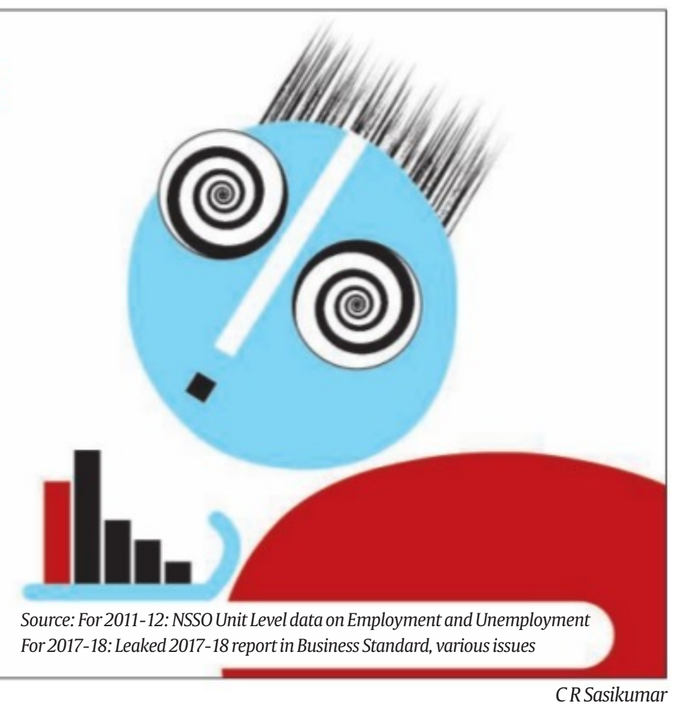
My view is that the PLFS data is a statistical embarrassment to India and the NSSO. We all complain about how institutions have gone down, and there are myriad complaints about the authenticity, or transparency, of Indian statistical data. The NSSO was a much-respected institution, as was the National Statistical Commission, which was first formed in 2006 under the chairmanship of the late Suresh Tendulkar (I was proud to serve under his leadership for the first three years of the Commission, 2006 to 2009).

Sadly, and extremely unfortunately, many, no, make it most, no make it all Indian institutions are still operating with the same mindset and technology and outlook that the pioneers did 70 years ago. The world, and technology, has moved on. But not us.

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express *and Consultant, Network 18. Views are personal*

NSSO PLFS DATA - BELIEVE IT OR NOT

	2011-12	2017-18	% change
Population (in mil)			
NSSO Survey	1088	1074	-1.3
Census	1220	1307	6.7
>=15 years			
NSSO Survey	763		
Census	848	937	9.5
Rates (%):			
Urbanisation	31.2	29.5	-5.8
Unemployment	2.1	6.1	65.6
As % of worker population			
Salaried Workers	19.3	22.8	15.4
Casual Workers	30.5	24.9	-22.5
Salaries & Wages (₹/day)			
Salaried Workers	397	475	16.4
Casual Workers	143	263	45.6
CPI Price Index (2012=100)	95.4	136.4	30.1
Real Salaries & Wages (2012 ₹)			
Salaried Workers	416.1	348.2	-19.5
Casual Workers	149.9	192.8	22.3



Source: For 2011-12: NSSO Unit Level data on Employment and Unemployment For 2017-18: Leaked 2017-18 report in Business Standard, various issues

C R Sasikumar

> Simply put, the PLFS 2017-18 survey is a huge statistical embarrassment and someone should inquire as to how it passed all the statistical checks and balances of the experts. My best 'recovery' of what happened — the expert masters felt that the radical change in sampling method would not make much difference to the results.

New year, new beginnings

Pahela Baishakh, celebrated on April 14, is a symbol of the indomitable Bengali spirit

SYED MUAZZEM ALI

SHUBHO NOBOBORSHO, HAPPY New Year! Greetings to you ahead of Pahela Baishakh, the first day of the Bengali calendar year 1426, that is April 14.

My introduction to this day came at a young age, in the early 1950s, in the sleepy town of Gopalganj (Faridpur) in Bangladesh, where my father was posted as the Sub Divisional Officer. On that day, my siblings and I would be invited to different shops and business houses, and treated to an array of delectable sweets. My only regret was that my favourite sweet, *jilebi*, was never offered to us as it was not considered "high class". We were told this ritual of offering sweets was a part of tradition, as *halkhata* (or new accounts books) were opened by tradesmen at the beginning of the new year, and customers were required to clear the past debts before the opening of the new book.

Curiously, the day was not a holiday — schools and offices would remain open. My mother explained that the Pakistani authorities refused to celebrate the day, ostensibly because it was not in line with "Islamic tradition". Once we moved to Dhaka, I realised that there too, the celebrations on this day were rather low key. Pakistani authorities continued to suppress Bengali culture and traditions, but resilience is a part of the Bengali soul, so we kept on resisting.

Chhayanaut, a premier cultural body, set up in 1961, started popularising Bengali songs by organising various public events. There was enthusiastic public response, and they were inspired to organise a public musical event in Ramna Park on Pahela Baishakh of 1967, under the old Banyan tree or Botomul: That marked the beginning of the celebration of Bengali *noboborsho* in the capital city of Dhaka. The Pakistani authorities did not look at this development favourably, and various attempts were made to kill the initiative. The more they tried to suppress the indomitable Bengali spirit, the more fiercely we resisted and the crowd kept getting bigger every year.

Since there was so much controversy about our Bengali calendar during the Pakistani reign, I became interested and started digging through history books to find out the reasons. History tells us that during the Mughal rule of Bengal, land taxes were initially collected from the peasants according to the Islamic Hijri calendar, which was based on the lunar calendar and did not often coincide with the crop cycle or "Fasholi Shon". Consequently, the peasants found it very difficult to pay taxes when it fell on the lean months. Emperor Akbar, being a pragmatic ruler, wanted a practical solution to the problem. Akbar's objective was to collect taxes at a time when the peasants had crop at home and money in their pockets. He asked his royal astronomer, Fathullah Shirazi, one of the famous nine gems of his court, to create a new calendar by synchronising the lunar Islamic calendar with the solar Bengali calendar: The result was the creation of the Bengali calendar. Akbar introduced the new calendar 1584 AD, and named it Tarikh-e-Elahi, or the calendar of God.

Some historians believe that King Shashanka had introduced this calendar in the seventh century, and Shirazi had developed his Fasholi Shon or crop calendar on the basis of that calendar. Others opine that Nawab Murshid Quli Khan, Mughal governor of Bengal, was the first to use Akbar's fiscal policy to start the Bengali calendar. Yet other historians, however, refuse to attribute the full credit to Akbar, underscoring the fact that there are evidences in various temples and scripts to suggest that the Bangabda or Bengali calendar, had existed long before Akbar. Whatever the origin, it is now established that the present Bengali calendar as introduced by Akbar remains, to this day, the basis for collection of land revenue in Bangladesh.

However, the Gregorian calendar, introduced by the British colonialists, still remains the sole official calendar of Bangladesh. The Bengali new year, based on the solar calendar, created a problem as Pahela Baishakh did not fall on the same day of the Gregorian calendar every year. The problem was resolved by a high powered committee headed by Muhammad Shahidullah in 1966, when they followed the Gregorian model by adding one extra day in the Bengali month of falgun every leap year. Since then, Bengali new year is celebrated every year on April 14 in Bangladesh. However, West Bengal and other Indian states, which have a significant Bengali population, do not follow this formula and they celebrate Bengali new year on 14 or on 15 April, depending on the solar cycle.

After the liberation of Bangladesh, the celebration of the Bengali new year received its due official recognition, and it is now a public holiday: People from all walks of life, irrespective of religion, celebrate with much fun and fanfare. Over the years, it has emerged as the biggest secular festival of Bangladesh where people can give expression to their cultural identity and heritage.

After independence, Bangladesh has seen a resurgence of Bengali cultural traditions and heritage. We are proud to have received international recognition (by Unesco) for some of them, too, like the observance of International Mother Language Day on February 21 and Mongol Shobhajatra on Pahela Baishakh. I may add here that Baisakhi celebration is not just a Bengali phenomenon: We see variations of Baisakhi in Nepal, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. During my foreign service training days in Lahore in the late 1960s, I was pleasantly surprised to see the Baisakhi celebrations there — with Punjabis flying kites, men and women wearing colorful dresses, and ladies adorning their palms with henna to mark the onset of Basant or spring. Their celebration was not at all different in spirit to ours.

In Bangladesh, "Kal Baisakhi" or Nor'wester storms happen during this time, clearing all the dust and dirt that accumulates during the winter. Slightly paraphrasing Tagore's words then, let us welcome Baisakhi — to clear our past sorrows, clean our world of heat and dust — and usher in a new year.

The writer is the High Commissioner of Bangladesh to India

Aligned interests and a big stick

That's what the West needs to meet challenge from China, Russia and others

SARJAN SHAH

AS A YOUNG undergraduate student of international affairs at the London School of Economics, I was excited by the possibilities of a cosmopolitan future, proud of the rules, convention, tradition and institution-based present and disdainful of the realpolitik of the past. While we were presented with "realism", "rationalism" and "revolutionism" as three theoretical frameworks with which to understand how nation-states interact with each other, we all knew that implicit in our education was a not-so-subtle hint that the world is — teleologically — moving from the conflict-driven past to the negotiation-driven present and integrated-driven future.

For much of the last 70-odd years, our post-war international system has been characterised by a somewhat superficial and somewhat substantive rules-based order. Countries acknowledge each others' sovereignty, a number of globe-spanning international treaties and organisations, and a wide array of formal and informal rules and norms of behaviour. War, while ever-present, seemed from the end of the Cold War onwards to have changed in character: Large-scale state versus state fighting seemed to have receded into history and low-intensity, long insurgencies and other forms of asymmetric warfare mushroomed. Great power rivalry seemed to have shifted gears towards economic competition within the framework of a global trade and finance system.

A decade or two ago, the West was smugly noting China's forced entry into the global economic system — opening up to international trade and capital flows and fuelling western consumption while polluting itself; Russia was weakened, boring and largely isolated. No other part of the world was even contemplating systemic alternatives to free markets and democracy, and western societies' undeniable advantage both systemically and culturally made a long-range triumph of western values and priorities all but inevitable.

By 2019, the picture seems to have altered dramatically. For a set of reasons too complex to fully explore here, important pillars of western leadership in the world are now creaking. Europe is in a fine, multi-layered mess of political and economic dimensions. The United States seems to have lost its sense of geo-strategic direction and is much distracted by domestic reactionaries, while its vaunted private corporations seem to have detached themselves entirely from national goals (the likes of Amazon, Facebook, Google, Apple and Microsoft have as much to do with the rest of the world for their profits as they do with US foreign policy objectives).

But whatever be the reasons for the West's decline, the current posture of Western politicians, diplomats and generals prevents an effective response to the moves of China, Russia, certain Middle Eastern powers and even North Korea. For even now, Western diplomats waste their breadth and ink at the United Nations — pursuing resolutions doomed to be vetoed — while US companies are forced to react to volatile stock markets while attempting to compete with Chinese corporations that are indistinguishable from Chinese state capital.

Meanwhile, Chinese and Russian diplomats have to pay nothing but fallacious lip-service to international norms, while their proxy cyber-warriors penetrate networks and steal critical information and their acquisitive companies act as instruments of state power through the construction of holistic infrastructure ecosystems in target economies — roads, rail, ports, aircraft and broadband and digital networks — all backed by Chinese capital, expertise and security.

The Chinese aren't and the Russians aren't willing to actually play by the rules, they see the rules as convenient artifices that have proved profitable to abide by in the recent past while being of no consequence when it is far more profitable to skirt, ignore or even blatantly violate them. Whether it is land-grabbing in Eastern Europe or the South China Sea, or one-sided and destructive economic agreements, whether it is stealing critical technology or installing government back-doors in leading Chinese tech products, the full spectrum of actions are available to Chinese strategists.

If the West continues to live in denial that the international order it authored is not just strained but probably obsolete, it will continue to handicap its best assets at the sharp end of the struggle against the Chinese and the Russians. While the very point of the struggle may be lost if Western tactics are to emulate their adversaries, there is surely no point in fighting with one hand tied behind one's back.

Perhaps the most important lesson to be learnt for theoreticians and practitioners is that aligned interests and a large stick are still the only guarantors of good behaviour in a system that still seems to reflect more of Hobbes than anyone else. Either the West recognises the peril and soon, or the end of the post-war order will be best described using a Hobbesian turn-of-phrase — "nasty, brutish, and short".

Shah is an alumnus of London School of Economics, Cambridge and Harvard, and lives and works in Mumbai

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

REFLECT DIVERSITY

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'A case for more electoral nuance' (IE, April 12). The idea of proportional representation and single transferable vote was debated in the constituent assembly. For reasons like illiteracy and the country's vastness, and going by the principles of the national movement, the founding fathers of the Constitution settled on the first-past-the-post system. For the scale of the electoral process in India, the proportional representation system seems too complex, demands greater number of personnel, more expense and an increase in voter education. A more rigorous anti-defection law, in contrast, is far more plausible.

Anirudh Parashar, *Solan*

OUR UNFREEDOMS

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The communal card' (IE,April 12). The Constitution provides for a range of freedoms that are guided by the principles of equality and secularism. India can be an ideal democracy if these provisions are followed. However, campaigns have narrowed down to "my religion" and "my community".

Titus Gonmei, *Ahmedabad*

STRESS ON PROBITY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'No dark spaces' (IE, April 12). The apex court has rightly dismissed the government's objections on the Rafale review petition. This ruling will stop the misuse of the secrecy clauses. The court has made it clear that the Official Secrets Act cannot be invoked to escape legal scrutiny on matters involving public money.

Lal Singh, *Amritsar*

LETTER OF THE WEEK

BETTER WORDS

THIS REFERS TO the article, "Anti-national' thoughts' (IE, April 10). Before the current regime came to office, the phrase "anti-national" was indeed used. But his government seems to have fixed a very particular definition for the term: Those who are not in favour or asking questions are called "anti nationals". It's better that terms and concepts like the HDI (Human Development Index) and Happiness Index find currency. These would be apt indicators of the working of democracy in India.

Manish Tailor, *Jaipur*

'Politics can bridge gap between shouting and talking... it's failing; rather, exploiting the gap'

What does nationalism mean in the context of Indian elections today? How are different social groups responding to the BJP's rhetoric on nationalism? To what extent do economic issues impact the way people vote? How is social media shaping ideas and political behaviour? In this Explained Conversation held before the first phase of voting for the new Lok Sabha, veteran analyst and professor of politics Suhas Palshikar explained a range of issues and questions around the elections to *The Indian Express* editors Harish Damodaran and Ravish Tiwari, and a select group of the newspaper's readers.

EXPLAINED by The Indian EXPRESS

On whether the discourse around the economy will have an impact on the Indian election at a time when tensions with Pakistan are high; in the US, for example, Bush Sr lost to Clinton even after the Gulf War, the principal reason being the economy:

Yes, it will, and the Prime Minister seems to be arguing also that his government has done well on the economic front. The deciding factor would be the actual experience that voters have gone through in these past five years, whether they think that the government has delivered on the 'Achchhe Din' promise. In fact, polls have found that the popularity of both the Prime Minister and the government have fallen since early 2018. When asked the open-ended question 'What is the country's biggest problem?', the answers were overwhelmingly related to the economy, unemployment being an example.

But there's a caveat: questions regarding the economy can be trumped by the nationalist argument and a personality cult. The government being unsure of how effectively it would be able to convince voters of the success of its economic policy, would turn to non-economic factors. Until the [February 26] Balakot strikes, I believed that the paramount consideration for voters was the state of the economy.

Also, it is important to note that when we say that the economy matters, it is actually the perception of the economy that matters. It is the perception, and not objective data, which makes the difference. Both the government and opposition are mistaken if they think they can only rely on objective data to convince voters.

The end of the Modi government's long honeymoon period, which survived even demonetisation, was spelt by an unfavourable perception of how things were going, and not by communal questions or incidents of lynching. It is the lived experience of the voter that is the most important.

On whether there is a parallel between the elections of 2019 and 2004, when too the opposition did not enjoy much credibility, and not many jobs had been generated; on whether Narendra Modi has something that Atal Bihari Vajpayee did not:

In 2004, surveys asked BJP voters whether they would vote for the party if Vajpayee was not on the ticket. Only 6% said that they would not vote for the BJP if Vajpayee was not the candidate. In striking contrast, 25% in 2014 said that it was the Modi factor that led them to vote for the party. It is indeed remarkable how this personality cult has been built. The efforts made to this end over the last five years have been unprecedented, and it is difficult to compare them even with those made by Indira Gandhi in the 1970s.

At the same time, as compared with today, the BJP was much weaker organizationally in 2004, as Vajpayee was too liberal to control the party in a top-down fashion.

On whether opposition parties would unite against the BJP over issues, as they did in 1977 or 1989:

There are reasons why opposition parties are not openly joining forces (against the BJP).

First, at this point of time, individual parties would want to expand their reach, and not give a chance to other rivals. For instance, the Congress, SP, and BSP would refrain from coming together (for the long term), even though the latter two have (done so for the Lok Sabha elections).

Second, it is noteworthy that while people today nurse a certain amount of dissatisfaction towards Modi, they are not completely disgusted with him. Grand coalitions happen only when people are completely disgusted by the party in power, and are waiting for a chance to throw it out. The Opposition should thus postpone the question of an alliance to after the elections. If the BJP lacks the numbers then, these parties can come together at that time to keep Mr Modi out of power.

It must also be taken into account that the BJP is now becoming a dominant all-India party. It is also becoming a hegemonic party in the sense that it is building the capacity to convince its voters that despite its flaws, the BJP is the only alternative. With the tremendous publicity campaign of the past five years, the party has been able to construct an image, which could persuade the people to vote for them.

On whether disenchanted farmers and the youth seeking jobs can still be convinced using cultural and nationalistic issues:

As opposed to economic problems, emotional issues always have a greater propensity to attract voters across social classes. We have seen that nationalism has been raised as an issue since 2014 not by the Opposition but by this government itself. There is now an understanding that nationalism means BJP, as people start believing that this is the only party that speaks of nationalism.

By constantly calling your opponents "anti-national" in order to win elections, you underscore a certain equation: that whenever there is a question of nationalism, we (the BJP) are there, and that the voter need not look elsewhere.

We have also been doing a study in over 21 states on politics and society in the period in between elections, in order to understand how people think about important issues in the absence of electoral fervour. We have seen from our data that while there are variations among states on emotive issues such as the slogan 'Bharat Mata Ki Jai', there seems to a consensus emerging around the country over the mainstream Hindi-Hindu heartland fervour, with Kerala and Tamil Nadu being the outliers. Large numbers of respondents across states answered in the affirmative when asked whether the government should punish those who eat beef. The current government has been able to construct this cultural consensus.

A strong majoritarian culture had begun to emerge even before Modi came to power, between 2004 and 2014. But one in two are now amenable to appeals of nationalism as opposed to one in three earlier. Nationalism now means a personal identification with the leader. If the leader becomes the nation and nationalism its basis, voters express themselves by voting for the leader.

On whether this trend exists across castes, community groups, generations, and rural and urban divides; whether castes such as, say, the Marathas think of nationalism while voting, going beyond traditional agrarian issues:

Our generalized understanding leads us to believe that rural folk are more rooted. However, the urban-rural divide does not operate this way. The government's campaign has had a penetrating effect, and even a gender divide in opinion does not seem to appear.

Caste does operate to the extent that the Adivasis still seem to keep away from this rhetoric. Whether decidedly or because of ignorance, we do not know, since several responses from them record 'Don't Know'. The SCs and STs are less keen to subscribe as well. In progressive circles, upper castes are bashed for all the ills facing the country. In fact, the middle peasantry communities are the ones subscribing to this rhetoric.

The links between data gathered show that the reason behind this is the state of the economy. Because one is so distressed economically, refuge has to be sought behind such ideological positions and ideas. Communities caught between the rich-poor argument find it much more necessary for their survival to go towards this kind of rhetoric.

I do not see the BJP as an upper caste party. 33% of the BJP's voters today are upper caste, but 39% are OBC. The BJP would never have come to power, even in the 1990s, if not for the OBC vote. As far as choosing Chief Ministers is concerned, inner-party dynamics are involved. The caste of an individual CM is a very limiting sociological analysis. It is interesting and useful, but I would not play it too much in analyzing the BJP.

The difference between the 1980s (when Jat Sikhs who could not transition to a better economic future began to see the Indian state as the enemy) and now is that you did not at that time (in the 1980s) have such strong rhetoric coming from the government. Indira Gandhi tried to an extent, but it worked against her. The communities in question right now do not necessarily believe in the government, but it is the rhetoric that is binding them.

On whether a course correction is required in the light of the significant changes that have been brought in by new technological factors like social media, and whether the elections could themselves provide that opportunity:

Social media is expanding rapidly, and becoming the first point of receiving information. There are WhatsApp groups, which spread certain prejudices or even a sense of pride in a particular community. Communities are coming up with their own traditions and narratives. This dual levelling, first of the possibility of accessing information, and the second of being able to articulate, is becoming a major development in the construction of what we describe as the 'public', and its ideas.

It is not just newspapers and their readers who matter now, it is also those connected with social media, which has made vast amounts of information accessible to large masses, while also producing new prejudices, and attenuated new stereotypes. Stereotypes about Muslims, for instance, get circulated far more easily today than they would have a few years ago.

Technology by itself is neutral. It empowers you in a certain manner. Whenever the rawness in the minds of the people is likely to surface, it becomes the task in a democracy of its parties or the organized political structure, as well as the leadership, to steer the country in a way in which this rawness transforms itself into the possibility of a public conversation. The distance between shouting and conversation has to be bridged. It will not be bridged on its own; it has to be bridged by an external agency called politics. This is where our politics is failing. Instead of bridging this gap, our politics is capitalising on this gap, making use of it, and surviving on this gap itself.

I am not blaming only one party, although one party in particular is definitely doing this much more than the others. This is a larger failure of politics. There is always a sub-stratum of rawness in public opinion, which has to be converted into something more humane, civilized, and conversational, and that is where a closure is seen in our politics.

Elections by themselves have a very limited corrective mechanism. Because elections are after all like going to restaurants — the menus are pre-set. Voters cannot collectively go and say that they want better politics and order something better, which is not offered on the menu. Our politics, even during elections or otherwise, does not think about expanding this menu.

On whether, and to what extent, governance matters:

Governance is a term coined by the World Bank in the late 1990s, aiming to describe how institutions are functioning. Talking about governance has become important suddenly because the World Bank says it is important. In the Indian context, the way democracy here has evolved over the years, emotive issues still remain, and our political parties therefore, do not bring governance issues to the centre of electoral competition.

If good governance or government means that institutions perform and governments deliver, we can say that both of these things do not happen. In the global South, institutions cannot perform, and governments deliver in fits. I ridicule the term 'governance' because, once you look at the global North-South divide, the gap between the expectations of performance on one hand and the availability of recourses on the other is so vast that this kind of slippage of 'governance' is bound to happen. Therefore, the global North telling us that we are failing on this count smacks of cultural imperialism.

Democracy by itself is highly complex. Force can be exerted by leaders, or forces can act upon leaders themselves; these leaders then convert it into rhetoric. How this rhetoric is perceived depends on where you are located in the society.

(Edited excerpts from the Conversation. Transcribed by Om Marathe)

Suhas Palshikar with Ravish Tiwari (right) and Harish Damodaran; the engaged audience at the Express Explained Conversation in Mumbai. *Pradip Das*

SUHAS PALSHIKAR
taught political science at Savitribai Phule Pune University. He is Chief Editor of the journal Studies in Indian Politics, and co-director of the Lokniti Programme for Comparative Democracy at CSDS, Delhi. Prof Palshikar is a veteran analyst of politics and elections in India, and writes frequently for *The Indian Express*.

WATCH VIDEO
https://www.facebook.com/indianexpress/videos/617578678713045/
https://www.facebook.com/indianexpress/videos/567052107133319/