



For a free referee

The Election Commission must be unfailingly strict in ensuring a fair election

It took more than a rap on the knuckles by the Supreme Court before the Election Commission of India stirred from slumber amid repeated violations of the law and transgressions of the Model Code of Conduct in the ongoing election campaign. In fact, the EC had appeared to be willing itself into inaction amid a flurry of abusive and divisive speeches by pleading powerlessness to act. On Monday, the Supreme Court came down heavily on the EC for its lack of initiative in enforcing the law. The EC cracked the whip soon after the court's censure and barred four leaders accused of intemperate speeches from campaigning for varying durations of time. By suggesting a clinical parity between BSP chief Mayawati's call for Muslims to not divide their votes, and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's speech in which he characterised the election as a contest between 'Ali' and 'Bajrang Bali', in a reference to Muslims and Hindus, the EC perhaps wanted to demonstrate impartiality. However, it needs to do much more to be seen as a fair referee. The incumbent members of the EC may end up expending the accumulated trust in the institution if they do not consistently and unfailingly demonstrate efficiency and neutrality in enforcing the law and the MCC.

For now, the EC has managed to redeem that hope to some measure, but not entirely. Article 324 of the Constitution gives the commission the powers of "superintendence, direction and control" of elections. Through the Representation of the People Act, other rules and orders, by the apex court and the EC, the system governing the Indian electoral process has evolved, and continues to do so. The EC has powers to deal with newer challenges that crop up, such as the easy dissemination of misinformation with the help of technological tools in recent years. While responding to new situations by changing the legal architecture is essential, the EC needs to build upon a fundamental premise of the rule of law, which is, 'be you ever so high, the law is always above you.' Prime Minister Narendra Modi has brazenly violated a directive of the EC that campaigners must not seek votes by invoking the name of the soldiers. Continuing raids by Central agencies targeting only Opposition leaders and the blatant partisanship of the public broadcaster, Doordarshan, smack of misuse of power by the incumbent government. The EC is vested with powers to ensure a free and fair election. Under Chief Election Commissioners like T.N. Seshan and J.M. Lyngdoh, the commission has in the past shown the capacity to come up with creative solutions that adhere to both the spirit and the letter of the law. Their examples should encourage the EC to find strength in its constitutional mandate and not plead helplessness in the face of challenges to its authority. The Supreme Court too made the EC conscious of its own powers once more.

Kohli's 15

India is hoping to deliver by packing the team with experience

The ICC World Cup is cricket's holy grail. The quadrennial event played through the One Day International (ODI) format often shapes the legacy of squads and players. It is the one championship where all leading Test-playing teams congregate, and once a unit wins the World Cup, the ambiguity ends and arguments cease. With the 12th edition set to commence in England on May 30, there had been immense interest in the Indian team's composition. The selectors, led by M.S.K. Prasad, have decided to give an experienced crew to Virat Kohli. Many summers ago, M.S. Dhoni said that a player should have a minimum of 50 ODIs under his belt before playing in the World Cup. The former captain's logic was that an experienced cricketer would have more game-awareness. The present squad ticks that box. Among the 15, nine have played more than 50 ODIs, with Dhoni leading at 341; four are hovering close to the 50-mark; and only K.L. Rahul (14) and Vijay Shankar (9) are below that mark although there is no mistaking their talent. The Indian team has explosive batsmen, incisive fast bowlers and wily spinners. The all-rounders' quartet of Shankar, Hardik Pandya, Ravindra Jadeja and Kedar Jadhav also gives Kohli varied options when India opens its campaign against South Africa at Southampton on June 5.

The Indian team can deliver, but it could face tough opponents in hosts England and Australia, bolstered by the return of Steve Smith and David Warner. Kohli, Dhoni, Rohit Sharma and Shikhar Dhawan will be under pressure to fire with the bat; the bowling, featuring the remarkable Jasprit Bumrah, has to strike. Bumrah's delivery stride might inflict a bio-mechanical strain on his body, but he has sparked and has adequate support in Mohammed Shami's pace and Bhuvneshwar Kumar's swing that gains extra bite under the overcast English skies. Meanwhile, wrist spinners Yuzvendra Chahal and Kuldeep Yadav have Kohli's backing. Additionally, there is Jadeja's left-arm spin and Jadhav's off-spin to bank upon. Dinesh Karthik's selection as the reserve wicket-keeper ahead of youngster Rishabh Pant stirred a debate, but the former's experience tilted the scales. There was heartburn for Ambati Rayudu but Rahul has prospered in the current Indian Premier League, and in an emergency, he can also step in as a wicket-keeper. In any case, Pant and Rayudu have been named as stand-bys. The accommodation of so many glove-men in the team is an acknowledgement that, at 37, Dhoni might suffer an injury in a long-drawn tournament that concludes on July 14. India will return to cricket's birthplace for one more tilt at the title, and the memory of Kapil Dev holding the 1983 World Cup at Lord's remains as potent as ever before.

The limits of populism

It is very difficult for an incumbent government to offer biographical solutions to structural problems



SAJJAN KUMAR

Democracy and populism are cousins. A charismatic leader mesmerises the electorate, strikes an emotional chord and blurs the distinction between the leader and the led. However, a charismatic-popular-populist pitch doesn't automatically transcend into populism. It requires demagoguery wherein hitherto suppressed but popular desires get articulated by a mesmeriser who emerges as the saviour. Both Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru were charismatic but not populist as they assumed a guiding role *vis-à-vis* the people rather than getting subsumed by their worldview. Gandhi didn't hesitate to withdraw the non-cooperation movement in the aftermath of Chauri Chaura when it gained momentum, and Nehru stood for secularism and scientific rationality in the midst of Partition's mass frenzy. The popular and the populist can be perfect strangers or bedfellows, and their transition into populism lies in a social, political and electoral mix.

History of populist elections

Against this backdrop, post-Independence India witnessed the first populist national election transcending into populism in 1971, on the plank of Indira Gandhi's "Garibi Hatao" slogan. Being true to the saltiness of the turbulent late-1960s and 1970s, she adopted left-wing populism, denouncing her rivals as right-wingers. To be called right wing at the time im-

plied being anti-democratic, anti-people and anti-poor. That populism made the leader and the led coterminous. It was even proclaimed that 'Indira is India'.

What makes an election populist and determines its final transition into populism? The answer can be found by locating the constituent elements of the package. First and foremost, one needs a democratic set-up – real or farcical – as the 'masses' are indispensable to populism. Second, a charismatic leader is required, someone seen as an insider-outsider in the system offering a therapy for an ailing polity. It denotes a politics of 'impatience' and 'exasperation'. Institutions and established procedures are seen to be subverted by the privileged elite to retain their advantage over the 'masses'. The collective quest then is for a larger-than-life saviour to recover the national self. Third, a leviathan demon must be imagined whose destruction only a messiah is capable of causing. This takes the focus away from institutions/structures to personalities. A perfect battleground of protagonist vs. antagonist is drawn. In a nutshell, populism offers a biographical solution to structural problems. A saviour is presented who must seek popular approval to take the demon head on. An election in a democratic set-up is the perfect occasion for this crusade.

Since 1971, India has witnessed three more populist national elections transcending into populisms of various kinds, in 1977, 1989 and 2014, when the collective democratic quest in the electoral arena seemed to be for a saviour rather than a leader. On every occasion elections appeared like a biography of a new saviour. Pollsters and political analysts call this pheno-



menon the 'leadership factor'. So, if 1971 was about Indira Gandhi, 1977 was about Jayaprakash Narayan, 1989 was about the sudden metamorphosis of an erstwhile feudal leader, V.P. Singh, into an anti-corruption crusader, and 2014 was about Narendra Modi promising epochal change.

The story since 2014

True to the populist requirement, Mr. Modi emerged as the complete package, being everything to everyone. A 'Hindu-Hriday-Samrat' to the Hindutva constituency, a 'developmentalist' for the corporate and middle class, a ray of hope for the rural masses, an ultra-nationalist for those sensing a national drift, a 'chaiwala' for the poor, and an insider-outsider to the masses feeling vanquished by the very system that is supposed to empower them. Thus, the circle of electoral populism that emerged from the leftward vantage point in 1971 got completed in 2014 with the right-wing populism of Mr. Modi.

However, the political journey since 2014 reveals something mammoth. The charisma Mr. Modi used to exude is dipping, if it has not vanished entirely, opening up a new political scenario without charismatic/mass leaders. At present, India doesn't have charismatic leaders like Bal Thackeray in

A crisis of credibility?

While nothing bars the EC from asserting its authority, it still needs institutional safeguards to protect its autonomy



S.Y. QURAISHI

The Election Commission of India (EC) is a formidable institution which has led the world in electoral efficiency since its inception. But in the 2019 general election, it has come under the scanner like never before in the wake of incidents involving a breach of the Model Code of Conduct, particularly those by the ruling party. On April 8, in a letter to the President of India, a group of retired bureaucrats and diplomats, in the context of recent incidents, expressed concern over the EC's "weak kneed conduct" and the institution "suffering from a crisis of credibility today".

Points of concern

The letter described the Prime Minister's March 27 announcement, of India's first anti-satellite (ASAT) test, as a "serious breach of propriety [which] amounts to giving unfair publicity to the party in power". Questions were also raised over the launch of NaMo TV without licence, and a biopic on the life of the Prime Minister which was scheduled for release on April 11, when elections commenced. The group also requested

the EC to "issue directions to withhold the release of all biopics and documentaries on any political personages through any media mechanism until the conclusion of the electoral process". They asserted that the release of such propaganda amounted to free publicity, and hence should be debited as election expenditure in the name of the candidate in question. The same standards should also apply to other such propaganda, an example being a web series titled "Modi: A Common Man's Journey".

Other important issues highlighted in the letter included transfers of top officials, voter verifiable paper audit trail (VVPAT) audits, violations of the MCC by Rajasthan Governor Kalyan Singh (for which the group has requested his removal on account of "grave misdemeanour") and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath (in his speech he referred to the armed forces as the army of Narendra Modi), and also corrosion of the political discourse in general.

Needless to say, the questions being raised about the credibility of the EC are a cause for worry. It is, however, not the first time that the conduct of the commission has been questioned.

At the core

To my mind, the genesis of the problem lies in the flawed system of appointment of election com-



missioners, who are appointed unilaterally by the government of the day. This debate can be settled once and for all by depoliticising appointments through a broad-based consultation, as in other countries.

In its 255th report, the Law Commission recommended a collegium, consisting of the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and the Chief Justice of India. Political stalwarts such as L.K. Advani, and former Chief Election Commissioners including B.B. Tandon, N. Gopalaswami and me supported the idea in the past even when in office. But successive ruling dispensations have ducked the issue, not wanting to let go of their power. It is obvious that political and electoral interests take precedence over the national interest.

A public interest litigation was also filed in the Supreme Court in late 2018 calling for a "fair, just and transparent process of selection by constituting a neutral and inde-

pendent Collegium/selection committee". The matter has been referred to a constitution bench. It's not a routine matter. On issues of such vital importance, even the Supreme Court – which I have always described as the guardian angel of democracy – has to act with utmost urgency. If democracy is derailed, its future too would be in jeopardy.

Besides the manner of appointment, the system of removal of Election Commissioners also needs correction. Only the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) is protected from being removed except through impeachment. The other two commissioners having equal voting power in the functioning of the EC can outvote the CEC 10 times a day. The uncertainty of elevation by seniority makes them vulnerable to government pressure. The government can control a defiant CEC through the majority voting power of the two commissioners. One has to remember that the Constitution enabled protection to the CEC as it was a one-man commission initially. This must now be extended to other commissioners, who were added in 1993, as they collectively represent the EC.

Moving forward
The EC's reputation also suffers when it is unable to tame recalcitrant political parties, especially the ruling party. This is because despite being the registering auth-

ority under Section 29A of the Representation of the People Act, 1951, it has no power to de-register them even for the gravest of violations. The EC has been seeking the power to de-register political parties, among many other reforms, which the EC has been wanting. The reform was first suggested by the CEC in 1998 and reiterated several times. The EC also submitted an affidavit to the Supreme Court last February saying it wanted to be empowered "to de-register a political party, particularly in view of its constitutional mandate".

Elections are the bedrock of democracy and the EC's credibility is central to democratic legitimacy. Hence, the guardian of elections itself needs urgent institutional safeguards to protect its autonomy. It is time that action is taken to depoliticise constitutional appointments and the EC empowered to de-register parties for electoral misconduct. It is a step needed towards restoring all-important public faith in the institution.

While these reforms may continue to be debated, nothing stops the EC from asserting the ample authority it has under the Constitution and being tough. It's not their discretion but the constitutional mandate. It did not need a reminder or a nudge from the Supreme Court.

Lessons from Paris
The devastation caused to the iconic Notre Dame cathedral is a great loss to

the world. At the same time, it is happy news that France is determined to rebuild the cathedral within five years. As far as India is concerned, the Notre Dame fire should be a wake-up call on heritage structures in India. The Indian government must chalk out a plan, if there is not one already, under the supervision of the Archaeological Department to check all heritage structures and their safety and have the full details of their architecture, if necessary in 3D.

As the response to the Notre Dame example shows, heritage structures that are properly maintained can greatly aid in improving foreign currency reserves and in generating employment.

P.S.V. PRASAD BABU,
Bhadrachalam, Telangana

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Cash, votes and TN

This is not the first time that the Election Commission of India has countermanded polls in Tamil Nadu, especially after allegations of the use of money power to influence voters.

It is deeply shameful and a pointer to what ails the election process in the State. It is also distressing that a culture of corruption and bribery is taking deep root in the State. Almost every high-profile constituency in the State is reporting a huge flow of money to influence voters. At the same time, one cannot be oblivious to charges being levelled by the Opposition of "selective raids" by Central agencies. (Page 1, "Vellore poll cancelled over cash seizures", April 17).

M. JEYARAM,
Sholavandan, Tamil Nadu

Seizure of money has become routine at the time of elections, but no one seems to be getting punished. Politics has become a channel to mint money and this is dangerous in a democracy. The EC appears to be leaden-footed.

SRAVANA RAMACHANDRAN,
Chennai

There is no doubt that money dictates elections in Tamil Nadu. The report makes me recall what a security personnel in an apartment complex near our house told me while I was out on my morning walk recently. He said he had received money from various "political agents", which came to a total of ₹3,100, but was confused about who to vote for. He also said he wanted to vote for the party which has the symbol of two leaves – according to him it always "had the welfare of

the poor in mind". In the same breath, he said he did not want to vote for the party at the Centre. He had a hard time believing me when I told him that both the parties he had mentioned were in an alliance in the State. No prizes for guessing which parties these are.

SHANTI SOUNDARARAJAN,
Chennai

Perhaps the EC could have made a decision soon after the huge haul of money earlier in the month as there was enough and more evidence of rampant cash distribution. It was also common knowledge that the election was likely to be cancelled. A quick decision could have saved a lot of man-hours for different departments, arrangements by election authorities and consequent expenses.

S.V. VENKATKRISHNAN,
Bengaluru

Women and politics

Politicians seem to be leaving no stone unturned in trying to impress women voters. But why aren't they equally fervent about sharing power with their women counterparts? Another major election seems to be passing without adequate representation for women in proportion to their population. India's gender parity in the political arena is abysmal. We need strong women leaders who can dictate decision-making which will also empower women of this country in the true sense of the word. All our political parties, big and small, must encourage women leaders to take up more meaningful roles (OpEd page, "Interview", "Women voters now matter much more than before", April 17).

Y. MEENA,
Hyderabad

'3D' remark

Ambati Rayudu's remark, "ordered 3D glasses to watch WC" ("Sport" page, April 17) is in bad taste. The comment was in apparent reference to all-rounder Vijay Shankar who pipped him for the fourth spot in the Indian batting line-up for the World Cup and whom selectors have described as a "three-dimensional" cricketer. But Rayudu has to blame himself as he performed poorly against Australia in the ODI home series. He has been struggling with the bat in the IPL too. Overall, the selectors have done a good job in picking the strongest possible squad for the World Cup.

R. SIVAKUMAR,
Chennai

Lessons from Paris
The devastation caused to the iconic Notre Dame cathedral is a great loss to

The ethical act of voting

It is the duty of having to act not for individual benefit, but for the benefit of the larger society



SUNDAR SARUKKAI

There is a puzzling trait that is pervasive and human. It is that we often judge others with a different yardstick than with which we judge ourselves. When I visit an organisation, there is always somebody who complains that their colleagues do not work at all. Ironically, the colleagues also say the same thing about others in the organisation. Our self-perception is often at odds with the way others see us. This is also part of a deeper human malaise: we think others are wrong and we are right in our beliefs and opinions. Elections exemplify these tendencies very well.

In the time of elections, we repeatedly hear these sentiments about other voters. The upper classes will tell you that poorer citizens vote only to get benefits such as cash, clothes, television sets and other consumer goods. The majority group will say that the minorities vote as a bloc since they have all been told whom to vote for. These are seen as examples of voters not doing their duty of voting for the best person, namely, the best political representative who will govern well. Those who support a particular party will say something similar about those who are voting for another party. It is as if when people vote for money or as a vote bank, they are not doing what they should. But then it could also be argued that a person who blindly votes for one ideology or another is pretty much doing the same thing.

Getting paid to vote

What does it mean to perform the act of voting correctly? It is often said that voting is a duty, but what kind of a duty is it? Is it to make a mark on a sheet or is it actually a particular process of thinking and deciding?

Consider the act of voting by those who get paid before they vote. This practice is not only endemic across States but is also done quite brazenly in some places. Party members go house to house and distribute money and other goods. This is done in the open and is a performance in itself.



"The problem lies in viewing voting as a transaction, the aim of which is to get some benefit for an individual or a group." A voter poses in Teliamura district, Tripura, after casting her vote in the Assembly election in 2018. •RITU RAJ KONWAR

In other cases, people are given money and goods in more surreptitious ways. This cash-for-votes practice seem to go against the very grain of democratic election. But why so?

In the case of taking money or goods, voters see elections as a transaction. What they are basically asking is this: what am I getting in return for voting for you? This goes against a fundamental principle of democratic voting, which is that voting is not a transaction. When we do a job for someone we don't know, and which benefits that person, we generally expect to get paid for that act. Voting is not a job in that sense. It is not a job which is eligible for some compensation. So, the fundamental question about voting is this: are we voting for our own sake or for the benefit of others? Does voting improve our well-being or that of others, the elected politicians? Or is it that the ultimate purpose of an individual's vote is to improve the well-being of the larger society?

We are clearly helping somebody else by voting. If a person wins because of our votes, then he or she de-

rives enormous benefit from being a member of the legislature. There is a direct benefit to the person who is elected — she enjoys a lot of power after being elected. This is the dilemma in electing somebody. We are supposed to vote for free, whereas the result of our action ends up making another person better off. So why is voting not seen as a business transaction since the winner of the election profits from the action of the voter? Why can't the voter who is enabling opportunity for another person's wealth ask for a share in that wealth? If voters do so, then they are behaving rationally.

People who stand for elections understand this logic well and they deal with it merely as a problem of economics. Their calculation is also based on this understanding: let us say a person wins an election, because of which she expects to make one crore in the next year. The person needs enough votes to make this happen and spends in anticipation that she will be able to recoup the money if she wins. Giving money to voters is thus like an investment. The

amount of payment to voters is really a measure of how much elected representatives hope to make during their tenure!

When we vote based on our ideology, we are following the same logic as those taking money. Those for whom small amounts of money do not matter ask for other favours, including protection of their interests, whether their religion, their caste or even economic benefits appropriate to their class. When a group of rich people vote for a person who supports lower taxes, they are doing exactly the same as the poor, since voting is used as a transaction to get something they desire.

The dynamics of voting is thus a complex problem of rationality, similar to problems in rational choice theory. First, how do politicians know that the people will vote for them after taking their money or listening to their promises, especially if more than one politician pays the same group of people or makes similar promises? Moreover, how do they know that enough people will vote for them to make them win? For the voter, it is a much simpler calculation. They get paid for a service they perform by voting. Interestingly, many of them do vote for the person they take money from, because they feel they are morally bound to do so.

For the larger good

The fundamental problem lies in viewing voting as a transaction, the aim of which is to get some benefit for an individual or a group. But we have to recognise that voting is not like any other transaction. The duty that is inherent in the act of voting is an ethical duty, not just a constitutional one. It is the duty of having to act not for individual benefit, such as money or ideology, but for the benefit of the larger society. Such benefit for the larger society will include others benefiting as much as each one of us does through each of our votes. That is, when I vote, I vote on behalf of others as much as on behalf of myself. This duty is the ethical rationality related to voting. It is also a recognition that a democratic action like voting is primarily for the good of something larger than one's self interests.

Sundar Sarukkai is a philosopher based in Bengaluru

End of the runway

The plans to rescue Jet Airways came too late



RAGHUVIR SRINIVASAN

Jet Airways seems to have approached the end of the runway. With banks unwilling to throw in more money to rescue the airline and no saviours visible on the horizon, it seems destined to follow the flight path of Kingfisher Airlines, which bit the dust in 2012. From over 120 aircraft, the storied airline is now down to just five. Almost all its leased aircraft have been repossessed by lessors. On Wednesday night, the airlines decided to temporarily suspend all its flights. Its experienced pilots have either moved to competitors or are queuing up before them now. And the Jet brand, which was once reputed, stands tarnished with passengers complaining of cancelled flights and delayed refunds.

Emergency funding

Jet Airways has been pleading for emergency funding of at least ₹400 crore. But banks have refused to budge, and rightly so. From their perspective, more lending to the sinking airline would simply mean squandering money. Emergency funding is a viable option when there is a high possibility of the borrower's business bouncing back and enabling repayment of the money borrowed. That is not the case with Jet Airways now. It was a different story a couple of months ago when the banks did attempt a bailout package for the airline. But the descent in the airline's fortunes since then has been rapid. Only a foolhardy banker would write a cheque for Jet now. Besides, given the atmosphere of political uncertainty, bankers would think twice before trying to save a private airline that is probably beyond rescue. No banker would like to get in the crosshairs of a new government. As it is, some are asking why banks should try to rescue the airline instead of taking it to insolvency court, which is the prescribed route for such cases.

It is interesting that the present government, despite all the pressure that has been brought to bear on it, has kept away from all the action. Bailing out a private enterprise with public money is something that it would not want to be seen doing at this point in time.

The lenders consortium is still trying its best to find a suitor for the airline. They have

invited expressions of interest from prospective bidders and will shortly call for bids. But what will the prospective buyers bid for? The airline is now down to about 16,000 employees, has a debt overhang of ₹8,414 crore (as of March 31, 2018), and accumulated losses of over ₹14,000 crore. Its routes and departure slots at major airports have been appropriated by competitors, albeit on a temporary basis. If Jet Airways does not show up on the radar again in full force before the end of the summer schedule in October, the routes and slots will be foregone.

For any prospective bidder, the attraction is not just the number of aircraft that the airline flies but also the routes, departure and landing slots, and parking rights. Besides, the brand loyalty, of course. Jet scored high on these accounts, but not any more. In short, Jet today has more liabilities than assets to speak about. So, why will any serious bidder agree to take over the airline now?

Stepping down

The fact is that the rescue act was mounted too late. That the airline was in trouble was known since October, but the desperation set in only in February. Part of the blame for the delay lies with founder and chairman Nareish Goyal, whose reluctance to part with control over the airline put off not just prospective investors such as the Tata Group (which admitted to have been in talks for an investment in Jet) but also Jet's partner, Etihad Airways. In the event, Mr. Goyal's decision to step down probably came too late in the day.

Mr. Goyal is a veteran of many a battle in the Indian skies and his influence over successive governments since the mid-1990s ensured that the skies were kept clear for him. The 5/20 rule (a government norm under which national carriers are required to have five years of operational experience and a fleet of minimum 20 aircraft to fly overseas) was clearly designed to help Jet. So were the restrictions on foreign investment in domestic carriers, until Jet decided to invite Etihad as a partner.

But Mr. Goyal has run out of options now. After all, what goes around comes around. Jet Airways was a superb brand and had built strong loyalty among fliers. It is sad that it has to go. But more unfortunate is the plight of Jet's employees, who will now be forced to work with competitors at lower pay scales, if at all they find openings. And of course, fliers, who are already forking out 20-30% extra on fares thanks to the fall in airline seats.

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SINGLE FILE

The facade of art house

Mediocrity is often celebrated in our collective zeal to uphold the alternative in cinema

KUNAL RAY



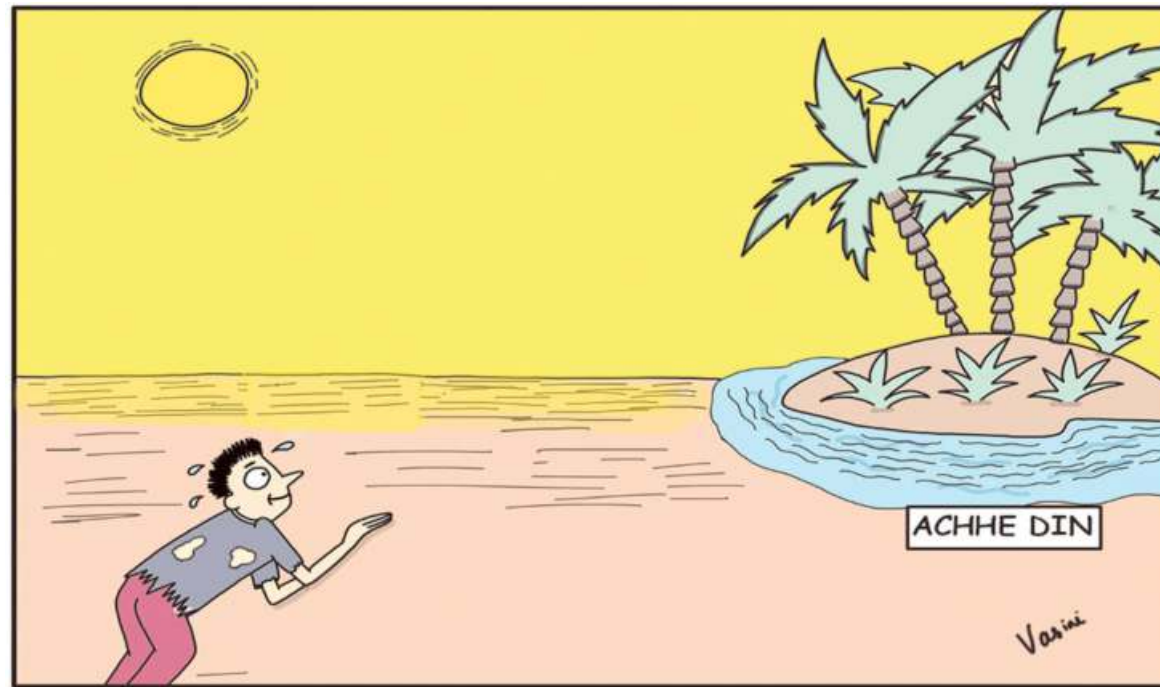
In India, particularly in art, the alternative to the mainstream is applauded. The alternative is shown more courtesy owing to the limited means of production that undergird this art, so much so that limited means are often wrongly adjudged as a precondition for good art. This assumption reflects our simplistic understanding of art and its making. A considerable volume of mediocrity is thus celebrated in our collective zeal to uphold the alternative.

In Indian cinema, the alternative is often synonymous with the absence of a popular star cast, small budgets, experiments in storytelling, and radical themes. All these together have created a formula for the alternative in Indian cinema. The question to then ask is, can the alternative ever be formulaic? And if it is formulaic, then how or what is the alternative really?

Take, for instance, the recent Hindi film, *Hamid*, which attempts to explore the problems of Kashmir. The film has been made on a small budget, features a relatively unknown star cast, and is shot in real locations in Kashmir. It also features a child actor who plays the lead and has all the necessary tropes of the alternative, yet the depiction of the problem is too simplistic. The message simply echoes the truism that terror is bad and the innocent always suffer. Don't we know that already? The film takes no position on Kashmir and merely reduces it to a chronicle of problems that are probably well known in India. I wonder what the filmmaker's position is vis-à-vis the issue and how it can be considered an alternative to portrayals of the Kashmir conundrum as seen in popular Hindi films such as *Fiza*, *Mission Kashmir* and *Fanaa*. Sections of the media were quick to applaud *Hamid's* realistic setting and performances but realism alone doesn't make the alternative.

When mainstream films attempt the alternative, they provide magnified access. A case in point is Alia Bhatt's character in *Gully Boy* and her zealous appeal for women's education. She is unabashed in her obsessive love for Ranveer Singh's character without losing the focus of her career goals, and why can't the two co-exist? This, to me, is authentic, alternative character creation. Kerala's avowal of the alternative in literature, film and visual art is common knowledge. From O.V. Vijayan's *The Legends of Khasak* to G. Aravindan's films, the alternative aesthetic is deeply entrenched in the cultural landscape of the State. A clutch of recent mainstream contemporary films such as *Angamaly Diaries*, *Thondimuthalum Driksakshiyum* and *Kammattil Paadam* have compelled us to rethink the alternative in the commercial format. The stories are new, the range of characters diverse, and the performances riveting, thereby establishing that the mainstream can be radical too. Perhaps this is the new alternative without the facade of the art house and its hoary pretensions.

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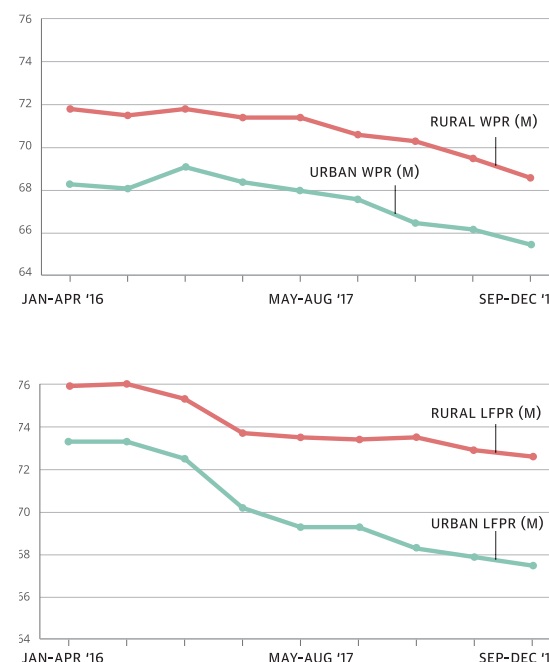
A rise in joblessness

A combination of major household surveys since 2016 shows that there has been a decline in the size of the labour force as well as the workforce and a corresponding increase in the unemployment rate, according to the State of Working India 2019 report.

By Varun B. Krishnan

Bleeding jobs

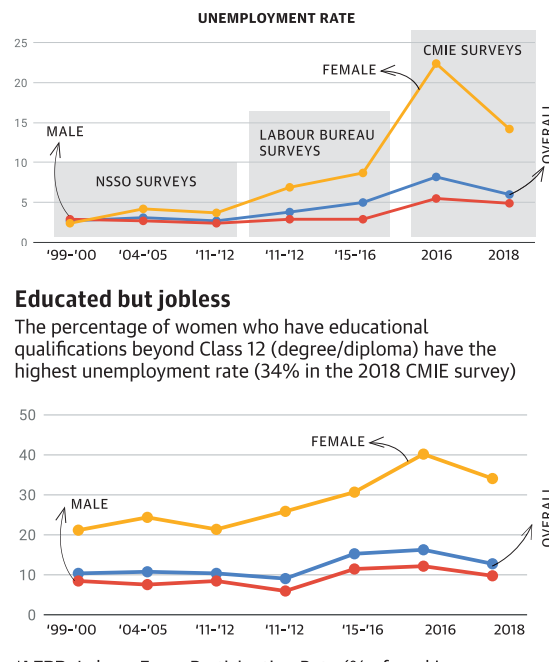
Trends in WPR and LFPR for men in rural and urban areas (across surveys) show a drop of at least three percentage points between January-April 2016 and September-December 2018



This decline in WPR translates to a net loss of 50 lakh jobs from among the male workforce post-demonetisation (2016-18), but a causal link can't be made based only on these trends

Higher unemployment

All the surveys since 2016 indicate a rise in unemployment. The 2016 CMIE survey shows the % of unemployed women as being very high, but the 2018 survey shows this falling to 14.2%



*LFPR: Labour Force Participation Rate (% of working age people working or looking for work); WPR: Workforce Participation Rate (% of working age people who are working)
Source: Centre for Sustainable Employment, Azim Premji University

FROM THE HINDU ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO APRIL 18, 1969

High-level committees for Telengana

The Andhra Pradesh Cabinet, which met here [Hyderabad] today [April 17], decided to constitute a high-power Telengana Development Committee and a Plan Implementation Committee in pursuance of the Prime Minister's statement on Telengana in the Lok Sabha on April 11. The Development Committee consists of the Chief Minister (who will be Chairman), a Planning Commission member, all the Ministers from the Telengana region and the Chairman of the Telengana Regional Committee. The main functions of the Development Committee will be to identify within the overall framework of the Five-Year Plan the programmes and schemes relating to the Telengana region with reference to the physical as well as financial targets to be achieved and to review from time to time the implementation and working of the programmes and schemes.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO APRIL 18, 1919.

Bose Research Institute. A New Discovery.

A new discovery of great scientific interest has just been made by Sir J.C. Bose in his Research Institute [in Calcutta] which proves that plants in general perceive and respond to long ether waves used in wireless signalling. In a vast range of electrical spectrum, plants are extremely sensitive to ultraviolet rays wave, the length of which is shorter than a hundred thousandth part of an inch. Going to the opposite end of the spectrum, in the region of invisible heat rays, the whole wave length is about one thousand part of an inch. Professor Bose has shown that plants also perceive and respond to them. The heat raised is also perceived by us as the sensation of warmth but we have no sense organ to perceive wireless message where the electric waves employed vary from many yards to miles in length.

POLL CALL

Voter ID

A voter ID, or the Electors Photo Identity Card (EPIC), is a document that is issued to an Indian citizen who is above the age of 18 and is eligible to vote. Voter IDs were first issued in 1993 when T.N. Seshan was the Chief Election Commissioner. The card primarily serves as an identity proof for the citizen for casting her ballot in a municipal, State or national election. Holding the card, however, does not guarantee the right to vote. The right to vote is available only for those citizens whose names can be found on the electoral roll. EPICs are provided only to general electors and not service and overseas electors. If a voter moves residence to another Assembly constituency, she will have to register afresh as a voter in the new constituency and will be provided with a new voter ID. Her EPIC number will remain the same though.

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