

Winning the fight against malaria

An anti-malaria vaccine could be a potent additional weapon in the country's fight against this disease



QUANTUM LEAP

DEVANGSHU DATTA

The first ever malaria vaccine went into phase 4 trials this week. About 360,000 children in Ghana, Kenya and Malawi will receive doses of the vaccine, RTS,S. This is manufactured by GSK and released under the brandname, Mosquirix. It is described as a "complementary malaria control tool" by the World Health Organization (WHO).

Something over 435,000 malaria-related deaths occurred in 2017, and

young children were the most at risk. Young African children are the worst-affected. Malaria kills as many as 250,000 African children under the age of five every year. That's a huge proportion of the 266,000 children who died of malaria in 2017, when there were about 219 million cases spread across 100 countries.

The vaccine took over 30 years to develop and cost close to \$500 million. It is only partially effective, acting only against the Plasmodium falciparum parasite and not against the other major malaria parasite, Plasmodium vivax. The vaccine prevents malaria only about 40 per cent of the time. But even that partial protection is better than nothing.

The difficulties of developing an anti-malaria vaccine were described graphically by Bill Gates (the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has helped fund the vaccine development and other measures against malaria). Gates described the malaria parasite as a "deadly shapeshifter".

There are different malaria parasites and these transform several times within the body of an infected person. Each parasite can present at least 60 different proteins, and the proteins it does present, keep altering. Our immune system works by recognising one specific protein, which it associates with a virus, bacteria or parasite.

Vaccines also work on similar lines. The best "multi-protein" vaccines (developed against pneumonia) can handle up to a dozen different proteins. Hence, malaria fools the immune system and slides past most defences. In addition, any vaccine which targets children has to be checked out stringently for side-effects.

RTS,S went through a phase 3 trial, from 2009 to 2014, with approximately 15,000 children and infants in the seven nations of Burkina Faso, Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, and the United Republic of Tanzania. A four-dose schedule is required. The first dose is given as soon as possible after five months, with dose 2 and dose 3 at

monthly intervals and the last dose around the second birthday.

WHO claims, "Among children aged 5-17 months who received four doses of RTS,S, the vaccine prevented approximately four in 10 (39 per cent) cases of malaria over four years of follow-up. It prevented about three in 10 (29 per cent) cases of severe malaria, and reduced the need for blood transfusions by 29 per cent." (Severe malaria is defined as cases where the initial infection evolves into acute, life-threatening illness.)

The EU's European Medicines Agency cleared the vaccine for more general use, after reviewing the phase 3 results. There are side-effects, including local pain and swelling, and some cases of fever and a few seizures. But these seem to be transient with no long-term consequences. Two potential areas of worry: There were more cases of meningitis among the vaccinated, and while severe malaria was reduced by 29 per cent, in the cases where it did occur, there were more cases of cerebral malaria. However, no causal links were discovered. The phase 4 will last until around 2022 and the results will be carefully reviewed before the vaccine

is introduced for routine use.

GSK actually developed RTS,S, way back in 1987. In 2001, GSK began collaborating with the Seattle-based non-profit PATH. PATH's Malaria Vaccine Initiative helped GSK continue developing RTS,S. The phase 3 trials were supported by a network of 11 African research institutes spread across the seven nations with support from the Gates Foundation. WHO says that the phase 4 is being funded through 2020 at least by a combination of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance (this is a startup from the Gates Foundation), the Global Fund to Fight AIDS Tuberculosis and Malaria, and Unitaid.

WHO's anti-malaria strategy is built around using insecticide-treated nets and indoor residual spraying, along with the use of larvicides, and personal protection measures like repellents and insecticide-treated clothing.

The battle against malaria has logged several successes. Between 2000 and 2015, cases reduced by 41 per cent globally and there was a 62 per cent reduction in deaths. But there were more cases in 2017 than in 2015. India contributed about 4 per cent of all malaria cases in 2017 but it managed to reduce the number of cases by 24 per cent from 2016. An anti-malaria vaccine could be a potent additional weapon in the fight against this disease.

A single-point agenda

As companies enter the new financial year, it is worth pausing and looking at the lessons that the just completed year has had to offer, and what will be on the agenda for the coming year



OCCASIONAL ASIDE

AMIT TANDON

Look at IL&FS, the carnage of bank balance sheets and the pledged share saga currently playing out, and this will be the year governance issues become central to debt investors. It is easy to forget that lenders are as affected by governance failure as are equity investors. After all, it is equity investors who get to vote on board appointments, related party transactions, ESOP schemes, capital allocation, even borrowings themselves. Further share price movements are far more spectacular than the basis point change in bond prices, so it is easy to assume that it's the equity investors who bear the brunt of governance slip-ups. But equity-holders vote because they are owners. Further equity investors in better governed companies have the ability to capture the upside by way of higher multiples, their lenders are merely guaranteed their money back and in a timely manner.

Governance matters just as much to lenders as shareholders.

One consequence of this will be the on-going scrutiny and regulations of the rating agencies. A recently set-up parliamentary committee <http://164.100.47.193/isscommittee/Finance/16_Finance_72.pdf> has recommended a mandatory rotation of rating agencies and moving to an investor or a regulator pay model. Neither of these to my mind is a solution — and more on this some other time. My suggestion is clawing back of fees combined with prohibitive fines. This will be more effective.

Two, expectations from independent directors have changed. Today each mis-step by the company is viewed as a failure of its board and independent directors. This was not always so. From the promoters' perspective, directors were names that added a shine to the company and may help open doors. The directors themselves were unsure regarding what was expected of them — oversight (read compliance), guiding strategy or consoling to the patriarch. Not so any longer. Both the regulator and investors expect far more now. Boards and the directors need to step-up.

Three, voting and engagement has now changed. Mutual funds started to vote from 2011. There is no mandated stewardship code for the industry, but asset managers pretty much do what a stewardship code expects — monitor companies they invest in, adopt a voting policy, disclose how they voted and engage with companies on issues that agitate them. The insurance players



ILLUSTRATIONS BY BINAY SINHA
The separation of the role of the chairman and CEO is what will keep boards and promoter-CEOs engaged this coming year

adopted a stewardship policy from 2017. The pension funds had collectively started to vote but has decided to ratchet-up its focus on governance by its fund managers rolling out their stewardship policies last year.

FII's own about 21 per cent of the market and vote 99 per cent of their holdings. Mutual funds own approximately 8 per cent of the equity and vote 90 per cent of their shareholding. Add

insurance and pension funds to the mix, and FIIs and DIIs, who in the aggregate own about 36 per cent, and will now be voting. Voting has steadily gone up these past few years and has now reached the tipping point. This is being reflected in how votes are falling — upturning decisions that the boards are placing before shareholders. This has ramifications regarding how investors view issues, but equally on how investors and companies engage with each other.

Four, is a change to job-description of the stakeholder empowerment committee. For long, we have advocated that the role of the stakeholder engagement committee needs to be recalibrated. From looking at non-receipt of dividends and non-transfer of shares (tasks made redundant by technology), the committee now needs to meet investors and proactively engage with them. This may even entail bringing all stakeholders under the governance umbrella. The supply chain, the distributors, the community in which the company operates, and the oft neglected female employees and workers. This is the right time to do so.

Looking ahead, the one item that I expect will dominate the board agenda is separation of the role of the chairman from that of the managing director.

The Kotak Committee cited in turn from the Report of the Committee on the Financial Aspects of Corporate Governance (1992) aka the Cadbury Committee, that "given the importance and the particular nature of the chairman's role, it should in principle be separate from that of the chief executive.

If the two roles are combined in one person, it represents a considerable concentration of power".

The Kotak Committee concluded that "corporate democracy is built into the interconnected arrangement amongst the board, the shareholders and the management, where the board supervises the management and reports to the shareholders". And further that "the separation of powers of the chairman (that is, the leader of the board) and CEO/MD (that is, the leader of the management) is seen to provide a better and more balanced governance structure by enabling better and more effective supervision of the management".

Although the Kotak Committee had recommended that this separation happens where public shareholding is more than 40 per cent, the Sebi, while accepting the report, stated that "It is proposed that separation may be initially made applicable to the top 100 listed entities (by market capitalisation) w.e.f. April 1, 2020. Further, in such entities, chairperson and the managing director/CEO should not be related to each other in terms of the definition of "relative" as defined under the Companies Act, 2013".

No matter what has happened this past one year, and no matter which direction the longer-term trends point us towards, the separation of the role of the chairman and CEO is what will keep boards and promoter-CEOs engaged this coming year. This, coupled with the need for a separate shareholder approval to pay non-executive directors over 50 per cent of the total board remuneration pool, will be seen as a clampdown by several promoters. This is where the back-channelling between promoters, the regulators and boards will take place. And this is what all attention will stay focussed on.

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CHINESE WHISPERS

Sealed with a pranam



If there were any doubts relating to the sustainability of the Samajwadi Party (SP)-Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) alliance beyond the Lok Sabha elections, Dimple Yadav

(pictured) on Thursday made sure they were demolished. Dimple, the SP candidate from Kannauj and wife of party president Akhilesh Yadav, touched BSP chief Mayawati's feet on stage at a rally in her Lok Sabha seat of Kannauj and sought her blessings before addressing the crowd. Dimple had won the seat in 2014. Some, of course, said their doubts were dispelled after Mayawati and former SP chief and Akhilesh's father, Mulayam Singh Yadav, shared the stage last week after more than two decades of bickering.

RCB caught and bowled Dinda



media users dubbed a couple of RCB bowlers — mainly Mohammed Siraj and Umesh Yadav — as students of the "Dinda Academy", a somewhat derisive reference to former India and RCB pacer Ashok Dinda for his propensity to give away runs. On Wednesday, however, RCB won against Kings XI Punjab with Yadav bowling some tight overs. Looking at the victory as an opportunity to hit back at the trolls, RCB tweeted, "Dinda Academy? What's that?" with the fast bowler's picture, only to delete it later. But the screenshots returned to haunt the franchise, fuelling much speculation online about who masterminded the tweet in the first place and who was behind the removal.

Swinging fortunes

When the Indian markets posted one of their biggest gains of 2019 on Wednesday, an influential brokerage firm attributed the rise to "increased hopes" that the Bharatiya Janata Party will return to power. However, the optimism proved short-lived as the markets gave up almost all the gains on Thursday. "Till the election results are declared, the markets will swing wildly and experts will offer comments to suit the narrative. Historically the market has been bad at gauging/predicting election outcomes," said an expert.

Opportunity waits for no one

Indian agriculture can emerge as an example for the rest of the world that's looking for ecologically supportive practices to pull back our planet from the edge of the cliff



PAHLE INDIA

RAJIV KUMAR

Zero budget natural farming's (ZBNF) core principles include complete elimination of all chemical fertilisers and pesticides; rearing of only indigenous breeds of cows which are used as principle source of nutrients with one cow sufficing for 30 acres of farmland; botanical extracts prepared by using only locally available inputs and minimum tillage, which makes the soil soft and porous. All the four pillars and their related practices put together increases the humus content in the soil that fuels the vast number of organisms above and below the soil. This entire soil food web is what enhances agriculture productivity, biodiversity, carbon sequestration and water availability. This scientific understanding was rooted in Indian tradition.

There is an important process in which the "sugars" (produced by plants through photosynthesis) are actively fed to the soil microorganisms. Plants use around 30-40 per cent of the sugar produced by photosynthesis for its shoot development (develop-

ment of new leaves, stems, branches, flowers, fruits etc). Another 30 per cent is used for the root system development (branching of roots, root elongation root hairs etc). The remaining 30-40 per cent of the sugar are released into the soil by the root system. This release of sugar and other substances into soil by roots is called root exudation. The substances exuded serve as food for the soil micro-organisms. The micro-organisms increase in number and associate with the roots and help in humus formation in the soil.

Practicing all the four wheels of ZBNF enhances this process efficiently. Keeping the ground covered with multi-layered crops for 365 days and increased porosity of soils and microbial action increases water use efficiency, water conservation, and increased absorption of water from atmosphere. Together, farm productivity increases, risks are diversified, costs reduced and food-nutrition-health security of the farmers and citizens is enhanced. Carbon sequestration comes as the huge positive externality.

However, practicing ZBNF is knowledge-intensive. While a week-long training camp, under Subhash Palekar's guidance, exposes the farmers to ZBNF practices, they need hand holding before making a successful transition from chemical input based farming to ZBNF. The agro-extension network needs to be thoroughly revived and preferably run through self-help groups (SHGs), which constitute an enormous volume of social capital. SHGs could work with champion farmers who have successfully transitioned to ZBNF for demonstrating the technology to other farmers. Such a combination of champion farmers and



SHGs can scale up ZBNF across India in the next 15 years.

Indian agriculture would emerge as an example for the rest of the world, which is today desperately looking for ecologically supportive agriculture practices to try and pull back our planet from the edge of the cliff, where we find ourselves today.

ZBNF's claims about carbon sequestration and enriching the organic carbon (OC) content of the soil have recently been certified by the CCS Haryana Agricultural University, Hisar, and the Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana. These institutions have pioneered the first green revolution in India and have the highest credibility in the agro-scientific circles. In their evaluation of the land quality in a 180 acre farm (Gurukul) in Kurukshetra district of Haryana they have certified that OC increased by 49 per cent from 0.61 per cent to 0.91 per cent in one year and was maintained at 0.75 per cent across

all seasons. It was further found that while yields in ZBNF remained comparable to those achieved by farms using chemical inputs, the level of micronutrients like zinc, manganese, iron and copper also increased and potassium and phosphorus content in the soil were also higher. ZBNF achieves this increase in micronutrient levels by promoting the symbiotic relationship between plants and soil, which generates the micro-organisms that work with newly-grown fungi to release the micronutrients locked up in the soil.

ZBNF's positive features have begun to attract international attention. The UNEP is now working closely with the movement and so is the FAO, which organised a special session on agroecology in one of its recent conferences. The International Council for Research in Agroforestry has also taken it on board. The UK government has reportedly shown interest in the process. France, as we know, has already passed the law to make its agriculture completely free of chemicals in the coming years.

This unique and proven solution for comprehensively addressing India's serious twin problems of accelerating environmental degradation and persistent farmer distress is now within our grasp. It is up to us to harness this indigenously developed technology and scale it across the country. Waiting for a certification from some 'respected foreign institutions', which often happens as a result of our inherent diffidence, may see India missing the bus once again. We cannot afford that.

(Concluded)

The writer is an Indian economist and is currently the vice-chairman of the NITI Aayog. Views are personal

LETTERS

Conflict of culture



As claimed by Dhiraj Nayyar in his article "Banish the fear of the four Cs" (April 25), "maximisation of government revenues" is the new objective of bureaucracy because of the fear of four Cs — Central Bureau of Investigation, Central Vigilance Commission, Comptroller and Auditor General of India and Courts. Has it moved from the goal of correct procedure (efficiency) to desired results (effectiveness)? I think the former remains the hallmark of Indian bureaucracy even now. A government official can be taken to task for adopting questionable means even if he got the results. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is now facing fire from the Supreme Court (pictured) on the Rafale deal for disregarding the established process by playing safe. The associated government servants came out with their objections on the process being followed by the Prime Minister's Office.

An associated offshoot of this efficiency-focused work culture is the conflict of culture which the new entrants, inducted from an effectiveness-oriented culture of non-government organisations, would face in the new setup. I presume that getting the best from minuscule nine inductees submerged in the vast ocean of "babudom" would be a challenge for the government as well as the inductees. This would need a well-structured socialisation process to integrate them into the government working but with outcome-related performance.

Y G Chouksey Pune

Consensus needed

This refers to the article "Strategic sales sans strategy" (April 24) by A K

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Fuel price control?

Govt should allow domestic prices to fluctuate

The global price of crude oil, as measured by the benchmark price for a barrel of Brent Crude, on Thursday rose above \$75 per barrel for the first time in 2019 in the wake of tightening sanctions on Iran. The path of prices is uncertain, but several analysts believe it could go past \$80 a barrel in the medium term. Earlier this week, the Trump administration in the United States announced that exemptions to five countries, including India, from the US' Iran sanctions would not be extended. This, alongside cuts in Russian exports of crude oil, has pushed global oil prices to the highest point that they have scaled this year. India, as a major beneficiary of the Iran exemptions, is hardly immune to recent developments in particular. So logically, the prices of fuel at the pump in India should react to these movements. After all, the prices of petrol and diesel in India have been deregulated and are supposed to move in tandem with the global prices of petroleum products. State-run fuel retailers, in fact, switched to daily price revision from a fortnightly pricing system in June 2017 as the government sought to further the pricing reforms in the sector.

But over the past six weeks, the price of a barrel of crude oil on the global market has increased by almost \$10; it was around or below \$65 a barrel in early March, and is now close to \$75 a barrel. In a deregulated market, the price of petrol at the pump in India would also increase, equivalently, by between 10 and 15 per cent. But domestic fuel prices have not increased, except marginally. This is worrying. It is another sign that political considerations are still determining the scale and timing of changes to domestic fuel prices in spite of the claim that the administered fuel price regime has been dismantled. The fact that a general election is on lends credence to the theory that politics is responsible for the domestic oil companies not raising prices concomitant with an increase in costs. There is also historical evidence to support the notion. Most obviously, before the Karnataka assembly election at this time last year, domestic price increases were kept on hold in spite of an increase in the global price of a barrel of crude oil. It seems clear that the policy of fuel price deregulation is being undermined.

This is short-sighted. The point of fuel price deregulation was to allow the public to recognise that prices at the pump were beyond the control of the Indian government. If the Indian government attempts to control these prices, it rapidly finds itself running into trouble in terms of overspending, pushing up the fiscal deficit and also the current account deficit, and exposing the economy to the risk of a crisis. By signalling to the public that political factors still determine the price of fuel domestically, all the good work — and pain — of deregulation is being undone. It is to be hoped that at the next revision of domestic fuel prices they will be pushed upwards significantly by the companies — even if the elections are not over. Or considerable built-up credibility will have been lost, for reasons of petty politics.

Another misstep

Suspending cross-LoC trade is a knee-jerk response

The Union home ministry has decided to suspend trade across the Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir at two locations — Salamabad and Chakan-da-Bagh. The government's contention was that this trade was being misused by locals on both sides of the border to send illegal weapons, narcotics and fake currency into India. Government officials reportedly identified at least 10 militants — essentially residents on the Indian side of the LoC from places such as Budgam, Sopore, Baramulla and Tral — using such trade openings to cross over to Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir and joining terror outfits such as Hizbul Mujahideen. The officials asserted that under the garb of local trade such individuals were assisting militants and separatists within Kashmir. There was also the issue of trade rules being violated in the form of under-invoicing and exchange of third party items such as California almonds. On the face of it then, the government's decision looks justified. The reality, however, is that it is yet another misstep by the government when it comes to its Kashmir policy.

The first thing to understand is the nature and origin of this trade. It is essentially in the form of barter trade that allows locals on both sides of the LoC to come together and trade without being straitjacketed by the onerous requirements of international trade. This kind of trading was started roughly a decade ago and was conceived as one of the confidence-building measures between India and Pakistan. The whole point was to allow locals, who often have strong family and cultural ties across the LoC, to mingle and create an atmosphere of trust that was more conducive to allow for a thaw at a higher political level. Many observers believed that given a chance, the social and cultural interconnectedness achieved through such barter trade would eventually lead to a more structured economic and political coming together of the region. To be sure, over the years, such trade has not only created hundreds of thousands of jobs for the local population. According to one estimate, last year, such barter trade was valued at over ₹5,000 crore.

Suspending this trade abruptly serves little purpose apart from further antagonising and alienating the locals. Security concerns must be addressed through greater scrutiny by border patrol officials, more in-depth background checks, better intelligence, etc, and not by stopping exchange of goods and putting at risk the livelihood of the people on both sides of the LoC. A summary trade ban is like throwing the baby out with the bathwater, and is at best a short-cut measure. What makes this decision even more unfortunate is the timing. India is in the middle of the Lok Sabha elections and the ruling party has made no bones about its intent to remove Article 370 from the Constitution and strip the troubled northern state of its special status. Already, the recent government decision to close the national highway between Udhampur and Baramulla to civilian traffic for two days a week in order to facilitate troop movement has caused a lot of unrest. Clearly, the government could do without yet another ill-advised move.

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



Guesswork and the elections

Guesswork is not psephology and something like that is happening in these polls, too, because nobody is quite sure any longer

This is one of those strange elections, lacking a theme and unfolding with a sense of drift. It is different from 2004 on the sensory side. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under Atal Bihari Vajpayee joined battle 15 years ago with great confidence in message and victory. When the numbers came in many in the media and middle class were taken aback by the BJP's defeat despite, or perhaps because of, 'India Shining'. That particular message and campaign seemed so inspirational and winning that it seemed a done deal.

In 2019, this is not so. Others have observed the negative thrust of the ruling party's campaign. We can quibble about this but it is indisputable that it lacks the flavour of 2014. So what exactly is missing for most people? It offers no magic solutions this time.

The promises are subdued, the slogans more banal — 'Phir ek baar Modi Sarkar' can be read as a plea, or an anodyne statement. You could even read it with a question mark at the end instead of the missing exclamation point.

It is not inspirational, doesn't give hope and it makes no promise of improvement. Importantly, it does not refer to performance. The most charitable thing one can say is that it rhymes in a kindergarten way.

You could perhaps see it as an expression of

confidence: That the slogan tells the voter that the era 2014-2019 is what you wanted, and so get ready for five more years of it.

But none of the other stuff validates this: The prime minister says he is still the challenger, meaning he is still not the system, which he's convinced remains hostile to him. But the system is what the citizen engages with and is interested in. The more I think of it the more the slogan appears to me to be a sign that the BJP has concluded that the voter would be put off if told that under Narendra Modi, India was shining.

This brings me to the opposition, which is arguably running a more positive campaign than the government. The primary weapon Rahul Gandhi is taking to war is the targeted basic income scheme called NYAY. It is ₹6,000 a month which is substantial enough to make many vote for it. What might stop them? Questions of credibility. Not the credibility of the idea and its deliverability but the question first about whether Mr Gandhi can win enough seats nationally to be in the position to implement the scheme. This will be his biggest issue and I wonder if he has thought about how to deal with it.

The cost of the programme is apparently around ₹3.2 trillion which is thought to be so big as to be unsustainable. I have a solution for this — take



AAKAR PATEL

The untappable floating voters of India

In the backdrop of the 2012 US presidential election, Linda Killian documented the characteristics and importance of floating voters in her book *'The Swing Vote: The Untapped Power of Independents'*. In fact, Ms Killian spotted four distinct demographic groups of Swing voters in the US:

- The *NPR Republicans*, also known as *Rockefeller Republicans*, due to their political philosophy close to Nelson Rockefeller, a liberal Republican. They are traditional, well-educated, socially moderate and fiscally conservative Republicans who became independents because of a growing disaffection with their natural party home. Many of them voted for Barack Obama, for example.

- *America First Democrats*, also monickered as *Reagan Democrats*, are largely male, working- and middle-class voters. They tend to be more conservative than the Democratic party, and think that many Democrats didn't stand up for traditional American values both at home and abroad. Many of them voted for Bill Clinton and Hillary Clinton, but didn't vote for Obama.

- Many voters under 35 are *Independent* as they mistrust politicians of both parties. They are from *The Facebook Generation*.

- The largest and most important Swing voting bloc are the *Starbucks Moms and Dads*. These suburban and exurban voters tend to be sceptical of big government; they are socially moderate, concerned about education and national security. And, according to Ms Killian, they decide elections.

Linda Killian believes that the Swing voters are an ever-expanding force which comprises more than 40 per cent of the American voters. And they determined the outcome of every election since the World War II. Some experts spotted a fifth category, namely the *Ideologues*, whose philosophical allegiance doesn't match with any major party contesting the elections.

Even days before the Brexit referendum, YouGov poll suggested the support percentages favouring

'Remain' and 'Leave' to be around 45 per cent each. The 10 per cent Undecideds certainly determined Britain's relationship with the Europe. In any YouGov survey ahead of a general election, the population is segmented into three key groups based on their voting pattern in the previous election and their current voting intention: *Stickers*, *Switchers*, and *Undecideds*. Clearly, *Switchers* and *Undecideds* can be pooled to form the 'Swing voters' group. For example, there were 57 per cent *Stickers*, 22 per cent *Switchers*, and 20 per cent *Undecideds* for the 2017 snap election, indicating about 42 per cent Swing voters, and, interestingly, this is about the same proportion as in the US.

In our multi-party democracy, floating voters may be categorised into many groups. Some voters are certainly independent, while there must be some soft-hearted supporters of any party who change their support quite often, like the *Rockefeller Republicans* or *Reagan Democrats*.

There is a widespread belief that the number of floating voters is reducing in this country. Is that so? Some experts prefer to find the

approximate proportion of floating voters in the country in an indirect way. Assuming 1989 the beginning of the coalition era, and considering the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Congress and Others as three parties/bloc, the minimum vote share for a party within the eight general elections during the last three decades, when the corresponding party/bloc faced a debacle, is considered to be the size of its core vote bank. The BJP attained its minimum in 2009 (considering 1991 onwards data for the BJP) when its vote share was 18.8 per cent, the Congress got its minimum vote share of 19.5 per cent in 2014, and the combined 'Others' had the minimum vote share in 1991 when it received 43.5 per cent support. If these figures represent the dedicated voter base to these parties/bloc, then nearly 82 per cent of the country's voters are committed, keeping only 18 per cent floating voters in the



ATANU BISWAS

₹2 trillion out of the defence and paramilitary budget. All told, this now comes to ₹4 trillion annually and has reached this appalling figure without debate on why it is required to be so large.

I'd like to see those who deal in nationalism explain why this money should be given to European manufacturers of 20th century baubles like fighter jets and submarines instead of to India's poorest. I never hear this argued in the media and I wonder if there are others who feel this way, and in fact more of them than those willing to sacrifice this nation for its Army.

All this time, I had assumed that Mr Modi would return to power easily, but I am no longer finding much support for this position. In a small WhatsApp group of friends, we were wagering where we thought the BJP would end up, given that it won 282 seats in 2014. I put my money on 220. This was not based on information or wisdom. I was just going by what the news channel, whose panel I am on, has reported by way of its opinion poll. However, that poll was taken a month ago and we know that cliché about the difference a week makes in politics.

It may interest readers to know that my figure was the highest and the others lowballed the BJP down to 145. I was taken aback by this pessimism in our saviour, but they were convinced that Uttar Pradesh was unfolding as a rout.

I have since reconsidered my position and will not be surprised if the Lok Sabha is either hung in favour of this side or that. I may not even be surprised if there's a sweep this way. Though I'd be pretty shocked if it went the other way. This tosh is hardly the sort of thing you'd want from a professional analyst but I must be honest with the reader: I've no idea what will happen.

Even the opinion polls are hedging where things are going. You may have noticed that many of the polls are showing results clubbed. Instead of individual states they're giving regions, like East zone, comprising Bihar, Bengal and Orissa and further aggregating the data by assigning seats to just three formations, 'National Democratic Alliance (NDA)', 'United Progressive Alliance (UPA)' and 'Others', which could ultimately mean anything.

It reminds me of an opinion poll done some years ago by psephologist turned politician, GVL Narasimha Rao. As counting began, it turned out that Mr Rao had called, if my memory serves me, the results in every single state wrong. His winners lost and his losers won.

When asked by the panellist (Swaminathan Anlesaria Aiyar) to explain how he could go wrong on this scale, Rao said "But at least I got the national totals right." Alas, guesswork is not psephology and something like that is happening in these polls, too, because nobody is quite sure any longer.

Earlier in the week, I asked an acquaintance in government what they thought the ruling party would win and the answer surprised me. "150" they replied, adding by way of justification, "Silent wave."

It would be remarkable if the Gujarati Renaissance ended so quickly and in such ignominy. But who can say that based on merits it is not deserved? On the other hand, if the BJP wins, at least my wager is secure.

country. There is no denial that this is a huge proportion, nearly 2 in 11, and certainly decisive in any election in our electoral setup. But, I tend to believe that this indirect method certainly overestimated the committed voters — with more and more elections we would attain new minimum for any party/bloc. Also, instead of considering 'Others' together, if the minimum vote share for each party is considered separately, we'd certainly get a much higher percentage of floating voters. Thus, this 18 per cent value may very well be a very conservative lower bound of the floating voters of the country — much less than the actual figure.

For example, in the 2017 Assembly elections of Uttar Pradesh, the Samajwadi Party, the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Congress could manage only 22 per cent, 22.2 per cent and 6.2 per cent votes, whereas the BJP got only 15 per cent support in the state in 2012. Adding a minimum value of 6 per cent support for the other small parties combined, the committed voters in UP can't be more than 57 per cent, leaving a massive 43 per cent floating voters in the state. I guess that this would hold true for any state and the whole country as well.

Political parties are up to grab these floating votes as much as possible, in their own styles. From poll promises to big-data-analytics-based canvassing — all come into the process. Interestingly, according to the National Election Study 2014 conducted by Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 43 per cent electorates in India go with the *hawa*. There are several factors contributing to that. Opinion polls, for example, contribute about 3 per cent *hawa*.

Likewise in the US, as portrayed by Linda Killian in her book, I firmly believe that a huge proportion of voters must be floating in India too — the gigantic and expensive election campaign is certainly not without reason. Where I differ Linda Killian is that the swing voters, I believe, are 'untappable', not just 'untapped'. And that keeps our democracy fascinating and thrilling as well.

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Testing cultural boundaries



BOOK REVIEW

SOURADEEP ROY

This selection of writings by Shanta Gokhale contains her journalism spanning several decades, short stories, and plays. The book ends with her play *Rosemary for Remembrance* but encapsulates Ms Gokhale's imagination as a creative writer and critic, and, in a sense, contains all the concerns that occupy most of the writing in this book. I will begin by placing Ms Gokhale, the playwright, at the centre, to borrow the title of one of her earlier books, *The Playwright at the Centre*.

In the play, Ophelia and Gertrude, two of the women in *Hamlet*, who pay for their desires, are the protagonists. The small details in the play are delightful — they eat a plate of biscuits as they discuss the men in their lives. The biscuits are a crucial reminder of the kitchen — a space that comes up often in other essays. But the biscuits are also not a full formal meal; they allow the women to have a heart-to-heart talk. Gertrude, the older one, tells Ophelia, "Men trust men. Eat your biscuit, my dear. It'll go soft. Look at the sky."

This small vignette of dialogue, in which we can almost hear the casualness of the tone, traverses the world of writing and performing in which women can talk to each other in a language that a Shakespearean tragedy can't hold. That world needed the drama of love and betrayal, the blame for which, in almost all occasions, lies with the women characters. "You had to be the reason for your brother/ to kill my son and my son to kill your brother./ Men with quills have

always made/the brave and noble kill each other for us", Gertrude explains to Ophelia again. The entire play, which runs to 18 pages, was intended for the intimate theatre, and is a testament both to Ms Gokhale's commitment to experiment to Ms Gokhale's commitment to experiment towards feminisation.

In one of her essays, she takes a critical look at the women characters in modern Marathi plays and analyses them through an interesting term she coins — the "Nora test". She sees if Marathi theatre has "created a woman who takes hold of her own life as Nora does" (Nora, a character in Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's play, *A Doll's House*, is one of the most iconic female protagonists in modern drama). It hasn't, she argues. Ms Gokhale rewrites and engages with the classics with a keen eye for the place of women in these texts, be it Shakespeare or Ibsen. She can, however, do that equally well talking about the

maxi, writing about it in Marathi.

In "Maxi-mum Story", she writes of the maxi as a new moment in Indian fashion, but, unlike fashion, which changes with the season, she tries to understand why it has endured. The maxi's utility for the working woman, she says, is invaluable and so it has stayed. "Most importantly," she says in conclusion, "wherever it came from, it is now as much ours as a play on the Kamani Auditorium stage, a Marathi novel or a modern painting. And so wherever it shows up, it has every right to be there."

She speaks of the clothing quite like her reworking of *Hamlet*: It is as much her own as it is Shakespeare's; she has every right to re-write it from her own perspective. With the maxi, however, she'll have to do it collectively with other women. The use of "us" shows that she is also aware of her readership. The article was first published in Marathi, which means a wider readership than her English play and essay that I have dis-

cussed so far. The right for women to claim what they think is their own is explained through a shared cultural object to which most of her readers can relate.

From this minute, private understanding of a shared culture, Ms Gokhale also takes us to the larger public implications of culture, especially for politics. This finds its best exposition in the sections, "On This Grand Nation" and "On Marathi Culture".

The context for many of these questions comes from the rising politicisation of Marathi culture in Maharashtra. Added to this is Ms Gokhale's own love for the language and its history most evident in her essay on the 19-year-old Dnyaneshwar Kulkarni, who wrote a commentary on the

Gita in Marathi centuries before the language became a site for the kind of politics in which the Shiv Sena engages. Writing about kisses as a form of public greeting and the kind of unfavourable responses it generates, she uses a curious phrase — "culture cannot hold". It's an incomplete

phrase taken out of context here, but if we probe a little deeper we understand a lot of things about ourselves. Can the culture of Marathi theatre hold a Nora? Can the Marathi *manooos* [man] hold workers from other states in India? If not, why? Ms Gokhale's search comes from this impulse.

The translations from the Marathi in this book are either by Ms Gokhale herself or by Jerry Pinto. If Ms Gokhale was one of the first to translate and unlock the door to Marathi literature, Mr Pinto, in translating and editing crucial books, has left it wide open. This is one book that must be read if anyone wishes to enter that world.

The reviewer tweets at @souradeeproy19

THE ENGAGED OBSERVER
The Selected Writings of Shanta Gokhale
Edited with an Introduction by Jerry Pinto
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