



No surprises

RBI's reduction in benchmark rates is an acknowledgement of a slowdown in growth

There was no surprise in the 25 basis points cut in benchmark interest rates by the Reserve Bank of India in its first bi-monthly policy statement of the financial year announced on Thursday. The market had anticipated such a cut and the only question was whether the central bank would surprise with a deeper 50 basis points cut. In the event, the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) seems to have decided to hold its horses and settle for a conservative approach given the divergent sets of data that it was confronted with. On the one hand, inflation, despite the mild spike in February, is well under control at 2.6% and is projected to average 3.2% to 3.4% in the first half of 2019-20. This is below the 4% target set for the MPC. But there are some factors that could spring a surprise on the upside, such as the behaviour of the monsoon and the trend in global oil prices, both of which feed directly into inflationary expectations. Early forecasts indicate a strong possibility of a below-normal monsoon due to El Niño. Such an event would cast a shadow on agricultural output, and consequently the food prices. Similarly, global oil prices are now edging close to the \$70 a barrel mark on the back of production cuts by the OPEC cartel. While the soft growth trends in the global economy could act as a check on any runaway increase in oil prices, the chances of a sharp fall in the next few months appear remote at this point in time. If these are points of upward pressure on inflation, on the other side growth has been faltering in the last few months, going by both data on industrial output and overall GDP. The Central Statistics Office has revised the GDP growth for 2018-19 downwards to 7% while the RBI has projected a lower growth of 7.2% in 2019-20 compared to the 7.4% estimated in the last policy.

The 25 basis points cut is, therefore, an acknowledgement by the MPC of the slowdown in growth. It also signals a shift in policy since Shaktikanta Das assumed office as Governor of the RBI, whereby the MPC is not solely focussed on inflation but also takes into account growth trends with equal seriousness. The MPC's neutral policy stance is prudent given the uncertainties ahead as it gives the central bank the flexibility to tailor policy to emerging data sets. Meanwhile, Mr. Das has sent out a welcome, clear signal on the central bank's commitment to the framework for resolution of stressed assets in the backdrop of the Supreme Court striking down its circular issued on February 12, 2018. While underlining that the RBI's powers have not been compromised, he has indicated that the central bank will soon reissue the circular taking into account the apex court's observations. This is as it should be.

Outer clarity

India must take up more forcefully the case against weaponisation of outer space

The Indian Space Research Organisation's successful April 1 launch of the PSLV-C45 rocket that placed 29 satellites in three different orbits is remarkable both for the complex set of multi-tasking the mission accomplished and for the timing. Coming three days after ISRO and the Defence Research and Development Organisation knocked out a satellite in a Low Earth Orbit with a direct hit, it would appear that the Indian space programme stands galvanised and poised for a giant leap. The dexterity with which so many satellites, most of them American, were placed in three different orbits certainly showcases both the reliability and the expertise that ISRO offers. This is not a new development. In February 2017, the PSLV-C37 placed 104 satellites, 96 of them from the U.S., in one go, a testimony to ISRO's ability to launch satellites at a fraction of the cost that other countries incur. Equally important, just as the February 2017 launch also placed the fifth of the Cartosat 2 series in orbit, an earth observation satellite with cameras that have a resolution of less than a metre, the PSLV-C45 placed EMISAT, which can, among other things, aid in electronic intelligence. In other words, India is assiduously putting in place a space military architecture. Over the next few months, as many as eight satellites are expected to be launched, strengthening the defence dimension.

That is precisely why the government should articulate much more clearly the doctrinal aspects of the space programme, as well as the deterrence sought to be achieved by it. India must communicate its peaceful intentions just as it showcases its capabilities, so as to contribute to a better understanding among countries it hopes to deter and thereby reduce the chances of wrong inferences being drawn in crisis situations. After all, missiles are but one aspect of space warfare. There are other, less visible but equally effective methods to incapacitate satellites that are being developed and are of equally serious concern. The problem is that there is no global regulatory regime to address the growing militarisation in space. Last year, at the UN Disarmament Commission, India expressed concern about the "weaponisation" of outer space, and sought collective action to secure space-based assets. In this regulatory vacuum, India has legitimate reasons to develop deterrence for the security of its space-based assets. Equally, New Delhi must take a bigger lead in forging a global and legally binding instrument to prevent militarisation of space. It is encouraging that after the ASAT test, India said it "expects to play a role in the future in the drafting of international law on prevention of an arms race in space". This is morally and pragmatically in keeping with India's power projection. Given the prohibitively expensive nature of space projects, India and other countries must utilise the increased presence in space to legitimately advance the well-being of their people.

Making democracy meaningful

Freedom must be foregrounded, and each person enabled to contribute her best to it



VALERIAN RODRIGUES

Within Indian common sense periodic elections, party-based competitive candidates, and universal adult franchise have turned out to be the primary ingredients of democracy. This common sense has come to cloud everything centrally associated with the idea of democracy in general and constitutional democracy in particular. Reading elections as democracy has also led to the equating of means with ends, celebrating the former, and abdicating it from all responsibility the latter demands. Denoting elections as 'the festival of the masses', a phrase that tweaks Mao's dictum 'revolution is the festival of the masses', or terming India as the 'largest democracy in the world' tends to suggest a view of democracy in which the role of the masses decidedly ends at the hustings. This reduction of democracy to elections, today, threatens to undermine the core aspirations associated with it.

For appreciating such aspirations we do not necessarily have to revert to the classics on this term elsewhere, such as Rousseau's *Du Contrat Social*, Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, Marx's writings on the revolutions of 1848 in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* and Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, but India's own reflections on it in such works as B.R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste*, K.M. Panikkar's *Caste and Democracy*, Ram Manohar Lohia's *Marx, Gandhi and Socialism*, Jayaprakash Narayan's *A Plea for Reconstruction of Indian Polity*, and above all the *Constituent Assembly Debates*

(1946-1949). These later writings do have a place for elections and representation that they engender, but also call for pre-requisites for a fair election that claims to represent the will of the people, and stipulate conditions for its continued salience.

Elections as tools

Elections can hardly be termed as the sole and effective conveyor belts of popular will in India any longer. Probably, they were never so. But there were reasons to hope, as the poor and the marginalised, cutting across diversity and the social and gender divide, rallied behind it in strength. But the hype that has come to surround elections, the resources that it calls for, the close monitoring of the voters by boxing them in social straitjackets, and the media's obsessive focus on elections as a gladiators' den have deeply compromised elections as the preeminent device of representation of popular will.

In the process the electoral space of the poor and the marginalised has shrunk, as other devices have been put in place to elicit their assent. The rectitude of the election machinery alone cannot ensure that the voter is enabled to make a deliberated choice of momentous significance to his everyday life, opportunities and access to resources. Political parties with their stakes, almost without exception, have increasingly tended to fix the voters in social silos, rather than help them redefine their affiliations and connect to the wider social ensemble, if they choose to do so. Redistribution of resources and opportunities has been lost in the endless litany of promises of goods and bounties. A promise, here and there, in the manifestoes of political parties that allude to redistribution sounds theatrical before their socially conservative stance.



Sections of the media have come to play second fiddle in amplifying the sound-bites of political leaders, deploying them to construct and reconstruct opponents, with specified social constituencies in view. They have found jingoism and archaic frames easy to stoke rather than nudge public sensitivity to reinforcing the democratic temper. Highlighting fragments from popular memory lane, spreading isolated events wide across the political space, and nurturing the effect of simultaneity, particularly with certain audiences in view, have been the take of much reporting these days. Negatively, the advances people had made in shaping their self-rule, in a context of bewildering diversity and complexity and widening inequalities, are given short shrift.

While elections have been successful in reproducing the order of things, they can hardly be considered as the tool of deepening democracy and the nursery of imagining alternative human possibilities.

Imaginary of democracy

There has been an ambivalence regarding elections as the route to democracy in India from early on, even before Independence. It is important to recall that the Indian National Congress rejected the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms

(1919) that expanded the then electoral base, and entertained grave doubts with regard to the provisions of the Government of India Act, 1935 till it accorded a qualified endorsement to it. There have always been political tendencies in India after Independence, particularly on the Left, that have sought boycott of elections by appealing to a richer and thicker version of democracy. But there is little to suggest that those who sought to reject or do away with elections have had much success in putting together an alternative, or enjoyed significant and consistent mass support for any appreciable time across the complex and deeply plural social ensemble in India. If the great scholarly account of W.H. Morris-Jones, *Parliament in India*, is to be believed, the 1951-52 general elections demonstrated to an incredulous world, entertaining deep doubts about the prospects of parliamentary democracy in India, the faith that people had come to repose in elections as a mode of choosing their rulers. Subsequent developments, particularly the option of Left parties to take the parliamentary path, demonstrate that elections as a device of choosing representatives find deep echo in the public culture in India. The challenge that the democratic project confronts in India can scarcely be imagined by setting aside elections.

In the reflections on democracy in India, a distinct imaginary of the same stands out, i.e. a political community of free and equal citizens who wish to define their collective life in the indefinite future, irrespective of, and taking along, the differences among them. There is a disconnect between this imaginary and the turn elections have taken in India today.

Looking ahead

As a political community, the bonds that unite Indians are not gi-

ven but have to be forged, and have to be forged consciously and deliberately. Certain inheritances, beliefs, memories and shared practices can be a great help in this direction, but it is also important to realise that they can be equally divisive. India's constitutional layout and public institutions can extend much support in streamlining and directing this political project, but cannot be its replacement. In a complex society such as India, such a political project needs all layers of the political community. The deliberation and participation such a project calls for will remain merely a slogan unless we foreground freedom, and enable everyone to contribute one's best to it.

There is no reason for anyone to participate in such a project unless it welcomes them as equals and enables them to pursue what they regard as the best for them. This calls for auditing the election promises of political parties, extending support to some measures and rejecting others. Measures such as access to quality education in the mother tongue, neighbourhood schools, strengthening public health systems, public transport, entrepreneurship and skill development, universal social insurance, and reaching out to those who suffer disadvantages in accessing these measures are definitely in synchrony with the democratic project. At the same time for a large number of Indians the beliefs they uphold, and the practices that ensue therefrom are central to their idea of themselves. There is no reason why India's democratic project cannot encompass such embeddedness and aspirations. There is a dire need to create a helm to focus on India's democratic project.

Valerian Rodrigues had taught Political Science at Mangalore University and Jawaharlal Nehru University

A presidential-style race in Andhra Pradesh

The Assembly campaign has been personalised, with Chandrababu Naidu and Jaganmohan Reddy trading charges



K. VENKATESHWARLU

The Assembly elections in Andhra Pradesh have been reduced to a vote simulating a provincial presidential binary, with people having to make a choice between a young challenger, Y.S. Jaganmohan Reddy, who has been waiting in the wings for quite some time to occupy the Chief Minister's post, and a seasoned, never-say-die, time-tested incumbent, N. Chandrababu Naidu.

In a way it is a repeat of what happened in the 2014 elections. At that time it was a keen contest between Mr. Naidu's Telugu Desam Party (TDP)-led alliance versus Mr. Reddy's YSR Congress Party. Mr. Naidu romped home with a margin of less than 2 percentage points. Among the many factors then were a strategic alliance Mr. Naidu had stitched up with the BJP as well as incremental support

from actor Pawan Kalyan's Jana Sena Party (JSP). Hurt by the way the State had been bifurcated – it had left them without a capital city that used to generate revenue of ₹60,000 crore – voters opted for a leader with vast administrative experience and who had transformed Hyderabad into an IT hub.

This time too the electoral battle is essentially between Mr. Naidu and Mr. Reddy, and if the results throw up a cliffhanger, the JSP along with the Left could prove to be deciding factors. The Congress and the BJP (which is no longer an ally of the TDP) are in the fray too but unable to make any headway as people are angry with Congress blaming it for "unfair bifurcation" and the BJP for denying the State Special Category Status (SCS).

The record and response

So will the magic of 2014 work for Mr. Naidu, given the fact that he has decided to go it alone? Will he be able to buck anti-incumbency? Will he be able to measure up to people's expectations? In a recent interview, Mr. Naidu said he had done his best in a short time and in a challenging situation, having in-



herited a budget with a deficit of ₹16,000 crore and been faced with an "uncooperative Centre". As much as 33,000 acres of land was acquired for a new State capital at Amaravati and ₹40,000 crore of infrastructural works initiated there. The Polavaram irrigation project, which is a lifeline for the State, is on track even though the Centre is yet to release ₹4,000 crore spent by his government. Mr. Naidu said that his government has also been able to attract big manufacturing industries (which includes South Korea's Kia Motors) and ensured an economic growth rate of over 10%.

For farmers, he waived crop loans of ₹24,000 crore and came

up with 'Annadata Sukhibhava', an economic support scheme for Annadata (farmers). Under the 'Pasupu Kumkuma' scheme, every woman registered with self-help groups has been given capital of ₹10,000. On the welfare front, a chain of Anna Canteens offers a meal (₹5) for the poor. Other measures include a hike in pensions for the elderly and widows to ₹2,000 and a scheme to build 30 lakh houses. Mr. Naidu's campaign has focussed on showcasing these 'achievements' and targeting Mr. Reddy for his criminal cases (31), a slew of corruption cases filed by the Central Bureau of Investigation and a 'conspiracy' with the Telangana Rashtra Samithi and the BJP to unseat him (Mr. Naidu).

In turn, Mr. Reddy too has focussed on corruption to corner Mr. Naidu. His counter-narrative touches on how this *Pedda Mamishi* (elderly person) has turned governance into a money-making machine, allowing his MLAs to loot the State's resources. In the name of land for the capital, Mr. Reddy alleges that the Chief Minister has turned it into a real estate business without building even a single permanent building there

so far. He asks why Polavaram remains half complete. Mr. Reddy adds that banks have estimated a sum of over ₹80,000 crore for implementing a crop loan waiver, with nothing done so far.

All-important caste factor

Campaign rhetoric apart, elections in the State are all about caste and the capacity of different political parties to marshal their support. Mr. Naidu's support base is among the numerically strong Backward Classes (BCs) besides his own influential Kamma community. Mr. Reddy has tried hard to breach the TDP's vote base by giving more tickets to BCs this time besides, strengthening his vote among the Reddys, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and minorities. Mr. Pawan Kalyan has a large following among his Kapu community. It is because of him that they had overwhelmingly voted for the TDP in the last elections. But now that the JSP is in the electoral fray – Mr. Reddy accuses it of backing the TDP – it has to be seen how it will affect the fortunes of the TDP and the YSRCP.

venkateshwarlu.k@thehindu.co.in

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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RTI scrutiny

The arguments put forth by the Attorney General, of the need to not have the judiciary under the ambit of the Right to Information Act are strange. Judicial exclusivity had never been envisaged by any of our Constitution makers. With the allegations made recently about the judiciary's functioning, the RTI Act would serve as a master tool, making the justice delivery mechanism more immune to political pressure and accountable to the people. People have the right to know how the judiciary functions (Page 1, "RTI scrutiny will ruin judicial independence", April 4).

Y. MEENA,
Hyderabad

■ The attempt by the judiciary to wriggle out of the RTI radar is unacceptable. The arguments given in support of this are unconvincing. They equally apply to other civil servants. Therefore, the

judiciary cannot claim preferential treatment. Instead, the judiciary should set an example by abiding by the RTI Act rather than finding excuses for not releasing information. How can there be an argument then to make sure the RTI Act applies to political parties?

R. VIDYA SAGAR,
Chennai

Water crisis?

Water management is a much-talked-about subject these days. The issue becomes all the more serious as there are now more credible scientific data to show growing water poverty. It is disheartening that proper lessons have not been imbibed. Year after year we helplessly watch excess rainwater flowing to the sea. Going forward in cities, in addition to rainwater harvesting, we need to build more storage bodies. Today while there is tall talk of desalination, it is strange that we allow huge water resources to join the sea and

thereafter leisurely think of converting brackish seawater into drinking water. Measures such as estimating the water available in aquifers, use of water conservation techniques, redefining the criteria for recycling and reuse of effluents, installation of water meters, groundwater drafting and water auditing are crucial now. This regimen should become the order and not the exception (Page 1, "Skymet expects a 'below normal' monsoon", April 4).

R. SAMPATH,
Chennai

The forces and politics

Our politicians should leave our defence forces and personnel alone. Let them not paint the armed forces with any colour. But for our bravehearts, the nation would not be safe. The military is the people's sena and not the Prime Minister's, as Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath claims. Mr. Adityanath should instead issue an

apology ("Former Navy chief protests Yogi's remarks", April 3). Political parties should seek votes based on their achievements.

T. ANAND RAJ,
Chennai

■ Since Independence our armed forces have had a stellar record of being apolitical and secular. Comments such as the one by Mr. Adityanath can lead to the politicisation of our defence forces, who are respected by one and all for their supreme sacrifices. The armed forces are sworn to uphold the Constitution of India and take "lawful orders" from the duly elected government, no matter which party is in power. Remarks like Mr. Adityanath's clearly try to intimidate voters. This is not the first time that the ruling party has tried to needlessly politicise the armed forces especially when it comes to scoring points over the Opposition parties.

S.K. KHOSLA,
Chandigarh

■ We are not living in the days of yore when the army was named after the ruler concerned. The Prime Minister does not need enemies from outside. His own followers and friends are capable of inflicting enough damage to the image of the party and the government.

S.V. VENKATKRISHNAN,
Bengaluru

The iconic Ambassador

The report "Business" page, "Ambassador brand an asset", April 4, on how France's Groupe PSA has said all options are open on the relaunch of the iconic Ambassador brand and car, brought back many fond memories. In 1976, my father bought our family's first car, an Ambassador, with a loan from his employer. It was actually a third-hand one, with a 'VIP number plate': BRF 1. My youngest brother would call it the 'BARAF gaadi'. Two years later it had to be sold as my father was changing jobs and had to close the loan. My brother

was traumatised, crouching and weeping near its tyres. A few years later, my father decided to buy another car and an Ambassador it was again, this time a second-hand one. We had a new life with even my children and nephew enjoying rides in it. But the car had to go after my father passed away. I do hope Groupe PSA relaunches the Ambassador soon. It will be the car I will buy for sure.

SAURABH SINHA,
Bhilai, Chhattisgarh

₹10 coin

The Reserve Bank of India needs to clarify whether the ₹10 coin is an accepted denomination. There are many establishments that refuse to accept and honour it, putting many of us in great difficulty. At times, this leads to bitter quarrels. The RBI should arrange for a toll free number for the public to lodge complaints.

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

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Jobs or doles: which is the way forward?

PARLEY

Governments can provide direct cash transfers while creating conditions for employment

With the Congress promising through the Nyuntam Aay Yojana (NYAY) scheme ₹6,000 every month to the poorest 20% of households if voted to power, Mahendra Dev and Pronab Sen talk of the importance and problems of direct cash transfers. Providing social protection is important even as governments try to create conditions for income-generating activities, they say in a discussion moderated by Sharad Raghavan. Excerpts:

Professor Dev, in the light of unemployment being such a big issue now, should the government that comes to power next double down on employment creation or opt for direct transfers to the people who need it?

Mahendra Dev: Let me start on the employment question. Productive employment is the best way to remove poverty. But the organised sector constitutes only about 10% of the population; unorganised sector employees constitute almost 90%. In that context, unless you create jobs for everybody in the organised sector, the working poor will have problems. People are working, but at low wages. About 50% are self-employed. Unless you create productive jobs, you need to have social protection measures because the poor face many risks – health risks, labour market risks, financial risks.

But whether it is a minimum income guarantee or the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi Yojna (PM-Kisan), are these the best ways to reach them, or some other programmes like old-age pensions and maternity entitlements? That's the debate. But the need for social protection for the poor is important in the context of risks. And now there is also rural distress. The best way is to create jobs, but for job creation at the higher level, we need to increase more labour-intensive manufacturing, which may take time. So, in that context, giving cash transfers may be right, but how to get resources for the scheme and implement it is another issue.

Dr. Sen, is the way forward to try to increase the number of

productive jobs, increase skilling and train people better, or provide them with economic assistance?

Pronab Sen: I think what Mahendra Dev is saying is that the two are not mutually exclusive. We keep talking about governments creating jobs, but the fact is that governments don't of themselves create jobs. The best a government can do is to create conditions whereby private enterprises create jobs. That has to be done, and people must have the expectations of being able to access the jobs. In the interim, when you have people who cannot get employment, like the old, you do need social protection for them.

And then comes the problem of the working poor, which is the largest chunk of the Indian economy. Do you need to do a top-up is the question. Now, the thing is, the two are related. So long as productivity and the income accruing from jobs don't reach a particular level, a certain amount of help is necessary.

The problem with entitlement sort of programmes, which is what both PM-Kisan and NYAY are, is that they don't create that link. When we think about jobs, we should be very careful in our choice of words. Jobs are when someone else is employing you. What we are really talking about is income-generating activities. That could be a job, it could be self-employment, there is a variety of things that people do.

We have simply gone away from the discussion on how to increase income-creating opportunities for the people at large. Our focus is too much on the formal sector, which, as Mahendra Dev rightly says, employs just 10%. Even if it grows at a very rapid rate, it is not going to make a dent for a while. But we are really not discussing the steps, the measures, the macroeconomic conditions that are necessary to create non-formal jobs which have been the mainstay of income for the bulk of the Indian working class.

Professor Dev, keeping that in mind, would increasing allocations to, say, MGNREGA, which is giving people work and also income, be one way



instead of directly giving money to those who can work?

MD: I am an advocate of MGNREGA. Of course, that is for unskilled workers mostly, although some skilled component is there. It is a self-targeted programme also. In the minimum income guarantee scheme, the problem of targeting errors is there. There will be exclusion and inclusion errors in identifying the poor. In MGNREGA, it is mostly self-targeted. The rich may not participate unless they do some corruption with the muster rolls. Otherwise MGNREGA is a good one. But that itself may not be enough because we have the self-employed poor and the old. That is one of the social protection things...

But also remember that the amount allocated for this minimum income guarantee, ₹3 lakh crore, comes with opportunity costs. Human development people say, why can't this be spent on health and education instead of on minimum income guarantee? There are opportunity costs to any expenditure, unless the government expands the tax base much more. Otherwise, there is always a trade-off.

Dr. Sen, how does one pay for something like the minimum income guarantee scheme?

PS: Let's be very clear. The scheme is a pure transfer, which is perfectly legitimate in any society that is caring. You take from the rich and you support the poor. There is nothing

now is that if the discourse now says, we are going to do this, we are going to tax the rich, what effect it has on the larger macroeconomic picture then becomes an issue that we need to debate.

Professor Dev, the thing with directly giving people money is that you are in essence just increasing their consumption expenditure, but the revenue earned by the government from them is more or less the same. Yes, there is some increase in indirect tax collections, but direct tax collections remain the same, whereas the consumption expenditure goes up. Is that a sustainable way? How do you mitigate that?

MD: As Pronab said, we are not against the concept of minimum income guarantee. But how we do that is important. If the consumption expenditure increases, the demand for industrial goods, many durable or non-durable goods will increase. So that may have some taxes for the government. But how do you raise ₹3 lakh crore is an important issue. There are implications, as Pronab mentioned, like taxing the corporate sector. So, one has to see how to raise the resources. Can you reduce the so-called non-merit subsidies or concessions to the corporate sector in the Budget? These are issues one has to see, apart from how to identify the poor and implement the scheme.

Dr. Sen, if the government does manage to raise this quantum of resources, would direct transfers be the best way for it to utilise this extra resource?

PS: I think this is where Mahendra Dev and I completely agree. The problem with the direct transfer mechanism is that there is an inherent assumption which has not been discussed, that is, the poor always remain poor. This is not necessarily the case. We are in a fairly dynamic economy and a person or household that was poor three years ago or five years ago may no longer be poor because their children have started working, they are earning better. The direct income transfer that is being talked about now is inherently non-dynamic. It's very difficult to drop people who have been

receiving these funds. On the other hand, MGNREGA is dynamic. That is, as people move into poverty, they will access MGNREGA because, as Mahendra Dev rightly said, it is self-targeting. People who are moving out of poverty will stop going to MGNREGA work sites. So, the ideal combination would be to have MGNREGA as a safety net and to have direct transfers to those who, for whatever reason – physical, age, gender – are unable to access the work market. It's a combination of social protection and a social safety net.

Professor Dev, Dr. Sen had mentioned that the corporate tax rate has been lowered and it could possibly be increased. Do you feel this is the case for personal income tax as well? There was a calculation that increasing the tax rate for people earning more than ₹2.5 crore a year by 2 percentage points would pay for this scheme. Is something like that feasible?

MD: I don't know the implications for the economy of increasing the tax rate for the ultra-rich. Economist Thomas Piketty talks of a wealth tax. One has to see the implications and how much you get and those kinds of things. One has to think much more about resource mobilisation and how to mobilise this ₹3 lakh crore and also continuously map the dynamic poor. For example, the Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) is of 2011. From that data, one can identify the poor, but what we had in 2011 could be quite different in 2019.

Dr. Sen, how then do we increase targeting? Do we need to increase the frequency of surveys such as the SECC or is there some other form of targeting we can use?

PS: There are other forms of targeting. It could be on the basis of readily verifiable parameters such as age, physical disability, being an orphan. There are ways of targeting without going into the issue of poverty itself. So that what you are targeting is the inability to work and you focus on the growth process and for social safety nets like MGNREGA to take care of those who are able to work.



Mahendra Dev is Director and Vice Chancellor, Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, Mumbai



Pronab Sen was the first Chief Statistician of India and is now the Programme Director for the International Growth Centre India Programme



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SINGLE FILE

Protecting freedoms

Political parties should pledge to uphold human rights – and mean it

MEENAKSHI GANGULY



Everyone, everywhere, is entitled to the protection of their fundamental rights. These rights are not just violated by the most authoritarian governments, such as in China or North Korea, but can also be undermined in well-established democracies such as India. This time, as India goes to polls, human rights need to be an important part of the discussion.

But speaking out for rights in India is getting increasingly difficult. Often, the loudest voices in the media defend the government's failures. A rising number of rights defenders and lawyers have faced arbitrary arrest and jail; some have even been accused of fabricated national security offences. Mobs have hounded, beaten or threatened activists. Some activists, such as Gauri Lankesh, have been killed. The arbitrary use of financial regulations and allegations of misappropriation have prevented many independent organisations from functioning. Writers, painters, actors, filmmakers and students have been censored or succumb to self-censorship. Dissent is often deemed unpatriotic.

Meanwhile, many have endorsed crimes under the cover of ultra-nationalism. Among the most troubling was when some politicians came to the defence of the men accused of raping and murdering a little girl in Kathua, Jammu and Kashmir. Lawmakers look away or applaud as mobs kill Muslim herders and traders in the name of protecting cows from slaughter, murder couples who choose relationships outside their caste or religion, or attack Dalits and Adivasis.

The government has given a 'free hand' to security forces to resolve the decades-long insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir, failing to investigate allegations of arbitrary arrests, torture, or excessive use of force that has left many maimed and blinded. In U.P., a similar 'free hand' given to the police to contain crime has resulted in at least 59 alleged extrajudicial killings in the last two years, according to the UN.

After the horrific gang rape in Delhi in December 2012 of a young woman, promised reform is still hostage to those same institutional barriers that have long kept rape survivors from finding justice – stigma, harassment and threats, particularly if the accused are powerful. Other human rights problems are newly emerging – for instance, the poorest and most marginalised Indians are being excluded from essential services through an ambitious biometric identification programme. People's rights to privacy and data protection are being undermined by claims of national security.

As India goes to polls, candidates of all political affiliations should make a commitment to ensure accountability in public service, to protect religious minorities and other marginalised communities, and defend the rights of those most vulnerable. They should also uphold freedoms of expression, association and assembly, and recognise that by welcoming criticism and dissent they can make better informed decisions. In other words, they should pledge to uphold human rights – and mean it.

The writer is South Asia director at Human Rights Watch



NOTEBOOK

A king for three days

In Dhemaji, Assam, the festival of Po:rag has a unique tradition

RAHUL KARMAKAR

Monsoon rains stories for reporters in flood-prone Assam. But Dhemaji, the district that usually suffers the most, is often not covered by representatives of mainstream media houses based in Guwahati, about 450 km south-west. Distance has not been an issue, nor has disruption of communication because of roads and railway tracks being washed away. Dhemaji is not in the news simply because covering districts closer to Guwahati, flooded almost at the same time, is more convenient.

Floods have never taken me to Dhemaji, the district as well as its headquarters. Neither did the bombing by the outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom on August 15, 2004, which killed 13 people, including 10 schoolchildren. That day, I was in Imphal, Manipur, to cover the violence that followed the alleged rape and

murder of Thangjam Manorama Devi, 32, while in custody a month earlier. The violence ended with the government lifting the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act from seven Assembly constituencies straddling Imphal.

Since 2006, I have travelled through Dhemaji to either visit Pasighat and other places in central Arunachal Pradesh or occasionally to cover Assembly elections. But for some reason or the other, I had never stopped over at Dhemaji until now – for the first Lok Sabha election coverage in the district in almost 30 years of my career.

I couldn't meet the candidates of the major parties, as they were canvassing in remote areas of the Lakhimpur Lok Sabha constituency comprising Lakhimpur and Dhemaji districts. But I bumped into a man who was king for three days.

It is believed that Siukaphaa, the founder of the

Ahom dynasty, had established his capital at a place called Haboong in the district in 1240. But perennial flood forced the king to shift his capital across the river Brahmaputra. The Brahmaputra isn't as much of a problem as a number of its tributaries flowing down the hills of Arunachal Pradesh. These include the Jiadhal, Moridhal, Telijan, Kaitongjan, Laipulia, Sissi, Gai, and Tangani. The damage done by these "playful" rivers is believed to have given Dhemaji its name, a corruption of 'dhal dhemali', loosely translating into 'play of flood'.

"I am not that kind of a king, although my coronation happened 32 years after that of my predecessor," said Manoj Pegu, a tea planter who owns a shopping complex named after Lenin, perhaps as a throwback to Dhemaji's past as a Communist stronghold.

Mr. Pegu was crowned the king in mid-March dur-

ing Po:rag, one of the three farming-related festivals of the Mishing community. Po:rag is derived from Apong, the rice wine brewed by the Mishings, and Rag that encompasses merriment, music and dance. Po:rag is fairly regular, the coronation part is not. "Becoming the king and lording over the festival comes at a price. The community invariably chooses a resourceful person as a king because it involves feasting to be paid for," Mr. Pegu said.

But it was worth it, he said. "I did feel like a king and as per ritual a queen was also chosen for me." Mr. Pegu, a family man, had an unmarried girl as his queen, who accompanied him to all the rituals. The three days entailed living with the queen in a morning, or community hall, with 11 others, as per tradition. I was Mr. Pegu's guest for a few hours, but missed being King Pegu's guest by 20 days.

FROM THE HINDU ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO APRIL 5, 1969

Three die in Telengana agitation

Three persons were killed when police opened fire to-night [April 4] on stone-throwing Telengana student agitators in Secunderabad. The condition of one more person who was admitted in the Gandhi Hospital with bullet injuries was stated to be critical. Several persons, including policemen were injured in the pitched battle between the police and the agitators for an hour. The Deputy Commissioner of Police, Law and Order, Mr. K.V.V. Subramaniam, and Circle Inspector, Mr. Veerabhadra Rao, were among those injured in the stone-throwing. About 30 policemen were injured and admitted in the Hospital. One bank near Anjali Talkies in Secunderabad was set on fire. The fire brigade immediately rushed to the bank premises and extinguished the fire.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO APRIL 5, 1919.

The Madras Tramway. End of the Strike.

The strike of the Tramway men [in Madras city] which was continued for over 25 days came to an end this morning [April 5]: the Company also after much vacillation had taken a sympathetic attitude. Public opinion is, however, that, if only the Company had adopted a reasonable attitude at a much earlier stage of the strike, things would have gone on very well, and much uneasiness on either side might have been averted. Hon'ble Mr. T. Rangachariar who had an interview with the leaders of the Tramway Union, last night, called at the Union premises this morning, and in a short speech paid a tribute to the men's sacrificing spirit, forbearance all these days, and finally advised them to resume work to-day pending the decision of the arbitration. The men accordingly resumed work today at 11 A.M., and the full service of cars has now been restored much to the satisfaction of the tram-using public. Mr. Kumaraswami Chettiar, the President of the Union, has resigned, he being made a patron of the Union and Mr. T. Venkataramanjulu Naidu, the Personal Assistant of the Manager of the Tramway Company who has commanded the confidence of the men, was elected President.

POLL CALL

Polling booth

A polling booth is a building, often a school or community centre, where voting takes place during an election. Except poll officials and voters, no one without a valid pass from the Election Commission is allowed to enter the polling booth. No political activity is allowed in or near the booth. A Returning Officer, who is an officer of the government or of a local authority, monitors the voting process and assists voters with the process in a polling booth. Polling booths are open only during specified hours on voting day.

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