



Transparency road

India and China should be guided by the Wuhan spirit, and not by differences over BRI

Two years after the Belt and Road Initiative forum was unveiled with fanfare, Chinese President Xi Jinping's address to the second BRI forum was a clear indication that Beijing is coming to terms with the pushback his ambitious project has received. Mr. Xi's speech to 37 heads of government and the UN Secretary General and the IMF Managing Director had many significant takeaways, including a stated commitment to "transparency and sustainability" of BRI projects, and to greater debt sustainability in the "financing model" of the Belt and Road under new guiding principles. Since 2017, India, the U.S. and other countries have been critical of the lack of transparency with which many of the BRI projects were negotiated with governments. Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Malaysia had second thoughts on some of the infrastructure projects over fears of a "debt trap", and allegations of corruption in BRI projects became election issues. In April last year, European Union Ambassadors to Beijing issued a statement saying the BRI ran "counter" to their agenda for liberalising trade and "pushed the balance of power in favour of subsidised Chinese companies". After Central Asia and South East Asia, China's biggest foray is into Europe, and the criticism did not go unheeded by Beijing. China agreed to renegotiate terms on projects, reached out to regional organisations like the Arab and African forums and the EU, where Premier Li Keqiang pledged to "respect EU rules and standards" at a summit of "17+1" Central and Eastern European countries that are part of the BRI. It is hoped that China will take this understanding forward beyond Mr. Xi's speech and help build an infrastructure financing network that is equitable and transparent, especially for smaller states.

While Mr. Xi's words on transparency and inclusivity will be welcomed in India, they don't address New Delhi's main concern over the BRI, of sovereignty. India's objection to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is that it runs through parts of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, and this has led to the Modi government's decision to stay away from the summit. India's other concern over the BRI's inroads in South Asia will also grow: at the summit, China listed the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor and the Nepal-China Trans-Himalayan Multi-dimensional Connectivity Network, and the CPEC as focus areas. Even so, India has abandoned its sharp rhetoric against the BRI this time compared to 2017, and China issued statements saying it would not allow the decision to affect the bilateral relationship. This was an indicator that both would rather be guided on the issue by the Wuhan spirit than by the deep differences they continue to have over the BRI project.

Off the mark

The Telangana exam fiasco necessitates a fresh review of all the papers

When the school-leaving certificate remains the most important outcome for a student at the end of a dozen years of study, governments have a duty to ensure that it is accurate. The serious errors in the Telangana State Board of Intermediate Education results this year, which have triggered 21 student suicides, show that policymakers and the bureaucracy can badly fail at meeting their responsibilities. A few hundred students were declared absent and passed, without their marks being displayed, and in other cases, as absent and failed, although the candidates had taken the examination. In one case, apparently caused by human error, the student's marks statement recorded a zero, when in fact she had scored 99. The State-appointed inquiry committee that went into the examinations issue has pointed to errors on the part of the company that was chosen to handle the results, notably absence of checks on the system's performance and sufficient trials of the software application to assess its robustness. Chief Minister K. Chandrababu Naidu has ordered free re-verification of the papers, but the government's major concern should be the restoration of public confidence. It should review all the papers and make them available to candidates for scrutiny without any fee.

Among the issues raised after the Telangana fiasco is whether the private agency selected to process the results could handle the scale of the operation. This year, over 8.7 lakh candidates took the Intermediate examination, and the inquiry has determined that there was no significant variation in the pass percentage in some of the difficult subjects, compared with 2018. But the agency contracted to do the processing had encountered problems with data even during the collection of fees, which should have led to rigorous scrutiny of the technology. There was also a lack of understanding among examiners, since some errors were traced to wrong entries in machine-readable forms. Independent verification, review of results and future preparedness are now being pursued, but many families have lost loved ones and others have been deeply traumatised. It is imperative that all school boards learn from Telangana's mistakes. The tragic consequence of examination muddles is a spate of student suicides. This distressing annual phenomenon is witnessed in many States, but governments have not addressed it with any degree of alarm. Students should be counselled at school that marks in the final examination are not the sole determinants of success. Policymakers should follow up such an assurance by creating more opportunities for all youth to acquire life-building skills that match their aptitude. Such counselling can also help parents, who view school-leaving marks as the make-or-break numbers for a child. A proper examination is important, but in a diversified, growing economy, sound learning and job skills hold the key to securing the future.

An employment-oriented economic policy

In the heated debate on jobs, the crucial link between macroeconomic policy and unemployment has not been flagged



PULAPRE BALAKRISHNAN

Innumerable tasks with respect to the economy await the winner of the parliamentary elections now under way, but two may be mentioned and they are connected. The first is to review the conduct of macroeconomic policy. Though it must come across as arcane, this is an element of public policy that makes a difference to whether we enjoy economic security or not. This brings up the second task for the winner, namely employment generation.

The macroeconomic policy pursued in the past five years needs overhauling. The government has continued with fiscal consolidation, or shrinking the deficit, while mandating the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to exclusively target inflation leaving aside all other considerations. This has contracted demand. That high fiscal deficits and high inflation per se can never be good for an economy does not justify a permanently tight macroeconomic stance. The rationale given for one is that it is conducive to private investment, said to be shy of fiscal deficits and held back by inflation. Both the deficit and inflation have trended downward in the past five years, yet investment as a share of national income has remained frozen.

Inflation targeting

Now, while fiscal consolidation was something the Narendra Modi government had inherited, it has taken credit for having moved India onto the path of 'inflation targeting'. Arguably though, India has seen a virtual inflation targeting since 2013 when the policies of

the RBI became more closely aligned to the practices of central banks in western economies. Thus in 2013-14 the real policy rate saw a positive swing of over four percentage points, and it has more or less remained there. Admittedly, at double digits, inflation had been high in 2012-13 but that could have been due to abnormal hikes in the procurement price and not due to runaway growth. However, as the theory underlying inflation targeting asserts that it reflects an overheating economy, an interest-rate hike is triggered. The high interest rate regime in place since 2013 could not but have had a negative impact on growth by raising the cost of capital to industry. The negative impact of a high policy rate may, however, have appeared elsewhere too.

Reviewing RBI's role

A regime of high interest rates can be bad not only for investment – and thus for growth and employment – but also for financial stability. Sharp increases in interest rates can trigger distress. A trade-off between low inflation and financial stability could emerge depending upon how the former was purchased. If low inflation is achieved via high interest rates it can trigger financial instability in two ways. The first is via the direct impact on the cost of financing in a floating interest-rate regime; a higher policy rate translating into a higher borrowing rate. Second, if rising interest lowers growth, revenue will grow more slowly for firms. Both these mechanisms can render once-sound projects unprofitable, leaving banks stressed. It appears that this did not find a place in the operating manual that goes with the 'modern monetary policy framework', with inflation targeting as its primary focus, instituted in India in 2015. That our concerns are not purely imaginary



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is evident in the fact that there has been a growth of non-performing assets of banks even after a change in the method of classification first resulted in their surging in 2015. This feature along with the spectacular collapse of the giant Infrastructure Leasing and Financial Services Ltd (IL&FS) recently point to the need to review the role of the RBI.

Experience suggests that it must be tasked with far greater responsibility for maintaining financial stability while being granted wider powers. It goes without saying that the Finance Ministry and its nominees on the RBI Board should desist from insisting upon actions that could jeopardise financial stability in trying to quicken the economy. At the same time, the RBI's leadership may want to reflect on the mindset that leads to publicly lecturing the government of India on the fate of incurring the "wrath of financial markets". Whatever be the compulsions of securing the balance of payments, such a view privileges the interests of international finance capital over the public interest in a democracy. It also suggests that the movements in the financial markets are to be treated as the bellwether in economic policy-making. Actually, over the past 30 years, from Mexico to southeast Asia, financial markets can be seen to have been fickle, self-serving and capable of causing great harm as they switch base globally in search of profits

through speculation.

The entire gamut of macroeconomic policy in India needs rethinking. In the heated public debate on job creation that we have seen recently, the link between macroeconomic policy and unemployment has not been flagged. When policy holds back investment, and we have seen above that it can, the prospect for employment growth is weak. The conduct of macroeconomic policy in India in recent years has compromised the principle that its two arms of fiscal and monetary policy must be used in a countervailing manner if aggregate demand is not to be affected. Instead, for too long, macroeconomic policy in India has been contractionary across the board, impacting employment adversely.

Job creation

Even as we shift towards macroeconomic policies that maintain the level of aggregate demand, we can assist the unemployed by strengthening the employment programme we already have, namely the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). Three actions may be taken towards this end. First, there have been reports that though the budgetary allocation for the scheme may have increased, workers face delay in payment. This is unacceptable, especially in this digital era when beneficiary identification and money transfer are cheap and reliable. Second, as has been suggested, there is a case for extending the MGNREGS to urban India for there is unemployment there. Of course, some rationalisation of existing public expenditure would be needed to generate the fiscal space needed, but we may yet expect a positive sum outcome when this is done imaginatively.

However, as with macroeconomic

polices, a thorough review of how the MGNREGS works on the ground is necessary. In the context, we often find a reference to "asset creation". This is an important criterion but we need not rule out the provision of public services under the scheme. The point is to ensure that we have desirable outcomes beyond just the job statistics. There is reason to believe that this matter is given no importance in the implementation of the scheme at present. An example would make this clear.

In Kerala, employment under the MGNREGS is also organised to clear the vegetation at the roadside. However, what at times is found to remain after the MGNREGS work team has left is the garbage that was earlier concealed by the undergrowth. The organised 'cleaning' expertly skirts the garbage unconsciously deposited at the roadside! This is more than just a matter of aesthetics and can be dangerous when, for instance, waste from abattoirs has been dumped in the shrubbery. It makes a mockery of publicly-funded programmes that they can leave us worse off, and speaks of the unaccountability that pervades so much of government intervention in the economy. But recognising the hazard opens up an opportunity for improvement. The MGNREGS should target the waste dotting our countryside, and when extended to urban India should aid municipal waste-management efforts. We would then have a cleaner environment and have at the same time created jobs. That would be a fitting tribute to the man after whom the programme is named, one who had worked for a clean India much of his life.

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A Washington pipe dream

The American stance on Iranian oil exports could only cause mayhem in West Asia



MOHAMMED AYOUB

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced on April 22 that the United States would not issue any additional 'Significant Reduction Exceptions' to existing importers of Iranian oil who had received such exemptions last November. Mr. Pompeo declared that the objective was to bring Iranian oil exports to "zero". India, China and Turkey, the principal remaining oil importers from Iran, will feel the greatest impact of this policy, which will take effect on May 2.

The end of the waivers is expected to bring different responses from the main importers. China, one of the largest importers of Iranian oil, is likely to defy the American demand because as a great power and potential challenger to U.S. hegemony it will not want to be seen as bowing to American pressure. Furthermore, Beijing is firmly opposed to unilateral sanctions, as it fears that one day it may be subjected to similar treatment.

Turkey and Iran have overlapping strategic interests regarding Kurdish secessionism, the territorial integrity of Iraq, and shared antipathy towards Saudi Arabia.

Iran is the second largest supplier of energy to Turkey and a leading trading partner as well. Furthermore, Turkey's relations with the U.S. are currently rocky over U.S. support to the Syrian Kurdish militia, the YPG, that Ankara considers a terrorist organisation because of its close relations with the secessionist PKK. The threat of American sanctions on Turkey following the latter's decision to buy S-400 missile defence systems from Russia has also contributed greatly to tensions between the two countries. Therefore, it is unlikely that Turkey will bend completely to American will although it may do so partially to placate its NATO ally.

Indian capitulation?

The American decision could not have come at a worse time for India with the country in the midst of a bitterly fought election campaign and policy makers focussed on the domestic scene. Nevertheless, the Indian response is expected to be the most weak-kneed of the three. New Delhi is likely to comply with American demands, as India's relations with the U.S. in the economic sphere are very important to it. The U.S. is India's largest trading partner and a leading source of foreign investment. It has become increasingly important in the strategic arena as well because of the convergence of American and Indian interests regarding containing China in the Indo-Pacific region. Moreover, the ci-



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vil nuclear relationship with the U.S. is very important for India, as is American support for India's bid to enter the Nuclear Suppliers Group.

However, compliance with the American dictat will not come without costs. India is heavily involved in building the Chabahar port in southern Iran. This port is expected to become a major access route for India not only to Iran but also to Afghanistan and Central Asia bypassing hostile Pakistani territory. Tehran is also important for New Delhi in the context of Afghanistan as both are unequivocally opposed to the Pakistan-supported Taliban returning to power even in a power-sharing arrangement. Furthermore, Iran shares India's antipathy toward Pakistan, which it considers Washington's proxy and Saudi Arabia's ally. India's decision to stop importing oil from Iran at America's behest could drive a wedge between New Delhi and Tehran that will be very difficult to

repair and cost India strategically.

The most important question is whether Iran will capitulate to the American threat of cutting oil imports down to zero and accept Washington's demand to revise its position on issues the U.S. considers important. These include Tehran totally giving up its right to enrich uranium and closing down all nuclear facilities including those engaged in research for peaceful purposes. Additionally, it would entail Iran drastically curtailing if not completely eradicating its ballistic missile programme, and radically changing its West Asia policy to fall in line with American preferences in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen.

However, this appears to be a Washington pipe dream. Iran has stood up to unprecedented sanctions for four decades and remained unbowed. The current American policy of forcing Tehran to cut its oil exports to zero will only aid Iranian hardliners and end up with Tehran adopting an even more virulent anti-American posture, further impeding the realisation of American strategic objectives in the region.

A dark scenario

While this confrontationist policy may please Israel and Saudi Arabia, it can well become a prelude to another major war in West Asia. Pushed to the wall by its inability to export oil in sufficient quantities, Iran is likely to retaliate by withdrawing from the nuclear ac-

cord and resuming full-scale nuclear enrichment close to weapon grade-level. This could lead to either an American and/or Israeli air and missile strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities. Such attacks are bound to invite Iranian retaliation against American targets in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan and around the Gulf, either through proxies or directly. Iranian retribution is likely to include air strikes against Saudi and Emirati targets as well and concerted efforts to block the Straits of Hormuz.

The mayhem that this action-reaction phenomenon will cause in the region can be disastrous for West Asia and could seriously disrupt the flow of energy supplies from the Gulf through the narrow Straits of Hormuz. It is ironic that some of the authors of America's disastrous invasion of Iraq, such as National Security Adviser John Bolton, are also the masterminds behind the current American confrontationist policy towards Iran. If not reversed, such a strategy could well lead to another American misadventure in West Asia before which the tragic consequences of the Iraqi invasion, such as state failure and the boost to international terrorism, are likely to pale into insignificance.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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

Fourth phase

As the general election moves to its last stages, one wonders what more is in store for the electorate: the ruling dispensation trying all the tricks of the trade to retain power and the Opposition trying hard to expose the BJP (Page 1, "Violence mars voting in Bengal, turnout up in fourth phase", April 30). Come May 23 and the world's largest democracy is sure to witness the results of one of the most keenly fought polls since Independence. The expectation of the people is for a government that will address serious and several basic issues whose solutions are still elusive, and not issues concerning religion.
G. B. SIVANANDAM,
Coimbatore

PM's comment

The comments of the Prime Minister while addressing an election rally in Hooghly district, West Bengal, that "40 MLAs" of the Trinamool Congress "are in touch" with him and probably ready to crossover once the election results are out, are in bad taste ("Mamata has betrayed State: PM", April 30). Though nobody is naive enough to believe that political parties would always be practising Swachh rajneeti, one cannot expect such a statement coming from the Prime Minister. While the BJP has had no reservations or hesitation in using horse trading and other backdoor manoeuvres to grab power, like most other parties would, it is unbecoming of a person of the PM's stature

to publicly stamp his approval on such subversions of democracy.
D. D.V.G. SANKARARAO,
Nellimarla, Andhra Pradesh

Telangana exam results

What has happened in Telangana as a result of bungling in the Intermediate examination is inexcusable ("Students demand Minister's resignation over Inter fiasco" and "Student who scored 99 given zero", both April 30). A student has every right to expect a fair examination. Also, marking a student's answer sheet may be a ritual but it must be done fairly and correctly as it dictates a student's future. In Telangana, who will take responsibility for the mess?
BEENA ANIL,
Chennai

Growing resistance

The world needs a 'Project Manhattan' for antibiotics as the U.S. did when it was working on nuclear weapons ('Life page', "Drug-resistant diseases could kill 10 million a year by 2050", April 30). No new antibiotic has been developed over the past 30 years. Antibiotic use has to be balanced and wisely applied. Easy access to antibiotics that is prevalent in the country should be regulated. In this pharmacists and the medical fraternity can play a critical role. All eyes are on who bags the Longitude Prize, a £10m prize fund, which will reward a team of researchers who develop a point-of-care diagnostic test that will conserve antibiotics for future generations and

revolutionise the delivery of global healthcare".
H.N. RAMAKRISHNA,
Bengaluru

Going EV

India has a long way to go before it can be a part of the electric vehicle (EV) revolution. In addition to having good battery technology, which includes making the charged battery work longer, there is also the challenge of bringing 'charging' infrastructure in place. Subsidy is one element in this. India needs a comprehensive policy on EV, a mechanism for the Centre-States to work together, and also for the private sector to participate. Funding aspects need to be taken care of.
C.K. MOHAN,
Chennai

Taxed

As bibliophiles are aware, books for personal use are not liable to customs duty and come under the General Exemption Customs Tariff Act 1975. However, there are instances, where one has had to pay customs duty and taxes for books bought from overseas for personal use. Authorities, in this instance at the Bangalore Customs zone, pleaded helplessness and finally said the change is with effect from February, 2017. Two complaints, registered under the Public Grievances Portal and also with the Revenue Secretary, Government of India, have not been responded to.
NAGESH HAVANUR,
Bengaluru

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The RSS is at war with India's past

All it wants to do is to demolish secular India and the Gandhi-Nehru state to erect a Hindutva state



A.G. NOORANI

"Beyond a doubt, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is the most powerful organisation in India today... Its pracharak (active preacher) Narendra Modi is now Prime Minister of India. Its stamp is evident in very many fields of national life," writes the leading constitutional expert and political analyst in his new book, *The RSS: A Menace to India*. The RSS is at war with India's past, he says, and is belittling three of the greatest builders of the Indian state, Ashoka, Akbar and Jawaharlal Nehru. "The poison" of Hindu right-wing communalism "has spread alarmingly," he says in the introduction, but points out that the "forces that spread it are not invincible. They can be defeated provided that those who oppose it are ready and equipped to meet the challenge at all levels... what is at stake is not only the Indian Dream. What is at stake is the soul of India." An excerpt:

In March 2015, the Indian Council of Historical Research became the first of the learned institutions to be 'reconstituted' to suit the tastes of the saffron rulers.

A Hindu Rashtra

The RSS believed that its hour had arrived. Mohan Bhagwat [sarsanghchalak, or chief] said on February 9, 2015, that this was a "favourable time". He asserted that "the idea of Hinduism is the only idea in the world which brings all together... Hindustan is a Hindu Rashtra, which is a fact. We are going ahead with this (idea). All Hindus have to be organised to make this nation great. When our country will become great that will benefit the entire world." He was being modest; for the usual refrain was that a 'Hindu India' would be a Vishwaguru or a Jagadguru (world teacher). The world expected the RSS to lead. "The job of the organisation is to unite Hindus and this cannot be done through speeches alone. The time has come when the whole society wants the RSS, and has expectations from us. The organisation



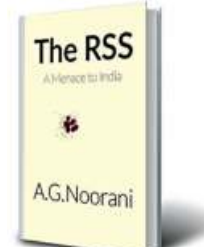
RSS workers in Mangaluru in 2016. •H.S. MANJUNATH

must grow in order to fulfil these expectations. We have to unite Hindu society, make it fearless, self-reliant and selfless."

The icon of the secular state

The RSS had every reason to be pleased with Modi's ventures, which were based on three fundamentals. First, wipe out the secular national consensus evolved since the 19th century by the leaders of the freedom movement such as Dadabhai Naoroji, Badruddin Tyabji and Surendranath Banerjea. It was also enunciated by Vallabhbhai Patel in his presidential address to the Congress in 1931 and by Maulana Azad in his presidential address in 1940 as a retort to the Muslim League's clamour for the Partition of India. Nehru faced the reaction thereafter. The tragic situation brought out the best in him and he emerged as the most articulate exponent of and the icon of the secular State.

Secondly, next only to Ashoka and Akbar, Nehru became a great builder of the Indian state. He won the nation's love and confidence and the world's admiration. But his concept of that state was that of a secular, democratic state based on a tolerant, pluralist society. This was in direct contradiction to the ideology of the RSS and its political progeny. He fought them tooth and nail. He is the one Congressman the RSS has always hated the most. On the Partition of



The RSS: A Menace to India
A.G. Noorani
LeftWord Books
₹1,500

India, it wanted to establish a Hindu State. Gandhi, Nehru and Patel opposed it. It fell to Nehru to expound the ideal by word and deed. He did so by a relentless campaign of educating the people and by building institutions cast in the secular mode. He espoused the concept of a composite culture of India. The former Jana Sangh leaders accepted this very concept in 1979, only to resile from it a few years later.

The 'Gujarat model'

The RSS and its creature the BJP want to wipe out and demolish the secular state and erect a Hindutva state based on the fascist 'Leader' principle. It would be sustained by a society from which religious tolerance is banished as was done, one hopes momentarily, in Gujarat before and after the 2002 pogrom. This is 'The Gujarat Model' which the RSS and its pracharak Modi seek to replicate at the Centre. Not only will India's democracy and secularism suffer, the India which the nation loves and the world admires will perish. The RSS is

a menace to India; and not only to its minorities.

The RSS has set before itself this, the second task – the destruction of the Gandhi-Nehru state after brain-washing the nation into acceptance of Hindutva. Soon after the 1989 elections, Jaswant Singh went about campaigning for an ideological "idol-breaking". Modi is at work on this ignoble venture.

Lastly, the RSS wants to eliminate the minorities, chiefly Muslims and Christians as minorities, and reduce them politically to being nonentities. Mobilise "the Hindu vote bank", denounce the "appeasement" of a "Muslim vote bank" and either eliminate all opposition parties ("Congress Mukht", Modi's ideal) or absorb them; the willing ones are too small and too contemptible to mention. The Sikhs are not overlooked. [K.S.] Sudarshan's characteristically Quixotic venture to Punjab earned him a loathing.

Sudarshan became RSS chief on March 10, 2000. He advised, "The Prime Minister should bring in economic advisers who believe in the swadeshi concept". He also demanded that the Constitution of India be scrapped. "This 'remake' of the British model [sic] in 1935" should be replaced with one based on the "aspirations of the people". In drafting the present Constitution "Indian ethos and aspirations were not taken into account". He added that "the RSS did not expect the Review Committee appointed by the Government to do this [take a fresh look] as it has been asked not to alter the basic structure of the Constitution".

On the same day, in his first address to RSS activists in Nagpur, Sudarshan said: "These non-Hindus are not foreigners but ex-Hindus; they are Indians but their faiths will have to be Indianised."

He attacked Gandhi as well as Nehru. "Even Gandhi blamed the Hindu community for creating an environment congenial to communal conflicts." He asserted that the "third phase in RSS history was marked by Jawaharlal Nehru's efforts to curb the organisation". The demolition of the Babri Masjid, he claimed on March 19, "has made Hindus all over the world proud".

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The battle for Sabarimala

The issues raised in Kerala this election were related not to matters of mortals but those relating to God



T.P. SREENIVASAN

The will of the people of Kerala, more inscrutable than before, is safely sealed in rooms with extra security as demanded by the times. The long wait for the Lok Sabha election results will mark an anti-climax, with temples getting a break from the delirium of devotees. Offerings from candidates will quietly pour in, making it comfortable for temples to regenerate and repair the damage done. As activists leave the temples, devotees can return to their prayers in peace. The rhythms, the bells and the music will be heard again, without being immersed in political cacophony.

Embracing Hinduism

This is the first time that God and temple rituals came to the forefront as election issues in Kerala. Earlier, it was only entreaties and special prayers that marked the election process. The first signs of the change appeared when some of the communist conclaves featured Christ and Krishna, together with Karl Marx and Fidel Castro. The explanation was that divine teachings may have influenced communism, but that was the beginning of the efforts to end the monopoly of the BJP over Hinduism. Soon enough, every party began to create its own version of Hinduism to prove that the BJP version was extremist. Political parties began to embrace Hinduism of different varieties rather than alienate Hindus, many of whom were inclined towards the BJP.

A Supreme Court judgment on the longstanding issue of whether women between the ages of 10 and 50 should be allowed to enter the Sabarimala shrine caused a tremor in Kerala, though initially there was a general consensus that constitutional rights would eventually let women of all ages enter the temple. There were some issues about women being unable to remain pure in body and soul for the entire 41 day-period of penance because of menstruation. But the surprising insistence of the Kerala government on enforcing the decision without any concern for the safety or the convenience of the women pilgrims led to sharp differences over the Supreme Court verdict. Following the model of the Ram temple, which brought the BJP to power in Delhi, the highly polarised political parties took on the cause of the vast number of devotees, who wanted customs

and traditions to be protected. The strongest position was taken by the BJP, which espoused the view that young women should not enter and a review of the verdict should be sought. The Congress hesitated for a moment, but in keeping with its soft Hindutva agenda, supported the traditionalists. The government stood firm and turned Sabarimala into a battlefield, openly escorting activists to the sanctum sanctorum.

Gaining political mileage

As political postures developed around the issue, the Left parties pushed for a renaissance movement to reform outdated practices, while the powerful Nair Service Society sought protection of the faith by either reviewing the Supreme Court decision or by legislative action. The BJP supported the faithful and championed their cause, but stopped short of using its majority in the Lok Sabha to issue an ordinance to counter the decision of the Supreme Court. The Congress eventually came to the side of the believers. As a consequence of these developments, the Kerala government was seen as a renaissance group, while the others became champions of faith and rituals. Since the line between the BJP and the devotee groups was thin, the BJP got more political mileage out of the controversy than the others and, therefore, is expecting to open its parliamentary account in Kerala this time. The Congress also believes that it has gained popularity with the devotees. The Left believes that it too has gained on account of its government-sponsored renaissance, demonstrated by protests staged under its auspices by women.

Rise in number of voters

The vexatious issue on the day after the polling was the phenomenal rise in the number of voters compared to previous elections. Each side believes that more voters came to vote this time because of its own enhanced popularity. Obviously, the issues raised this time were not those of mortals, like unemployment and price rise, but those relating to God. Though the Chief Electoral Officer of the State had decreed that Lord Ayappa's name should not be dragged into the campaign, the Sabarimala issue was on the minds of voters as they went to the polling booths. The description of Kerala as 'God's Own Country' was a mere tourist slogan once, but today political parties are banking on divine intervention to determine Kerala's future.

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SINGLE FILE

We are all similar

The neuroscience of Indianness and a case for unity

MADHURIKA SANKAR



We are living in an increasingly polarised world. When we draw lines in the sand to demarcate our socio-cultural and religious identities, the consequences are violent. This is visible in the threats to liberal institutions, in mob lynchings, in suicide bombings, and in the building

of walls that would put ancient Chinese engineering to shame.

However, our self-identity has been scientifically proven to have a strong biological basis and that contradicts the notion that, as human beings, we voluntarily choose certain behaviours over others.

In his fascinating book, *The Man Who Wasn't There*, Anil Ananthaswamy illustrates how when things go awry in the brain, we get a peek into the way certain neurobiological processes work. For instance, it seems so obvious to say, "I exist". But people who suffer from Cotard's Syndrome claim, "I don't exist." By understanding abnormal neurobiological underpinnings, we have gained an insight into the neuroscience of our notions of self-identity.

Neurologist-philosopher Gerhard Roth's words are profound: "Irrespective of its genetic endowment, a human baby growing up in Africa, Europe or Japan will become an African, a European or a Japanese... he will never acquire a full understanding of other cultures since the brain has passed through the narrow bottleneck of culturalization."

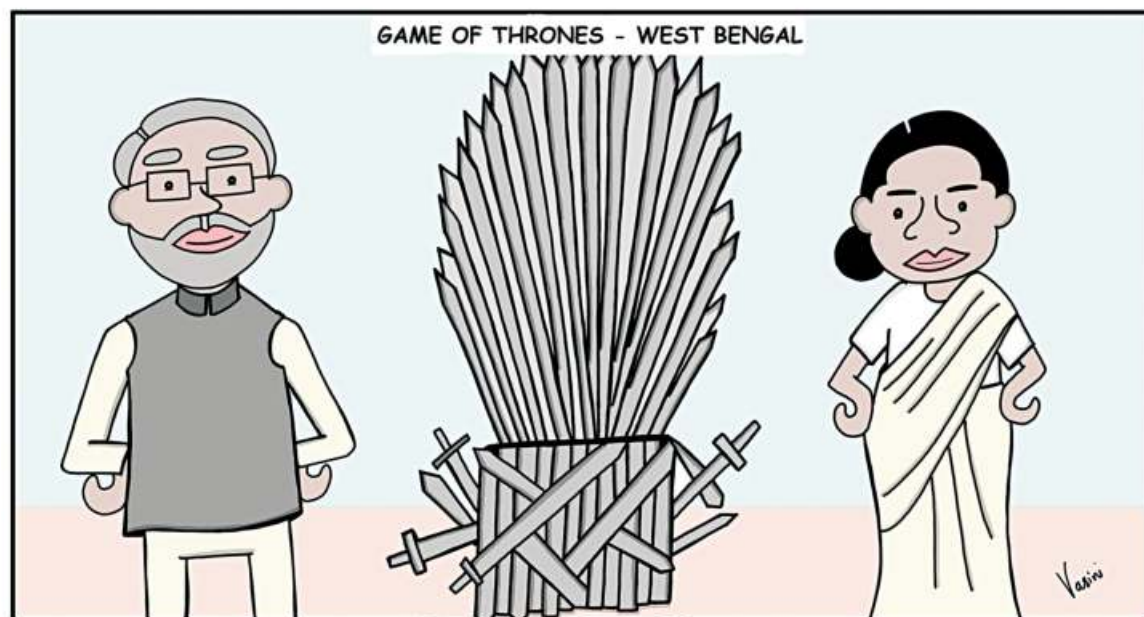
Indeed, cultural neuroscience is a cutting-edge area of scientific exploration, using highly sophisticated brain-imaging tools such as fMRIs, which examine the neurobiological underpinnings of self-identity and how the culture we live in affects the neural pathways that dictate behaviour.

For example, when solving simple arithmetic problems, native English speakers engage the left perisylvian cortices – areas that are typically involved in linguistic processing. However, native Chinese speakers show very little activation in this area. Instead, they show marked activation in a pre-motor association area. This demonstrates that the same behavioural outcome is accomplished by different brain pathways, depending on their cultural backgrounds.

Renowned psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar examines the above biological phenomena through the lens of Indian identity in his book, *The Indians*, and posits that Indians, no matter which nook of the country they are from, share certain biologically predicated responses in thought and behaviour to the same stimuli.

The notion that we are more similar than different – whether Hindu, Muslim, Christian, forward or backward caste, rich or poor, local or from the diaspora – may elicit ire in some people. But where do socio-cultural assertions by an insular few stand in the face of larger forces – biologically-proven phenomena that, in a beautifully Socratic irony, have partial bases in the very cultures they stem from?

The writer is based in Chennai



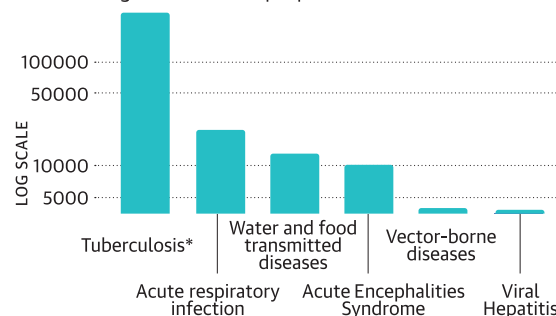
DATA POINT

Infectious killers

Tuberculosis claimed close to three lakh lives between 2012 and 2016, making it one of India's deadliest infectious diseases. Sikkim and Himachal Pradesh registered a high number of deaths per one lakh population. Though deaths due to TB have come down, casualties due to vector-borne diseases have been on the rise in recent years. By Sumant Sen

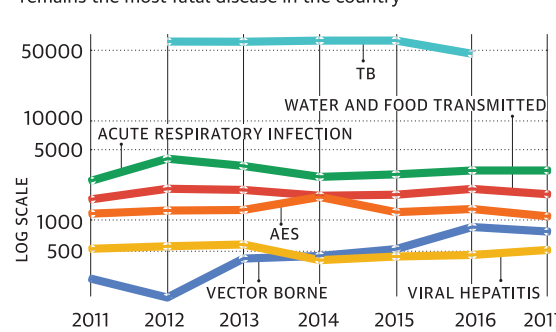
TB, a grave concern

The chart shows the infectious diseases which caused the most number of deaths in India from 2011 to 2017. Tuberculosis killed the highest number of people



Alarming trends

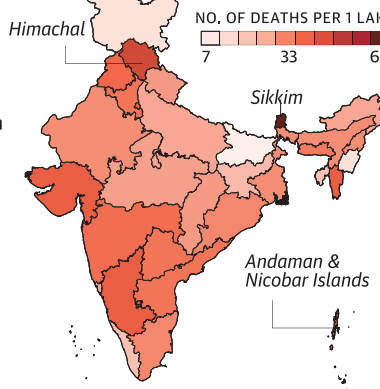
The chart shows the number of deaths due to diseases over the years. Although casualties due to TB reduced in 2016, it still remains the most fatal disease in the country



Source: MOHFW, National Health Profile of India, Central Bureau of Health Intelligence, Rajya Sabha

State-wise split

Sikkim recorded the highest deaths per lakh of the population (66 per 1 lakh population) due to TB. The least deaths per 1 lakh population were recorded in Lakshadweep, Bihar, and Jammu & Kashmir



Breathing troubles

While West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, and Andhra Pradesh accounted for most deaths due to respiratory ailments in India, Mizoram, Sikkim, and Himachal Pradesh had the maximum rate of such fatalities

State/UT	Total deaths	Deaths per 1 lakh of the population
W.B.	4,243	4
U.P.	3,842	2
A.P.	2,064	2
M.P.	1,358	2
Delhi	1,315	7
Mizoram	302	24
Sikkim	127	19
Himachal Pradesh	1,233	16
Tripura	480	12
Puducherry	172	12

*TB data from 2012 to 2016

FROM THE HINDU ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO MAY 1, 1969

Desai denies charge of Budget leakage

Mr. Morarji Desai, Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister, to-day [April 30, New Delhi] vehemently denied there had been any leakage of the budget proposals as alleged by the S.S.P. member, Mr. Madhu Limaye. Mr. Desai who was replying to the general discussion on the Finance Bill in the Lok Sabha did not agree that the levy on fertilizers would either discourage the use of fertilizers or hit the farmer. He also defended the stringent penalties for the failure to file Wealth Tax returns. Mr. Desai who was replying amidst interruptions from the Opposition benches, characterised Mr. Limaye's demand that the Customs department should appeal against the Appellate Board decision which dealt with the BOAC case as "fantastic". "My honourable friend still persists even though there is no case in it," he said.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MAY 1, 1919.

Behar Planters.

The General Secretary, Behar Planters' Association, has addressed a lengthy letter to the Government of India [as it is available in Calcutta] urging upon the latter the immediate necessity for taking effective measures to prevent any recurrence of recent outbreaks in the Punjab and other Provinces. After reviewing the action of the Government with regard to Mr. Gandhi's activities in Champaran, Knaira and other places the letter concludes: My Association wishes to impress upon the Government of India the fact that the responsibility for recent outbreaks and consequent loss of life must be shared alike by the instigators of agitations against the Rowlatt Bills and by the Government of India itself. It is impossible to believe either that the organisers of the Satyagraha movement did not realise the inevitable effect of their propaganda on the mobs and students of the towns in which they worked or that they would have gone to the lengths they did had they not had good reason to believe from previous experience that the Government would be unlikely to take any strong action against them.

POLL CALL

Dissolution of Lok Sabha

In India, the Lok Sabha has a five-year term, but can be dissolved earlier. According to Article 83(2) of the Constitution, completion of five years from the first day of its meeting amounts to dissolution of the Lower House. In this case, an election is held to elect the new Members of Parliament. The Lower House can also be dissolved earlier by the President on the advice of the Prime Minister. It can also be dissolved if the President feels that no viable government can be formed after the resignation or fall of a regime.

MORE ON THE WEB

Taking it on the chin like a woman

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