

Tea party politics

What was behind Sonia Gandhi's invitation to opposition parties to a tea party on May 23? Apparently, the effort was to forestall invitations by others and ensure the Congress had the initiative. The first attempt to create a common front was taken by Telugu Desam Party (TDP) leader Chandrababu Naidu, who reached out to all non-BJP parties including the Congress to hold a meeting on May 21 to address a strategy on May 23.

However, Trinamool Congress chief and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee was markedly unenthusiastic about the meeting, informing Naidu that she would have to stay confined to the state to prevent any mischief while counting.

Naidu's intention was to act as an honest broker — he firmly believes that he is the only one who can persuade both Mamata and the Congress to the come to sit at the same table. He shared his ideas over a phone call to other Opposition leaders, including DMK's Stalin, JDS' Kumaraswamy and Samajwadi Party's Akhilesh Yadav. Naidu even suggested that opposition leaders should meet President Ram Nath Kovind, urging him to consider 22 parties as a single bloc, while inviting the single largest group — rather than a party — to form the government in the case of a hung Lok Sabha.

However, Mamata's irritation with the Congress (which has put up candidates in every constituency that has a sizeable Muslim population, thus cutting into the TMC's votes) is palpable and she really doesn't want to share a platform with the party that, in her view, is enabling a BJP victory.

Hence Sonia Gandhi's decision to step in. Gandhi believes Mamata will not be able to say 'no' to her.



OPINION

RAM NATH KOVIND

A message to IFS trainees: Reach out and serve

I warmly welcome you to Rashtrapati Bhavan. It is always a pleasure for me to interact with our youth, and more so, when they happen to be the ones ready to enhance our external relations and contribute to nation-building.

I congratulate you on joining the Indian Foreign Service (IFS), and the two Officer Trainees from the Royal Bhutan Foreign Service. It is, indeed, a privilege to represent one's country. This privilege entails a deep commitment from you to serve the people of India. I hope you will attend to this higher call of duty with pride, humility and dedication. I am happy that, as a group, you represent India's diversity in every sense of the term. It is equally satisfying that we continue to see greater gender balance in the newer batches of the IFS.

You have had an intensive six-month training at the Foreign Service Institute. It has given you an all-round exposure to the political, economic and cultural facets of India. You have learnt about our national interests and its linkages with the outside world; of our hard-power options and soft-power influence; of our expansive global agenda; and of the geopolitical complexities facing us.

There could not be a better time to join the IFS. India's role and influence in the international arena is expanding. Geopolitics and geo-economics are drawing Asia to the center of global power relations. And, in this matrix, India has an important role to play — as a driver of global growth and as an influential voice in global governance.

We are living in an age of rapid changes. As a country, we have taken 70 years to become an economy of \$2.5 trillion, but would take just seven years to double the figure! If this be the projection, you can imagine the scale of responsibility you have before you: To foster peace and stability, scout for investments, look for technology partnerships, secure new markets, and create frameworks to tackle conventional and non-conventional threats — from cyber security to energy security and more. Your work abroad primarily entails securing our national interests and promoting India's image. That being said, you are also responsible for fostering growth and development in the country at the ground level. For example, if we are aiming to enhance the income of our farmers, you have to take initiative and work hard to look for new markets for our exports. Similarly, if we are to construct a world-class high speed train, you have to engage with relevant global financial and technology entities to make it a success. Your role and contribution to India's progress and prosperity are as important as that of your colleagues in other branches of the civil service and you have to work with them hand-in-hand to attain our larger goal.

We have brought engagement with our diaspora at the center of our external relations. This year we are celebrating the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, our greatest *pravasi*. In his struggle overseas, he relentlessly fought for the welfare of four people. Gandhiji should be an inspiration for you as you work to serve our community abroad. In my visits overseas, I have given high priority to meeting our brothers and sisters abroad. Our external affairs minister has done exceptional work to make our consular duty and community outreach service-oriented. She has provided a humane touch to public service. This has received appreciation from far and wide, and so has the work of our missions, who have been sensitive to the needs of our people. As professional diplomats, you must develop an attitude and mindset of serving the people. At times, you may be required to go that extra-mile to give them a helping hand. Such sensitivity and human approach in your work will go a long way in enhancing our public-service delivery.

Today, the international community, indeed, has greater appreciation of India and its global standing. Leaders from across the world are keen to visit India and strengthen bilateral ties with us. Nations are looking for solutions to global challenges from us — be it climate change, cyber security, humanitarian disasters or combating extremism and terrorism. These open unprecedented opportunities, but also pose new challenges for our diplomacy. In such a scenario, as a country and as diplomats we must bring "strategic thinking" at the center of our working more than ever before. Thinking into the future and looking at the world holistically will help us anchor our interests better.

Also experienced firsthand the value that communication and use of cultural idiom brings to our external engagement. You talk to your interlocutor in his or her language and you see an instant connect developing. I understand you will shortly be leaving for your language posting. Do your best to master the languages you would be studying. On my visits abroad, I have had the opportunity to see how well some of your colleagues have done to achieve higher levels of specialisation in foreign languages. I encourage you to follow them and do better. You must also be open to embracing culture, people and technology. We have two Officer Trainees from Bhutan with us. To them, I wish to say we take great pride in India-Bhutan friendship. I hope the engagement you have had with your course-mates will strengthen our friendship.

To the IFS Officer Trainees, I would like to say you are members of a very distinguished service. The high responsibility of strengthening our bilateral relations and global partnerships with countries rests on you. You have to deepen political and security engagement, expand trade and economic collaboration and foster closer people-to-people relations. I am convinced that you will work with dedication, integrity and honesty to bring greater peace and prosperity to the country. And, while you do so, I urge you to be ever empathetic to those you serve, especially the less privileged. The people of India have high expectations from you and you must live up to them. I wish you success in your career ahead.

Edited excerpts from an address by President R N Kovind to Indian Foreign Service Officer trainees at Rashtrapati Bhavan, New Delhi, May 14

DID THEY REALLY SAY THAT?



"Whatever has been said about Gandhi or Godse, these kind of statements are very bad and worth contempt... In a cultured society, this type of language is not permissible... Though she has apologised, I won't be able to pardon her with my heart"

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on BJP's Bhopal candidate Pragna Singh Thakur calling Nathuram Godse a *deshbhakt*, 17 May



ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

Chhattisgarh Chief Minister **BHUPESH BAGHEL** played a crucial role in delivering a two-thirds majority for the Congress party in the 2018 Assembly elections. He remains assured that the party will make a clean sweep in the Lok Sabha election as well. Excerpts from an interview with **Sandeep Kumar** where he discusses various issues — from politics to Left Wing extremism and the future road map for the mineral rich state's development

'Jobs, agrarian crisis real issues'

The Congress secured a tremendous victory in the recent Assembly polls, but in the 2014 Lok Sabha polls, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won 10 of the 11 seats in Chhattisgarh. Can the Congress overturn the losing trend this time?

We are going to win all the 11 seats in the state. People who voted for the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014 are feeling deceived. Not only in Chhattisgarh but across the country, people have suffered immensely from steps such as demonetisation and the introduction of the goods and service tax. That's the reason the BJP has denied tickets to all its sitting MPs in the state, including Abhishek Singh, the son of former CM Raman Singh. If you consider the trend of Assembly elections, the

Congress is going to attain a sweeping victory across the state.

Whenever you address a public rally, you target only the PM.

That's because he pretends to be omnipresent.

He displays a peculiar trouper talent depending on the places he is visiting. He pretends to be a tea vendor, a *chowkidar*, a bullet train driver and whatnot. In Chhattisgarh, he announced that he belonged to Sahu community. Elsewhere, he becomes someone from a backward caste. I have sent him a mirror to help him identify the real Modi, even getting an acknowledgment receipt for that.

Recently you campaigned for Digvijaya Singh in Bhopal. What do you feel is the

Q&A

BHUPESH BAGHEL
Chief minister, Chhattisgarh

Addressing the loneliness of being

In a bid to create awareness and safe space for conversations on mental health and illness, Health Collective is building an accessible platform for all, writes **Sneha Bhattacharjee**

Amritha Tripathi was a journalist for 15 years before she founded the Health Collective — a safe space for conversations, trusted information and resources on mental health in India. The organisation represented who she was, as well as what she thought the mental health arena needed: Dialogues in a safe space around problems such as depression via accessible, conversational reporting, and story-telling. "Today we have about 200 stories on the site — a mix of original reporting, expert columns and very powerful first person stories on living with conditions like depression, anxiety, schizophrenia and more," Tripathi says. The site also has comic strips including one by Solo — an artist who has borderline personality disorder and uses illustrations to communicate what it's like on the other side.

Globally, reports say one in every four people is likely to face a mental health challenge at some point in their lifetime. The National Mental Health Survey in India says one in every 10 adults in India will have a mental disorder at any given time. However, an interview for the website with Dr Vikram Patel, a psychiatrist, put it in context for Tripathi. "He said this does not mean that the other 90 per cent of us have 'good' mental health," she says, adding: "If we don't talk about what the implications and access to help mean to us, we are doing ourselves a disservice."

In her three-year association with Health

Collective, Tripathi has wondered whether there is an audience for this kind of information. "We crossed about 100,000 unique visitors to the site sometime last year, with zero marketing or PR," she quips. Having said that, it has not been easy to get people on board. The main challenge is around getting people comfortable enough to talk. "Many of the contributors we work with have some very personal connection to this world, but that means we have to be empathetic, flexible with deadlines and, above all, ethical. The challenge in a space like this is to ensure that you're doing no harm. So, we also don't commission or chase after first-person stories. I do very light edits and keep it as unintrusive as possible; I am more than happy for people to share a pseudonym if they want, instead of using their names. The last thing we want to do is trigger someone," Tripathi adds.

And, then, there are challenges around funding. "While several editors have also commented on the quality of content, there's unfortunately no model for paying for content (or syndication). The reporters sometimes share some of the sites that are "inspired" by our stories regularly, rather than crediting our work, which is also not ideal," she adds. The challenge for Health Collective in such a scenario is keeping this information open and accessible to all — especially as they branch into languages — while working out a sustainable business model.

CHECKLIST

THE LAST PHASE OF ELECTIONS: SOME INTERESTING CONTESTS

■ **Ujjain:** This is a seat reserved for Scheduled Caste candidates. The BJP has fielded Anil Firojia from the seat against Congress' Babul Malviya. In the 2014 general polls, Chintamani Malviya of the BJP defeated his Congress rival by a margin of 309,663 votes, or 30.5 per cent votes. This is pretty steep margin. Then why was Malviya not fielded again? Apparently because of the influence exercised by Union Minister Thawarchand Gehlot who also belongs to this region. The BJP decided on a neutral candidate and this could be a recipe for disaster, given that the Congress won four of the five Assembly segments in the 2018 assembly polls.

■ **Patiala:** A seat much in contention. Preneet Kaur, popularly known as Maharani Sahiba (she is Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh's wife. He is the Maharaja of Patiala) will face sitting Member of Parliament Dharamvir Gandhi, a cardiologist by profession, who prefers to use a

rickshaw to reach out to his voters. The Akali Dal-BJP combine has fielded former minister Surjit Singh Rakhra from this seat. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has fielded greenhorn Neena Mittal, an activist who worked for the party during the 2013 Delhi Assembly elections. Kaur lost the 2014 elections by a margin of just 20,000 votes.

■ **Ghazipur:** You might have thought that between united opposition candidate and well-known mafia leader Afzal Ansari and Union Minister Manoj Sinha, the choice would be obvious. But it is not. Sinha is facing a tough fight, given that at the height of the Modi wave he managed to win the seat in 2014 by a margin of only 33,000 votes. Moreover, caste, rather than development, is a big issue here. Yadavs, Dalits and Muslims are 50 per cent of the voting population. Modi is popular but, if the Opposition unites Sinha could be in for a shock.

reason behind Pragna Thakur's candidature from the BJP? Do you buy their claim that they want to prove there is no such thing as saffron terrorism?

This is a doomed experiment. You must remember how they fielded Kiran Bedi in Delhi and she lost. Similarly, Pragna Thakur will face a heavy defeat. In the Sunil Joshi murder case, the then BJP government of Shivraj Singh Chouhan lodged the FIR against her. She is a habitual offender. Her brother lives in Chhattisgarh and she was arrested here for a knife attack. Even for a moment, if we believe the argument that she has been framed in the Malegaon blast case, my question is: Who framed her? The BJP was ruling in Madhya Pradesh for 15 years, the party is at the Centre for the past five years now. The accountability should have been fixed against the officers who framed her. As far as saffron terrorism is concerned, the term was coined by former home secretary R K Singh. He was given a ticket by the BJP and was even made a Cabinet minister later.

Like in Madhya Pradesh, the Chhattisgarh government has also announced a farm loan waiver. What is the model? Is the government waiving the loan with its budgetary provision or banks are also writing off some of the amounts?

See, till date, we have waived off the loan with the help of the exchequer. We have initiated the process but due to the model code of conduct, it had to be stopped for the time being. We will talk to nationalised banks. In Madhya Pradesh, the process was rather easy as cooperative banks were involved. Now we will look for all available options. We will negotiate with the banks. In nationalised banks, the per acre KCC

(Kisan credit card) loan amount is more than cooperative banks. We will waive at the rate of cooperative banks loan per acre. Rest of the amount will be waived by the banks. One more thing, only crop loan will be waived.

When the Congress formed the government in Madhya Pradesh, the central government under Modi was not very cooperative. What has been your experience with regard to Centre-state relations so far?

Yes, they did this to us as well. For example, the Centre provides racks for picking rice. Earlier, it used to provide about 100 racks. Now, they hardly provide 40 racks. If rice rots in open, it's

a national loss. They should understand this. They have stopped funds related to toilets and MNREGA as well. Even government officials have been brainwashed by the BJP and RSS people. Like MP, they also tried to create a fake electricity crisis during the election. We have started an inquiry against them. We are doing our bit to solve the problem.

When the Congress was in the Opposition, it sought dismissal of controversial senior IPS officer S R P Kalluri. But when it came to power, he was put in-charge of the Economic Offence Wing?

The reason is very clear. He is considered to be a close aide of Raman Singh, who made him meet Prime Minister Modi defying all protocols. I thought let him investigate the scams that took place during Singhs' era. Now, he has been transferred to the post of additional transport commissioner. He has not been given any field posting.

Chhattisgarh is a Maoist-affected state. What is your road map to tackle the situation?

If the previous government had taken the right steps, this problem would not have increased this much. The Maoists, once limited to four districts, are now operating in 14. Confidence building is the only measure that can solve this problem. We want to build confidence in the tribal people of Naxalite-affected areas. The western model of development can't win their trust. We returned them the land acquired by Tata group. Distribution of forest rights and better price for *tendu* leaves are some other steps we are taking. As far as dialogue with Maoists is concerned, let me make it clear that, under the current circumstances, it's not possible to talk to them. If they want to come to the table, they have to put faith in the Constitution and drop

the gun.

Employment is a big issue in Chhattisgarh. What model are you adopting to address this and for the development of the state?

Not only in Chhattisgarh but all over India, unemployment is one of the biggest issues. This is in our priority. We want to focus on agricultural produce and small forest produce sector. This will generate thousands of jobs and also help in value addition of local resources. It will also boost the state's economy. Other than employment, price rise and agrarian crisis are the real issues that we have to tackle.



Amritha Tripathi (seventh from left), founder of the Health Collective, says the organisation is a safe space for conversations, trusted information and resources on mental health in India

When asked if she ever felt like leaving the task midway, Tripathi says it can be overwhelming sometimes. But, the incredible emails, comments or testimonials that come in every once in a while on the website, keep her going. "What more could I ask for, in terms of validation, than a reader writing in a year after discovering the site to say that it helped her through a tough time? Or another reader saying reading some of these stories makes her feel less alone? That she is a part of this community now? That makes me realise this is bigger than any one of us and, collectively, we are such a powerful force to reckon with," says Tripathi.

Funding so far has come through a mix of syndication of content and private entities. The foundation is soon going to launch a

three-part book series commissioned by Simon & Schuster India. The next big step, Tripathi says, is to create and curate content and safe spaces in regional languages. "We are also working on a sustainable business model that will allow us to collaborate more on offline projects for impact. We do want to have these conversations outside the metros too," she notes.

For Tripathi, having a conversation and being empathetic towards another person is of extreme importance. And, that is what she wants people to "equip themselves" with. She concedes that it is a tough ask but is optimistic about creating a safe space for anyone who wants to reach out, and tell them that they are not alone.

A sporting chance

ICC brings gender parity in the field, finally

In May, Claire Polosak of Australia became the first woman umpire to officiate in a men's One Day International and India's G S Lakshmi became the first woman to be appointed to the International Cricket Council's panel of match referees. For a sport that has long been considered aggressively male-oriented, shading into outright sexism in the way women TV anchors are presented, this month, then, marks a great leap forward for women in sport. But both appointments, however encouraging, only serve to underline the deep-seated gender prejudice that lies at the heart of the international sporting industry. For the longest

time, men officiated and managed women's sports; over time, women were grudgingly permitted to officiate only in women's matches. It is only towards the end of the second decade of the 21st century that women started playing a role in men's matches.

Cricket, in fact, has been a latecomer to the equality party. The tennis establishment, which prides itself on its gender equality, paying men and women the same prize money and according equal TV time to matches by both genders, was among the earliest mainstream sports to break the gender barrier. In 2015, Eva Esderaki-Moore was the first woman chair

umpire for a men's Grand Slam Final, the US Open. Football, a sport that remains mired in the antediluvian attitudes of the previous century, was unexpectedly among the earliest to raise the gender barriers. In 2017, Bibiana Steinhaus, a police-woman by profession, became the first woman to referee in a top European football league men's match, a Bundesliga match between Werder Bremen versus Hertha Berlin (to mark the occasion, Hertha Berlin offered its female fans tickets at half-price). But well before that, there were many women who served (and still do) as assistant referees in men's games. Back in 2011, two established football commentators were relieved of their jobs after they were heard suggesting that Sian Massey-Ellis, an assistant referee in the English Premier League, didn't understand the offside rule because the person concerned was a woman. In 2017, Tunisia

appointed an all-women referee team to officiate in a professional men's match. In retrospect, this is not so surprising; the North African nation is a regional outlier in terms of gender equality. In 2018, the Tunisian cabinet approved a law recognising gender equality in inheritance, a first for an Arab nation. In the US, home to the global feminist movement, a woman officiated at a National Football League (that is, American Football) only in January this year.

The paucity of women in sporting establishments — the number of women team owners or heads of sporting institutions are a noticeable minority — points to an ingrained chauvinism. That is primarily because sport is traditionally believed to be an activity that demands physical toughness and endurance, attributes assigned to males. Today, two trends are converging to change those attitudes. First,

now that women have summited Mount Everest and travelled to the North Pole and spent months in space, the question of feminine weakness has been exposed as a myth. In games such as football that require referees to keep up with fast-moving players, no woman has been accused yet of lack of fitness. In tennis Grand Slams, women are regularly criticised for being paid the same prize money for playing three setters to the men's five sets. The Women's Tennis Association indicated its willingness for women to play five sets in 2013. It is tournament administrators who say doing so would be too time-consuming. Second, as the burgeoning profession of sports psychology illustrates, mental resilience counts for much more than just physical strength. It would take a brave man to say women lag in this department. Ms Lakshmi will be the standard bearer for Indian women on this score.

Ending the scourge of measles

Vaccination against measles has been declining steadily over the last ten years in India. This must be reversed in order to avoid a serious outbreak of the disease

PHALASHA NAGPAL

Measles is a highly contagious disease with the potential to leave large sections of the population vulnerable to morbidity and mortality. Historically, it has claimed millions of lives each year. The measles vaccine that John Enders and his colleagues developed in 1963 changed the morbidity and mortality demographics of the world forever. Between 2000 and 2016, the two-dose measles vaccine helped save an estimated 20.4 million lives the world over. To reiterate efforts at the global level, the WHO, under its Global Vaccine Action Plan, is targeting the elimination of measles by 2020.

However, it seems that the wheels of this profound development may have been turned back. The past two years have witnessed a resurgence in measles outbreaks, with a 30 per cent increase in cases reported globally. The tell-tale signs of such resurgence are being seen with several countries having lost their measles elimination status, including the United States. Meanwhile, over 82,500 measles cases were reported in Europe in 2018 — more than three and fifteen times the cases reported in 2017 and 2016 respectively. This is corroborated by research published in the journal *Neuron*, which confirms that gaps in vaccination efforts the world over is likely to pave the path for a serious comeback for measles.

In India, the Measles, Mumps and Rubella (MMR) vaccine has been given a sustained push since 1985. However, the recent outbreaks in Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra show that India's story is consistent with the global reality. An outbreak is defined as reporting of five or more cases of a disease. In November 2018, 31 outbreaks were reported in Mumbai. As per WHO, India has the second highest population of children unvaccinated against measles and accounts for 37 per cent of global deaths due to measles.

Moreover, given our high population density and the contagious nature of the disease, India's position is all the more precarious. Studies state that 95 per cent target population coverage is needed to prevent outbreaks. A look at India's data on coverage would help us better understand the realities on ground.

The graph shows that MMR vaccination coverage in India has been declining gradually since 2008-09, followed by a sharp decline in 2018-19. The abysmal coverage in 2018-19 (April-March) is a strong indicator of an impending sharp resurgence of the disease in India. To gain perspective, of the 26.277 million children in the category of the total need assessed for the year 2018-19, only 36.2 per cent have been administered the MMR vaccine — a far cry from the 95 per cent threshold. This means that over 63 per cent of children continue to remain unvaccinated and vulnerable to contracting measles.

Among the major reasons for such decline in vaccination administration is "vaccine hesitancy", which WHO defines as a "delay in acceptance or refusal of vaccines despite availability of vaccination services." Vaccine hesitancy, which has been identified as one of the top 10 threats to global health in 2019, is linked to three primary factors. First, when there is a trust deficit between parents and the government, the health care system and vaccine administrator. Second, complacency, which is directly linked to the low risk per-



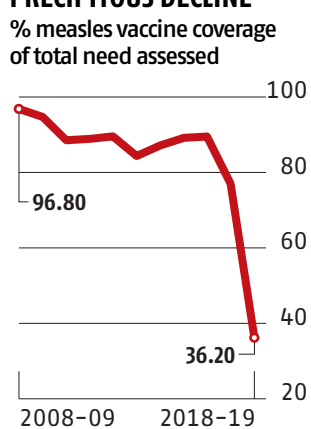
ception of the disease. Paradoxically, targeted efforts to eliminate measles have led to its gradual decline in populations. The consequently low prevalence across populations creates complacency among parents to get their children vaccinated.

The third is convenience, which is linked to access to vaccines and associated costs. Unfortunately, the problem of vaccine hesitancy is worsened through the spread of "fake news", rumours and incorrect information on social media. Such misinformation often leads to confirmation bias wherein parents tend to focus on information floating around that

confirm their pre-existing anti-vaccine mindsets, superstitions, religious and political beliefs. Relatively low literacy levels and knowledge about the benefits of the vaccine also make vast populations more susceptible in countries like India.

While the problem is ubiquitous, we are not defenceless. A way forward must focus more than just on national-level efforts. Vaccinations require a community effort to ensure confidence and convenience, and end complacency. Mission Indradhanush is playing an effective role in ensuring easy cost-less access, thus tackling the issue of convenience. But for creating confidence and ending complacency, there is a need to strengthen grassroots awareness generation and vaccine administration efforts. This means going

PRECIPITOUS DECLINE



Source: Health Management and Information Systems, National Health Mission under Ministry of Health and Family Welfare
Need assessed: Estimated number of children up to one year of age during current year

beyond identifying total need assessed, which is currently undertaken by the ministry of health and family welfare.

It calls for identifying vulnerable groups, that is, the people who fall in either category: Unvaccinated, or vaccinated with only one dose. Once the challenges of access are tackled, there is a need to understand the social dynamics of the resistant populations. Parents often fear adverse reactions or long-term side-effects as a result of the vaccine. Cases like the attack on vaccinators in Kerala and polio hesitancy in Bihar and UP for fear of infertility and impotency highlight the adverse effects of vaccine hesitancy.

Besides, studies show that use of coercion is counter-productive when it comes to vaccinating children without parental consent. Therefore, a system for educating mothers (after institutionalised deliveries) about measles, the benefits of the vaccine, its safety and potential side-effects is essential. This must be coupled with mobile-based vaccine reminders and efforts through the network of *anganwadi* ASHA workers under the National Rural Health Mission. Adequate monitoring efforts must also be ensured. Leveraging incentive-based mechanisms like mandating vaccines as a pre-requisite to government schooling may also show positive results.

The writer is with the NITI Aayog. These views expressed are personal and do not represent the views of the government or any other organisation

Is China manipulating its currency?

SITHARAM GURUMURTHI

United States President Donald Trump has often been critical of China for weakening its currency, the yuan, which helps Chinese exporters. Even after assuming charge as president Mr Trump has called China "the grand champion of currency manipulation". In a report released in October 2018, however, the US Treasury refrained from calling China a currency manipulator, though it decided to keep China on the watch list along with Germany, Japan, Switzerland, Korea and India.

Patti Domm of CNBC noted that this decision came amid an escalating trade conflict with China that could ultimately lead to the US imposing tariffs on all Chinese exports until the conflict was resolved. In fact, recently, the US had expressed concern when the yuan edged near 6.93 to the dollar, but it was pointed out that China was trying to hold the currency back from falling further to seven to the dollar.

In the wake of Mr Trump's continued attack on the Chinese currency, *The Economist* (May 2, 2017) carried an article which examines whether China qualifies to be called a currency manipulator.

Though the criteria adopted by the US Treasury to identify countries that indulge in currency manipulation are considered inadequate, China does not come close enough to be called a currency manipulator, even by those flawed criteria.

The US Treasury adopts three criteria: Whether the country has a sizable trade surplus with the United States; whether its current account surplus exceeds three per cent of GDP; and whether the country spends more than two per cent a year to purchase foreign assets to depress the value of its currency.

As per its latest available report when this article appeared, China met only one criterion — it was running a very large surplus in its bilateral trade with the US.

The Economist has developed a crude scoring system to identify those countries that would qualify as currency manipulators. Using the current account metric, one manipulation point is awarded to countries with surpluses at the three per cent threshold, and two points to countries with surpluses at six per cent of GDP spent for bringing in foreign assets to depress the value of their currencies. Bilateral trade with the US is not included in this scoring system, under which South Korea and Taiwan scored higher than China.

The highest score, however, went to Switzerland, which has a large current account surplus and hefty foreign asset

purchases. Incidentally, the Swiss franc is easily the most over-valued currency in the world.

According to *The Economist*, China has been trying hard to prop up its currency against the backdrop of large capital outflows and China's score is negative. In other words, China has raised the value of its currency. The scoring system shows that over the past decade China has "progressively done little to distort the value of the yuan." This is reflected in the verdict of the International Monetary Fund that the Chinese currency is "no longer undervalued."

But all this does not mean that China has never been guilty of currency manipulation.

With the end of the recession in March 2009 and the consequent recovery, all the emerging economies of Asia witnessed surging capital flows, leading to significant appreciation of their currencies to the point of destroying their export competitiveness. During his maiden visit to Beijing in November 2009, the then US President Barack Obama called upon the Chinese government to allow the country's currency to appreciate further. But the then Chinese President Hu Jintao chose to

ignore the demand. The Chinese currency was held at 6.83 to a dollar between mid-2008 and mid-2010. Prior to this, the dollar-yuan exchange rate moved from 8.11 yuan to a dollar to 6.83 between July 2005 and July 2008. Between June 2010 and July 2013, the yuan appreciated from 6.83 to 6.17 against the dollar. The US, the European Union and collectively the IMF had individually and collectively taken all possible measures in 2009 to persuade China to move away from its fixed exchange rate regime to a market-oriented system. All this fell on deaf ears.

In August 2015, however, the Chinese yuan was devalued. This move was seen against the backdrop of China's anxiety to have its currency included in the SDR basket. The IMF had found that while the Chinese currency met the requirements as a significant currency in terms of international trade, the yuan had failed to meet the requirements as a freely usable currency.

The yuan was finally included in the SDR basket in late 2015. There is no denying the fact that China had remained a currency manipulator till about five to six years ago. It was only after the inclusion of its currency in the SDR basket that China has moved away from its earlier *avatar* of a currency manipulator.

The writer was formerly with the International Monetary Fund, Washington DC

OTHER VIEWS

EC has dispensed with even the pretence of neutrality

Most parties are justifiably critical of its conduct through this election

From pleading helplessness before the Supreme Court in enforcing the Model Code of Conduct a month ago, the Election Commission has come a long way in asserting its powers. On Wednesday it took the rare step of ordering that campaigning in West Bengal's nine Lok Sabha constituencies that go to the polls on Sunday end earlier than scheduled. West Bengal had witnessed sporadic incidents of violence through the previous phases of polling, but on Tuesday tensions ran high after clashes during a roadshow of BJP president Amit Shah in Kolkata. The EC may have had sufficient reasons to conclude that a "fear psychosis" has gripped the state, and therefore campaigning must end prematurely.

However, the advanced deadline of 10 pm on Thursday to end campaigning was devoid of any logic or reason, other than being evidently partisan towards the BJP. The 10 pm deadline clearly accommodated Prime Minister Narendra Modi's last rallies in the state slated for Thursday evening. If in the EC's assessment campaigning could have led to violence, why did it not order its curtailment on Wednesday or early in the day on Thursday? Since the announcement of the Lok Sabha poll schedule, the EC's credibility has come under a



cloud. The manifestly partisan decision on the campaigning deadline in West Bengal has further eroded trust in the institution. Most parties have been justifiably critical of the EC's conduct through this election, and it was not surprising that the latest provocation has revived their complaints.

The Hindu, May 17

Trade troubles

India needs strategy to revive exports

India's trade deficit surged to a five-month high of \$15.3 billion in April with merchandise export growth slumping to 0.64 per cent — the slowest pace since December 2018. This subdued performance in April comes after recent data showed that industrial production had contracted by 0.1 per cent in March. With both consumer durables as well as capital goods segments contracting sharply — the latter is a proxy for investment demand — it suggests that the underlying drivers of growth are sputtering. According to the latest trade data, at the aggregate level, exports grew by a mere 0.64 per cent in April. But, strip away the spurt in petroleum exports, and the remaining exports actually

contracted by three per cent in April.

The lacklustre performance can be traced largely to the contraction in exports of engineering goods as well as subdued growth of major labour-intensive segments. For instance, gems and jewellery contracted by 13.4 per cent, leather products by 15.25 per cent as did man-made and cotton yarn. The near-term prospects for exports appear to be muted. Clearly, the next government has its task cut out. It will have to carefully navigate the intensifying trade war between the US and China while putting in place measures to boost competitiveness and revive exports.

The Indian Express, May 17

Dark state of education

Overhauling processes is urgent

As West Bengal has been slipping and sliding down the school education ladder for some time. The 2017-18 Performance Grading Index report of all states and Union territories on school education, published by the ministry of human resource development earlier this year, has placed the state in the fifth grade — among seven — on the basis of its scores under the five heads of the PGI. That is a comment on the state of India's school education as a whole, which was revealed alarmingly by the 2018 Annual Status of Education Report on school education by Pratham.

Bengal still prides itself on its learning and "culture"; clearly this is foolish fantasy.

The standard of spelling in common words on posters, walls and banners, film and serial credits and other public texts is a simple indicator of the tragic level of learning in the mother tongue. In spite of high enrolment and lower drop-out rates, the fact that the state is 35th in a country in which, according to the Pratham report, 25 per cent of Class VIII students cannot read a Class II text and 56 per cent of them cannot do simple division, should cause the state school education department serious worry. And worry is far from enough. Rehauling processes has become urgent, since it is obvious that children are just not learning.

The Telegraph, May 17