



Slowing down fast

The downturn in industrial activity and the spike in retail inflation pose a policy challenge

Yet another indicator, worryingly, points to the Indian economy slowing down fast. Industrial growth was just 0.1% in February from the year-earlier period, the slowest pace in 20 months. Industrial output had expanded by 6.9% in February 2018. Industrial growth, as measured by the index of industrial production, has been slowing down considerably in recent months, dropping to just 0.2% year-on-year in November. Manufacturing, which has a weight of almost 78% in the index, continues to be the biggest drag, with output contracting by 0.3% as compared with an 8.4% jump in the year-earlier period. The largest contributor to the slowdown in February was the capital goods sector, which shrank by close to 9%, with the contraction widening from the preceding month's 3.4%. That the revision in this closely watched proxy for business spending plans has widened, from the 3.2% contraction reported last month, is striking. GDP grew by just 6.6% in the quarter ended December, the slowest pace in six quarters. Various institutions such as the Reserve Bank of India and the International Monetary Fund have been lowering their expectations for India's growth in the coming quarters. With other economic indicators such as the purchasing managers' index and high-frequency data like automobile sales also signalling weakening momentum, the overall scenario, when viewed along with the slowdown in industrial output, suggests that a turnaround in economic growth is not in sight.

Retail inflation as measured by the consumer price index reached a five-month high of 2.86% in March due to the rise in food and fuel prices. While price gains still remain below the RBI's stated inflation threshold of 4%, the trajectory is hardly bound to be reassuring. The RBI, which has cut interest rates at two successive policy meetings to help bolster economic growth, is likely to be tempted to opt for more rate reductions. While monetary easing could be an easy solution to the growth problem, policymakers may also need to look into structural issues behind the slowdown. The high levels of troubled debt in not just the banking sector but the wider non-banking financial companies are hurting credit markets, and unless these issues can be resolved, no amount of rate cuts would serve as an effective stimulus. To a large extent, the slowdown is due to investments in sectors that turned sour as the credit cycle tightened. In the fiscal year ended March, new investment proposals fell to a 14-year low, says the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy. Easing interest rates without reforms may only help hide investment mistakes instead of fostering a genuine economic recovery.

A mammoth election

Much is at stake in Indonesia's presidential, parliamentary and provincial polls, all in a day

Indonesia's single-day presidential, parliamentary and provincial elections on April 17 will be a mammoth exercise. It will also test the popular mood on President Joko Widodo's moderation, which has been under attack from the religious right. Popularly known as Jokowi, he is seeking a second and final term, as Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority nation, approaches 75 years since gaining independence from the Netherlands in 1945. Mr. Jokowi, a former Jakarta governor, from the ruling Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, faces Prabowo Subianto, a former army general, of the Great Indonesia Movement Party; they had clashed in the 2014 race too. Opinion polls show Mr. Jokowi winning comfortably. The roughly 5% rate of growth in GDP in the last few quarters is well below the President's 7% target, but is still an improvement over previous years. Sentiment has also turned positive since the rupiah regained its value after the slide during the 2018 currency crises in emerging markets and the return of capital flows. Jakarta's current account deficit, owing to a slump in exports, could cause concern unless the U.S.-China trade dispute is settled amicably. But the liberal-leaning President's challenges are linked to the poll-time rise in religious tensions.

In the 2014 contest, Mr. Jokowi's opponents played the identity card by claiming that he, a Javanese Muslim, was a Christian and a communist. In 2017, an ethnic Chinese and Christian successor of Mr. Jokowi as Jakarta governor was convicted of blasphemy soon after re-election. The government's subsequent ban on Hizb ut-Tahrir, an Islamist organisation wedded to the establishment of an international caliphate, underscored the difficulties in balancing conflicting political interests. Rising religious militancy in some regions of Indonesia has also endangered the rights of the LGBTQ community, denting the country's record of respect for cultural pluralism and tolerance of heterodox social behaviour. While the constitutional court in 2017 rejected a bid to ban same-sex marriages, human rights groups are concerned over the lack of anti-discrimination protections for gay persons. Mr. Jokowi's choice of an orthodox Islamic cleric as running mate is being viewed as an attempt to boost his religious credentials. In a unique Indonesian electoral operation, votes for thousands of seats, fought by hundreds of thousands of candidates at various levels, are tabulated manually in full public view during daylight hours. Final results of the April 17 polls are expected after weeks. The complex nature of the process and provision for quick counts based on a sample of the actual votes cast have in the past led rival camps to trade accusations of manipulation and intimidation. Mr. Jokowi, whose party narrowly won the 2014 legislative and presidential vote after spectacular poll ratings, would be acutely aware of the high stakes involved. A nascent democracy, Indonesia will hope to see through this transition with fortitude.

An India without the Left?

To understand the Left's central role, one has to take stock of the mass mobilisations to highlight injustice and inequity



VIJAY PRASHAD & SUDHANVA DESHPANDE

One out of every two Indians goes to bed hungry at night. That's almost 700 million Indians. The number comes from McKinsey. But you don't need a consultant to tell you about the distress in India. It is evident on our streets and in our fields. Agrarian distress (amplified by the suicide of farmers) and urban distress (illustrated by the growth of slums) have become normal. Policy from the Central government does not effectively address any of the challenges faced by over half of the Indian population. Deprivation and desolation set the mood. The emotional dial switches to anger ever so often.

The voices of peasants and workers, of Dalits and Adivasis are muffled. Most political parties ignore them, making their appeal to the middle-class as if this class should set the terms for political decision-making. It is evident that the real beneficiaries of government policy since 1991 have not been this middle class, but it has been what should be called an oligarchy (10% of Indians own 75% of India's social wealth). Centre-stage have been the interests of prominent business houses. Not the voice of Chhinna Balayya (a farmer from Parigi mandal, Andhra Pradesh, who killed himself) nor the voice of a 16-year-old girl from Gaya, Bihar who was killed in an

honour killing, nor hundreds of lakhs of people like them.

Amplifiers on the street

The amplifiers of the voices of the farmers and the workers, the women and the Dalits are one section or the other of the organised Indian Left and of leftist movements. One often hears chatter about how the Left is anachronistic or how the Left is marginal. Yet, in 2018, the Left played a central role in hundreds of public actions by ordinary people whose extraordinary courage stunned the nation. It was the long march of the farmers of Maharashtra in 2018 that pushed a section of the urban middle class to acknowledge the suffering in the countryside and to welcome the marchers to the outskirts of Mumbai late on a Sunday evening. When the farmers realised that the next day an examination for students had been scheduled, they picked up their belongings and marched into the night to reach Azad Maidan. This sensitive gesture won the hearts of Mumbai. It is one thing to keep saying 'farmers', and another to say that the farmers came as part of the All-India Kisan Sabha, a mass organisation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Farmers suffer the agrarian distress in a relatively isolated way, and the suicide of farmers is an illustration of their solitary experience of sorrow. It is the organisation that takes this loneliness and makes it political.

Across India, over the past year and more, people agitated against the vicissitudes of capitalism and the failure of the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to address this turbulence. There



PRASHANT WADNANE

was the agitation of the ASHA and Anganwadi workers, the workers and peasant march into Delhi, and the general strike in early January 2019 as well as other, smaller public actions. All of these were organised by trade unions and peasant and agricultural worker platforms of the Left. The Left and other left-liberal platforms — pushed by sensitive sections of the Indian public — fought against the dangerous cow protectors and the honour killing murderers. The most volcanic of these agitations were the cascading kisan mobilisations by the Left mass fronts in Rajasthan. These protests, along with those in Maharashtra and the peasant march into Delhi, put agrarian distress on the table. They are what contributed to the churning of political fortunes in the three Hindi-speaking States — Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh — where the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was defeated in the Assembly elections last winter. That the Left was not able to convert these mobilisations into more seats for Left candidates is a sad commentary on the Indian electoral system — where caste and other sectarian

affiliations, as well as sheer money power, determine the outcomes.

The Kerala example

A pall of gloom descended on the country after the disaster of demonetisation and the goods and services tax, after the daily reports of lynching and communal mobilisations, after the ghastly anti-science drift of intellectual institutions, after brutish language began to define public discourse. Meanwhile, in Kerala, the Left Democratic Front government provided an alternative discourse and practice. Small gestures of care were offered to break the rigidities of culture. The government provided free sanitary pads for schoolgirls in government schools, so that they would not feel the social penalty heaped on women for menstruation. Transgender rights came into focus, with some of Kochi Metro's ticket collectors being recruited among the transgender community. The divisiveness of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh was consistently fought by Kerala's incomparable Chief Minister, Pinarayi Vijayan, and his fellow Ministers.

Then came the massive flood that swept through the small State. Central government aid was paltry and slow. It was a reflection of how parties like the BJP tackle tragedy. Relief and rehabilitation, particularly for the poor, takes ages. When we travelled recently across the length and breadth of Kerala, in cities as well as the countryside, it was hard to imagine that the State had been ravaged by ferocious floods. A large part of the credit goes to the people of Kerala and the culture of public action in the State. They organised them-

selves in myriad, more or less spontaneous ways to help each other. The courage of the fisherfolk who ventured into the waters with no regard for their personal safety is one example. There were so many others.

Coupled with this was the attitude and fortitude of the Left Democratic Front government itself. It plunged into rescue and relief in an absolutely non-partisan manner. This was contrasted with the attitude of the Modi government at the Centre, which sought to penalise the people of the State for the government they had elected. It is also in sharp contrast to the Hindutva organisations, which gave even this colossal tragedy a sectarian and communal colour.

Being human

Imagine if there were no Left in India. Would anyone pay attention to the voice of the worker and the peasant, the voice of the dispossessed and the frustrated? Would anyone amplify their dreams and desires, their aspirations for a good life? Who would take up the Supreme Court order to allow women into the Sabarimala temple, or go out on the street to form a Women's Wall of lakhs of women? Who would stand for reason above division, social care above individual wealth? Years ago, Akbar Allahabadi sang, "You were people. With great difficulty you became human." That 'difficulty' is the place where the Left lives. Without its efforts, would humanity survive?

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Weather-vane of democracy

The Election Commission's weakening commitment to the Model Code of Conduct is cause for concern



RASHMI SHARMA

For the first time since the general election of 1996, the reputation of the Election Commission of India (ECI) has taken a beating. Subsequent to the 1996 election, which marked a turning point in the reduction of electoral malpractices, surveys showed that trust in the ECI was the highest among the major public institutions in India. However, there are now perceptions that the ECI has responded inadequately, or not at all, to violations of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), which is in effect from March 10 to May 23. Some examples in this election include the Prime Minister's announcement on national television of India's first anti-satellite weapon test, the Rajasthan Governor making statements in favour of the ruling party, leaders of the ruling party invoking the Indian Army in their election campaign, and, in a spate of dubious media initiatives, a continuous line of statements along communal lines.

The MCC, like the ECI itself, is a unique Indian innovation and encapsulates an important story about democracy in India — the conduct of free and fair elections.

Though just a brief set of guidelines, not law, the MCC is a powerful instrument. It comes into force when the ECI announces election dates and comprises directions to government functionaries, political parties and candidates aimed at an impartial election process. Important provisions include barring governments from making policy announcements to sway voters and restraining political actors from inciting hatred against any group, or bribing or intimidating voters.

Down the years

The origins of the MCC lie in the Assembly elections of Kerala in 1960, when the State administration prepared a 'Code of Conduct' for political actors. The leading political parties of the State voluntarily approved the code, which proved useful during the elections. Subsequently, in the Lok Sabha elections in 1962, the ECI circulated the code to all recognised political parties and State governments; reports were that it was generally followed. The emergence of the code and its voluntary acceptance by political parties showed the commitment of the political elite to the holding of free and fair elections.

However, from 1967 till 1991, as political competition intensified, political actors began to resort to corrupt electoral practices. Governments made populist announcements on the eve of elections,



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had pliant officials in key positions while intimidation of voters and booth capturing increased. The ECI's appeals to observe the code of conduct were largely ignored. The ECI now resorted to a familiar, but ineffective, strategy in Indian public life. It refined the code, making it more stringent by including a section about the misuse of powers by ruling parties and re-named it the MCC. Though it demanded that the MCC be incorporated in the law, no such law could be passed.

A turning point

After 1991, the ECI used new means to enforce the MCC. The then-Chief Election Commissioner, T.N. Seshan rebuked prominent political actors publicly and even postponed elections, thereby re-interpreting the ECI's power to fix election dates. The burgeoning electronic media of the time reported these initiatives with enthusiasm, while candidates were happy to capitalise on the mistakes made by their rivals. Conse-

quently, political actors began to take the MCC seriously, fearing it even if they did not respect it. The MCC now countered the lack of commitment of the political class to free and fair elections, the ECI began to command a new respect and electoral malpractices declined dramatically.

New flashpoints

Today, the MCC is at a crossroads, as is the ECI. Two distinct trends are visible. One, electoral malpractice has appeared in new forms. Voter bribery and manipulation through the media have become the techniques of unethical influencing voters in place of voter intimidation and booth capturing. These malpractices are harder to stem. Booth-capturing is an identifiable event, taking place at a particular time and place. Voter bribery is spread over time and space. Voters resent being intimidated and are likely to cooperate with authorities in preventing it, but may be willing to be bribed. The misuse of the media is difficult to trace to specific political parties and candidates.

The ECI's response to the new challenges has been inadequate. It has appointed expenditure observers, evolved a code for social media, and, very recently, after a spate of criticism, stopped the release of biographical pictures that could influence voters. But there is little evidence that it has got to the core of the problem as it did after

1991. As in the pre-1991 phase, its efforts have hardly borne fruit. At the same time, the misuse of money and media power has intensified since the last two elections.

The second trend is that the ECI's capacity to respond to the older types of violations of the MCC has weakened. Its response to inappropriate statements by powerful political actors has been weak, or delayed. Consequently, political actors are regaining the confidence to flout the MCC without facing the consequences. As the ECI's capacity to secure a level playing field has dipped, attacks on it have increased. They now encompass its processes such as the use of electronic voting machines, which had become acceptable when the ECI was stronger. A vicious cycle has been set in motion.

The MCC is, in many ways, the weather-vane of our democracy. The initial idea of free and fair elections was embraced by the political elite voluntarily, and the MCC emerged. Over time, the commitment of the political class to free and fair elections declined, and it flouted the MCC. During the early to mid-1990s, the ECI enforced the MCC on reluctant political actors, and MCC began to be feared, if not voluntarily followed. Today, the ECI's own commitment to the MCC seems to have weakened, a bad omen for our democracy.

Rashmi Sharma is a former IAS officer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Opposition on EVMS

The move by some parties in the Opposition to approach the Supreme Court again to demand verification of at least 50% of VVPATs with the electronic voting machines is odd (Page 1, April 15). It appears that the Opposition wants to disturb established democratic processes, such as stalling the checking of money power in elections and raising unwarranted doubts over the EVM which has shown its worth in terms of faster and error-free operations, thus enabling free and fair elections.

Does the Opposition want to return to an era of booth capturing and a troublesome ballot box system? Why this wicked and cunning intent to derail a working system?

V.S. GANESHAN,
Bengaluru

Opposition over the dependability of EVMS is strange. Will these leaders care to recollect that it was on the basis of these very EVMS that they were returned to power in States such as Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh? Do these leaders mean to say that the EVMS started misbehaving after the completion of Assembly elections? To the common man, the new and renewed demand sends out a signal that these leaders and parties are making accusations in anticipation of their defeat. While there is always scope for improvement in efficiency and transparency, making wild allegations does not help in creating a positive image

S.V. RADHAKRISHNAN,
Chennai

■ The move by some Opposition parties could have a snow ball effect. The continuous levelling of

allegations about the credibility of EVMS could destroy the trust of the common man in the electoral process. It could discourage people from voting and have long-term implications on the voter turnout. Also, the global perception that the most transparent electoral process takes place in India could be reversed. The Opposition has to understand the impact of what it is doing.

SIMRAN AGARWAL,
Jaipur, Rajasthan

■ Technology always moves forward and the demand for paper-based votes is backward thinking. Instead the demand should be for incontrovertible proof of tamper-proof software. In the event of an EVM malfunctioning, there must be a foolproof spare EVM. This is where the ECI needs to be nimble and give no room for complaint. The electoral system cannot be subverted by wily politicians

out to ensure their self-preservation. The poll code also needs to be reinforced.

B. GANGA RAJU,
Hyderabad

Corporates and deals

It has become a fashion to berate the corporate world for political gains without examining the role they can play in the development of the country (Page 1, "Anil Ambani firm got tax relief after Rafale deal: French paper", April 14). No doubt there are procedural lapses in the Rafale deal which definitely warrant a probe. However, the revelations have not progressed beyond that phase to the level of evidence of corruption. No middlemen were involved in the exercise. In this context, the 'continued assault' on the business house connected with the Rafale deal, on the basis of conjecture largely based on media reports, is nothing but a tactic especially by the

Opposition to gain political mileage in the general election. For argument's sake, if the government was favouring the business group, would its owner be in such dire straits today and faced with a crumbling empire? In this entire saga, one only wishes that the NDA government had yielded to a probe instead of stonewalling as soon as reports of alleged transgressions surfaced earlier. This would have not only helped clear the air but also avoided a court intervention and prevented uneasiness in the corporate world.

V. SUBRAMANIAN,
Chennai

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In the FAQ page story on capturing the image of a black hole (April 14, 2019), the reference to *Sagittarius A** needs to be corrected to *Sagittarius A*. In the same story, in the answer to the question, "What has been discovered?", the reference to 55 trillion light years should read 55 million light years.

It is the policy of The Hindu to correct significant errors as soon as possible. Please specify the edition (place of publication), date and page. The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300 (11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday); Fax: +91-44-28552963; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in; Mail: Readers' Editor, The Hindu, Kasturba Buildings, 855 & 860 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002, India. All communication must carry the full postal address and telephone number. No personal visits. The Terms of Reference for the Readers' Editor are on www.thehindu.com

Respecting leaders in a democracy

We do not defer to our rulers. Our equals, they earn our respect only if they perform well



RAJEEV BHARGAVA

Respect for politicians is in short supply in our times. Most citizens of contemporary democracies seem to tolerate, not respect, those they elect. Are we troubled by the absence of respect in politics? Should politicians even be accorded respect? If yes, what form of respect must they get?

Directive respect: Egalitarian
'Respect' has multiple senses, of which three are relevant here. One sense, that might be called 'directive respect', was elaborated by the late 18th century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant. For him, respect had the force of an authoritative moral instruction, a directive. Why? Kant understood that humans in their social interactions can never entirely eliminate using one another for personal benefit. When I enter a bus, I approach the conductor not out of love, affection or curiosity, but with one goal in mind: to purchase a ticket to travel. And the conductor is in the bus to do a job for the bus owner: sell tickets. All of us – the passenger, the conductor, the driver and the bus owner – relate to each other as instruments to achieve our respective ends: travel home, earn a livelihood, make profit. However, Kant argued, while this may well be so, each must also keep in mind that we are moral agents with distinct purposes, with our own subjective take on the world, with the capacity to endow the world with meaning, purpose and value. In short, we have inherent dignity that imposes limits on the extent to which we can use each other for personal benefit. I can't treat the bus conductor as a mere thing to be pushed around, offended or humiliated, even as I buy the ticket from him. I must respect him.

To reiterate, the quality of dignity that inheres in a person is the ground for a moral directive not to treat someone only as an instrument to realise my purpose but also always as a person with distinct purposes of her own. Put differently, to respect others is not just to have an attitude, but



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also to act towards humans in a way that does not merely use them. This is what makes it a form of directive respect. In addition to being directive, Kant's notion is also egalitarian. This is because each of us commands this respect regardless of our differential social status or position, class, gender, race, talent or achievement.

Directive respect: Hierarchical
This egalitarian feature alone differentiates it from another instance of directive respect where the quality that commands respect from others inheres not in the person qua person but in the social position she occupies or the role she performs. Thus, children must respect their fathers; wives, their husbands; servants, their masters; lower caste people, those in higher castes; and so on. Indeed, this unequal status is the original site of the idea of respect, its breeding ground. The notion of respect was for long intertwined with ideas of superiority and inferiority and had deep hierarchical overtones. Virtually indistinguishable from fear and deference, it was expressed not only in words but through silence and bodily stances. Thus, a person believed to be inferior could not call a superior by his name; could not look him in the eye; always had his or her head bowed or covered; could not touch any part of the superior person or could, at best, touch only his feet; was always to obey, do as he was told, never question or even respond.

This hierarchical notion of directive respect has not disappeared

from our society (as many had hoped) and continues to permeate social relationships. But disturbingly, just when we thought that because of our anti-colonial struggle and equality-centred reform movements led by Jyotirao Phule, Mahatma Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar, it is fading away from politics, it appears to be raising its ugly head again. Revived here is the older, deeply hierarchical idea of respect as deference which brooks no dissent, muffles voices, demands unquestioning silence from all. It is also being used to elicit obedience to a 'supreme leader'. This appears to be happening not only in India but in many other polities of the world. I am told that many conversations between Trump loyalists and his critics come to an abrupt, screeching halt by the complaint that critics don't respect the President. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán says that any attack on his policies is a sign of disrespect for Hungary. The Turkish writer, Ece Temelkuran, drew attention to similar demands by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. When charged with rigging the polls, Mr. Erdogan claimed that this showed disrespect to the people of Turkey and their choice.

The hierarchical notion of respect is a one-way street and incompatible with the very idea of democracy. The egalitarian notion of respect articulated by Kant, a perfect riposte to respect as deference, is presupposed by democracies and relevant as a value in relationships among citizens but is too general to be of use in the specific context of citizen-ruler relationship.

Does this mean then that respect for politicians is entirely dispensable in democracies? I don't think so.

Evaluative respect

Another kind of respect exists: this is owed to people not because of what they are or their social position but by virtue of what they have achieved. This may manifest in some praiseworthy qualities of character such as moral integrity or by perfecting some skills as a cricketer or scholar. This respect consists in an attitude of positive appraisal of the person's moral qualities or non-moral skills. Here respect is not presumed but earned. We can appropriately say that this attitude of respect is deserved when a person meets some standards of excellence integral to that practice. Precisely because it is something one achieves, it can also be a matter of degree. Rightly or wrongly, one can say that one has greater respect for Sunil Gavaskar than, say, Chetan Chauhan, or Jawaharlal Nehru than, say, Govind Ballabh Pant.

It is this notion of 'evaluative respect' or 'appraisal respect' that is relevant in democratic politics. Politicians occupy a contingent political position where they have a job to perform: work for the common good; ensure that everyone is treated as an equal, not suffer from negative discrimination at the hands of the government; get what the people need; ensure that there is peace and justice. Also, that they work truthfully, sincerely, transparently. When politicians achieve these goals and behave in accordance with the highest standards of political morality, they earn our respect. When they fail to do so, we begin to disrespect them.

There is no question of hierarchical respect or deference to our leaders in modern, democratic politics. It is our right to question, challenge and criticise our politicians. All power wielders, including the Prime Minister, must submit to these demands. All of us, the rulers and the ruled, are bound by norms of egalitarian respect more generally, and by evaluative respect specific to democratic politics in particular. To our politicians, we can only say: perform well, and earn our respect!

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A lot to say, but little to offer

The current nationalist hysteria does not enable the voter to make her choice in tranquility



SWAMI AGNIVESH

Elections are an opportunity for people to express their will. In healthy situations, electioneering is undertaken with sensitivity to a people's welfare. When public life becomes pathological, electioneering becomes indifferent to lived realities. People allow themselves to be bewitched by rhetorical demagoguery. Instead of choosing what is good for them, people punish persons and parties they are made to dislike.

The will of a people is that their real-life needs must be addressed. It is that governance should become a medium through which welfare is enhanced. If this is the case, electioneering will focus on the issues that concern the people. Good governance is its by-product. Governance stands rooted in freedom and justice for all. Good governance is not a matter of growth-related statistics or muscle flexing against political rivals.

The essence of freedom in a democracy is that citizens are able to exercise their right to choose in an informed fashion. It is to this end that electioneering and exercising one's franchise need to be 'free and fair'. Political parties which try to vitiate electioneering with extraneous factors so as to determine how citizens exercise their franchise can have no interest in providing good governance. That they feel obliged to resort to such strategies is tantamount to a confession that they have failed in providing good governance.

Nationalistic hysteria

Consider, for example, the promise of development that dominated electioneering in 2014 ('*achhe din*'). But this promise does not figure at all in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's electioneering this time. Instead, he is busy whipping up 'national security' hysteria. The need to tom-tom 'national security' arises only because of an aggravation of insecurity. Admittedly, national security has deteriorated under Mr. Modi's watch, through terrorism and cross-border hostilities.

The strange thing is that this distressing sign of the failure of governance is being used to whip up nationalistic hysteria to prevent factual and rational thinking. This undermines the capacity of citizens to make rational choices conducive to their welfare. The purpose of jingoistic propaganda is to ensure that people do not express their will

through franchise, but vote according to the will of somebody else. No election conducted amid mass hysteria can be 'free or fair'. The Election Commission is in denial of realities, even if it maintains otherwise. The prescription that electioneering shall stop 48 hours before voting takes place is meant to provide voters the serenity to think for themselves in a calm and collected fashion. But thinking does not take place in a vacuum; it is substantially influenced by what a person has been exposed to in the immediate past. It is naïve to assume that the potent effect of jingoistic propaganda will wear off in two days. Propaganda of this kind affords the party in power a huge advantage over its rivals. All the more so given the support it enjoys of a partisan media, augmented by an army of social media warriors who enjoy freedom to distort information.

Even this would not have proved so lethal, but for the disarray among the Opposition parties, which seem to not know who to fight. Much of the impact of Mr. Modi's speeches stems from the Opposition's immaturity and irresponsibility. As of now, these parties seem to lack vision and consistency. When a voter, as yet unsettled by pro-Modi propaganda, weighs her options before deciding who to vote for, she is likely to wonder if there is a viable alternative to endorse.

An irresponsible campaign

Elections must be fought on real-life issues. To fight is to stay focused. The outcome of staying focused is that the public are educated on the ground realities vis-à-vis the issues that concern them. Only within such a framework can alternatives be identified.

Instead, the energy in the present electioneering has gone into generating waves of mutual acrimony. The alleged inferiority of Opposition parties does not alleviate the deprivations of the people. The sole point on which the present electioneering is strategised is that people have no alternative other than oneself. Parties vie with each other in proving that all are vile and unworthy. Neither formation offers anything convincingly positive to decide rationally which way to turn.

But this one thing I know: the Modi show is based on violence and malevolence – linguistic, sentimental, ideological and communal. His idea of patriotism is no more than hostility towards Pakistan. But time will prove that reducing the outcome of the world's largest democratic franchise to settling scores with a neighbouring country, in utter indifference to pan-Indian lived realities, is at once idiotic and irresponsible.

Swami Agnivesh is a social activist

SINGLE FILE

The road to Kashmir

Respecting human rights is not at odds with providing security, but an essential component of it

MEENAKSHI GANGULY



After authorities declared that the highway linking Udhampur in Jammu to Baramulla in Kashmir will be closed to civilians for two days every week until May 31, Jammu and Kashmir residents reported extreme hardship in transporting products and getting services, including critical health care. In a letter to the Home Minister, 26 members of civil society and retired public officials, many of whom have been associated with Jammu and Kashmir, warned that the decision "undercuts our democratic credentials and attracts the charge of military rule". Many blamed the government's approach towards the Kashmir insurgency and towards Pakistani support for armed groups – an approach that both admirers and critics have described as "muscular".

Armed attacks and human rights violations have soared in Kashmir in recent years. The violence has taken a heavy toll on security personnel and civilians. Over 800 alleged militants have also been killed in the last five years, and security experts have reported increased recruitment of young Kashmiris by armed groups. There are allegations that security forces use excessive force to quell protests, causing serious injuries including permanent blindness. Hundreds have been held under the draconian Jammu and Kashmir Public Safety Act, which permits up to two years in preventive detention. Kashmiris also complain about rude treatment by security forces during search operations.

The "muscular" approach may also have encouraged a culture of collective punishment against Kashmir's Muslim citizens. On social media, admirers of the ruling party no longer distinguish between protesters armed with stones and militants armed with guns – they are all called terrorists. Kashmiri students, traders and street vendors in various cities across India have been threatened in mob attacks. In a shocking case of communal hate, following the rape and murder of a Muslim child in Kathua, a hard-line Hindutva group publicly supported the accused.

Kashmiris have expressed concern that the restrictions on civilian use of the highway is another form of collective punishment because of the attack in Pulwama in February. The State Human Rights Commission noted that "school-children, medical patients, government and private employees, as well as other civilians, will not be able to reach their destinations well in time." Under international law, measures such as closing a crucial highway that undermine fundamental rights to movement, food and health must be narrowly tailored and proportionate to a legitimate governmental aim. While the authorities have a responsibility to provide security, they need to recognise that respecting human rights is not at odds with providing security, but an essential component of it. What should occur is a muscular approach to minimise the hardships Kashmiris face and ensure that protecting their fundamental rights is a priority.

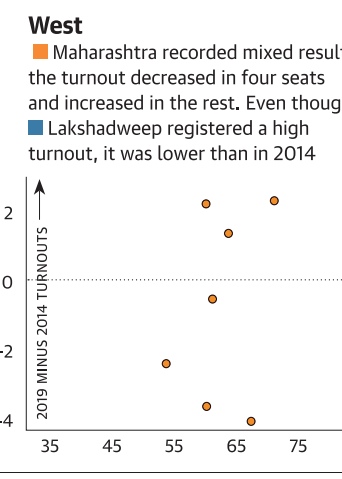
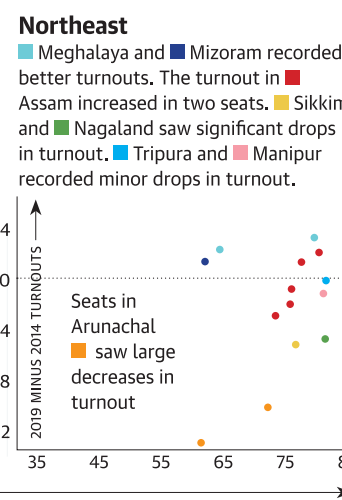
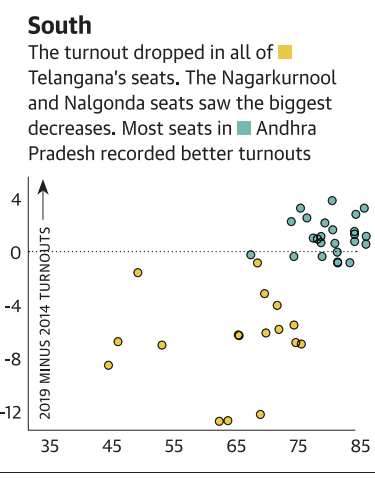
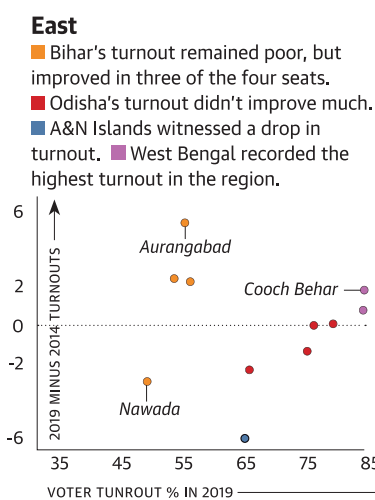
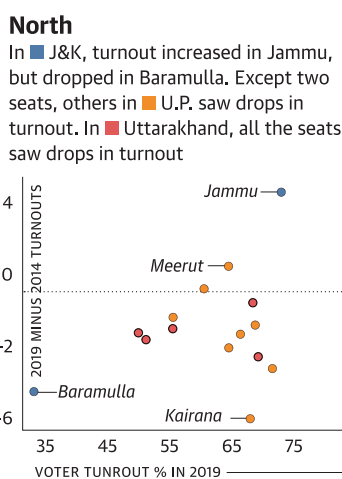
The writer is South Asia director at Human Rights Watch



DATA POINT

A marginally lower turnout

Voter turnout in a majority (58%) of the 91 seats in the first phase of this general election was lower than in 2014, according to provisional data released by the Election Commission. The overall turnout in these seats was 69.43%, compared to 70.8% in 2014. The graphs capture variations in turnout across regions. Each circle denotes a seat. Seats above the horizontal zero line registered a better turnout in 2019 compared to 2014. By The Hindu Data Team



The lone seat in Chhattisgarh (central zone) saw an increase of 6.4% points in turnout. Source: Election Commission

FROM The Hindu ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO APRIL 16, 1969

Constitution Bill on Assam passed

The Lok Sabha to-day [April 15, New Delhi] passed with an overwhelming majority of 369 votes to 28 the Constitution (22nd Amendment) Bill to enable the formation of an autonomous State for the hill districts of Assam. The Union Home Minister, Mr. Y.B. Chavan, who piloted the measure, firmly ruled out the possibility of extending a similar arrangement to Telengana or to any other region in the country. "Assam is a separate case, because already autonomous hill districts exist under the Constitution," he said. "It is wrong," he said, "to draw a parallel between Assam and Telengana. The question of Telengana is different. It has a different connotation. We have to consider the Telengana problem in the Telengana way." Conceding a demand for autonomous States within States would be the beginning of the disintegration of the country, Mr. Chavan said. There was record attendance in the House and the Congress Party took every precaution to see that its members were present at the time of voting in almost full strength.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO APRIL 16, 1919.

German Missionaries.

In the Commons [in London] replying to Mr. Hailwood who alleged that great harm was being done to British interests in India and Far East by the seditious efforts of German Missionaries, and who asked if they were specially exempted from deportation, Mr. Harmsworth referred to Mr. [Secretary of State for India] Montagu's answer of July 1st. So far as India was concerned since then the situation had not changed in any way. Government was aware of the political activities in Far East of certain German Missionaries, but it was open to doubt whether British interests were greatly harmed thereby. The question of exemption from repatriation of German missionaries in China was being considered. His Majesty's Minister at Peking had been instructed to expedite repatriation of those whose attitude rendered them obnoxious during the war.

POLL CALL

Booth capturing

Booth capturing is an electoral fraud whereby supporters of a political party "capture" a polling booth and vote in place of the registered voters there in order to ensure that their candidate wins. The first recorded instance of booth capturing took place in the 1957 Bihar Assembly election; in later elections more rampant booth capturing was reported across the country. Under the Representation of the People Act, 1951, booth capturing was made punishable by law. On the ground of booth capturing, a poll can be adjourned or countermanded. Electronic Voting Machines were introduced in India in place of the paper ballot to, among other things, prevent this malpractice.

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Blog: Umpire, umpire, on the wall, who is the fairest one of all?

<http://bit.ly/UmpiringTHREad>