CHATTERBOX

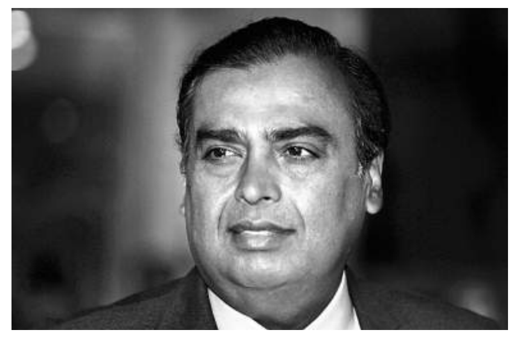
In the limelight

In the Congress party, the man to watch seems to be K C Venugopal. The newly appointed general secretary is not contesting the Lok Sabha elections but has a big say in who should get the Congress nomination across the country. One of the reasons behind Rahul Gandhi contesting from Wayanad in Kerala is Venugopal who was elected to the outgoing Lok Sabha from Alappuzha, the nearly 100-km-long constituency, spread across six assembly segments and one in Kollam district, home to a cross section of fishermen in the state and the birthplace of many Left Front politicians. It always helps to have the Congress President elected from your state. Especially on your advice.

Estranged relations

Poor Tejashwi Yadav has a heavy burden to carry in the absence of Lalu Prasad, his father and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) supremo who is in jail. This includes maintaining relations with brother Tej Pratap who fancies himself as the next Lalu. Amid chatter about an estrangement between the two brothers following squabbling over tickets, recently Tejashwi tweeted pictures of the two brothers cutting a cake on the occasion of Tej Pratap's birthday. Wishing a very Happy Birthday to my "Krishna" elder brother @TejYadav14 Bhai, one of the sweetest person I've ever known." Wishing abundant happiness, love and life! — Tejashwi Yadav (@yadavtejashwi) April 16, 2019 went the tweet. The tweet and picture comes days after Tej Pratap announced his plans of forming a Lalu-Rabri Morcha, after he was allegedly snubbed by his brother in his choice of seats.

DID THEY REALLY SAY THAT?



"Milind is the man for South Mumbai... Milind has in-depth knowledge of social, economic and cultural eco-system of the South Bombay constituency"

Mukesh Ambani in a video tweeted by Congress candidate from South Mumbai Milind Deora, April 17

CHECKLIST

CONSTITUENCIES TO WATCH IN GUJARAT: ELECTIONS ON APRIL 23

Patan: The 83-year old Liladharbhai Khodaji Vaghela, the sitting BJP MP from the constituency created a sensation by writing a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi about farmers not receiving compensation under the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana for crop loss. He also announced unilaterally that he wanted to change his constituency. "I decided to contest from Patan and left Banaskantha for Haribhai as I felt he was unlikely to win from Patan. This time I am ready to contest from Banaskantha. Hence he should quit the seat for me, or else quit the party," Vaghela told reporters in 2018. He has been replaced by Bharatsinh Dabhi.

Surendranagar: After he was dropped from the seat, Devjibhai Fatepara, blamed his two party colleagues for the ouster. The Mahendra Munjpara, a medical practitioner, will now be the BJP nominee from the seat. Fatepara alleged that BJP MLA Dhanjibhai Patel and former legislator Jayantibhai Kavadiya conspired to have his name struck off.

Gandhinagar: Firoz Khan Pathan has filed his nomination as an Independent from Gandhinagar, where he is pitted against BJP chief Amit Shah. The Pathan brothers lost 10 members of their family, including their mother and grandmother, when an angry mob attacked the Gulberg Society in Ahmedabad after the 2002 Godhra train burning incident. "By deciding to contest from Gandhinagar, I want to give a message to Amit Shah that I am coming to fight against you," Firoz Khan said. "Though I am a Muslim, many of my Hindu friends have extended their support to me. I am confident that Hindus will give me votes, as my ultimate aim is to establish communal harmony. I will embark on a door-to-door campaign in the coming days," he said.

OPINION

COMMUNIST PARTY OF INDIA (MARXIST)

The euphoria around PMJAY vs neglect of public health schemes

The NDA government announced the Ayushman Bharat-Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY). The PMJAY component would give hospital coverage of up to ₹5 lakh for about 100 million families. The costs would be shared by centre and states in a 60:40 ratio.

PMJAY is largely based on the erstwhile Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yoajana, a model which was fraught with problems and has not led to any decline in the out of pocket (OOP) expenditure for the people. A large chunk of OOP expenditure is on outpatient care that is not covered under the insurance scheme. The poor and the marginalised largely seek outpatient care because they cannot afford to lose their daily earnings.

As of now, five states — Delhi, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Telangana and West Bengal — have opted out of the AB-PMJAY. For those states that are part of the AB-PMJAY, there are reportedly issues of central funds not being disbursed timely, giving rise to apprehensions regarding last-mile delivery of services to patients which was a major problem in RSBY also.

Even in terms of resources provided for the scheme, the implementation agency of AB-PMJAY, the National Health Agency (NHA), had reportedly demanded ₹7,400 crore to meet the expenditure for 2019-20 but has been allocated only ₹6,400 crore. Further, it has been made clear by the government that it would give land and other facilities to incentivise private investment in tier 2 and tier 3 cities — a clear step in favour of private commercial interests.

Starving of NHM

This euphoria about an insurance-based healthcare can be juxtaposed with the apathetic treatment meted out to public health schemes/programmes such as the National Health Mission. The share of NHM in the total health budget has consistently declined since 2014-15 from 61 per cent to 49 per cent in 2019-20.

Despite tall claims made by the Modi government, the union government's budgetary allocation/expenditure for the health sector has remained stagnant at about 0.3 per cent of GDP since 2014-15. To achieve the targeted health expenditure by government (both centre and states) of 2.5 per cent of GDP by 2025, of which 40 per cent should come from the centre, requires one per cent from the union budget, which remains a distant dream.

Thus, what we see over the years is a deliberate weakening of the public health system. If we compare budget allocation for PMJAY with those for National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), this becomes evident. The allocation for PMJAY increased by 167 per cent while for NRHM it increased by a mere 2 per cent, though over 2017-18, the NRHM allocation in fact declined by 1.5 per cent. Further, the allocation for the second component of Ayushman Bharat — the Health and Wellness Centres — budgetary provisions have been put under the NHM head, which implies that allocation to HWCs would come at the cost of existing interventions under the NHM.

Increasing privatisation & no regulation

In addition to the incentives being given under the PMJAY, the private sector has been given an increasing role in managing primary healthcare. In a number of states, the operation of health facilities is being pushed into the public private partnership (PPP) mode which is being opposed by people in Chhattisgarh, Punjab and Rajasthan. To compound the problems further, regulation of private sector is negligible and only a few states have adopted the Clinical Establishment Act. In effect, what these developments indicate is a plot towards undermining public health system and promoting a privatised healthcare model.

Dilapidated infrastructure; neglected health personnel

Such stagnation in terms of budgetary resources is being witnessed at a time when overall public health system is in shambles. There is a debilitating shortage of key health personnel — 75 per cent shortfall of obstetricians and gynaecologists, 85 per cent shortfall of surgeons, 86 per cent shortfall of physicians and 83 per cent shortfall of paediatricians at community health centres. Health infrastructure across the country is in poor condition as was highlighted by the CAG report in its audit of NRHM. Nearly 25 per cent of the sub centres are without electric supply, 17 per cent without regular water supply and 10 per cent without all-weather motorable approach road.

In addition, there is increasing contractualisation of health workforce with very less remuneration but enormous work pressure. The backbone of the primary health care — the ASHA and Anganwadi workers have been demanding regularisation and status as a worker but the government has conveniently ignored the demands.

Neglect of maternal and child health

Even as the finance minister talked about "women-led development" in his budget speech, the programmes/schemes that are relevant for women's health have been neglected. Allocations towards reproductive and child health (RCH), which includes schemes like Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY), immunisation programmes and various key disease control programmes, have experienced a cut of around ₹4,200 crore compared to the expenditure in 2017–18. Along with this, the allocation for Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY), the erstwhile maternity benefit scheme, has largely remained the same as in 2018-19 (BE). It must be noted that PMMVY succeeds the erstwhile Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojana (IGMSY). Whereas the incentive provided under IGMSY was for the first two live births, under PMMVY, this has been limited to the first living child.

Edited excerpts from a critique of the Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana in CPI (M) organ, People's Democracy, April 21 in New Delhi

ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

Union minister of Petroleum & Natural Gas and Skill Development & Entrepreneurship **Dharmendra Pradhan**, a key member of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's cabinet, speaks to **Dillip Satapathy** on party's prospects and agenda in the Lok Sabha election and assembly polls in Odisha. Edited excerpts:

'No need for a post poll tie up'

Q&A

DHARMENDRA PRADHAN

Cabinet minister

What are the prospects of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the Lok Sabha elections and also assembly polls in Odisha?

The BJP will form the government at the Centre with National Democratic Alliance (NDA) getting more seats than the last time. In Odisha too, we will form the government by winning majority of the Lok Sabha seats on offer in the state.

Any projection of seats?

I can say that Odisha is heading for a big change. There are two major factors. Nineteen years of non-performance, corruption, lethargy, insensitive governance of Naveen Patnaik has led to an anti-incumbent mood against his party. On the other side, the welfare politics of PM Modi, be it Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY-G), Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, SAUBHAGYA Scheme or Pradhan Mantri Sahaj Bijli Har Ghar Yojana, toilets for poor households, more investment in infrastructure like rail, road and air services, more funds for state's development, have created a special space for Modi in the hearts of the people. There is a positive vibe in favour of Modi. This happens rarely. BJP Odisha unit has two advantages. Being an Opposition party, it will get the benefit of anti-incumbency against the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) government and also get benefit of its own good image. These are the reasons for expansion and growth of BJP that will yield unexpected political outcome.

Will you ally with the BJD to form government at the Centre or extend similar support to them for government formation in the state?

There is no question of such an alliance. We will form the government on our own at the Centre and also get a majority to form the government in the state.

Do you expect the same kind of success in Odisha as you got in the panchayat elections two years back?

It will be more than that. Then they were saved. But this time they will be routed.

There was an eight per cent vote difference in panchayat elections...

We will overcome that

Where in Odisha will you do better?

All of Odisha. In each and every village they (BJD) are facing problems. They do not have an answer. You see the campaigning by Patnaik. He is a four-time chief minister and seeking mandate for the fifth time. On what issue is he seeking votes? Has he mentioned any? "I am going to do this or do that", Nothing. He is only accusing PM Modi of neglecting Odisha. His own statistics say something else. In 2014 during UPA II, Odisha got 490,000 houses. When Modi took charge, he enhanced the amount under PMAY-G from ₹75,000 per unit to ₹1.5 lakh per unit. In the last five years, quoting government of Odisha website, the government of India has already given 800,000 houses to the rural poor and 200,000 more are in the pipeline. That means 1 million houses in last five years. In Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana, the average spending per annum has gone up from ₹1,100 crore during 2009-2014 to ₹2,500 crore now. Similarly, in railway budget, we got less than ₹5,000 crore between 2009 and 2014. In last five years, we have got ₹27,000 crore. Still he (Naveen) is accusing Modi of neglecting the state. Are these the neglecting factors? What is his (Naveen's) plan for the state? How is he going to improve the employment in the state? How is he going to eradicate poverty in a time bound manner?

But still Patnaik is a popular face...

People are revolting against the BJD government in Odisha. There is a serious breakdown of law and order situation. Women are not safe. Earlier, people thought there was no alternative to him. Today, Modi's development model is the alternative. People are looking at the BJP. They are believing in him and we have huge organisational base today in Odisha. We have shown our strength in the panchayat election and we will show it again by winning majority of seats in this election.

But BJP has expanded its base in the state by taking people from other parties....

That is not the factor. From day one, our party President Amit Shah was focused. Today he has established himself as a successful political strategist in the country. To expand our base, we adopted three-four methods. One was to take influential people from other political parties, from different walks of life. That we did in Odisha.

What are the other methods?

Strengthen the grassroots organisation, more membership, more agitation activities, more well-knit organisational mechanism in the grassroots.

BJP has emerged as an alternative platform. What about an alternative face to Naveen Patnaik?

Is it necessary to have an alternative personality? People will vote for an alternate platform. It is a democracy. There is no feudalism in Odisha politics. The BJP is fighting election here in the name of PM Modi. There is a talented bunch of leaders in the state. If we get the majority, the party will choose a face to lead the government. It is not necessary. Who was the CM face of BJP in Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh?

What is the economic agenda of the BJP?

Why do people in Odisha believe in PM Modi? Because they have faith, they have hope. Modi's development model will bring more economic empowerment. More employment and self-employment opportunity will be created. Odisha has enough potential for that. It is a mineral rich state, full of water resource, full of fertile land, people are hard working. There is a long coastline. There is so much natural beauty. Heritage points such as Puri is here. Important temples are in Odisha, forestry is also available. Take three pockets, Simlipal, Kandhamal, and Koraput. If people are going to Africa for jungle safari, my understanding is that Simlipal or Kandhamal is no less than that.

It is an issue of branding, showcasing, creating facility and building infrastructure. Tourism alone can develop the state. So with all these things, agriculture, tourism, and industrial development, the state can grow. For any goods manufactured in the country, Odisha can be the point of export to Southeast Asia. We have abundant coal, so you can supply cheap electricity. You have the best quality of iron ore and bauxite that means steel and aluminium. You have an oil refinery. So you get petrochemical raw material. Starting from food processing industry to industrial goods, the BJP has promised to create global manufacturing hubs for Southeast Asia in Odisha. If my people are going to different parts of the world for plumbing, why can't they create plumbing goods manufacturing industry here? Due to coastal state identity, Odisha will be cheaper than having manufacturing hubs in Punjab, Uttar Pradesh or Madhya Pradesh.

Why didn't you contest the elections this time?

I am a small worker of the party. My party has given me an opportunity to serve in a different capacity. I am happy with my job in the PM's cabinet. I have done it to the best of my ability. I can't decide my future. The party will decide. I never thought I would contest for MLA or from any parliamentary constituency. I have gone to Rajya Sabha twice from two different states. My party always takes the decision.

How do you see PM Modi's role in the NDA III government at the Centre?

If the prime minister returns for the second time, you will see a new world order after June. In NDA III, and during the tenure of Modi's second term, the world power centre will shift. India will be a major super power. I have seen PM Modi's personal equation with all important world leaders. The growth we have seen in the last five years will be tenfold in the next five years.

Where do you see India's position in the global energy field?

We are influencing the world energy scenario already by being the consumers. He (Modi) has leveraged the consuming power of the country to create the new world order. Many countries are heavily acknowledging that. Modi has created a new diplomatic economic model. If China has to have good relations with India in trade and commerce, they have to give us space in export of non-basmati rice to China. States like Odisha are likely to benefit from this.

An umbrella for quality education

Through collective efforts by government departments and village communities, Varitra Foundation is giving a new lease of life to rural schools in Karnal, writes **Sneha Bhattacharjee**

THE OTHER INDIA

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2018 revealed that strategic planning and implementation are the need of the hour to bridge the chasm between the 20 per cent urban masses who have access to quality education and opportunities and the remaining 80 per cent scattered across rural schools in India. This widening divide throws light on how our children are lagging behind with the rest of the world. It is this lack of education that could impede India's overall growth says Fitch Ratings in its Global Economic Outlook putting India's potential growth rate at 6.7 per cent for the next five years. While there are small improvements in the Indian education system, the crisis in terms of outcomes, continues.

With the simple idea of giving "output" to the "outcomes" coupled with the thought "alone we can do so little; together we can do so much", two friends set up a foundation to act as facilitators between schools in rural areas, government departments, non-governmental organisations and funders. Thus was born Varitra Foundation in 2018.

It was while working for corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, which both — founder Baljeet Yadav and co-founder, Ayeshna Kalyan — realised the potential of a platform where those who needed funds and those who wanted to disburse funds could come together and build a partnership.

"We knew there were ideas, but none of them really produced any results. Thus we envisioned to bring a change through collective efforts at the grassroots," says Yadav. A Sanskrit word, Varitra means umbrella. "It symbolised synergy, collaboration and a canopy of ideas in developmental terms," he adds.

The foundation has developed a mechanism linked to specific sectors to facilitate a more strategic and disciplined approach that will increase developmental effectiveness and operational efficiency. "We design our programmes as supplementary to the government programmes to maximise the outcomes of the government programs," says Yadav. The flagship project of the foundation — SEARCH (Strengthening Quality Education Access to Rural Children of Haryana) — has reached over 3,250 students across 15 government schools with over 6,000 plus books being donated.

They strongly believe a community needs to take ownership of its social development programmes for the larger sustainability. Therefore, they empower the communities and help them to recognise their strengths and design programmes based on their strengths. "We have 23 on-field volunteers working across 15 schools in Karnal currently, who take care of post remedial classroom sessions for children in primary classes," Yadav adds.

PIC COURTESY: VARITRA FOUNDATION

The flagship project of the foundation has reached over 3,250 students across 15 government schools with over 6,000 plus books being donated

"First, we look at the transformation of school, in terms of necessities and resources. We work on how we can bring the government departments on board by involving the entire village along with the teachers of the school," he says. He notes that constant follow ups with government departments is a more challenging task than getting the village community to work for a school in their area. "Second, we create a child centric environment by building libraries and post school learning centre," he adds. Having done this already since their project inception in January last year, the foundation is looking to looking to work on instilling leadership qualities among children and enable them to become changemakers.

A basic principle that the foundation believes is not to duplicate what is already being done at the grassroots. Thus, they focus on building leadership qualities in people who come on board with them, and let them become change-makers. The foundation started its first project in January 2018 in Karnal. The focus was on overall transformation of government schools in collaboration with government organisations such as the education department, MNREGA, etc. "We wanted to merge government schemes and reach out to government schools that needed help. We did a recce of around 25 schools, of which, six came on board," says Yadav adding that the schools that were ready to partner with them and not just gain benefit out of the work were roped in. They are now hoping to take the number of schools to 25 by this year end.

The foundation strives to implement meaningful and relevant developmental initiatives through partnerships with other development organisations for a larger social and financial impact. "Our goal is to maximise the reach of people to their basic rights in education, health, livelihood through scaling the organisation's projects in a gradual and sustainable manner," says Yadav.

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The plastic monster

India Inc will have to lead the charge against it

Last week, activists from Greenpeace Africa delivered to the Nestle factory serving East Africa a giant plastic monster made of the company's brand packaging. This was an effective way of conveying that much of the needed action on restricting the prevalence of single-use plastic throughout the world will need to be taken by the big fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) companies. It is certainly an important and urgent issue — according to the United Nations Environment Programme, over 8 billion tonnes of plastic has been produced since the 1950s and that might increase to as much as 34 billion tonnes by 2050. Plastic production could rise by 40 per cent a year over the next decade, further increasing dependence on fossil fuels. This growth is clearly unsustainable and driven in large part by an unnecessary dependence on plastic products that can only be used once — such as plastic packaging.

India has also taken this issue on board. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has declared that India seeks to be free of single-use plastic by 2022, though this may be a somewhat ambitious timeframe. Some states, however, have been moving faster than others. It is easier to do so if the state in question is smaller, or if it has a more effective government machinery. More than half of India's states and Union Territories now have legislated or plan to legislate restrictions on single-use plastic. But, as Delhi's failure to crack down on plastic shopping bags has shown, this is not always the most effective way to go about things. Some states, like Tamil Nadu, have the administrative competence and capacity required. Others, especially, in the Gangetic plain, do not.

The Ganga valley creates vast amounts of plastic, much of which finds its way to the river. It was estimated, in a study published in the journal *Nature*, that the Ganga moves 110,000 tonnes of plastic to the sea every year, the second-highest such amount for any world river — second only to the Yangtze. Nor does India do well enough in recycling or collecting plastic. It is true that India, because of its poverty, has a large informal network of "ragpickers" who are effective recyclers. But there is little demand for thin, single-use plastic in that market. As a consequence, about 40 per cent of the plastic sold in India is neither recycled nor collected.

As a consequence of this set of circumstances, much is expected of larger companies. The state cannot do everything and does not have the capacity to do so. The large informal sector is cost-sensitive and it is difficult to create incentives to change its behaviour. As a result, the responsibility devolves upon the organised private sector — particularly those companies in sectors that create large amounts of single-use plastic, such as FMCG. If the large companies selling packaged goods and consumables change their behaviour, the informal sector that depends upon them will do so as well. E-commerce will have a major role to play. Currently, packaging charges are an insignificant proportion of the cost — only 3 per cent or so — but do not take into account sustainability. This will have to change.

Food processing as a sector, if it moves to non-plastic solutions, will have to invest in other methods to ensure that food spoilage does not increase commensurately. But the big target will be, as it is for Greenpeace Africa, the FMCG majors. Nestle India says it has reduced the use of plastic by 1,500 tonnes last year. But this is but a drop in the metaphorical bucket. Much more will need to be done by the corporate giants in India, or a giant plastic monster is likely to arrive at their headquarters as well.

Why telecommunications reforms are vital for India

They can boost both GDP growth and the country's ranking in the ease of doing business index

RAJAN S MATHEWS

Sustained reforms to tackle legacy concerns like complex paperwork and multi-layered taxation have helped India jump 23 places in the World Bank's recent Ease of Doing Business rankings, to rank 77 out of 190 countries.

The country's aim is to break into the list of top 50 countries in the EoDB rankings. However, to get to there, fundamental changes are required across all sectors, with telecom being at the top of that priority list. Not only is it one of the few sectors where 100 per cent FDI is allowed, it is also the backbone of the economy, connecting and empowering a billion-plus citizens, becoming the vehicle for financial inclusion and digital literacy, playing a key role in improving macro-economic indicators and adding to GDP growth. Every 10 per cent increase in investment in telecom infrastructure can boost India's GDP by 3.3 per cent, according to a study by ICRIER.

Last year, Trai had issued a draft paper on the Ease of Doing Business, aggregating recommendations from the industry for consideration. The telecom sector is extremely distressed in financial terms, with mounting debts and crumbling revenues. However, once it recovers on the back of favourable policy reforms, the positive impact on a myriad of industries would be immense. And, given its cascading impact on the economy, it would also improve India's rankings on the index.

Apart from reforms targeted at making the regulatory ecosystem more in tune with the changing times, doing away with burdensome and expensive litigation is equally necessary for building a commercial environment, conducive to the sector's growth. Major concerns that need to be addressed relate to licences, tariffs, accounts and finance. Further, spectrum pricing and management needs immediate redressal to ensure the sector's long-term sustainability.

It is heartening that the principle of "input line credit" has been formally approved in the National Digital Communications Policy 2018 by the Union Cabinet. This approach is similar to the principle adopted for GST and VAT, where such a levy payable at each step of input services is set off against the levy payable by the recipient of such services. This will ensure that there is no double taxation at any stage.

Further, we believe that DoT should accept and adopt the Trai recommendations of January 2015 on "Definition of Revenue base (AGR) for the Reckoning of Licence Fee and Spectrum Usage Charges", in regard to the methodology suggested by the regulator for determining the adjusted gross revenue (AGR).

On licence fees, the industry believes that the assessment of the Gross Revenue/AGR should be conducted at the central rather than the circle level. Currently, assessments are done at the circle level, on the basis of instructions on the principles to be used for GR/AGR assessment laid out by the department of telecommunications (DoT). The Controller of Communications Accounts (CCA) in the DoT is responsible for conducting circle-level assessments.

This results in the industry facing various issues of inconsistencies in the overall process. As the applicable principles vary from circle to circle, it results in piling up of litigation cases. A centralised filing system will promote operational efficiency and bring in consistency of principles. It will also free up resources currently being used up in litigation.

Also, there are permissible deductions under the licence from gross revenue to arrive at AGR for determining the licence fee and spectrum usage charges (SUC) to be paid by the licensee. These deductions include payments of interconnect usage charges and roaming between operators. The industry believes that the process for verification of deduction claims is extremely complex and leads to disputes for which there is no process of appeal in the DoT. As recommended by Trai in its January 2015 recommendations, a system of licence fee deduction at source should be implemented, which will entail automation of LF/SUC verification like TDS TRACES to simplify the verification process.

Licence fees should be payable through an online portal, so that payment can be made by licensees directly to the credit of DoT. The set-off of the licence fee paid on input services against licence fee payable on output services should be allowed.

Major concerns that need to be addressed relate to licences, tariffs, finance, and spectrum pricing and management, to ensure the telecom sector's sustainability

Another concern is the multiple audits that telecom companies have to undergo regularly, apart from the statutory audits required under the Companies Act, 2013. Conducting an audit is a time-consuming exercise involving substantial resources. TSPs already have their quarterly and annual audits by statutory auditors, as they follow the highest standards of corporate governance. We believe that these audits are sufficient and there should not be a duplication of efforts by multiple audits in a given financial year. This will cut duplication of effort, and wastage of time, manpower and precious public resources.

It is recommended that the functioning of the Standing Advisory Committee on Radio Frequency Allocation (SACFA) should be made paperless and a web portal like Tarang Sanchar, which is currently being used for EMF compliance, should be created. This will not only reduce unnecessary expenditure but will also act as a harbinger of optimised and enhanced operational efficiency and faster approvals.

Moreover, free movement of equipment across the country should be facilitated. At present, import licences are provided on a LSA-wise basis and once the equipment is imported, it is mandatory for TSPs to use that equipment only in that LSA. There are various reasons why there may be a need to shift equipment from one circle to another, including increase in rollout in a LSA or lesser usage of equipment in a particular circle owing to business needs. In such scenarios, free movement of equipment should be allowed from one LSA to another.

The industry is working with state governments for the development of an online portal for granting Right of Way (RoW) permission in a time-bound manner. The RoW Portal has been operational for Haryana and Jharkhand, and discussions are underway with the governments of Assam, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Uttarakhand.

The telecom industry and the government need to work together to bolster the country's economic strength and usher in an inclusive, connected and digitally empowered India. This is a pre-requisite if the country wants to break into the top 50 in the Ease of Doing Business index.

The writer is Director General, COAI

How to outwit cyber criminals in a rapidly changing world

MUKUL SHRIVASTAVA

The world has come a long way since the first computer viruses — Creeper, Wabbit and Elk Cloner — were unleashed on the ARPANET (forming the technical base of today's internet) close to half a century ago. Initially self-replicating and somewhat harmless programmes, these viruses and worms gradually turned complex, vicious and persistent. The internet is a goldmine for cybercriminals and they can easily release malware for a price, bringing businesses as well as nations to a crashing halt.

Millions of systems have been compromised worldwide over the years as cybercriminals stole money, credentials and information, or just caused intense turmoil. Most recently, for instance, the "Cookie Miner" malware was discovered that could potentially steal user information (credit card, passwords, etc.) from the browser's cookies linked to crypto currency exchanges and wallets. In Australia, cybercriminals hacked the systems of a health care company and an auto enterprise, holding the data for ransom.

The last two years have seen a massive rise in cybercrime. Cisco's 2018 Asia-Pacific Security Capabilities Benchmark Report highlighted the fact that India recorded the second highest number of real cyber threats, followed by Australia, in the Asia Pacific region. The year 2019 will continue to see incidents on a global scale, with cybercriminals attempting to exploit vulnerabilities, breaching confidential data and hacking security systems. As we talk about cyber security becoming an integral part of the boardroom agenda, organisations can take note of some areas as they strive to protect their critical assets in 2019.

The year 2019 will continue to see incidents on a global scale, with cybercriminals attempting to exploit vulnerabilities, breaching confidential data and hacking security systems

The artificial intelligence (AI) "opportunity" will be big in 2019. However, the rapid advancement and adoption of AI can turn out to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, AI can help organisations ramp up their technology systems to new levels of sophistication, predict attacks and correspondingly take quick corrective action; on the other, it can also be misused by cybercriminals in avoiding detection and evading security.

Recently, there was an uptick in "Deepfake" videos that were created using deep-learning AI and involved creation of fake videos showing real personalities. In 2019, cybercriminals are likely to exploit the power of AI to a significant extent for nefarious purposes, circulate fake news and spread malware through phishing attacks. With security solutions yet to be developed as a counter, the only remedy available is to raise awareness and set up training for all stakeholders.

Smart contracts, which use Ethereum blockchain to maintain a decentralised ledger and subsequent contract between parties, have been implemented by some of the leading financial institutions. Increased usage is expected in financial transactions, including money transfers and protection of intellectual property rights. However, there have been flaws associated with this AI that may be exploited by cybercriminals. One of them is the "re-entrancy attack" that may see hackers accessing user's funds and extracting them without complying with contract requirements or without the knowledge and/or approval of the respective users.

Cloud computing, used extensively to store company data on servers, is another area at risk. In 2019, hackers will focus their effort to breach organisations' systems, resulting in a radical shift from malware stored on the desktop to being stored within the data, making the same redundant. Investments in enhancing cyber security and incident response capabilities and hiring talent will be crucial.

Voice-controlled digital assistants are expected to be another area that will be targeted by cybercriminals, as they are used frequently by individuals as well as businesses. Hackers will further develop malicious codes and commands to target the Internet of Things (IoT) devices and their voice assistants. These assistants are also likely to be used in digital/financial payment applications, which will further augment risks.

While the threats continue to escalate, governments across the globe are launching initiatives and enhancing greater cross-border collaboration to fortify cyber security measures. The year 2019 will see India taking rapid strides to counter growing cyber threats by institutionalising a Defence Cyber Agency, under the supervision of the Integrated Defence Staff, inauguration of a national cyber forensic lab (NCFL) and Delhi Police's cyber-crime unit, 'CyPAD'. A National Centre for Artificial Intelligence is also on the anvil under the aegis of the ministry of electronics and information technology.

The EY Global Information Security Survey (GISS) 2018-19 highlights cyber security gaining prominence among the board. However, it also notes that more than three-quarters (87 per cent) of organisations do not yet have sufficient budgets to provide the levels of cyber security and resilience they want. Protection is patchy, relatively few organisations are prioritising advanced capabilities, and cyber security too often remains siloed or isolated. The cyber threat that stands before us is as real as it can get. In 2019, organisations will have to buckle up their cyber seatbelts for the bumpy ride ahead.

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OTHER VIEWS

Grounding of Jet a moment of truth for Indian aviation

Failure to revive it will mean a reversal of the gains from liberalisation

From operating a 120-aircraft fleet and being India's second largest passenger carrier as recently as January, to possibly flying for the last time on Wednesday, it's been a literally grounding-to-a-halt for Jet Airways. The company's financial difficulties were public from around March 2018, when it started deferring disbursal of salaries, which was followed by defaulting on aircraft lease rentals and loan repayments towards October-December. The fault lay with the lenders for failing to see these signs of trouble.

Only this month have banks finally acted and called for expression of interest from investors. It is unlikely that they would want to take over the ailing airline without the lenders agreeing to a substantial write-off of its outstanding dues. The company needed emergency funding from banks in order to be able to run. The latter declined the request. They had no choice really, as doing so would have risked more money going down the drain. Such a situation could have been avoided had the lenders forced Mr Goyal to step down earlier and sounded out other carriers, both domestic and foreign; they may have been more willing even about six months back. Whether Jet Airways — a symbol of the 1991 economic reforms much like Airtel or Infosys — will fly again will be known only when the current bid process concludes on May 10. It is in the consumer's interest that no airline gets to monopolise the skies and reverse the gains from liberalisation.

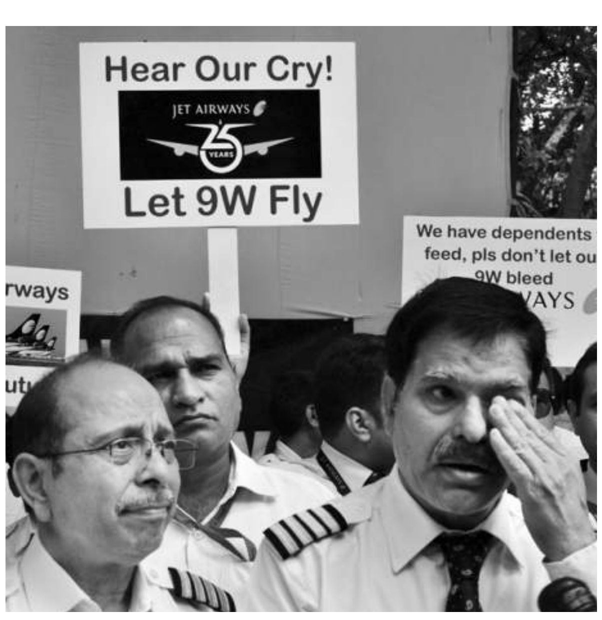

PHOTO: SANJAY K SHARMA

The Indian Express, April 19

Classic case of crony capitalism

India's *neta–babu*–business nexus

The Reserve Bank of India has revealed that banks have been writing off bad loans as non-performing assets. During the last three years alone, banks have written off ₹2.4 trillion worth of such sour loans. The total write-off during the last 10 years has been ₹7 trillion. Banks are stuck with ₹10 trillion worth of NPAs.

There are a number of obvious implications of these high-value write-offs. First, when a bank writes off a loan, its asset side of the balance sheet is reduced, meaning that its liabilities become higher than its assets. Hence it must provide for such loans from reserves, profits or provisions from the government. This is taxpayers' money from the government or public money from the reserves and profits of public sector commercial banks. It is, in short, a massive public subsidisation of private gains. The second implication concerns recovery. After a write-off, the bank can continue with its recovery efforts. However, since the balance sheet is cleaned up, there is very little incentive for the bank to pursue the defaulter. The third and, arguably, the most damaging implication is that the identities of the beneficiaries of the write-offs are not revealed. India remains a classic case of crony capitalism. The nexus among big business, senior bureaucrats and national politicians is too dense to be cut.

The Telegraph, April 19

Where are the jobs?

Govt must look beyond existing schemes

The Azim Premji University report that at least five million Indian men lost their jobs between 2016 and 2018, after the demonetisation of ₹500 and ₹1,000 currency notes, confirms the serious crisis on the jobs front. The study's authors said the figures would be much higher if women were included, and even discussed the quality of jobs being created. The university's findings should cause sleepless nights for Mr Modi, who had promised two crore jobs annually in 2014, which means over eight crore jobs should have been created by 2019. Instead, according to Niti Aayog CEO Amitabh Kant, a measly 7.8 million jobs were created.

As Mr Modi's term ends in a few weeks, this seems meagre compared to the two crore jobs a year he promised. Mr Kant was literally scraping the bottom of the barrel, citing the number of jobs created by taxi aggregators Ola and Uber, and quoted the 7.2 per cent GDP growth figure to bolster his premise. The next government has the arduous task of creating jobs for the unemployed, with unemployment among educated youth at over 15 per cent. An estimated seven million people enter the job market yearly, and providing for them needs programmes that go beyond Make in India, Skilling India and suchlike. None of these have taken off, and the PM doesn't talk about it any longer.