

Conjecture & surmise in imagined realities

The use of statistical tools might give exit polls a semblance of science but that does not make the inferences anything more than conjecture



WITHOUT CONTEMPT

SOMASEKHAR SUNDARESAN

By the time you start reading this column, the actual final results of the Lok Sabha elections may not yet be fully out. Exit polls are loud and clear (perhaps more loud than clear) in terms of which way people have chosen. All exit poll outcomes (barring two) have returned a sweeping runaway victory for the NDA and a rout for the UPA.

The exit poll results have led to extensive airing of firm views on the real deal with India's politics. Even a seasoned poll pundit like Yogendra Yadav has said the Congress party must die for a change in the political situation. Despite being a politician himself, he is usually dispassionate enough to keep his aspirations and hope out of his assessment of the reality. However, are exit polls adequate for such firm conclusions to be drawn?

Response to questions put to a sample of voters, forms the basis of drawing inferences and statistical conclusions as to the outcome of elections. While this exercise may feed the insatiable curiosity of the human mind, even with the best standards of integrity in the conduct of exit polls, astrology can remain a close competitor.

There is many a parallel in the real business world, and in particular, in business regulation, where similar extreme conclusions get drawn and policy choices are made, based on con-

jecture and surmise akin to exit polls. While exit polls results may at worst lead to some shooting of blood pressure in television studios, in the real world, expensive choices get made despite similar lacunae. Just two facets are worth noticing.

First, our ballot is a "secret ballot" for a reason. The law guarantees the secrecy of the vote cast so that the citizen casting her vote does so without any fear of reprisal. A citizen who is then asked to confess who she voted for, can only be expected to volunteer and waive the right to secrecy. Of course, a diehard loyalist would proudly declare her choice. Indeed, many could answer truthfully, only because they are asked — computer hackers will tell you that the easiest way to get someone's password is to simply ask for it. But those strong-minded or fearful about their secrecy being violated are bound to recoil. Often, speculative consumer choices are sought to be discerned by competition law regulators,

say, when they have to consider if they should approve a merger of owners of two competing brands. They are prone to making the same mistakes as placing much in store by exit polls.

Second, the mere peppering of statistical tools that can give a semblance of science would not result in the outcome being more than conjecture or surmise. There could of course emerge realities in election outcomes that match the exit poll outcomes — but these would be more in the realm of being fortuitous than in the realm of a scientific cause-effect relationship being established. Factors other than truthfulness too matter — for example, how one selects a sample, what size of sample is selected, how representative the sample is, and so on. Just consider how deeply controversial the selection of samples are in computation of television rating points, and of course how violent disagreements are over how to assess which news publication is read the most. The cause-effect confusion that boggles the mind, too comes up often in market abuse investigation — a typical vexed issue is determining

whether a person who sold securities in large numbers was cutting losses or whether it was her sales that led to an unfair fall in prices.

By the time you finish reading this column, the actual final results may be out. If the exit polls are proven right, remember it is a random match despite lacunae. If they are proven wrong, you know the randomness did not work out a match. Publication of exit poll results until completion of polling is banned for this very reason — their absence of reliability is inversely proportional their impact.

What is vital is to remember is that real strategic decisions on whether to dump a product (winding up the Congress party), or hold someone guilty (say, of market manipulation) or discharge someone of suspicion (say, approval of a large merger), has to be founded on firmer reality and not solely on extrapolation from responses to sample-based surveys. It is vital to own statistical tools and not let these tools own you.

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CHINESE WHISPERS

Return of king of good times



That's right. Beleaguered industrialist Vijay Mallya will appear on the big screen soon. Word is that a documentary is in the works on Mallya and his life, complete with anecdotes and points of view from those who knew him well. That includes voices of employees, fellow industrialists, and senior members of his management team. Siddharth Mallya, his son, will likely be involved in the film and recently registered his name with the Los Angeles Screen Actors Guild. While it isn't clear when the documentary-style movie will be released, what is certain is that it will be launched on Netflix and talks are on with the OTT player. Neither Netflix nor Mallya's press team commented on the movie. Mallya, who left the country in 2016 to live in the United Kingdom, faces extradition.

Fine-tuning' strategy

The Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP's) pick for Bhopal, Pragya Singh Thakur, ensured a charged up campaign in which much bitterness was exchanged between her party and the Congress, which fielded Digvijaya Singh against her. What neither of the two sides would have imagined was a musical and somewhat harmonious end to the campaign outside a counting centre where electronic voting machines (EVMs) are kept in the constituency. As a bunch of supporters from each side gathered to "guard the EVMs against manipulation", they thought a game of *antakshari* would be the best way to pass time. Bollywood numbers from various decades began to flow. And as it happens often these days, a video of the episode soon found its way to Twitter, prompting one user to comment that democracy was a great leveller.

From hotels to bhawans

Lok Sabha Secretary General Snehlata Shrivastava on Wednesday said the newly elected members of the Lower House of Parliament would no longer be put up in hotels but in state bhawans or Western Court, a transit hostel for parliamentarians, and its annexe building. With the counting of votes for the Lok Sabha polls scheduled for Thursday, the newly elected members are expected to start arriving in the capital from Friday. MPs were often lodged in hotels earlier; sometimes they stayed on for months while their bungalows were renovated, stressing the exchequer. "The Lok Sabha secretariat has done away with the system of transit accommodation in hotels," Shrivastava said.

Green clearances: Small tweaks, big effect

The NDA proposed key changes to the Environmental Impact Assessment notification in the last month of its term

NITIN SEHI

At the beginning of its first term, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government introduced a slew of measures to simplify the process by which environmental clearances are granted under the Environment Protection Act (1986). At a larger level, it tried to provide a time-bound delivery of such clearances to applicants through standardised processes. At a more micro-level, it responded to requirements of specific industrial sectors to tweak particular provisions and standards.

In its last month of this tenure the NDA government has proposed a more substantial rewriting of the key enabling notification called the Environment Impact Assessment of 2006. The proposal has been sent to states for comment but has already attracted criticism from environmentalists for significantly diluting the spirit of the Environment Protection Act (EPA).

This was possible because the EPA itself has generic provisions that allow great latitude to the political executive to detail the process of clearance purely through notifications. Such notifications, significantly, do not need Parliamentary approval.

The Environment Impact Assessment notification, which was first fashioned in 1994 and then over-

hauled in 2006 to give states more control over clearances for projects up to a particular size. This quasi-decentralisation was meant to reflect changed political and economic realities, in that states had a greater role to play and industrial expansion after economic liberalisation required more federal oversight.

Successive governments focused on altering the clearance processes but

largely gave a pass to the second, and essential, element of environmental regulations for monitoring pollution levels and how industries followed conditions laid down for clearances. In fact, in 2009, an analysis by the Centre for Science and Environment showed that the financial, technical and human capacity of the state pollution control boards — the state-level arms of the environment ministry which monitor industries under the law — had either stagnated or fallen over time.

This diminution in monitoring capacity has continued even as industrial output has increased manifold.

The NDA addressed this lacuna by providing for the online monitoring of individual industrial units for pollution levels but the mechanism remained opaque and is yet to show credible results.

The rewritten notification brings into one place all the piecemeal regulatory tweaks the government made



CHANGE AGENT

Key changes proposed in the draft Environmental Impact Assessment notification

- Transfer of environmental clearances for coal blocks when leaseholders change now extended to the entire mining sector;
- Responsibility for granting environmental clearance process partially devolved to district-level authorities;
- 'Empanelled' government-recognised institutions to monitor industrial activity instead of depending on dedicated state capacity
- Role of public consultations for industrial expansion to be scrapped under specific conditions, including if holding them poses an administrative challenge

during the five years. For example, the government had allowed a smooth transfer of environmental clearances for coal blocks when leaseholders changed. This was done in reaction to the Supreme Court orders cancelling coal blocks in 2014, requiring their redistribution to new leaseholders. The proposed EIA notification, logically, extends this facility to the entire mining sector.

The proposed EIA notification also devolves some of the responsibility of granting environmental clearance process to district-level authorities. The government tried to do so earlier in haste and was stopped in its tracks by

courts. The devolution of powers to the third tier of urban governance is proposed with an elaborate administrative mechanism this time around. Again, the question of whether district authorities would have the capacity or the independence to carry out this function efficiently remains as doubtful as it has been in the case of states.

Through the proposed notification, the government has also revived a proposal to leverage "empanelled" government-recognised institutions to monitor industrial activity instead of depending upon dedicated state capacity. Alongside, the government proposes to diminish the role of public con-

sultations for industrial expansion under specific conditions and to do away with such consultations on discretion if holding them poses administrative challenge.

Several environmentalists have complained about the proposed dilutions since the draft EIA notification was leaked. Government officials, speaking off the record, defend it. They say it is a draft open to improvement, but also a logical product after five years of the government's experience, in tune with the mandate for putting in place ease of doing business, decentralised regulations and efficient environmental governance.

At best, it does so incrementally. The proposed EIA amendment is not more than a series of tweaks. It does not require the government to go through a deeper overhaul of a law or regulatory framework, which would require some legislative amendments at the Centre and bringing states on board for yet others.

The Environment Protection Act was legislated partly in reaction to India's first (and still the biggest) industrial disaster, the Bhopal Gas Tragedy, in 1984. The basic framework for environmental clearance and monitoring was set up under this law in 1994 when India had only begun to liberalise its economy.

Regulations to mitigate environmental degradation, mediate in contestations over natural resources and address the climate crisis, in today's India present a challenge that tweaking a vintage EIA notification, wide-angled as it might be, cannot match. Whether the NDA retains power or another political arrangement takes over at the Centre, reimagining environmental governance would require greater political will.

INSIGHT

Push the envelope on market reform



DHIRAJ NAYYAR

There is a paradox at the heart of India's post 1991 political economy. India has grown at its fastest (currently the world's fastest) after it liberalised its economy. Many more people have been alleviated from absolute poverty in the last three decades than in the five preceding decades. And yet, there is no political party which is explicit or unabashed in its endorsement of a market economy. That can only be because there is no substantial constituency for market reform. Therefore, the question to ask, on the day India elects its next government, is why the apparent success of a market-led economy, in terms of both growth and poverty alleviation, has failed to create a political constituency?

Three plausible explanations stand out. First, in public perception, the market economy has been most closely associated with crony capitalism, rampant corruption and fleeing (the law) capitalists. Combined with the old socialist-era legacy of viewing all profit as vice/evil, it is a lethal cocktail which politicians unsurprisingly prefer to avoid in their public pronouncements. Perhaps, to get its moment in the sun, India's capitalism needs saving from at least some of its capitalists.

Second, it may be argued that the process of market reform post 1991 gave inclusion short shrift or paid only lip service to it. Here, inclusion is not defined as some form of dole but in the broader sense of participation in the mainstream economy — by being part of the banking system for example or getting a quality education or receiving first rate healthcare. Much of these are the fundamental responsibility of the State. By falling short, India's governments have let down markets. In fact, in the lexicon of centre-left parties, government failure has been masked as market failure.

Third, it is reasonable to posit that politicians have failed to articulate the merits of the market economy in sectors where it has brought great benefit to hundreds of millions of Indian, like in telecom or in aviation. In the quest for votes, it is likely that these would be advertised as successes of government rather than of the invisible (to voters) hand.

Recently, several commentators have lamented the unwillingness of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to embrace market reform, which is indeed necessary to raise India's growth trajectory to double digits. The reality is that Modi is too savvy a politician to push ideas or policies which do not have mass support. He realised that quickly when he tried to reform the land acquisition law in a market friendly way early in his term. Instead, Modi spent the last five years in a concerted effort to try and neutralise the adverse public perceptions around the market economy.

There was a concerted effort at cleansing the economy of rampant cronyism and corruption. A series of policy measures, from demonetisation to GST from the Indian Bankruptcy



Code to the Benami Properties Act and RERA were targeted at creating a "fair" economy. Increasing tax compliance, ensuring promoters lose control of bankrupt businesses, clamping down on black money in real estate and so on would all help in restoring the faith of the people at large that the market economy is not rigged to favour a few.

The PM Jan Dhan Yojana may yet go down in the history books as the most important reform of the Modi era because it universalised the possession of bank accounts. For the excluded and marginalised, that is the first point of entry into the mainstream economy. The decision to move to direct benefit transfers with the help of Aadhaar and mobile phones has put money into those bank accounts. Not only has leakage been cut, money in bank accounts has allowed people to access loans and purchase other financial instruments like insurance. In fact, the government's life insurance and accident insurance schemes bolstered Jan Dhan, just like direct benefit transfer did. The attempt

at inclusion subsequently moved to health care with the implementation of the Ayushman Bharat scheme. The vast improvement in the government's ability to facilitate genuine inclusion of the poor in the mainstream is significant because eventually they will become stakeholders in the well being of the market-based system.

Modi has also tried to communicate to the public about the importance of entrepreneurs and job creators who are the fulcrum of any market economy. His emphasis on start-ups, and new technologies, will enable the creation of a new class of Indian capitalists who will have grown without any support from the government. They will be the best advertisements for free markets. The challenge for Modi, should he win re-election today, is to build on the efforts of the last five years to push the envelope on market reform. He probably will. As should anyone who becomes India's next Prime Minister.

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LETTERS

Justice denied

While Prime Minister Narendra Modi went bragging about the Balakot bombing by the Indian Air Force as a muscular response to the Pulwama massacre, he kept under wrap a very tragic incident — of our own surface-to-air missile downing an IAF Mi-17 helicopter on February 27. Such an incident, euphemistically called a "friendly fire", killed seven IAF personnel and a civilian and yet there was not a word of remorse from the PM during his campaign. It is obvious that admission of the incident would have embarrassed his government. Both the PM as well as the defence minister need to explain their silence on the issue. Unfortunately, the IAF top brass seemed to acquiesce. While a detailed inquiry report is pending, prima facie, this is not just a case of professional incompetence and gross criminal negligence, but also of culpable homicide not amounting to murder. I hope justice is done and steps taken to prevent recurrence of such "friendly fire".

S K Choudhury Bengaluru

Culture is key

I read Mihir Sharma's article, "Do 'jobs' even matter in politics?" (May 22) with great interest. Indians carry a long history on their shoulders that they cannot just shake and throw away because someone who studied in the West wants to forget history. The country needs to include sustainability of culture in policy making because that is what most

Indians want. And in a democracy, the majority does count first. This means the ban on cow slaughter will continue and people will continue to search for glory in the past. Is there anything wrong in this? Not really. The new economics of growth in India will have to factor this in. Those who cannot do this will no longer be accepted in the economic analysis of India.

Chandrasekhar G Ranade Washington

It's hara-kiri

Apropos your editorial "Questions over Huawei" (May 22), in view of the growing tension between the United States and China, India needs to protect its 5G rollout. The Indian government and companies will undoubtedly ask Huawei to address all concerns of security and dependability of equipment supplies. It is highly unlikely that Huawei will provide satisfactory and acceptable responses. Equally or perhaps more important is the scenario of "a world without Android, Intel, Qualcomm, Cisco, Google and Apple". If America continues its nationalist crusade. It is akin to committing hara-kiri. Is Trump bent on carrying forward the bogey of nationalism to its illogical and irrational end?

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HAMBONE



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Bailout dilemma

Special credit window for NBFCs isn't a good idea

Dewan Housing Finance Ltd's (DHFL's) decision to freeze premature withdrawal of deposits is the latest in a series of bad news coming from non-banking finance companies (NBFCs). The problems began in September last year when infrastructure finance company IL&FS defaulted on payments to banks and term deposits and failed to meet the commercial paper redemption obligations. It caused panic in the markets as it impacted banks, mutual funds and investors. A spate of rating downgrades over the past month has also stoked fears of a liquidity crisis, with a cascading effect on the broader markets, leading to the demand that the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) should extend a special credit line to NBFCs to help them tide over the crisis. Those who back this demand say without a dedicated credit line, the NBFC segment is going to sink, and they will certainly not be alone in that. The RBI's own Financial Stability Report in December showed how the interconnectedness was increasing in the financial system. Mutual funds were the largest net lenders to the financial system, and NBFCs and housing finance companies (HFCs) were the largest net borrowers, the report said.

The asset liability mismatch is indeed stark and scary. Among the various players within the financial sector, NBFCs and HFCs together had a gross payable of ₹13 trillion, whereas the receivables were only ₹97,000 crore. The money due was mainly to banks and mutual funds. Supporters of a special credit line also say it is wrong to paint all NBFCs with the same brush. If they were really such a concern, why did the regulator allow more than 10,000 of them to come up in the system? Since the IL&FS defaults in September, the sector is now dependent upon its own cash flow, and that means the balance sheets would scale down. And it is but a matter of time before the real economy starts showing signs of a slowdown simply for the want of credit.

While the arguments have some merit, the RBI's reported decision against a special borrowing window should be welcomed. Such bailouts can fuel the problem of moral hazard because other financial institutions may expect a similar lifeline in the future. After all, quite a few of them are highly leveraged mainly due to their reckless lending in the past — they lent to weaker companies, including the real estate sector, and the quality of the security is suspect. The tactics some of the NBFCs use to get marginal funding advantage by relying on short-term borrowing have led to the crisis. In that context, the RBI has done well to ask the management of large NBFCs to submit concrete plans, with specific timelines, for capital infusion and asset monetisation. The central bank is already keeping a tab on the liquidity position of these firms on a monthly basis and recently asked NBFCs with assets over ₹5,000 crore to appoint a chief risk officer. There are several other questions on how a special window would work. For example, there is no clarity about the collateral against which the RBI would lend to the NBFCs. The RBI should thus try to focus on taking steps to address the structural problems that contributed to the crisis, instead of hurrying through a bailout package. The demand that NBFCs are regulated like banks, given their asset size and growth, is also a broadly valid argument.

New Delhi isolated

India seeks to block global e-commerce rules, but has few allies

E-commerce and digital trade are likely to be among the biggest value creators in economies — and particularly for the Indian economy. In fact, much of the recent investment in India is in this or related space. The Indian government has also been active in drafting and enacting rules in this space, many of which have greatly upset foreign players. However, it appears that India is an outlier in global terms when it comes to its attitude toward the regulation of e-commerce and digital trade. In particular, there is a strong move afoot to create a multilateral mechanism to govern the international regulation of e-commerce and digital trade. The United States, the European Union, and Japan — three of the four largest trading entities — have come together more than once over the past year to affirm their commitment to the creation of such a mechanism. They are united in seeking to prevent domestic regulations that restrict the free flow of data across borders. There is also a move to prevent domestic governments from bullying transnational companies from handing over source code or proprietary software. The People's Republic of China has also declared its openness to multilateral discussions on what a future World Trade Organization pact on data flows and storage, as well as digital products and services, would look like. Beijing is, of course, considerably more protectionist than the West on these matters, but it also would like to see global trading rules that allow its own multinationals like Alibaba or Tencent to flourish.

India, is, however, determined to try and block any international framework on e-commerce on digital trade. This reflects its own recent moves to force data localisation, which restricts the free flow of data generated by Indian consumers across borders. Multinational companies operating in the e-commerce space have also been subject to increasingly restrictive — and even arbitrary — rules. (The latter is one major irritant that led to the recent coldness in trading ties between the US and India.) India also wants to make sure that the needs of its IT service sector are met. However, it is far from clear whether Indian IT services would be harmed or benefited from a global architecture that opens up these services. After all, Indian companies provide low-cost and competitive solutions in this sector. The question of data localisation is more fraught, and is not settled domestically in spite of recent government efforts. While large Indian companies may benefit from data protectionism and the government has legitimate questions about national security, Indian consumers and smaller companies and start-ups stand to benefit greatly from a free flow of data.

Either way, it is unwise for India to find itself isolated in this manner. Plurilateral agreements that leave India behind would not be to its benefit. It is necessary therefore to seek more allies for its viewpoint. Unfortunately, many countries, including less developed ones, do not have as harsh a view on these issues as the Indian government is adopting. A combination of compromise and outreach will be necessary.

Can local communities save liberal democracy?

Liberals should beware of communitarian romanticism, as 'community failures' are as important as market and government failure

As the job-displacing effects of markets and global integration and the cultural shocks of large immigration have rattled workers, particularly the less skilled ones, their reactive turn to populism in different parts of the world has dismayed liberals. This has been reinforced by resentment against centralised bureaucracies (not just in Brussels or Washington but also in Mexico City or Delhi or Jakarta) run by professionals and technical experts whose dispensations often ignore local realities and sensibilities. The alliance between liberals and workers that used to form the backbone of centrist democratic parties is getting frayed, as in the minds of many blue-collar workers the liberals with their mobile professional skills come across as privileged meritocrats and rootless cosmopolitans ('citizens of nowhere').

Global markets and mobility of capital have required standardisation and harmonisation of local rules and regulations, which some communities feel are ironing out their local distinctiveness and proximity-based personalised networks. Increasing market concentration in large corporate firms, their blocking of small business, capturing of state power in democracies through strong lobbies and copious election funding, and weakening of labour organisations and depressing labour share have made many small people precarious in their livelihood and suspicious of markets.

State-provided public services which are supposed to relieve the harshness of the market are everywhere riddled with bureaucratic indifference, malfeasance, and resistance to reform, while the better-off liberals are increasingly seceding from them. In developing countries the public delivery of social services is often so dismal (with inept, corrupt or truant official providers) that in contrast the image of voluntary community organisations (including charitable religious institutions run by Muslim, Hindu or Christian evangelicals) trying to fill in the gap is often much better than that of the state. Even when the state delivery mechanisms work reasonably well, the projects often do not involve the people but simply treat them as passive objects of the development process. (In rich countries, communities have sometimes rejected negotiations over their heads by corporate and city officials to help investment in the community — as in the recent case of the failed Amazon investment proposal for Queens in New York.)

In general, in the day-to-day democratic process political parties which used to be viable mediators between the state and society are now in some decay all over the world, and thus the regular political-organisational channels of demand articulation and conflict resolution are clogged. At the global level there is also

a general feeling that in facing the environmental challenges both the state and the market have failed us. Even in the community management of local environmental resources (forestry, fishery, irrigation water, grazing lands etc) the rampant encroachments by market expansion of private business and by the overreaching and collusive state officials have played havoc in many parts of the world. Thus there is widespread disillusionment with both the market and the state. In such a situation some liberals are turning to the local community to provide an anchor for democratic institutions and solidarity.

Communitarians and sociologists have argued for this over many decades, but economists have usually emphasised the resource allocation efficiency and productivity effects of mobility and footloose factors of production for which community loyalties can be a drag. The emphasis has been more on anonymous competition than on social cooperation. The only recipient of the Economics Nobel prize who had extensively worked on community institutions of cooperation, Elinor Ostrom, was a political scientist, not an economist. (When in the early 1990s I linked up with her in connection with my work on community institutions in the local commons of developing countries, she expressed to me her bewilderment why so few of my fellow economists were interested in these issues at that time.)

This is changing now. More economists, persuaded by the ubiquity of both market and state 'failures', are turning to the community as the 'third pillar' of society and economy — as a very sensible and balanced recent book by Raghuram Rajan has called it. Policy suggestions of devolution of power to local community associations, or to village councils and municipal administrations now abound in the economic governance literature for both rich and poor countries.

The main economic arguments in favour of such devolution involve: (a) a better utilisation of local information, ingenuity and initiative, particularly in the targeting and implementation of local public projects, which distant technocrats cannot easily mobilise or sustain; (b) the procedures of trust, coordination and social sanctions of defaulters that undergird local social contracts become weaker as the domain expands beyond small local communities, exit becomes easier, and social norms get diluted; and (c) a desire to keep under control the inequalities that large-scale agglomeration and network externalities inevitably generate (when talented and skilled people gravitate to one another in a small area or entity, others suffer the consequences of the brain drain).

Examples are many, in both rich and poor countries, of devolution leading to better decisions, from



PRANAB BARDHAN

the point of view of efficiency as well as equity. Technological changes have now made it administratively somewhat easier for lower levels of government to handle certain tasks. Politically, the arena of local democratic contestation and governance is also a good training ground for future democratic leaders at the national level. And, in a world of rampant ethnic conflicts and separatist movements, devolution of power can diffuse social and political tensions and ensure local cultural and political autonomy.

But liberals should also beware of communitarian romanticism. Compared to central entities where many rival groups contend, small local community institutions may be more susceptible to capture by local overlords, oligarchs and majoritarian tyrants — think of white supremacists in the localities of US South, the tyranny of dominant castes in Indian villages, or mafia capture of local institutions in Sicily. In all these cases outside intervention has been necessary to relieve institutionalised systems of local oppression. In India, during the freedom struggle, important social thinkers like Gandhi and Tagore had emphasised the centrality of the village community, but Ambedkar, the leader of a marginalised oppressed group (who later as one of the founding fathers of the Indian Constitution tried to do something about that oppression through liberal-constitutional means), used to call the Indian village community a 'cesspool... a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism'. When there is such 'community failure' for the socially marginalised groups, the anonymity of the market or an intervention by the distant state with its impersonal legal procedures may be welcome.

At a somewhat less oppressive level of associational life, all of us are familiar with too much insider control in local bodies for zonal restrictions or professional licensing, not-in-my-backyard-type resistance to new projects (even liberal but expensive cities like San Francisco are, for example, divided on the issue of public housing projects), and local property tax based school financing, that work against the interests of the poor and disadvantaged. Decentralisation can thus exacerbate inter-community inequality; under devolution of power and more autonomy communities with initial advantages build on them and advance faster. Then there are related issues like externalities and spillovers where local control mechanisms are inadequate, as in the case of upstream deforestation causing flooding and soil erosion in downstream communities. Intra-community economic inequality can also have an adverse impact on trust and cooperation. For instance, in my empirical work on south Indian irrigation communities, I have found statistical evidence that across villages when land is more unequally distributed, farmers' cooperation on resolution of water conflicts breaks down more easily.

The small scale of communities can also be a disadvantage when they face covariate risks (for example, natural disasters or local market mishaps affect most members of a local community simultaneously), so risk-pooling to keep insurance costs under control requires supra-local involvement and larger scale. Small scale is also a disadvantage when infrastructure investments require raising large amounts of external finance.

(Tomorrow: Dilemmas of community participation)

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Economic outlook darkens

The government that assumes power after the election results has its work cut out for it on the economic front.

First, there is the global economic slowdown. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates global economic growth at 3.3 per cent in 2019. That's down from 4 per cent in 2017 and 3.6 per cent in 2018.

Global growth of 3.3 per cent is not a crisis. But two developments that have followed the IMF's forecast could make things worse for the world economy. The US-China trade war has escalated. Tensions between the US and Iran have risen to a dangerous level and this has pushed oil prices to over \$70 per barrel. If the situation in West Asia worsens, analysts see oil prices touching \$100 per barrel.

Secondly, tax revenues for 2018-19 have disappointed. Revenues have fallen short of revised estimates by ₹1.6 trillion. The government will have cut capital expenditure sharply towards the end of 2018-19 in order to contain the fiscal deficit. The effects on growth will be felt in 2019-20. Tax revenue projections for 2019-20 too will have to be scaled back which, again, will mean cuts in capital expenditure.

Thirdly, the Non-banking Financial Company (NBFC) crisis has been contained but it hasn't gone away. Public sector banks have played an important role in preventing a collapse partly by buying up some of the NBFC assets and partly by increasing loans to the better quality NBFCs. But the crisis of confidence in NBFCs persists. The better ones can access funds at higher rates than before but not the weaker ones. The housing and consumption goods sectors have been adversely impacted by the problems at NBFCs.

Fourthly, the pace of recovery under the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) process has been well

below expectations. Many PSBs were hoping to return to the black in a big way on the back of recoveries from the 12 top corporate accounts that had been sent to the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT). This hasn't happened. Credit growth at public sector banks (PSBs) would have been higher had the expectations on recovery been met.

In the short-run, the economy has to reckon with the cumulative effects of a slowing global economy, higher oil prices, cuts in government capital expenditure, problems at NBFCs and constraints on credit growth at PSBs. GDP growth in FY 2019-20 is poised to fall below seven per cent. This is clearly not the best of starts for the next government.

What positives or mitigants do we find in the situation?

A big positive is the willingness of the central bank to loosen monetary policy consequent to the change in leadership last December. Annual consumer price inflation was 2.9 per cent in April, so inflation is hardly a concern at the moment. The combination of low inflation and weakening growth strengthens the case for a policy rate cut in June.

Secondly, the infusion of capital into PSBs and the exiting of six banks from the Prompt Corrective Action has helped boost credit growth. Banks' non-food credit grew at a healthy 14 per cent in March 2019 over the previous year. However, the share of industry in non-food credit has declined by 1.7 percentage points in the period. The share of retail loans has risen by 0.9 percentage points and of NBFCs by one percentage point. If manufacturing is to be revived, the flow of credit to manufacturing, especially to small and medium enterprises, needs to improve. For PSBs to take the necessary

risks, they need a more comfortable level of capital. The government must infuse at one go whatever capital is required instead of providing it in dribbles.

The great white hope for the next government must be the Bimal Jalan Committee on the economic capital framework for the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). The committee can provide a shot in the arm to the government by settling for a lower level of reserves at the RBI, whether contingent reserves or revaluation reserves. If the former, the committee will be putting cash in the hands of government. If the latter, by extinguishing some of the government debt, it will be opening up space for more government borrowing. Either way, the government will have room for manoeuvre in what is otherwise a tight situation.

R Gandhi on Yes Bank board

There could be no sorrier comment on the state of governance at private sector banks than the RBI's appointment of Mr R Gandhi, former deputy governor, to the board of Yes Bank.

The appointment comes in the wake of several decisive interventions the RBI has made in respect of private banks. The promoter of Yes Bank was ousted from the board. The grapevine has it that the RBI had a role to play in the appointment of its new CEO. The former CEO of Axis Bank was refused an extension despite one being offered by the bank's board. Both the government and the RBI seem to have had a hand in the appointment of the present Chairman of ICICI Bank.

In 2014, the PJ Nayak Committee on bank governance had recommended that the government be distanced from the appointment of CEOs and independent directors of PSBs. We are now in a situation where the government or its arm, the RBI, cannot distance itself from top appointments at private banks. What do we make of the contention that privatisation is the answer to poor governance at PSBs?

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Books and ballots



PAGE DOWN

MIHIR SHARMA

toms. Electoral politics has been discussed threadbare for months — and now, suddenly, we are supposed to stop thinking about it?

Let us not despair! For, even if the daily newspaper now turns to such trifles as a slowing economy or a trade war, there is always the bookshelf. If your preferred party was humiliatedly trounced, then lose yourself in an imaginary election in which you can pick the side that wins; if your party instead scored a famous victory, then reading a spirited description of another election might keep the euphoria going.

And no description, no election, is surely more spirited than that of the borough of Eatonsville, to which Charles Dickens' Mr Pickwick repaired in order to things other than voting percentages and observe mortal, electoral combat between air strikes. But it is also possible that, for the Blues and the Buffs. Dickens, who some of us, there will be withdrawal symp-

real one that he witnessed as a journalist, to the constituency of Northumberland North is at his cynical, amused best in this passage. There is no trace of the sentimentality that weighs down much of his work; instead, here he is positively Mark Twain-esque in his savagery, and there is no greater compliment. The parties have divided the town between them, he explains; he parodies the vicious tone that partisan newspapers take with each other, and has the candidates' agents gleefully list the various breaches of ethics in which they intend to indulge.

Dickens observed his bye-election in 1835; and it is amusing to note how, some decades and much reform later, little had changed when Anthony Trollope came to write about elections in turn. He too had observed elections close at hand, but as a candidate, in 1868. He came dead last in an election so famously corrupt they actu-

ally dissolved the constituency. He mined that experience in *Ralph the Heir*; but his books are chock-full of parliamentary and political chicanery, and deeply observant about the compromises that men without means of their own must make to rise in politics. Yet, as befits a man who seriously sought to enter Parliament, his cynicism is tempered with a deep respect for the democratic system that Dickens or Twain never would have shown. "When a man lays himself out to be a member of Parliament," Trollope declared in *Doctor Thorne*, "he plays the highest game and for the highest stakes which the country affords."

The notion that elections are corrupt, that voters are bought, that honest outsiders cannot take on the machine of money and influence, is as old as representative democracy itself. But there are few better descriptions of how machine politics works — and of its limitations — than a now little-remembered novel by the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Edwin O'Connor. *The Last Hurrah* was written

in 1956, and it tells the story of a veteran machine politician seeking re-election as mayor in an American city obviously modelled on Boston. The mayor, named Skeffington, is an instantly recognisable figure for Indians. He is the arbiter of claims between religious and ethnic communities, the dispenser of patronage, both destination and source of the illicit gold that keeps the wheels of commerce and politics turning in a large town. Yet *The Last Hurrah* tells the story of how he is defeated by a handsome newcomer with no record but a telegenic presence. Patronage mattered less in a country that had begun to see big national welfare schemes. And the spread of television to every home — O'Connor was in fact a TV critic — meant that suddenly, the telegenic challenger with a vacuum message had an advantage over the grand old party. This story of a changing political landscape feels almost painfully relevant to today's India.

But, for Indians, there is surely only one novel in English that perfectly cap-

tures the many nuances of our vast and complicated electoral process: Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*. Most readers might remember Seth's masterpiece as a book about a girl choosing between three men. But the other thread of the story, the other choice, is the Republic of India's first election in the winter of 1951-52. No other book about India has ever approached Seth's ambition here: He tells us of the Hindu nationalists hoping to capture power and the Muslim aristocracy trying to hold on to what influence they have left; of the war being waged by Nehru for the soul of Congress, and the battles being fought by zamindars against land reform. Preparations for India's first great democratic choice run through the novel alongside Lata's evasion of her own choice of husband, and the two stories reach their climax together. But the election story is in many ways finer: there is a twist at the end which reminds us that we never can predict how elections will turn out, and also that we might never know the full story of why.

Opinion

THURSDAY, MAY 23, 2019



NO INFRA WITHOUT TRADE DEAL

US president Donald Trump

Before we get to infrastructure, it is my strong view that (the US) Congress should first pass the important and popular USMCA trade deal

Lavasa's right, the EC has hurt its own credibility

His dissent should have been recorded, and made public; that said, some part of the Model Code of Conduct must be revisited

THERE CAN BE little doubt that, given its mandate and the fact that its decisions have the force of law during the elections, the Election Commission (EC) can hardly be compared with any other arm of the government. Going by news reports, that, however, appears to be the argument made by Chief Election Commissioner Sunil Arora and Election Commissioner Sushil Chandra while not recording Election Commissioner Ashok Lavasa's dissent on various issues, much less making this public. One of the arguments made, it appears, is that neither the Cabinet nor the CAG record dissent though, as in any other body, there is bound to be some disagreement on some issue or the other. This is, however, the wrong comparison since neither the Cabinet nor the CAG pass orders or adjudicate on issues; in all bodies that do, from various tribunals to even the courts, minority rulings are made public; indeed, even RBI is trying to do its bit to encourage transparency and notes of the meetings of the Monetary Policy Committee are made public. So, the EC was wrong in not recording Lavasa's dissent.

Indeed, the EC was slow to react to various violations of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), and did so only after it was pulled up by the Supreme Court. In this context, Lavasa is said to have suggested that, before electioneering began, the EC write to prime minister Modi requesting his cooperation in upholding the MCC; repeated sensitising of political leaders can't be a bad thing. Lavasa disagreed with the several clean chits given by the EC to Modi, in cases such as his asking for votes in the name of the Pulwama martyrs; while the EC, like the courts, goes by the majority view, even recording Lavasa's dissent would have had an impact in disciplining wayward candidates since this would have been widely publicised. What is odd, of course, is that while many wanted Modi to be censured for this, few thought the EC needed to take action on Congress party chief Rahul Gandhi repeating, with no proof, that Modi had given Anil Ambani's firm ₹30,000 crore of Rafale orders or his telling tribals that the crux of one of Modi's proposed Bills was "shoot Adivasis with impunity" when the reality was a lot more complex.

Once the elections are over, the EC, various political parties and civil society need to revisit the MCC to see how this needs to be reinterpreted. Asking parties not to campaign on the basis of either caste or religion appears the right thing to do, but since several political parties have been set up precisely to appeal to certain caste/religious groups, can this be helped? And if, as in the case of the BJP, a more muscular policy towards aggressors is part of the party's USP, how is the MCC to be implemented when it says that events like Balakot are not to be publicised? Oddly enough, political parties that are now pillorying the EC for being soft on the ruling party and who are alleging, again without proof, that the EVMs are being transported in private vehicles instead of in EC vehicles—the argument is that this will allow switching/tampering of EVMs by the BJP—have not spent a minute in doing anything about the other big thing that vitiates polls: the large-scale presence of criminals among their candidates.

Maha move on land title

States must emulate Maharashtra on registering land titles

MAHARASHTRA'S PLANNED LAND-title registration system, which will be a single-window land ownership authentication mechanism, is what other states need to emulate. Indeed, as per Business Standard, the Maharashtra experiment is the pilot for the national rollout of digitising land title records—Chandigarh moved on conclusive land titling system (CLTS) in 2017, but that was for limited area, where the government knew the titles were clean. Such authentication of titles will boost immovable property transactions since, with the government authenticating the title of a piece of land, the likelihood of fraud or dispute will fall drastically—Maharashtra is proposing strict punitive measures, including heavy fines and even imprisonment, for any attempt to defraud the process by deliberately concealing information or furnishing false information. Once a government-authenticated database of titles is set-up, it will guarantee the rights of both the property owner and the buyer/receiver. Apart from what it means for the real estate market, the new system will be a big boost to infrastructure, where acquisition of massive tracts of land is often held hostage by title disputes. Clean titles and easy authentication will also make financing based on land much smoother.

Though the details of the Maharashtra process are not yet known, it is hoped that it emulates the Chandigarh CLTS that assigns a unique ID number to every piece of land and hands out ownership certificates that contain details on even borrowings against the property. Digitally accessible, government-authenticated land titles would be an unprecedented shot in the arm for the economy. Now, that nearly 90% of the land records (record of rights) in the country have been computerised under the Digital India Land Records Modernisation Programme (DILRMP)—though land records and property registration have been integrated for just 58% of the cases where this is applicable—rolling it out across the country doesn't seem to be too far in the future. The government can inject some pace in property transactions if it were to stand guarantee for the title—that is, if there is a fraud detected in the title, the government should compensate the buyer for the loss. Professor DC Wadhwa of the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics had offered a rationale for this saying that the local government moving to authenticate titles before the rights of the owners are recognised will mean that the chances of fraud are low and the gains to the government from increased transactions—not just from duties on the land/property, but also from taxes on the increase in economic activity such transactions eventually bring about—will offset the costs the government bears. In any case, the Maharashtra provision for fine for fraud will also take up a part of the burden of compensating buyers falling prey to fraud. As FE has held before, bringing in insurers to provide cover to titles based on the risk attached is also something that states must consider. While users, where records are up-to-date and disputes are minimal, will not mind paying a small premium for the peace of mind the insurance guarantees, those in states where the records have been historically poorly kept will demand better from their governments.

ObservationPOWER

India's RISAT 2B will help with monitoring crop failure, forest cover depletion as well security at the border

WITH THE LAUNCH of RISAT-2B, Isro's newly minted Earth-observation satellite, India will reap a raft of benefits in diverse areas, from agriculture and forestry to security and disaster management. RISAT-2B has been dubbed—rather too quickly—as a spy satellite. Though there is a military utility to the satellite—it can be used for enhanced surveillance and checking cross-border infiltration—and it can carry on its observation functions even in poor weather, generating images from the ground, the potential it has for other areas is far to great to play second fiddle to its surveillance potential. In agriculture, specifically, where the world is moving towards real-time observation for early detection of crop failure, India needs eyes in space. As experts have pointed out, calculation of crop insurance under the central government scheme can become more accurate and payment to farmers faster if satellite-based imagery is used. Similarly, real-time monitoring of forest cover loss, poaching, illegal mining in resource rich areas can also help India tackle these losses. One of the strongest potential lies in disaster management. If, for instance, the satellite is able to detect loss of mangrove cover or map flood-hit areas for faster relief delivery, the lives of millions of vulnerable Indians can be made better. RISAT-2B will be replacing the RISAT-2 and will be on a five years mission. It is India's first such earth-observation satellite with indigenous technology having such complexities. If it delivers across the fronts it is expected to, India can further consolidate its position in the club of the space-elite.

NEED FOR REFORMS

ONLY POLITICAL LEADERSHIP OF A HIGH ORDER CAN CHANGE THE DEEP-ROOTED, SYSTEM-WIDE MINDSET OF BEING SUSPICIOUS OF BUSINESS

Cost of doing business trumps ease of doing business

THE BIGGEST, THE most colourful, the most contentious and perhaps the most expensive general election is finally over. During this period, governance had clearly taken a back seat as all decisions, except the routine ones, had come to a standstill. Now that the electioneering is done and dusted, hopefully for another five years, the new government will focus on the urgent needs of governance to put India's slowing economy back on a fast growth track.

I am writing this article before the results are out but given the exit polls, it seems that the ruling party is coming back to power for another five years. And they have been preparing for it and had been sounding out different stakeholders—both official and unofficial—on 'big ideas for decisive action' as part of their 100-Days plan as the new government. By chance, I engaged with some stakeholders on this question and was asked for my thoughts. We discussed many ideas that have the potential to create value and new jobs, such as taking the decision to systematically build a mineral map for India over next couple of years as a way to unlock one of the most under-leveraged national assets—the mineral wealth of the country—and grow the mining industry in a sustainable manner.

However, I also shared my view that a single-minded focus on 'big ideas for immediate action' is important to improve governance, but not sufficient for sustained growth of the country, as I believe that India faces some serious systemic and structural challenges in its economy, in a global economic regime (a paradigm that is changing rapidly). The answers to these systemic problems are not immediately apparent and call for an in-depth root-cause analysis, looking at the different options and their pros and cons before we can get to the sustainable solution. Let me offer my top three systemic priorities from the perspective of

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the Indian industry for the new government.

First and foremost is the current slowdown in credit off-take. Investment as a share of GDP has been falling and private investment has not just stalled but declined significantly impacting growth and new job creation. While on the demand side the slowdown of the economy and exports can be blamed, on the supply side we have the complex systemic challenge posed by the government ownership of PSU banks with its potential for political influence in various decisions, which impacts performance and builds up NPAs when they are taken for political rather than economic reasons. At the same time, the banking system globally is coming under enormous pressure from the growth of digital formats and shifting profit pools, and unless we find a solution to the first problem, which also helps address the second challenge, we will continue to face the same cycle of increased NPAs followed by re-capitalisation, and longer term erosion of market share of PSU banks, making them highly vulnerable. Dealing with the political-economy of a decision on PSU bank ownership and its implications on holding management accountable for performance of banks will be one of the biggest challenges that the new government will have to take on.

My second priority is the crying need for a focus on competitiveness and productivity as a country-wide initiative. Productivity, in the longer term, is the only factor that drives improvement of living standards across generations. This NDA government has done an enviable job

focusing and improving its position on World Bank's Ease of Doing Business (EoDB). But, that is only one part of the economic equation that drives competitiveness of the industry. The other, perhaps more important, part is driven by the competitiveness of factor costs—land, labour, capital and power. Today, India competes for global investments not with the high-cost countries as a lower cost manufacturing destination but with other fast-growing emerging markets. This calls for the important shift in the focus from EoDB to Cost of Doing Business (CoDB), where we benchmark ourselves against these competing nations. But the political-economy in each one of the four areas pose challenge and unless we can find systemic and comprehensive solutions to them, and not address the low hanging fruits, only Indian industries will continue to be hobbled in its efforts to compete globally and attract foreign, and even local investment, where the investor has a choice of other EMs with lower CoDB.

The third of my top three priorities is the systemic change in the way policy initiatives are developed to solve the problems of industry and the role of the latter in this process. Today, the industrial ecosystem is becoming more and more complex as industry boundaries becomes fuzzy with growing digitalisation, new non-traditional

A 100-Day plan for decisive action is important. But, so is a longer-term plan to overcome systemic and structural challenges and make the industry globally competitive

players enter a sector, new profit pools emerge which cut across the traditional industry boundaries, and growing global digital integration of e-markets and data flows pose many regulatory uncertainties. It is, thus, becoming more difficult for the government to solve these big and myriad challenges without active partnership with all the stakeholders in the industry, which goes beyond the traditional process of 'consulting' in choreographed meetings with the stakeholders. As the CEO of a large industrial group told me, "The government must understand that industry has as an equal stake and commitment in making India more

competitive and grow faster". Unfortunately, over past few years the trust between the government and the industry seems to have broken down and many business leaders feel that an unfortunate political narrative has developed, in which they are all branded as 'thieves until proven otherwise' due to unscrupulous behavior by few select promoters. If Indian industry has to grow and be globally competitive this trust

breakdown between the government and industry has to be overcome. Only political leadership of a high order can lead to the change in the deep-rooted 'system-wide mind-set' of being suspicious of business. A new narrative of equal partnership between these two critical stakeholders is necessary.

The winning political party will have fought and won a big fight. Now, its new government has to fight a bigger one to revive the fortune of the Indian economy and the industrial sector. The 100-Day plan of big ideas for decisive action is important. But, so is a longer term plan to overcome the systemic and structural challenges to making industry globally competitive.

Qualcomm's day of reckoning is here?

A US federal judge's ruling strikes at the heart of the chipmaker's business model, one that leverages the patents the company holds

SHIRA OVIDE

Bloomberg

A US federal judge may have done what Apple and a succession of foreign governments couldn't do: Force Qualcomm Inc. to change how it does business.

Including a long-running legal case, US district judge Lucy Koh said late Tuesday that the San Diego chip company, whose products are essential building blocks for modern smartphones, broke the law by squashing competition in important corners of industry and tying sales of its chips to fees for Qualcomm's technology patents.

The ruling strikes at the heart of Qualcomm's unusual and controversial business model. Qualcomm makes chips that smartphones need to connect to the internet, but it makes most of its profit from licensing its technologies to makers of phones and other computing devices. Qualcomm's terms for licensing—which covers technology essential to the functioning of modern phones—mean the company is paid even if a smartphone maker uses non-Qualcomm chips, and Qualcomm's fees are based on the consumer price of smartphones rather than on the cost of the parts Qualcomm makes.

Apple, rival computer chip companies and regulatory agencies in multiple countries have challenged Qualcomm's business approach. The US Federal Trade Commission two years ago sued over the arrangement, which the FTC said gave Qualcomm the power to overcharge for its patents and unfairly reduced the appeal of products from Qualcomm's chip competitors.

Qualcomm has so far withstood every challenge to its business model and even fought off—with the US government's help—an unwanted takeover offer that might have changed how the company does business.

The FTC case, on which Judge Koh ruled, may have been one legal challenge too far for Qualcomm. The company said Wednesday that it would appeal the decision and disagreed with the judge's "interpretation of the facts and her application of the law." The company has long said that its prices are fair and that its business model isn't uncommon; that it plows its revenue back into development of future technologies that help the industry and consumers; and that the market for cellular chips is competitive.

But assuming the finding holds up, this may be the long-delayed day of reckoning for Qualcomm. The company may have to reduce its royalty payments, rewrite every customer contract and open up its trove of intellectual property to rival chip companies.

Qualcomm shares soared in April when the company settled litigation with Apple over similar claims to the case judge Koh heard. Two weeks ago, Qualcomm awarded stock bonuses to top executives for their "outstanding efforts" in ending the fights with Apple and its partners. Those payouts

look awkward now. Qualcomm's stock opened down nearly 10 percent on Wednesday. The settlement with Apple seemed to signal that Qualcomm's royalty-rate structure and business model would remain essentially intact. Maybe not.

The timing of Qualcomm's legal loss couldn't be worse. Smartphone sales are sagging globally, which is already weighing on sales for Qualcomm and other companies that make smartphone components. And companies including Qualcomm and its customers are planning for the transition to the next generation wireless internet standard, known as 5G, and the legal ruling adds uncertainty to that transition.

The ultimate cost to Qualcomm is difficult to calculate. For now, Qualcomm will keep collecting royalty payments as usual

Its business model was under siege so often that it may have been inevitable it couldn't maintain it forever. Now we will see whether Qualcomm is prepared for its business to be upended. Does the company have a "break glass if our business model must change" plan? If not, investors need to hold the company to account for failing to have a Plan B.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Forget not: *Vox populi, vox dei*

Renowned theatre artiste Arundhati Nag has expressed a fear that the country has been heading towards oligarchy. This is a misapprehension. To be candid, it is more a veiled criticism against the BJP government at Centre than any real fear over the survival of the Indian democracy. The exit poll result has sent her into a tizzy. She disapproved of the win the BJP had the last time. Does she remember that once Congress had bagged 400 seats? All other parties were in microscopic minority. Why does she have to single out BJP for getting fair number of seats? It is the will and wish of people that prevails in a democracy. Nobody has right to question the people for electing a party or combination of parties of their choice to rule. Undoubtedly, the ruling party and opposition parties are like two eyes of government. Non-cooperation by the opposition parties in passing the Bills has been hindrance in smooth running of the government. Nag has also expressed her disappointment for misusing soldiers for electoral gain. People are not blind. People are appreciating the free hand given by the NDA government to the army to fight enemies. RTI enquiry and the Army chief have made it clear that no surgical strike had taken place prior to September 28, 2016. If the Congress were sincere, it could have placed its 'record of surgical strike', albeit falsely, after the final phase of election is over. It is cruel to say that a reference to surgical strike in speeches is misuse of Army. Credit for eliminating enemies must first go to Army only. But it is unfair to deny credit to a government that is behind the Army by giving it a free hand. — KV Seetharamaiah, Hassan

Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com



ILLUSTRATION: SHYAM KUMAR PRASAD

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FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Reforming FCI not a piece of cake

The NDA's PDS reforms have been half-hearted measures. Mounting arrears towards food subsidy budget settlement pose a serious question mark on the Centre's fiscal management. The new government has its task cut out to deal with large food subsidy arrears payment and huge grains stocks with the FCI

Subsequently, after a huge mandate to the NDA, the Modi government took charge and appointed a high-level committee (HLC), chaired by former food minister Shanta Kumar, on restructuring of the FCI in August 2014. The HLC, in its report submitted in January 2015, recommended, among other things, that "the FCI hand over all procurement operations of wheat, paddy and rice to states (Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and Punjab) that have gained sufficient experience in this regard and have created reasonable infrastructure for procurement."

The HLC had also recommended the FCI should accept only the surplus grain (after deducting the needs of the states under the National Food Security Act—NFSA) from these state governments (not millers) to be moved to deficit states. "The corporation FCI should move on to help those states where farmers suffer from distress sales at prices much below Minimum Support Price (MSP), and which are dominated by small holdings, like eastern Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Assam, etc.," the HLC had recommended.

After more than four years since the HLC gave its recommendation, restructuring of the FCI remains a dream, and the corporation continues to depend on the same set of states for procurement of grains and procurement operations have not been revamped in eastern states. On the PDS reform, the HLC had recommended that the government should relook at the coverage (67% of the population) under the NFSA as it's on the 'higher' side and it also stressed the need for computerisation of the PDS process for checking the pilferage of PDS grains.

In terms of the PDS reforms, the Modi government's achievement has been rather a mixed bag. According to the official data, all the existing 23 crore ration cards have been digitised and most of the cards have been seeded with Aadhaar numbers. The government has stated that 2.75 crore ration cards have been deleted during 2013-17. Food ministry officials have often stated that deletion of ration cards has ensured better targeting of beneficiaries. In order to ensure transparency in grain sale process in the

manifesto (in 2014) of incorporating best practices of successful PDS models. Stating that the new regime would be the "government of the poor, marginalised and left behind," the BJP manifesto five years ago had proclaimed to 'unbundle' the Food Corporation of India (FCI) operations into procurement, storage and distribution—towards greater efficiency.

PDS, the electronic Point of Sale (ePoS) machines have been installed in 3.88 lakh fair prices shops (FPSs) out of nearly 5.33 lakh FPSs in the country. But all these measures in reforming the PDS have not yielded tangible results. The off-take of foodgrains by the states under the PDS after deletion (bogus) and digitisation of ration cards has not declined in the last five years. The off-take of foodgrains by the states under PDS has increased from 47.41 million tonnes (MT) in 2013-14 to 52.75 MT in 2018-19, a rise of 11%.

Rising food subsidy dues & loans

While the new government will assume office in a few days, it would face a tough situation to manage the rising food subsidy, along with huge outstanding dues to the FCI, the key procurement agency. Along with ballooning of the food subsidy budget, there is a fiscal juggling or innovation taking place as far as FCI's finances go. The total outstanding dues to the FCI stand at ₹1.85 lakh crore as on March 31, 2019, because of the mismatch between budget allocated to the corporation and the actual expenses incurred (to the corporation). The actual expenditure towards food subsidy has been rising because of two factors—the annual rise in MSP for paddy and wheat given to farmers for procurement, and 'open ended' purchase operations leading to excess grains stocks held by the FCI.

The finance ministry has devised an innovative strategy to raise loans for meeting food subsidy expenses, which soon would be difficult to handle. As on March 31, 2019, the total loans raised by the Centre on behalf of the FCI towards the food subsidy expenditure have reached ₹2.48 lakh crore, of which the total loans from the National Small Savings Fund (NSSF) amount to ₹1.82 lakh crore and the rest of the loan amount was raised from cash credit limit of banks, short-term loans and bonds. The annual interest liability towards the loans availed by the government for the FCI was around ₹13,400 crore, which pushes up the overall food subsidy expenditure. This implies that the central government expenditure is being substituted with loans raised through the NSSF. This innovative method is adopted to maintain fiscal prudence in the central budget.

Another factor contributing to the rise in the food subsidy bill is the Centre's reluctance to increase the price of highly subsidised foodgrains supplied under the NFSA, 2013. Under the Act, the price of ₹3/2/1 for rice, wheat and coarse grains, was capped for three years, which ended in 2016. Each rupee (per kg) increase issue price of grains could result in savings of food subsidy of over ₹5,000 crore annually. For 2018-19, while FCI's issue price of grains to the states under the NFSA remains at ₹3 per kg for rice and ₹2 per kg for wheat, the economic cost of grains is ₹33.1 (rice) and ₹24.45 (wheat) per kg, respectively. Over the years, FCI's economic cost (procurement, distribution and storage of holding foodgrains) has been rising sharply, contributing to rising food subsidy expenses.

As on April 1, 2019, the FCI had 46.38 MT of grains stocks compared to the required buffer norm of 21 MT. The HLC had recommended "gradual introduction of cash transfers in the PDS, starting with large cities with more than 1 million population; and extending it to grain-surplus states, and then giving an option to deficit states to opt for cash or physical grain distribution." However, on cash transfer to PDS beneficiaries, the progress has been minimal. Only Chandigarh, Puducherry and parts of the Union Territory of Dadra and Nagar Haveli have opted for cash transfer in the PDS.

The NFSA—which has the objective of providing for food and nutritional security by ensuring access to adequate quantity of quality food at affordable prices to the people to live a life with dignity—is gradually turning out to be huge financial burden on the central government. The mounting burden of the food subsidy budget is compounded by huge surplus grains, and this has put enormous pressure on the central government's finances. The short-cut method of raising loans against food subsidy arrears has to be curbed immediately.

A custodian of the grid needed

VIJAY CHHIBBER

The author is a retired secretary, government of India

An independent CTU at arm's-length from any developer, including PSUs

AS THE 'DANCE' of capture' plays out, a debate on opportunities and missed during the outgoing government's tenure is inevitable. A focal area of the NDA has been its work on the infrastructure sector. There has been a marked step-up in the scale and speed of implementation, albeit with varying degrees of success across sectors. Roads and railways have demonstrated visible gains towards achieving global standards. But relatively slower progress was seen in ports, inland waterways, water management, and power transmission and distribution sectors. These verticals should be the obvious areas of focus for the new government.

The power sector has been a mixed story. There have been massive gains in generation, leading to a power-surplus status. Successful implementation of Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gram Jyoti Yojana, Integrated Power Development Scheme and Pradhan Mantri Sahaj Bijli Har Ghar Yojana 'Saubhagya' will lead to exponential growth in per capita consumption of electricity. But such major demand increase can only be met if transmission and sub-transmission elements of the grid are strengthened. As was evidenced by a lukewarm response to renewable auctions last year, the strength of the transmission grid to evacuate necessary renewable capacity is questioned by renewable developers themselves. A strong focus is needed not only to ensure a robust and resilient grid, but also the success of the renewable mission.

The tariff-based competitive bidding mechanism has led to innovative practices in transmission sector, and resulted in tariff 30-40% lower than the regulated one. A key principal of promoting competition is symmetry of information availability, which ensures a level-playing field for all players.

The Electricity Act provides for a central transmission utility (CTU); it can be any government company responsible for undertaking transmission of electricity through interstate transmission—it should be responsible for planning and coordination of interstate transmission. PGCIL, a

panies Act, has been playing the dual role of a planner, as a CTU, and of a transmission developer. With tariff policy seeking all transmission projects to be executed through competitive bidding, concerns arise on the conflict of interest in this dual role. It's evident in the constitution of the National Committee on Transmission (NCT) and Empowered Committee on Transmission (ECT)—the deciding bodies with regard to the route of allocation of projects.

The CTU has a symbiotic relationship with PGCIL and the interface between the two is opaque. Projects awarded on regulated tariff mechanism (RTM) are decided by the ECT, of which PGCIL is an integral part. Projects identified for award under the RTM route are automatically awarded in favour of PGCIL. Even in projects awarded through the bidding route, there is asymmetry of information, which disadvantages the private sector in the bidding process.

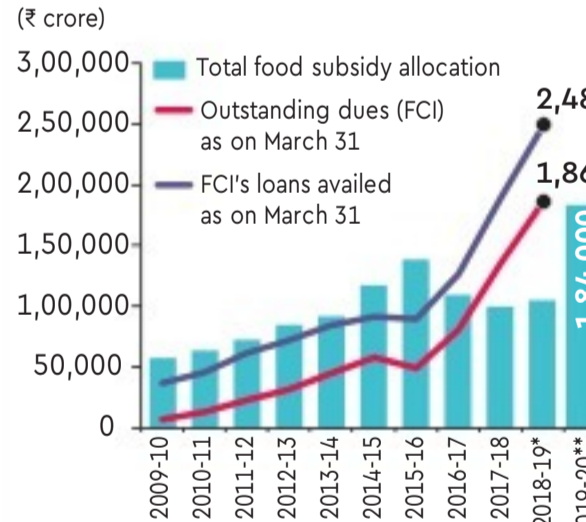
PGCIL, as a CTU, influences technical standards specified in tender documents for competitive bids. The CTU, along with the Central Electricity Authority (CEA), works out technical specifications (tower designs, conductor type, etc) for each transmission project, which, along with PGCIL's role as a developer, potentially distorts the level-playing field.

We need to segregate embedded functions into independent functions of planning, development, operations. The government has carved out a critical function of grid operations from PGCIL and created POSOCO to manage the grid. The next step should be creation of an independent CTU completely at arm's-length from any developer, including PSUs. This new institution should be entrusted with network planning, construction, bidding and revenue recovery functions. Its efforts must focus on advance planning, and support developers in obtaining all statutory clearances including Right of Way. This will result in improving the pace of award of projects as well as qualitative improvements in efficiencies of design, technology and costs for the consumer.

The National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) is a perfect analogy of an institutional framework that has delivered rich dividends without any conflict of interest. The NHAI, in its only role as the planner of national highways, has resulted in meaningful and sustainable change in both quality and pace of infrastructure development.

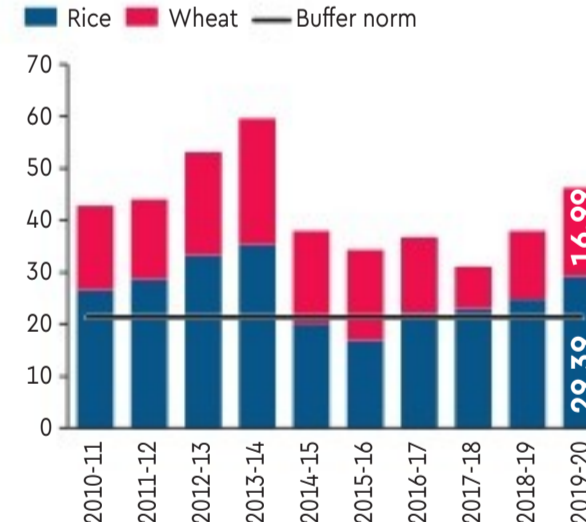
The new government must include the CTU's revamp in its 100-day agenda. Once the institutional framework is set right, all other imperatives will receive their due attention in a coordinated and sequenced manner.

Food subsidy, outstanding dues to FCI, loans availed by FCI



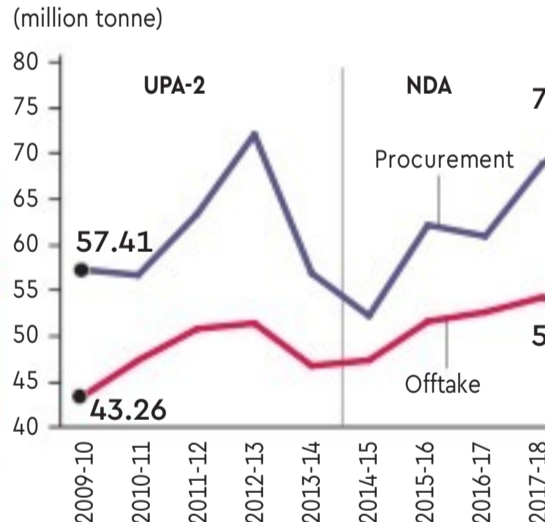
Source: Budget document, food ministry. Note: 80-85% of food subsidy allocation is routed through FCI. *unaudited **Budget estimate

Foodgrain stock position with FCI (million tonne) as on April 1



Stocks as on April 1 for each year against buffer norms of 21.04 MT (rice 13.58 MT & wheat 7.46 MT). This includes operational stocks as well as strategic reserve

Offtake of foodgrains by states (PDS) and procurement



Source: Food ministry. *provisional, foodgrains (rice & wheat)

RULING OVER SOFTWARE services exports for two-and-a-half decades globally, India is synonymous with the new normal of technology disruption. Now the time has come to shift focus from software services to software products, to capitalise on the dynamic global trends in technology adoption. Against the backdrop of a high performing IT-BPM industry, the country needs to reinvent itself as a products superpower. The advent of emerging technologies has disrupted business processes and global enterprises are sprinting towards faster adoption strategy to leverage the benefits. While outsourcing the IT services of an organisation to a trusted Indian technology partner was the standard practice for MNCs to optimise the cost arbitrage, rapid evolution in Industry 4.0 technologies has necessitated companies to relook at the strategy. Now, the technology priority is much of a core business strategy and the initial adopters are unequivocal winners.

According to a recent report, the global software products market was \$515 billion in 2018, with 7.4% growth. The overall growth of global software products in 2018 was driven by intelligent solutions based on Industry 4.0 technologies, cloud, connected infrastructure and cybersecurity products. At the same time, the market size of Indian software products industry in FY19 is \$8.2 billion, of which \$5.5

From IT services to software products

With the focus on tech start-ups and R&D, India can make great strides in the software product development space

OMKAR RAI

The author is director general, Software Technology Parks of India

billion is from the domestic market and \$2.7 billion from exports. Although Indian software products industry just accounts for 1.6% of the global market, given the global opportunities in this segment, India can strive to capture the largest pie of the global software products market.

India has successfully established a matured IT ecosystem comprising 18,000 IT enterprises, 7,700 technology start-ups, 4 million IT talent, robust R&D institutions, policymakers and academia. The Indian IT industry, which clocked \$177 billion revenue in FY19, is expected to reach \$350 billion by 2025. The large technology and engineering talent pool is an advantage to India's technology leader-

ship. The country produces 2.6 million graduates every year with STEM degrees. It's not far when many of the budding tech start-ups would transform themselves into tomorrow's global unicorns, and not just in value, making India a superpower in innovation and entrepreneurship.

Given this growth trajectory, the government must visualise a new India with initiatives that will propel the success story further. Keeping a tab on the past successes and a bright future, the government has initiated many niche programmes such as Make in India, Digital India, Atal Innovation Mission and Start-up India, which are focusing on the creation of indigenous products and a digi-



tally-empowered society. Software products are central to India's mission for digital transformation journey of the country. The drive of innovative software products companies will make all the difference to the government's vision by delivering superior products that can be integrated with software stacks. When public digital platforms are coupled with groundbreaking software products, it will result in adding hundreds of billions in economic value.

The National Policy on Software Products 2019 is an impetus to transform India as a software products nation and drive the country as a global leader in conception, design, development and production of intellectual capital-driven software products and accelerate the growth of the entire spectrum of the IT industry. Industry expects collaboration for the purpose of tech products creation in the country. To achieve these objectives, the NPSF 2019 envisions a 10-fold increase in the share of global software products market by 2025. The policy also envisages the creation of a cluster-based innovation-driven ecosystem by developing 20 sectoral and strategically-located software product development clusters with integrated ICT infrastructure, incubation facility, R&D/test beds, and mentoring and marketing support. It targets nurturing 10,000 technology start-ups, including

1,000 such start-ups in tier-2 and tier-3 cities, to generate direct and indirect employment for 3.5 million people by 2025. Policies like these will definitely rev up the growth of the IT industry by promoting software products business ecosystem, stimulating entrepreneurship and innovation for employment, building skills, and improving access to domestic and international markets.

As India has embarked on leveraging the potential of frontier technologies—AI, AR/VR, IoT, robotics, 3D printing—a strong IT industry base and demographic dividend will play a disruptive role and change the IT landscape. In the times to come, we will see more start-ups, entrepreneurs and product companies that not only create world-class products using cutting-edge technologies, but will also develop products that can resolve societal issues, bridge the digital divide and augment inclusive growth. We need a collaborative approach amongst all the stakeholders including industry, academia, R&D institutions, government agencies and state governments. Indian IT behemoths have already started shifting their mandate from software services to software products development. With the focus on technology start-ups and R&D, India can make a stride in software product development space, continue its brand as a global IT leader, and become a wealthy nation, eventually bringing prosperity to all.



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FACT CHECK, GROUND REALITY

CAN SPACE TRAVEL CAUSE HARM TO AN ASTRONAUT'S JOINTS?

FOLLOWING A novel study of mice aboard a Russian spaceflight, researchers have raised a question for astronauts of tomorrow: could travelling in space be bad for your joints? They found early signs of cartilage breakdown in the mice, suggesting that the reduced biomechanical forces of spaceflight are at play on the musculo-skeletal system.

The study, published online in the journal *npj Microgravity*, was done by researchers of Henry Ford Hospital in the United States. While they agree that it is premature to translate the finding to humans, they also note that previous research has shown that living and working in space leads to many changes in the human body including the immune system, blood pressure and the shape of a person's eyes.

In the new study, evidence of articular cartilage breakdown in the mice was "clear-cut", according to lead author Jamie Fitzgerald. "We believe this degradation is due to joint unloading caused by the near lack of gravity in space. If this were to happen to humans, given enough time, it would lead to major joint problems," Dr Fitzgerald was quoted as saying.

The research team analysed the molecular changes in the cartilage of mice that spent 30 days in animal research enclosures aboard an unmanned Russian Bion-M1 spacecraft in 2013. This included performing tissue stains and gene expression studies on the cartilage. The results were compared to mice observed on Earth during the same period. The changes were found to be consistent with those associated with osteoarthritis. In comparison, the mice on Earth showed no discernible cartilage degradation.

The study was funded by NASA, which is keen on developing a better understanding of what happens to the human body in space. The researchers said more studies are needed, especially given that there is a potential trip to Mars in the future.

Source: Henry Ford Health Systems



Study was on mice in space, raises question on humans. NASA

quoted as saying.

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Source: Henry Ford Health Systems

THIS WORD MEANS

ITERATIVE EVOLUTION

How a bird that went extinct came back from the dead

THE WHITE-THROATED rail is the only flightless bird known in the Indian Ocean area. New research has found that it had once gone extinct, but rose from the dead thanks to a rare process called "iterative evolution". It means the repeated evolution of similar or parallel structures from the same ancestor but at different times.

The study, from the University of Portsmouth and the UK's Natural History Museum, is published in the *Zoological Journal of the Linnean Society*. It found that on two occasions, separated by tens of thousands of years, a rail species was able to colonise an island called Aldabra and subsequently became flightless on both occasions. The last surviving colony is still found on the island.

The white-throated rail is a chicken-sized bird, indigenous to Madagascar. Migrating to Aldabra, the rails evolved so that they lost the ability to fly. However,



White-throated rail. Wikipedia

Aldabra disappeared under the sea during an inundation event around 136,000 years ago. The researchers studied fossil evidence from 100,000 years ago when the island was recolonised by flightless rails, and compared with fossils from before the inundation event. They concluded that one species from Madagascar gave rise to two different species of flightless rail on Aldabra in the space of a few thousand years.

Source: University of Portsmouth

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, MAY 22

INDIA'S seven-phase Lok Sabha election, spanning two-and-a-half months and 542 seats, ends on Thursday. The counting of votes will begin at 8 am, and strong result leads will be known by noon — unless it turns out to be a neck-and-neck fight like the Madhya Pradesh Assembly elections. Here's what will happen.

Who will be in charge of the counting?

The Election Commission of India (ECI) specifies that the counting of votes is to be done by the Returning Officer (RO), who is an officer or a local authority nominated by the Commission for each constituency. In most cases the RO is the District Magistrate of the concerned district.

Assistant Returning Officers too, are legally empowered to supervise the counting, and they take over especially if the RO has been assigned more than one constituency.

Where will the votes be counted?

Rule 51 (Time and place for counting of votes) of The Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, says that the "returning officer shall, at least one week before the date, or the first of the dates, fixed for the poll, appoint the place or places where the counting of votes will be done and the date and time at which the counting will commence..."

In its *Handbook for Returning Officer, February 2019 (Document 23, Edition 1)*, the ECI says that "for the sake of uniformity, the date and time of counting of votes is fixed by the Commission". The place of counting is decided by the RO — and while it should "preferably" be at the RO's headquarters in the constituency, the ECI says "there will be no legal objection even if the place so fixed is outside the limit of the constituency".

Votes for a particular Assembly constituency are counted at one place. However, the ECI says, "each Assembly constituency or an Assembly segment of a parliamentary constituency is to be counted in separate hall and under no circumstances can the counting of more than one Assembly constituency be taken simultaneously in a hall".

Each counting hall "shall be a separate room walled on all sides preferably with separate exit and entry facilities"; "where pre-constructed separate rooms are not available but large rooms are proposed to be divided for creating halls, each part constituting a hall will be separated by temporary partitions".

There can be no more than 14 counting tables, apart from the RO's table, in one counting hall.

How will counting centres be secured?

The ECI specifies that a 100-metre periphery around a counting premise/campus should be made a pedestrian zone and barricaded. A three-tier security cordon — at the periphery of the pedestrian zone, the gate of the counting premise, and the door of the counting hall — manned by the police, the State Armed Police, and Central Armed Police Forces (such as the BSF, CRPF, CISF, ITBP, etc.) respectively, will be in place.

To ensure "smooth flow of EVMs between the respective strong rooms and the counting halls", the ECI directs that "proper barricading of the path used for transport-

SIMPLY PUT QUESTION & ANSWER

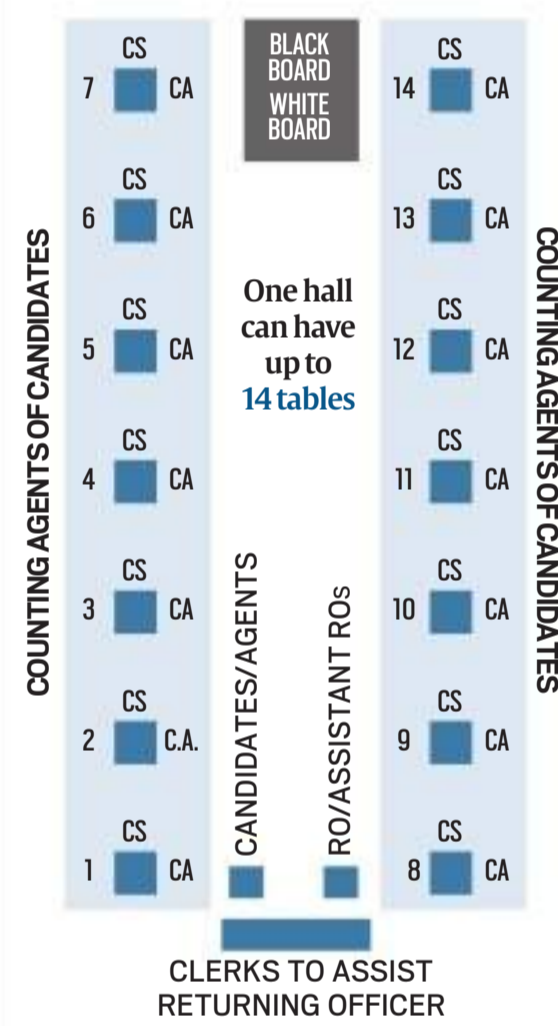
How votes will be counted

60 crore votes locked in EVMs will be counted today as the world's largest democratic exercise nears culmination. Counting is scheduled to begin at 8 am — here's what will happen through the day



Outside the counting centre in Goregaon East, Mumbai, on Wednesday. Nimal Harindran

INDICATIVE LAYOUT OF COUNTING HALL



CS: Counting Supervisor
CA: Counting Assistant
Blackboard/Whiteboard: Candidates' names and round numbers pre-written; results of each round are filled in as counting progresses
Counting of ETPBs and PBs takes place at RO's table
Source: Annexure 34, Handbook for Returning Officer, February 2019 (Document 23, Edition 1), pp 431-2

ing EVMs between the strong room of an AC (Assembly constituency) and the counting hall for that AC should be done so that the transportation is not interrupted by the presence of non-officials and media persons",

and that "no unauthorised persons should be able to breach that barricade and access the area/path nor should the path of two different ACs crisscross".

No one except the following can enter the counting hall: counting supervisors, counting assistants, and micro-observers; ECI-authorized individuals and Observers; public servants on election duty; and candidates, election agents, and counting agents. Police officers and government Ministers are not considered "public servants".

No one (not even the candidate, RO, or Assistant RO) other than the ECI's Observer can carry a mobile phone inside the counting hall.

Who will be doing the actual counting?

The RO appoints the counting staff. The number of counting staff depends on the number of counting halls, and the number of tables in each hall, with some reserve staff. For each table, there is one counting supervisor (the ECI says they should preferably be gazetted officers of the central or state government or officers of comparable rank from central/state government undertakings), one counting assistant, and one Micro-Observer, who is a central government/PSU employee, and is "responsible for the purity of counting process on his/her respective table".

The counting officials are randomised in three stages: first, a week before counting, a list of 120% of the required staff is randomly generated; second, 24 hours before counting begins, Assembly constituency-wise randomisation is done; third, counting tables are allotted at 5 am on the date of counting.

What process will be followed?

At the designated time, the strong rooms, where the polled EVMs are kept under safe custody, will be opened in the presence of the RO/Assistant RO(s), candidates/election agents and ECI Observers. After making entries in the log book, the seal of the lock will be checked and broken under videography and date-time stamping.

Rule 60 of The Conduct of Election Rules,

1961, lays down that "the returning officer shall, as far as practicable, proceed continuously with the counting". The Electronically Transmitted Postal Ballot Papers (ETPBs) and Postal Ballots (PBs) will be counted first at the RO's table. Counting of votes in the EVMs can start after 30 minutes, even if the counting of postal ballots has not been completed by then.

After all EVMs of a particular round have been counted, and the ECI Observer has done a parallel counting of two randomly selected EVMs, a tabulation for the round will be done, and the RO will announce the result of that round of counting and sign the relevant record (Part II of Form 17C).

Thereafter, the RO/ARO will give verbal clearance for the EVMs for the next round to be brought from the strong room into the counting hall. In case of simultaneous elections (Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim), the next round of counting will be taken up only after the previous round of counting for both the Assembly and Lok Sabha elections have been completed.

How will VVPAT slips be counted?

This is the first Lok Sabha election in which VVPAT slips will be compulsorily verified with the EVM count in five randomly selected polling stations of every Assembly segment. Mandatory verification was introduced with the Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh Assembly elections in 2017, but it was limited to one VVPAT per Assembly segment. This was increased to five polling stations by the Supreme Court on April 8.

VVPAT tallying will be taken up after all rounds of EVM counting are over, and will be done sequentially — and not simultaneously — for all five polling stations. On an average, it takes an hour to verify slips of one VVPAT machine. Hence, the EC anticipates a delay of almost four hours (since the SC has ordered tallying for an additional four machines for every Assembly segment) in the final announcement of results. In case of a mismatch between the VVPAT and the EVM count, the VVPAT count will prevail.

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Making of a conflict zone: humans vs tigers in a Maharashtra forest

VIVEK DESHPANDE
NAGPUR, MAY 22

HUMAN DEATHS in wildlife attacks have been rising in the forests of Brahmapuri in Maharashtra, from six in 2006 to 18 in 2018, most of them in tiger and leopard attacks (*The Indian Express*, May 20). A look at the factors leading to the area's emergence as a human-wildlife conflict zone, and the mitigation measures taken or explored:

The area

The 1,200-sq-km Brahmapuri forest division of Chandrapur district — home to 41 tigers (16 males, 25 females, besides some 15-16 cubs) as well as 80-90 leopards — is not a tiger reserve. It has been a mix of about 1,000 sq km territorial forest and about 200 sq km Forest Development Corporation of Maharashtra area. About two years ago, 153 sq km of it was declared as Ghodazari Wildlife Sanctuary. It is a protected area from the perspective of commercial forestry, but not so from a wildlife point of view. Contiguous with the 625-sq-km Tadoba-Anandhari Tiger Reserve (TATR) with over 44 tigers, Brahmapuri is today the most precious tiger-bearing non-protected area in the country.

Tiger population

Among the reasons for Brahmapuri emerging a hotspot for human-wildlife con-

lict, the most obvious is the growth of tiger numbers, from about 15-16 in 2013 to 41 now. With TATR packed with tigers, part of its population has dispersed to adjacent forests in Brahmapuri and other areas. Chandrapur district as a whole has more than 100 tigers, possibly the highest for a district anywhere in the country. Also, outside TATR, the tigers are spread mostly in Brahmapuri area. But while TATR's 44 tigers have to live with only two yet-to-be-rehabilitated villages, Brahmapuri's 41 tigers have to live with over 610 villages, half of them close to the forest.

Cattle density

Among other reasons for the conflict are high fragmentation of the forest and high cattle density. "Brahmapuri has one of the highest numbers of roads for a forest teeming with tigers. In recent years, it has been bisected by network of huge-sized canals of Gosikhurd irrigation project. And then there are agricultural fields all around. So, tiger dispersal or movement is bound to trigger conflict with humans," said Wildlife Institute of India scientist Bilal Habib, who has been working in the area.

According to Mohammad Talib, Chandrapur's Deputy Commissioner for Animal Husbandry, Brahmapuri *tehsil* (part of which is in Brahmapuri forest division) had a livestock population over one lakh in the 2012 census. The forest division also includes parts of Nagbhid, Sindewahi and Chimurtah-



A tiger in a forest of Chandrapur. Deepak Daware

sils, with cattle populations of 70,000, 36,000 and over 90,000 respectively. Cattle being easy food for tigers, cattle kill cases have risen from 305 in 2009-10 to 852 in 2018-19.

Migratory preferences

Habib explained that the tiger population in Brahmapuri has increased also because of more breeding tigresses. "Unlike males, females don't migrate long distances through fragmented forests. When they breed, the male cubs again can go long distances after separation but not the females.

That's why we have females involved in most cases of conflict," he said.

Habib and colleagues have recently radio-collared five tigers, including four females. One of the three radio-collared sibling females has been found responsible for one death this year.

Other factors

One major factor for the rise in tiger numbers has been a major crackdown on organised poaching gangs that had been operating since 2013. "Earlier, the annual

takeoff from Brahmapuri was about 6-7 tigers. That is not happening now. And there have been no local revenge killings either," said Nitin Desai, Central India director of the Wildlife Protection Society of India.

Another reason for rising conflict is the spread of the canal network of the Gosikhurd project, which has broken wildlife corridors connecting Brahmapuri to other forested areas. "We had then suggested to the Water Resources Department that it build bridges across those canals to facilitate wildlife movement," former Divisional Forest Officer Sanjay Thavre said. The WRD eventually built some, and wildlife have started using these.

Mahua flowers

As with any forest, human-wildlife conflict is mostly due to people's interface with wildlife. People go inside the Brahmapuri forest to collect minor forest produce and firewood. The conflict is generally intense during April-May, when people enter the forest to collect mahua flowers and tendu leaves, the latter used to make beedis. Mahua flowers are nutrient-rich and edible, and are also used to make liquor.

Mitigation measures

During his stint in Brahmapuri from 2008 to 2013, then DFO Thavre had systematically mapped the trouble-spots. "We undertook a massive awareness campaign and expedited compensation cases that used to remain



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

When the big guys fight

US-China spat presents little opportunity for India, will aggravate the economic slowdown



BHASKAR CHAKRAVORTI

“CHINA SHOULD NOT retaliate — will only get worse.” That was just another late evening tweetstorm from the White House. China will turn “peril into opportunity,” retorted China Central Television, reminding the people engaged in this “people’s war” that as a nation that has “experienced 5 years of wind and rain,” it was ready for pretty much anything. The US-China trade war has not only added tariffs and jitters but is headed towards a tweet-for-tat escalation with no clear end.

In case you missed it, here is a quick recap. Donald Trump rides into office with many promises, one of them being standing up to the Chinese for currency manipulation, unfair trade practices, intellectual property theft and taking away American jobs. In January 2018, he starts following through in earnest with an enquiry into Chinese intellectual property theft, followed by a string of tariffs on Chinese imports, to which the Chinese — predictably — retaliate. Then, the situation escalates as talks to de-escalate fall through. The US jacks up tariffs on \$200 billion worth of Chinese goods to 25 per cent from the previous 10 per cent and threatens to add another 25 per cent tariff on an additional \$325 billion worth of goods. Again, predictably, the Chinese retaliate with tariffs hiked from 10 per cent to 20-25 per cent on \$60 billion worth of US goods.

Here are three questions you should ask about what happens next: How long can the standoff last? How will it end? Why should India care?

To get a sense of how long the standoff might last, it is useful to keep in mind that other than Trump, neither party should really want to do this. Trump, buoyed by a strong US economy and blissful ignorance of elementary economics, claims that the Chinese will pay for all this. Even his — otherwise loyal — television economist, Larry Kudlow, who directs the National Economic Council, admits both sides will pay. Kudlow has been wrong on many things in the past; this time, for a change, he is right. Both are hurt by a trade war and ought to prefer a swift end. American soybean exports to China have plummeted, while the Chinese risk losing share among the US consumers and firms that voraciously use Chinese-made products and US consumers and firms pay higher prices when there are few alternatives to the Chinese import. The Chinese have fewer

products on which to levy retaliatory tariffs and would have to turn to other weapons in their arsenal if the standoff lasts too long — selling part of their enormous holdings of US treasuries or weakening its currency, making its exports more competitive despite the tariffs. Both sides desperately need off-ramps.

As a sign that there has been some cautious thinking, tacticians on both sides have left a window of opportunity for a deal — or either side coming to their respective senses. China’s tariff hike goes into effect on June 1, while the US has imposed the higher levies on goods shipped from China on May 10 only when they eventually arrive on American shores. Then, of course, both presidents, Trump and Xi, are due to meet at the G20 summit in late June. In other words, there are a few opportunities in the near future for a resolution.

For the standoff to end, both sides need to score a win; neither Trump nor Xi can emerge from behind closed doors looking like a loser. Here is one scenario for closure: Trump ticks the box that lets him say he has been tough on China, as he had promised. A period of extreme tweeting, high tariffs and declaration of victory which can be used as proof of toughness in campaign rallies can serve that purpose. His base has, thus far, not been too finicky about the facts; so why would this time be different? The Chinese should just give him room to let him do that. In the meantime, Xi has already declared himself president for life. This means he cannot afford to appear weak by making any substantive concessions that could hurt China’s growth, especially in an already slowing economy. Ironically, if Xi were to concede there would be even more reason for American companies to do business with and in China — this would mean even fewer jobs for American workers. Trump’s only real option is to let Xi get away with some minor or superficial adjustment in China’s trade or intellectual property practices.

Will Trump readily see this logic? Not necessarily, since he has been an ardent believer in tariffs and protectionism since the 1980s, when the Japanese were the bad guys preying on the US. Other than replacing the Japanese with the Chinese, his worldview has remained ossified. Time will, however, run out on him as the US elections pick up steam and the trade war begins to bite and his base com-

plaints that the jobs are not returning, soybeans are not selling and the economy is slowing. It will be easier for him to reach a deal now than in the thick of the election year.

It’s a bilateral spat, but others, such as India, are affected both positively and negatively. Theoretically, India ought to emerge as a beneficiary from a US-China trade war, since Indian exports could become more competitive. Shrimp exporters, for example, are reporting an opportunity to grow in the ready-to-fry, ready-to-eat and other value-added seafood products. How big are these benefits? Not much. There is relatively limited overlap between India’s primary exports to the US (diamonds, generic pharmaceuticals and machinery being the top three besides services) and China’s primary exports to the US (electrical and other machinery, furniture and toys and sports equipment). Even in the category of machinery, there is gigantic difference in scale; India’s machinery exports to the US last year were \$3.3 billion versus China’s \$152 billion in electrical machinery and \$117 billion in machinery. It is hard to see how China’s pain will result in a significant gain for Indian exporters.

There is a genuine concern that excess unsold inventory of Chinese exports will be dumped in India. A more significant concern for India is the global slowdown being predicted by the IMF, partly due to the US-China trade war. India’s exports have been suffering of late and a global slowdown will make the situation even worse. The crisis can have an impact on the Indian economy and jobs — and make the life of Indian exporters more difficult.

The Cold War was an escalation of bombs that were, thankfully, not deployed. This trade war is an escalation of bombast. Unfortunately, the bombast is also accompanied by genuinely value-destroying tariffs and protectionist policies. When the warring parties are the world’s two biggest, and entangled, economies, everyone gets hurt — even in countries such as India, supposedly sitting on the sidelines.

The writer is the Dean of Global Business at The Fletcher School at Tufts University, founding executive director of Fletcher’s Institute for Business in the Global Context and non-resident senior fellow of Brookings India

SHOOTING THE MACHINE

Whoever wins and loses today must know the EVM did not do it. It is futile — and dangerous — to target the rules of the game

THE OPPOSITION’S CLAMOUR on EVM tampering is not new. In some elections in the past, parties that lost have sought to talk up apprehensions about the manipulation of electronic voting machines by the victor. The first such prominent spectre was held up at the national level in 2010 by L K Advani — patriarch of the party that had lost the Lok Sabha polls in 2009 and is now, strenuously, ironically, trying to shout down the Opposition on EVMs. On different occasions, the Congress and the BSP have articulated their suspicions about EVMs. It can be nobody’s case that the EC or the poll process is above questions. In fact, the protocols of the poll monitor are currently being interrogated from within. And despite the layered security systems designed to insulate the EVM, aberrations can arguably creep into an electoral exercise of this size and complexity. Yet, the current chorus led by 22 parties, and apparently backed by a former President of India and a former Chief Election Commissioner, is troubling. Involving a larger number of political actors than before, and armed with nothing more substantial than suspicion, it seeks not just to flag specific concerns — for instance, parties demanded, and the EC rejected, that VVPAT verification should come before, not after, the counting of votes — but to question the integrity of the poll process.

Given that no evidence of serious electoral wrong-doing has been presented and every EVM bogey has been slain, the EC is going by what the Supreme Court ruled, the current questioning of EVMs, like the old questioning of EVMs, only points to the ungracious loser. Or in this case, suspected loser. The exit polls vary but they have all projected the NDA’s return to power. In that context, parties that fought the BJP, be it the Congress or regional parties, would appear to be taking preemptive steps to avoid confronting their own political failure. Whoever wins and loses today, however, parties must know the EVM did not do it. And that it is futile — and dangerous — to target the rules of the game.

India’s democracy is diverse and argumentative, but its sprawl is anchored by a shared faith in the credibility of the poll process. Even as everything must be done to make it error-free and more transparent, the bar for questioning its good faith and integrity must remain very high. If it gets a new lease of life, the BJP’s electoral dominance poses a challenge that must be countered politically. Its political opponents will need to summon a will to power to match the BJP’s. They will also need to craft the contours of an alternative politics, and to tell stories that engage the voter, speak to her hopes and aspirations. For the loser of Election 2019, there is no easy way out — no fall guy or machine.

ARUNACHAL OMEN

The murder of a legislator ahead of assembly poll results raises the spectre of renewed militancy in the region

THE MURDER OF 11 persons, including a National People’s Party MLA in the outgoing Arunachal Pradesh legislative assembly, his son and security guard, by suspected Naga militants on Tuesday is a challenge to the government’s efforts to end militancy in the Northeast. Tirong Aboh was on his way to Khonsa, the headquarters of Tirap district, when he was ambushed by militants suspected to be from the NSCN (I-M). Aboh, reportedly, had been speaking out against the NSCN (I-M), the Naga insurgent group engaged in peace talks with the Centre, for threatening his supporters during the recent election campaign. Whatever be the motive, and whoever be the culprit, the government should send out a strong message that it will not let anyone take the law in their hands.

The incident comes a month after the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) was partially lifted from Arunachal Pradesh, 32 years after the law was first introduced in the state. However, it continues to be in force in Tirap, which borders Assam and Myanmar. Militant groups, among them various NSCN factions and the ULFA, have a presence in Tirap district because of its terrain and proximity to the international border. These have come under pressure after the Myanmar military began to target their camps, forcing them to relocate to India and even surrender to the armed forces. Naga civil society groups in India have raised the concern that the military action in Myanmar is no longer limited to militant groups but extended to the indigenous Naga population as well. The Naga insurgency has a transnational imagination and conceives of Naga populations outside Nagaland, including in Myanmar, as part of the Naga homeland of Nagalim or Greater Nagaland. Groups like the NSCN claim to speak for all Nagas, a claim fiercely contested by dominant ethnicities in Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The demand for Nagalim, which will need a redrawing of the existing state boundaries, is a major stumbling block as the Centre and the NSCN (I-M) work towards a final peace accord.

The new Arunachal Pradesh government — the assembly election results will be out today — should see Tuesday’s incident as a warning: It needs to step up the vigil against militancy. It calls for a co-ordinated effort involving the various state administrations, armed forces and the Centre. A clean and effective administration can help ensure that militancy has no ground to stand on.

AFTER THE GAME

The final season of ‘Game of Thrones’ has fans fuming. Perhaps they are being unkind

THE PROBLEM most addicts face — the biggest roadblock to their recovery — is admitting they have a problem in the first place. Usually, the debilitating reality of dependence hits home only when you “hit bottom”, after time, money and human interaction have all suffered as a result of your obsession. The millions around the world — addicts masquerading as “fans” — who watched with anticipation the eight-year culmination of *Game of Thrones* on Monday, must thank the show’s creators for facilitating their recovery. Such was the bottom that the world’s most popular TV show achieved in its final season that many are considering giving up visual entertainment all together.

David Benioff and D B Weiss, the show’s creators, have been “off-book” for the last couple of years — GOT has outpaced its source material, the series of novels by George R R Martin. In that time, the TV show which thrived on inverting the themes of traditional fantasy stories by killing of heroes and introducing mundane adult themes such as incest, excrement and the gore that accompanies violence, seemed to slip into typical storytelling clichés and the most insipid crutch of all, VFX. But even the biggest small-screen budget in history seems unable to compensate for the lack of the most basic, and ineffable, of skills — story-telling.

But perhaps fans, aware that they have had their last “hit” of dragons and direwolves, are being too unkind to Benioff and Weiss. After all, time was that an over-the-top battle scene would be more than enough to give them their fix. And maybe part of the reason that GOT’s final season does not shock and awe is because the real-life games of thrones, from India, to the US, from Brexit to Ukraine, holds far more viciousness, comedy, high-mindedness and tragedy than a mere TV show can provide.

THE EVM EXCUSE

Bogey of EVM switching is an outrageous attempt to deny public opinion



AKHILESH MISHRA

SCOTT SPENCER COULD well have had the EVM bogey raised by the Congress party and its co-travelers in mind when he said “the trouble with excuses is that they become inevitably difficult to believe after they’ve been used a couple of times”.

It is not difficult to see why the current manufactured controversy on EVM reliability has been met with universal derision, except among members of the Khan Market gang. In the age of social media and screenshots, the public memory has been enhanced. They remember that Rahul Gandhi and his compatriots had raised a similar din just a few months ago and then happily accepted the results when it favoured them. The public remembers that in fact the originator of EVM bogey posted on February 4, 2015, that he suspected massive EVM tampering in Delhi and proceeded to accept the verdict a week later.

The information disseminated by the Election Commission has convinced most sane people that hacking EVMs is not possible, since they are stand-alone machines with no networking with the external world. This is why the din this time is not on EVM rigging or manipulation, but EVM replacement. EC procedures make it impossible for anyone to replace even one EVM. But even if we consider the outrageous theory plausible, consider what it entails: Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal,

Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Telangana, Punjab, Karnataka, Odisha and Tamil Nadu all have non-BJP governments. Some states have never had a BJP government. Even in states where BJP is currently in office, like Uttar Pradesh, regional parties have networks at all levels.

From the people who pack and transport the EVMs, to those who man the CCTV cameras in strong rooms to those who provide the outer security ring, all are drawn from the local state machinery. If the EVM replacement theory were true, it would mean the BJP is orchestrating a nationwide conspiracy involving millions of people who are all keeping the secret. Even the scriptwriters of *Game of Thrones* would envy such a perfect plot.

If the Opposition had been more honest in accepting public opinion, it would perhaps not have been reduced to trying to discredit India’s electoral democracy. Every survey after the 2014 elections has held that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has not just maintained his popularity but actually increased it in many places, even over his party. In many states, the BJP has been voted to power without a chief ministerial candidate, purely on the basis of votes for Modi. Would it not be logical, then, that when Modi himself is on the line, his popularity would translate into votes?

As the recent CSDS-Lokniti pre-poll sur-

vey notes, Modi’s popularity has increased substantially, among both BJP as well as non-BJP voters, as compared to 2014. In fact, when CSDS-Lokniti surveyors asked voters, in a close-ended question, what they had kept in mind while voting (the party or the candidate), around 17 per cent chose neither option and instead said that what had mattered to them the most was the prime ministerial candidate (Modi). The same survey notes that the difference between the preference for Modi and his nearest rival is as high as 20 per cent.

In the last five years, there has been no finding in any pre-poll survey, reporting from the ground, anecdotal evidence, social media trends, participation in political rallies and in any of the just-released exit polls which would suggest that there was any disenchantment with the Modi-led BJP. None of these involved the use of EVMs. The result of the final exam, which will come on May 23, through EVMs, have been preceded by five years of a series of rigorous multi-pronged tests, each of which Modi has passed with flying colours. So, if the EVMs only confirm what every other indicator has been pointing at — that Modi is the defining Indian political phenomenon of this century — will it be a surprise?

The writer is CEO, Bluekraft Digital Foundation and former director (content), MyGov

MAY 23, 1979, FORTY YEARS AGO

POLICE PROTEST

AS THE POLICEMEN’S agitation spread like wildfire in Madhya Pradesh, sources close to the agitators told Express News Service that they may resort to “direct action” by the beginning of next month if their demands for better working conditions and pay-scales were not conceded by then. The policemen were reportedly continuing their secret discussions all over the state. Messengers are going to different places to spread the word and to coordinate the voices of discontent. Leaders are emerging from within the policemen and by the end of this month, they hope to have elected associations at most of the district headquarters. Bhopal and Indore policemen

would reportedly elect their leaders respectively on May 26 and 28.

CPI INFILTRATION

FOLLOWING CONFESSIONS BY a few policemen in Punjab that they were CPI card holders, the Centre is trying to assess the extent of communist “infiltration” into the police force throughout the country. The fact that the state intelligence departments — as recently happened in Punjab — has worried Delhi the most. The politicisation of police forces is a cause for concern. The impression has grown that political parties in power in different states have over the past few years have “recruited” their own men in the police force. Perhaps some of these political

parties nourish the hope of “trouble from within” at an appropriate time.

PRICE RISE

THE PROBLEM OF spiralling prices proved rather intractable for the Union cabinet which debated the issue for 90 minutes on May 22. At the end of the meeting, which discussed two papers by the Union Finance Ministry and the Planning Commission, no decision was forthcoming. The Planning Commission was asked to work out a rational price structure for kerosene, high-speed diesel oil and petrol, as the increase in the prices of these commodities was considered to have contributed significantly to price rise in general.



13 THE IDEAS PAGE

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

Chinese people do not know whether we should call US approaches hegemonic politics or profiteering politics. But in short, they are crooked means. The threat of tariffs will not work.” —GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA

The message, from the road

This was a general election where the BJP campaign exuded energy, the opinions of women mattered, and the Congress seemed to come up short in answering the tough questions



ANANT GOENKA

IT COSTS Rs 20 to enter Patna's three-year-old Eco Park which is divided into two distinct areas: One for families and children to play on swings, trampolines, slides and rope ladders, and another, where the lights don't work. Here, young couples embrace on benches or behind bushes in the park's darkest corners.

I retreated to the family area to get a sense of how the Patna Sahib constituency was likely to vote. In this part of the country, people seem especially happy to strike up a political conversation. And whether it's at the park, in rural Bihar, or the conversations I had with lawyers inside the illegal chambers — neatly constructed underneath the flyover, a few yards away from the Patna High court — most suggest a Ravi Shankar Prasad victory.

But you don't need such conversations to tell you that Patna Sahib — an 80 per cent urban constituency spread over 40 km — is a safe seat for the BJP. You just need to compare the energy in Ravi Shankar Prasad's campaign to that of the Congress party's candidate Shatrughan Sinha.

The Indian Express's Patna correspondent Santosh Singh describes Sinha best: A man who is confusing selfie requests for votes. The actor left the BJP in a sulk, only a few months ago, having won the past two terms from Patna Sahib on a BJP ticket.

Lok Sabha debutant Ravi Shankar Prasad — who was born to a well-known lawyer in Patna and is currently the country's law and IT minister — isn't taking any chances. He's visiting almost every village that his team asks him to, holding jan sabhas for as few as 100 people, stopping for bathhaks at every cluster of 25-40 people.

Prasad is a seasoned orator: Every speech of his connects. At the first village we stopped, he asks people, How many are on Facebook and WhatsApp? Around half of them raise their hands. "Shabhash," he says, proceeding to credit his government for empowering them with data in the digital age. He mentions various national schemes, the work of the BJP's alliance partner, Nitish Kumar, with respect to schools, roads and power, and also that of Ram Vilas Paswan to subtly display the formidable caste arithmetic his alliance offers.

But one wonders why every speech of his carries a mention of national security: Asking people to vote in the name of soldiers. "Is chunavka mudda hai — kya aapko shahidon ki shahadat ka saboot chahiye, ya Bharat Mata ke suput chahiye? Yeh aapko tay karna hai. (Do you want to vote for those who ask our armed forces for proof of their sacrifice, or do you want to vote for the brave sons of Bharat? This is the decision you have to make)".

Based on the uniformity of the audience's response across all his meetings, this query seems to draw the biggest applause.

And that frightens me. What our services need is an upgrade across the board — men, women and material (including fighter aircraft). What they do not need is the message that military action can be used by the political establishment to reap an electoral harvest.



MY TRAVELS ACROSS THE COUNTRY, during this election, have reinforced one trend that I had begun to ponder on well before the elec-



CR Sasikumar

tion process started: This will be India's first election where women have their say. Issues such as Sabarimala, triple talaq, Me Too, demonetisation, Ujjwala and toilets, have activated political opinions of women who — up until now — generally voted in line with their family preferences.

Consider Sabarimala — an issue that 15 years ago would have been confined to the region, today elicits impassioned opinions from women across the country. Our Marathi daily's website — loksatta.com — had thousands of comments from women on Sabarimala. I won't hazard a guess on their politics but that they are speaking their mind will change the perception that families (or even small towns, for that matter) vote as a unit.

So the political activation of women in this election could throw long-held assumptions out the window: That Muslim and Yadav women would vote for the RJD, or that Brahmin women in Eastern UP would vote for the BJP. Given the unsurprising hesitation of any voter (even more so, one voting differently from her family) to publicly divulge her politics, I wonder if our pollsters have been able to capture this.



IRRESPECTIVE OF THE Congress's tally this evening, I don't think any number can absolve the party of the pressing need for a long hard look in the mirror.

And for various reasons. First: Shockingly little has changed in the Congress that delivered 44 seats in 2014 and the Congress that went into this election.

The party has had a confused, disorganised campaign and has failed on multiple opportunities to pick fights with the BJP. Rafale was a rare (and surprising) exception to an otherwise poor communication effort that stalled before it could really take off.

Second: Even at 44 seats, the Congress is the second largest political party by popular vote. In 2014, the Congress brand still pulled 10.7 crore of the 55 crore votes across the country. These are people who have an affinity for a legacy, and for a national brand that's taken decades to build.

It's a legacy that deserves a leadership that can script a single, clear message. And that message has to be more powerful than "Defeat the incumbent".

Because, third: With the current management, money bags in Mumbai and Delhi don't want (or are, maybe, even too scared) to fund the Congress party. It forces the broke party to put up lacklustre candidates whose most attractive qualification is the ability to fund their own campaigns.

Like the Congress candidate from Indore

Shockingly little has changed in the Congress that delivered 44 seats in 2014 and the Congress that went into this election. Even if we hypothetically consider the most generous numbers given to Congress - MyNeta's 130 for UPA — that should not give the party a license to continue to maintain status quo. The party has had a confused, disorganised campaign and has failed on multiple opportunities to pick fights with the BJP. Rafale was a rare (and surprising) exception to an otherwise poor communication effort that stalled before it could really take-off.

The writer is executive director, The Indian Express Group

Short on science

Election manifestos have pushed matters of scientific research and policy to the margins



M S SANTHANAM

ELECTION MANIFESTOS HAVE a short shelf-life in public memory. Except for the big-ticket announcements such as NYAY or doubling farmers' income, political parties are rarely held accountable for the other, often significant, commitments they make in their manifestos. This selective accountability encourages breaching the election promises with impunity, especially in areas such as science and technology (S&T) that remain outside the media limelight. If manifestos ever grapple with issues that have implications beyond the election cycle, it is in these critical areas that determine the nation's long-term competitiveness. As a marker of India's technical prowess, S&T issues have been a part of manifestos since many decades, though with an unenviable track record of delivery on promises.

For election manifestos, science is a tool for societal transformation. Few recognise the intrinsic value of the worldview it offers. Even as far back as the 1945-46 elections, the Indian National Congress's manifesto had stated that "scientific research is a basic and essential activity of the state and should be organised and encouraged on the widest scale". The Jana Sangh, the ideological precursor of the BJP, declared in its 1951 general election manifesto that their "policy will aim at the provision of facilities for the highest scientific education and research". Post-independence, such platitudes gave way to specific policy commitments.

The Congress manifesto (1967) focussed on brain-drain and service conditions, recurrent issues that have figured in all the manifestos in subsequent decades. It called for improving the "conditions of work and service as to attract our best men from whichever part of the world they may be working in now... no foreign aid can replace the loss of skills as a result of the drain of some of our ablest students to other countries". In the first few decades after Independence, self-reliance was another popular manifesto theme across the party lines. In 1977, the Janata Party and CPI manifestos emphasised self-reliance through the application of S&T, while the latter also committed to provisioning more research funds.

Even a cursory analysis reveals a huge gap between these promises and actual delivery. After the 1960s, migration of scientists to the Western countries increased. The Economic Survey (2018) estimates that 9,50,000 India-born scientists and engineers work in the US alone, up by 50 per cent since 2003. This is partly related to the working conditions that have not kept pace with the changing times. Acknowledging this issue, the then prime minister, Manmohan Singh, addressing the Indian Science Congress in 2010, spoke of the need to "liberate Indian science from the shackles and deadweight of

bureaucratism and in-house favouritism". From 2004 onwards, both the BJP and Congress had repeatedly assured more autonomy and less procedural hurdles for the scientific institutions, with little follow-up action. Self-reliance, the dominant development idiom in the last century, has ceased to be a favoured option since the economic reforms of 1991. Over the years, most of the manifestos, with the exception of CPM in 2014, have replaced self-reliance with collaboration and transfer of technology to reap quicker benefits.

By far the most elusive promise is for enhancing the budgetary support for research to 2 per cent of GDP to help maintain India's competitive edge. For decades, India's research spending had stagnated at about 0.7 per cent while the global norm is about 2-3 per cent of GDP. Since the 1990s, election manifestos of all the major national parties have responded positively with varying levels of commitments. Outside of the election arena, Atal Bihari Vajpayee and later Manmohan Singh led governments supported this cause, with a rider that the private sector must contribute in equal measure. This election is witnessing a rerun of this old classic: The Congress has renewed this pledge again, while the BJP remains non-committal.

In a rare consensus across the political spectrum, all the manifestos in the last 10 years have supported open-source standards and software to run IT hardware. There are many positives to open-source software, and one of the attractive features is that it comes free of cost. It can potentially save costs associated with software procurement. Both the BJP and CPM have supported it since 2009, while the Congress has joined the bandwagon this year. In 2015, the government adopted a policy framework favouring open-source software. It is a partial success story. In the future, manifestos must focus on its implementation.

In the 2019 manifestos, the yesteryear issues of self-reliance, brain drain and autonomy, even if not entirely resolved, have faded out in favour of a slew of futuristic promises, ranging from harnessing the power of quantum technologies (by the BJP) to setting up a think tank to evaluate medium-to-long term strategic future opportunities and risks (the Congress). In 2014, the BJP committed to establishing an institute for big data and analytics. Five years later, this remains unfulfilled, but found a mention in the BJP and Congress manifestos. Had scientists been consulted, manifestos would have also reflected one of their existential concerns: more budgetary support and timely release of funds for all the research projects and students.

As we wait for the results of an acrimonious election, even the significant manifesto announcements seem like a distant memory crowded out by emotive issues and vitriolic speeches. The non-contentious issues related to science and technology are struggling to find a foothold in this narrative. These need debating space, scrutiny and accountability as well.

The author is a professor of physics at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Pune

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

CONGRESS NEEDED

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Why Congress can't' (IE, May 22). The Congress has the wherewithal to revive itself. Not too long ago, it was the single-largest party in India. Though diminished, it has a solid support base. The Modi-led BJP openly calls for a "Congress-Mukt Bharat". But the performance of the Narendra Modi government has also been poor. That is why we need the Congress.

Tapamoy Ghosh, Kolkata

IT SHOULDN'T DIE

THIS REFERS TO the article 'Dear Yogendra, I disagree' (IE May 22). Yogendra Yadav's comments may have come as a surprise but they are just a reiteration of Amit Shah's "Congress Mukht" rhetoric. In a democracy the left, right and centre must co-exist. They may switch places in terms of political power but wanting the "death" of a party comes from a lethargic mindset.

Abhinaba Maitra, Kolkata

WRONG PRECEDENT

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'A one-sided justice' (IE, May 22). Justice Madan B Lokur's argument on the Indira Jaising precedent not being relevant in the case related to the allegations against Justice Ranjan Gogoi deserves contemplation. The non-furnishing of a copy of the internal committee report to the complainant points to a serious shortcoming in the justice delivery system, since the matter is related to the apex court. This in-house procedure has set a

LETTER OF THE WEEK AWARD

To encourage quality reader intervention, The Indian Express offers the Letter of the Week award. The letter adjudged the best for the week is published every Saturday. Letters may be e-mailed to editpage@expressindia.com or sent to The Indian Express, B-1/B, Sector 10, Noida-UP 201301. Letter writers should mention their postal address and phone number.

THE WINNER RECEIVES SELECT EXPRESS PUBLICATIONS

wrong precedent for situations where CJI is the prime accused.

Ankita Srivastava, Delhi

WIDEN THE DEBATE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'No laughing matter' (IE, May 22). The editorial rightly argues there is a need to strike down the "sedition" and "defamation" laws. But, they are not just laws that impose restrictions on the freedom of expression of the citizen. There are many others like "Parliamentary Privileges" enjoyed by the MPs and MLAs.

Suchak Patel, Ahmedabad

Five years of missteps

The government has failed the economy, farmers and mainstreamed corruption



ABHISHEK SINGHVI AND MUHAMMAD KHAN

WITH A RESOUNDING mandate, historically-low oil prices and unprecedented average growth rates in the 2004-2014 period, the Narendra Modi government had no excuses for performing poorly. Yet, it chose to spend its five years inventing them. It believed propaganda was a substitute for governance. This was compounded by furthering a politics that pandered to the worst prejudices. The Modi government is certain to be remembered for missteps in eight areas:

First, with devastating missteps like demonetisation and the hurried roll-out of a broken GST, the government proved ill-equipped to make sound economic decisions. Unemployment figures reached a 40-year high a few months ago. Instead of course correction, the methodology for calculating GDP was rewritten and employment figures suppressed, while critics were denounced as anti-nationals. Never before have international economists (including the IMF chief) questioned the credibility of India's data. The index of industrial production stands at a negative and car sales, a reliable indicator of rising incomes, stagnate at an eight-year low.

Second, the defiant mainstreaming of corruption. The prime minister's office allegedly, interceded in the Rafale deal, sacrificing sev-

eral key safeguards (as attested to by the CAG). A private party, who lacked any qualifications, was included as an offset partner. The misleading contents of the sealed envelopes in the Supreme Court (SC) betrayed a government that has much to hide. High-value defaulters fled the country to evade the law.

Third, the isolation of farmers. The BJP manifesto of 2014 promised to implement the M S Swaminathan committee's recommendations on MSP. An affidavit contrary to that was filed in 2015 in the SC; this was followed by a 55-month silence. The last budget announced a face-saving but meaningless improvement in the MSP. Farmer suicides rose rapidly and protests by people from all over the country took place even in the government's own backyard, the Jantar Mantar. Yet, the government tried repeatedly to pass a draconian and dishonest land acquisition law.

Fourth, no institution survived from a run in with the Modi government. The CBI crisis, created entirely by the government playing favourites, could not be resolved amicably, even by the apex court. The Election Commission made history by giving clean chits to multiple and egregious violations by the PM and BJP president, while taking prompt action against others accused of iden-

tical charges. Government bodies were, reportedly, staffed with men and women whose highest qualification was an endorsement from the RSS. The RBI was bypassed on crucial decisions and the IT, ED and the CBI became instruments of vengeance against those who did not chant, "tussi great ho".

Fifth, large sections of the media are embarrassingly reluctant to question the PM. Some channels compete to prove their loyalty by asking tepid questions that embarrass the viewer. Journalists seeking hard answers are subject to vile trolling and abuse.

Sixth, hate. On social media, several vituperative serial abusers proudly declare themselves "blessed" to be followed by the PM. The PM and the BJP president rarely condemn, regret, recriminate, suspend or punish. The PM himself demonises an entire constituency as one where the majority is in a minority. The BJP president says that a procession in the streets of that constituency is indistinguishable qua India or Pakistan, forgetting that all inhabitants are Indian citizens.

Seventh, Uri, Pathankot, Pampore, Nagrota and Pulwama marked some of the worst security lapses the country has seen. Unprecedentedly, the PM invited a Pakistani delegation to India to see the results of their

dastardly acts. There was a 72 per cent increase in soldiers martyred in the first three years of the BJP government. The last five years saw the most inept handling of Kashmir.

Eighth, the reduction of foreign policy to an anonymous foreign minister and personal aggrandisement of the PM. Countries like Nepal and Maldives actively engaged with China. Sri Lanka's engagement with China has increased exponentially. A foreign policy has to be more than just an advertising campaign to create a personality cult.

The PM's obsession with the Gandhi family is the sign of a leader without a vision. Repeated co-option of the achievements of the armed forces (the first Indian leader in 70 years to do so) demonstrates the trait of dictators who confuse strength for governance. It also reflects a disconnect from the problems of those he was elected to govern. References to minorities and religion highlight a blatant disregard for law and its consequences.

A government with a large majority can jeopardise its first term by malice or ineptitude. In PM Modi's case, it is a lot of both.

Singhvi is a MP and national spokesperson, Congress. Khan is an advocate at the Supreme Court



Disclosing dissent

People are entitled to know whether or not the poll panel's key decisions are unanimous

The rejection of the demand of one of the Election Commissioners that dissenting opinions be recorded in the orders passed by the three-member Election Commission on complaints of violations of the Model Code of Conduct may be technically and legally right. However, there was indeed a strong case for acceding to the demand of Ashok Lavasa at least in regard to complaints against high functionaries such as Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The EC has been rightly widely criticised for giving a series of 'clean chits' to the PM, despite some questionable remarks that appeared to solicit votes in the name of the armed forces. Added to the widespread unease was the unexplained delay of several weeks in disposing of complaints against Mr. Modi. It is in this context that Mr. Lavasa's dissenting opinion may have been relevant enough to merit inclusion in the EC's orders. After all, the public is aware of the allegedly offending actions and remarks, and is entitled to be informed if the decision was not unanimous. In this hotly contested election, one in which the level of discourse was abysmally low, the onus on the poll panel to maintain a level-playing field and enforce the election code was quite high. Making public a dissent in the final order would have deepened the popular understanding of the issues in play.

The law requires the multi-member EC to transact business unanimously as far as possible – and where there is a difference of opinion, by majority. Therefore, there is nothing wrong if decisions are made by a 2:1 ratio. The apparent justification for excluding any dissent from the final order, but merely recording it in the file, is that the practice of including dissent is limited to quasi-judicial matters such as allotment of symbols. Should recording of a dissenting opinion be based on such a distinction? A more appropriate distinction would be between decisions that require reasoning – absolving the Prime Minister of an election code violation surely ought to be one – and administrative matters that need to be resolved with dispatch. If members have specific reasons for deciding for or against a particular course of action, there would surely be no harm in spelling out their respective positions. It would be unfortunate indeed if Mr. Lavasa stays away from meetings concerning violations of the Model Code of Conduct. However, as he has taken up the issue through as many as three letters, it is reasonable to infer that there is some basis for his grievance. At a time when the institution's reputation is being undermined by sustained criticism, the EC should not shy away from making public any difference of opinion within. It would be unfortunate if the majority in the EC were to be afraid of any public reaction that may result from disclosure of a split opinion.

Eye in the sky

RISAT-2B will enhance India's monitoring capabilities for civil and military purposes

With the successful pre-dawn launch of RISAT-2B satellite on May 22, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has added another feather to its cap. The satellite will enhance India's capability in crop monitoring during the monsoon season, forestry mapping for forest fires and deforestation, and flood mapping as part of the national disaster management programme. Given that overcast skies are a constant during the monsoon season and during times of flood, the ability to penetrate the cloud cover is essential. While optical remote sensing that relies on visible light for imaging gets obstructed by clouds, RISAT-2B will not. Much like the RISAT-1 satellite that was launched by ISRO in April 2012, RISAT-2B will also use microwave radiation. Unlike visible light, microwaves have longer wavelength and so will not be susceptible to atmospheric scattering. Microwave radiation can thus easily pass through the cloud cover, haze and dust, and image the ground. Hence, RISAT-2B satellite will be able to image under almost all weather and environmental conditions. Since it does not rely on visible light for imaging, it will be able to image the ground during both day and night. The satellite does not have passive microwave sensors that detect the radiation naturally emitted by the atmosphere or reflected by objects on the ground. Instead, RISAT-2B will be transmitting hundreds of microwave pulses each second towards the ground and receiving the signals reflected by the objects using radar. The moisture and texture of the object will determine the strength of the microwave signal that gets reflected. While the strength of the reflected signal will help determine different targets, the time between the transmitted and reflected signals will help determine the distance to the object.

The RISAT-2B satellite uses X-band synthetic aperture radar for the first time; the synthetic aperture radar was developed indigenously. Unlike the C-band that was used by RISAT-1, the shorter wavelength of the X-band allows for higher resolution imagery for target identification and discrimination. Since it has high resolution, the satellite will be able to detect objects with dimensions of as little as a metre. This capacity to study small objects and also movement could be useful for surveillance. As K. Sivan, ISRO Chairman and Secretary, Department of Space, had said last month, the satellite could be used for civil and strategic purposes. RISAT-2B will have an inclined orbit of 37 degrees, which will allow more frequent observations over the Indian sub-continent. With ISRO planning to launch four more such radar imaging satellites in a year, its ability to monitor crops and floods as well as engage in military surveillance will be greatly enhanced.

The search for a 'majority'

How the BJP's Hindutva demographic is founded upon splitting and depoliticising hereditary identities



FAISAL DEVIJI

Since elections were grudgingly introduced to India under British rule, they have put into question the existence of a nation. The British denied the reality of such a nation by pointing to India's rivalrous diversities of caste, creed and culture, and introduced separate electorates for religious groups. Indian politics is still informed by an anxiety to define and maintain a national identity. The partition of India in 1947, to create a Muslim homeland in Pakistan, gave substance to this anxiety but was also meant to resolve it. Secessionist movements or Maoist insurgencies have subsequently questioned though never threatened India's integrity.

Beyond diversity

These regional, religious or ideological threats are suspected of receiving the support of 'foreign hands', from Britain, America and Russia in the past to Pakistan and China today. Yet they are side-shows to the problem of India's diversity: its lack of a European-style national majority defined by language, race, culture or religion. Not only does every social category in this vast country break down into ever smaller units, but the expansion of democracy ensures that each can set itself up as a political identity of its own.

This fragmentation peaked during the country's economic liberalisation in the 1990s. An invigorated private sector and the proliferation of new political identities along caste and regional lines made Hindutva the only credible basis for a national majority. The state-defined nationalism of the past, which added up India's diver-

sities in a cultural hierarchy, crumbled in this new market of politics. But unlike Islam in Pakistan, there is nothing theological about Hindu nationalism. It is a secular movement for which religious belief, however genuinely held, possesses political meaning only as the majority's culture.

A national future

Novel about the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is its attempt to create not a political majority in the elections but a national one. This conflation allows it to turn the vote into a referendum about nationality. In the past, majorities were achieved arithmetically, by bringing together social groups not simply on an ideological platform, but by promising each some entitlement or share in power. The party able to attract more and larger groups formed the government. In 2014, however, the BJP shifted away from such electoral arithmetic, and achieved its national majority by a process of polarisation.

This entailed splitting existing groups not only from each other but also internally. In Uttar Pradesh, the BJP was able to lure less entitled lower castes from more entitled ones to place them under the leadership of upper castes. By ignoring the State's Muslim population, it was also able to collect Hindu votes in the name of Hindutva rather than caste. Instead of achieving its majority by consolidation, the BJP did so by fragmentation, appealing not to the largest number of voters but an effective and disaggregated core. Its national majority depends upon the dismantling of inherited constituencies.

Yet this national majority is not simply engineered by party strategy, illustrating rather the political disintegration of social groups in urban India. Low caste and Muslim voters, who in the countryside might never support the BJP, can do so when they migrate to towns



REUTERS

and cities. This is not due to any privilege or protection they receive from the party, but perhaps because the national majority it represents is increasingly based on social fractions rather than units, on individuals rather than groups. This makes the BJP India's most modern party, its fractions representing the future, while the Opposition's whole numbers belong to the past.

But the past isn't dead in India, and the future hasn't yet come to pass, so there is no guarantee that Hindutva will win the day. In 2004 the BJP was turfed after its first full term in office by 'traditional' and often rural voters left behind by the new realities of urban India. But any repetition of this act is subject to the law of diminishing returns, given the country's rapid urbanisation and the social change it produces. The BJP thus turns out to be less conservative than the Congress, and can no longer be described as an upper-caste party dedicated to perpetuating tradition.

Because it depends upon traditional groupings based on caste and creed, the Congress is marked by a culture of nepotism. While not immune to such corruption, the BJP's more meritocratic and ideological style indicates a break with this past. That it can only achieve its majority by fragmenting and depoliticising social groups tells us how revolutionary the party is. It absconds with the supporters of its own caste and re-

gional allies. Even middle and upper-class families that once voted for a single party have been split by the BJP, and thus rendered politically impotent as collective agents.

Although the BJP hasn't fragmented all India's social groupings, it has revolutionised the meaning of the majority there. The minority, too, has therefore ceased to be a politically transient form and come to represent an 'anti-national' force in BJP rhetoric. This means that the Opposition can now be identified with the two most important exemplars of treachery in nationalist narratives: Muslims and Maoists. While centrist parties like the Congress are therefore seen as favouring Muslims, leftist ones are understood as supporting a Maoist insurgency to divide the country.

Retiring minorities

Apart from their disparities of size, constitution and outlook, the most striking difference between Muslims and Maoists is that the latter are political actors, while the former appear to lack politics. As the country's largest minority, Muslims represent not only themselves but every group that can be called one. Their depoliticisation thus heralds that of all India's hereditary groupings. Muslims stand in for all that is traditional about India, from the tendency of castes and creeds to vote collectively in return for political favours (called 'appeasement' in the lexicon of Hindutva) to non-modern ways of life.

The fact that Muslims are no more likely to sustain 'backward' practices than anyone else is irrelevant, the point being to delegitimise the political identity of all traditional groups. Apart from the insurgency in Kashmir, however, and the existence of small parties in one or two regions, Muslims have no political presence in India and are under-represented in Parliament, the civil service and the

armed forces.

Muslims have become models of political quiescence under the BJP, making a living largely as petty traders, artisans and labourers in the private sector that opened up with India's economic liberalisation. They no longer seem capable of protesting against any grievance, which these days includes scattered episodes of mob lynching over accusations of eating beef or eloping with Hindu women in acts of 'love jihad'. This depoliticisation may be due to their remaking as economic subjects outside the state as much to their abjection.

If economic liberalisation and the market it created allowed Hindutva to achieve power, it led Muslims to opt out of politics, no longer a 'vote bank' for any party. But upper castes have also abandoned public life for the private sector. Politics has increasingly become the preserve of the numerically dominant Other Backward Classes (OBCs), with upper castes funding and influencing political parties from outside. Muslims are unable to do this and have exited the system as a casualty of India's democratisation.

Characteristic tension

The BJP's majority is founded upon splitting and depoliticising hereditary identities. While these groups continue to exist as social entities, their members are recruited to the BJP's strongly individualistic and anti-caste ethos, with Muslims and other minorities representing the backwardness of traditional loyalties. As long as inherited social structures exist, Hindutva's national majority and its ideal of modernity remain incomplete. Yet in a tension that marks the politics of Hindutva, these groups are still required to win elections even as they are depoliticised in the process.

Faisal Devji is Professor of Indian History at the University of Oxford

Looking for secular alternatives

If the non-BJP parties don't coordinate, the Muslim community's struggle for fair representation will continue



SHAIKH MUJIBUR REHMAN

According to a survey by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, many Muslims voted for Narendra Modi in the 2014 election, particularly in Gujarat, U.P. and Karnataka. They believed in the party's slogan, 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas'. However, it did not take long for them to realise that the party had no intention of following this slogan. Mr. Modi's polarising campaign this time unmasked the carefully packaged aggressive majoritarianism that was sold as 'Sabka Vikas' in 2014. Lynching of people on the suspicion of storing beef and a ban on cow slaughter, among other things, generated outrage among Muslims against the BJP, an anger far greater than what we saw after the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992.

Split votes

Given this anger, it was quite clear who the community would vote against in the 2019 general election. However, Muslims did face a dilemma over which party to vote

for, especially in constituencies where there were three-cornered contests. In Uttar Pradesh and Delhi, for instance, Muslims realised that merely voting against the BJP would not help as their votes would get split between the Congress and the Samajwadi Party (SP)-Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) combine (in U.P.) and the Congress and the Aam Aadmi Party (in Delhi). The anxiety the community faced was that their votes would get split and they would not be represented in Parliament, even as the BJP juggernaut rolled on.

The widespread perception is that Muslims vote en bloc. Till 2004, nearly all political parties believed that the most effective way to secure Muslim votes was to extract a fatwa from Shahi Imam of Jama Masjid in Delhi. Even non-Congress Prime Ministers such as V.P. Singh and Deve Gowda sent emissaries to the Imam to secure fatwas. Maulana Syed Abdullah Bukhari emerged as a Muslim mass leader owing to his fierce opposition to Sanjay Gandhi's notorious sterilisation programme during the Emergency. Since then, the Shahi Imam's fatwa was seen as the only way of securing the Muslim vote. Fortunately this backfired in 2004. Imam Sayed Ahmed Bukhari, who succeeded Syed Abdullah Bukhari after his death in 2000, urged Muslim voters not to



TABASSUM HASAN - PTI

see themselves as slaves of secularists, and passed a fatwa to vote for the Atal Bihari Vajpayee-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA). The Muslim community chose to ignore it and the NDA was defeated, but the practice of issuing fatwas continues, though it is noteworthy that there were no fatwas this time.

Since 1977, Muslims have been looking for various non-Congress secular alternatives. Some regional parties in U.P., West Bengal, Bihar and Andhra Pradesh have been big beneficiaries of this shift of loyalty of Muslim voters from the Congress ever since. The Congress's effort to woo them back has had mixed results. For instance, 2009 saw the return of Muslim voters for the Congress, but in 2014, the BJP increased its Muslim vote share. While Muslims have been looking for secular alternatives to the Congress for long, it was only after the 2014 Lok Sabha election, when split votes ensured

that Muslim representation in the 16th Lok Sabha hit an all-time low, that Muslims really began to worry about their votes getting split among parties.

Some argue that the Modi regime's response to the triple talaq issue has created a pro-Modi constituency among Muslim women. Perhaps Muslim women have some appreciation for the proactive response of the Modi regime. However, it would be an insult to the common sense of Muslim women to presume that they fail to see how little they would gain from the contentious Bill in the larger context of the Hindutva-inspired aggression over the community which is increasingly subjugating its men, women and children into statelessness.

Flawed idea of unity

In 2014, there were 54 Muslim candidates in U.P. and not one got elected. Seventeen of them came second in their constituencies. Only in the Kairana bypoll in 2018 did Tabassum Hasan of the Rashtriya Lok Dal (as a joint Opposition candidate) enter Parliament. At present, there are 20 Muslim candidates, but owing to the SP-BSP alliance, there is a strong possibility of more Muslims getting elected to the 17th Lok Sabha from U.P. This time, the Opposition parties are more united than they were in

2014, but this is not enough to arrest the BJP's rise. A fair chance for an overall increase of Muslim presence in Parliament exists compared to 2014 even though this election has been India's most polarising election along religious lines so far. The BJP has not fielded any Muslim in U.P., as was the case in 2014.

The voting behaviour of Muslims, like the voting behaviour of Hindus and other communities, cannot be attributed to one cause. While appeals or threats might remain party strategies (BSP chief Mayawati appealed to Muslim voters to vote against the Congress, and Union Minister Maneka Gandhi warned Muslims that she would have second thoughts about helping them if she wins from the Sultanpur seat without the community's help), for Muslims to maximise the utility of their votes they need to probe the veil of darkness that Opposition parties often cast over them owing to the flawed idea about the community's sense of unity. Therefore, without the unity of all Opposition parties, the Muslim community's struggle for fair representation will continue, and this in turn will help the BJP's agenda.

Shaikh Mujibur Rehman teaches at Jamia Millia Central University. He recently edited a book titled 'Rise of Saffron Power'

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.

The Opposition's logic

The Opposition's "concerns" about EVMs are born more out of fear of losing the election rather than a sincere attempt at streamlining the electoral process ("Tally EVM-VVPAT slips before final counting, Oppn. tells EC", May 22). The Opposition must accept the verdict, whatever it is. In case of any doubt, these parties can always approach the court. Casting aspersions on the functioning of the Election Commission is dangerous for democracy.

V. SUBRAMANIAN,
Chennai

have devised a strange logic to justify or find fault with the electoral verdict – if the Opposition wins, that means the people have favoured these parties, and if they lose, it means that something is wrong with the EVMs and with the Election Commission. Strangely, in the world view of the Opposition parties, nothing is ever wrong with them.

G. NATARAJA PERUMAL,
Elatour

Failing the dope test

It is shocking that Gomathi Marimuthu has failed the dope test twice and even worse that the Anti-Doping Agency did not report the

fact that she tested positive a month ago ("Gomathi fails dope test twice!" May 22). This amounts to cheating. Sports persons must realise that they let down fans when they test positive for banned performance-enhancing drugs.

N.R. RAMACHANDRAN,
Chennai

The secular fabric

The secular fabric is being destroyed because of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's silence on crimes against minorities ("Time to rebuild India's secularism", May 22). Even if he condemns these crimes, he speaks too late. His silence is then seen as

encouragement for perpetrators of such crimes. If Mr. Modi comes back to power, it will signal that a majority of Hindus endorse the Hindu supremacist ideology of the RSS, an organisation that has penetrated not just institutions but the everyday life of the common man.

T.S.N. RAO,
Bhimavaram

Though it is true that crimes against the marginalised are on the rise, the writer has conveniently omitted a few facts. For instance, persecuted Christians too will be granted citizenship

under the Citizenship Bill. While Opposition leaders have made it a point to label the BJP as communal, it is also true that they themselves are not as secular as they claim – in this election campaign, for instance, BSP chief Mayawati made an open appeal to Muslims to not vote for the Congress as the votes would then get split

and that would help the BJP win. The writer could have provided many examples of how public discourse has worsened, of 'appeasement politics' and polarisation for electoral gains, but cherry-picked examples to suit his narrative.

NIKHILESH N.,
Hyderabad

MORE LETTERS ONLINE:
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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS: >>The picture caption in a Sports page story titled "FI legend Niki Lauda passes away" (May 22, 2019) had erroneously given his year of birth as 1939. It should have been 1949.

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A blueprint for a national security strategy

The new government must build on D.S. Hooda's outline



HAPPYMON JACOB

"Indian elites show little evidence of having thought coherently and systematically about national strategy... Few writings offer coherent, articulated beliefs or a clear set of operating principles for Indian strategy," wrote American think tanker George Tanham in a paper prepared for the U.S. government in 1992.

A glaring lacuna

Most Indian students of strategy and security studies rightly disagree with this rather presumptuous argument, especially since Tanham located the causes of the Indian inability to think strategically in its historical and cultural specificities. And yet it is pertinent to ask, even today, whether India thinks about strategic affairs in a systematic, consistent and coherent manner or whether its national security runs on ad hoc arrangements and 'raw wisdom'. Or is it that the political class has traditionally been too cagey about putting out a national security strategy, even a mere declaratory one as opposed to an operational one, in black and white?

It is interesting, therefore, that the Congress party recently shed its coyness about formulating a national security strategy for India. Earlier this year it tasked Lt. Gen. (ret'd) D.S. Hooda, a former Northern Army Commander, to write a strategy document which it eventually endorsed and made part of its manifesto.

In fact, there have been several attempts at formulating a national security strategy for India. According to some accounts, the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) had formulated draft national security strategy documents on four different occasions and presented them to successive governments, but the political class wouldn't bite. There has been a lingering worry in the minds of the politicians about a potential commitment trap if a national security strategy were to be put on paper.

Recently a senior member of the NSAB stated that there is indeed in existence a national security strategy of sorts, though not disclosed to the



"There have been several attempts at formulating a national security strategy for India." BSF personnel patrolling the border in Ferozepur, Punjab, in 2015.
*R.V. MOORTHY

general public – though Gen. Hooda has said that as the Northern Army Commander, he at least had not seen the document. So, if indeed there is such a document, it is odd that one of the senior-most generals tasked with managing Kashmir and India's border with Pakistan didn't know about it. And if there isn't a strategy in place, we should be worried.

Key issues

There are some major shortcomings in India's national security architecture that must be addressed. There is a need to take a look at some of our key national security institutions and revamp their functioning. The National Security Council (NSC) set up in 1998 almost never meets, primarily because it is an advisory body, with the Cabinet Committee on Security being the executive body. If the NSC is to be made more useful, the government's allocation of business rules should be amended to give more powers to the NSC and its subordinate organisations, such as the Strategic Policy Group.

Second, the job of the National Security Adviser needs to be reimagined. Even though the NSA plays a vital role in national security, he has no legal powers as per the government's allocation of business rules. The K.C. Pant Task Force in the late 1990s had recommended the creation of an NSA with the rank of a Cabinet Minister. Over the years, the NSA's powers have increased, even though he is not accountable to Parliament. The institution of the NSA today requires more accountability

and legal formality.

More national security organisations are not the answer; fundamental structural reforms in national security planning are needed. Take the case of the recently constituted Defence Planning Committee (DPC) tasked to recommend policy measures to improve India's defence capability and preparedness, and national security in general. Not only does the DPC have too many responsibilities on its plate, it is also an advisory body. More worryingly, there is a feeling among the armed forces that by having the NSA chair the DPC, the government may have scuttled the demands to appoint a Chief of the Defence Staff, an issue the Hooda document highlights.

The Hooda document

The Congress promised Gen. Hooda that it would adopt his national security strategy document after internal consultations. The document was prepared in less than two months and in consultation with six key core group members and many domain experts. The guiding philosophy of the document is enshrined in the following sentence: "This strategy recognises the centrality of our people. We cannot achieve true security if large sections of our population are faced with discrimination, inequality, lack of opportunities, and buffeted by the risks of climate change, technology disruption, and water and energy scarcity."

This is by far the most comprehensive treatment of national security in the Indian context. The document

offers a comprehensive definition of national security ranging from challenges posed by new technologies to social unrest to inequality. At a time when national security is referred to in strictly military terms, it is heartening to see that a strategy document written by a former Army general, the man behind the 2016 surgical strikes, defines security in an out-of-the-box and inclusive manner. A glance at the key themes shows how well-designed the document is: "assuming our rightful place in global affairs", "achieving a secure neighbourhood", "peaceful resolution of internal conflicts", "protecting our people" and "strengthening our capabilities".

The key recommendations in the document are both timely and well-thought-out. On the issue of military jointmanship, it recommends that "the three services should undertake a comprehensive review of their current and future force structures to transform the army, navy and air force into an integrated warfighting force." It argues that it would take "a cultural change in the way the DRDO is currently operating" to improve domestic defence production.

While discussing emerging national security threats, the document differs with the BJP-led government's decision to set up a Defence Cyber Agency instead of a Cyber Command as was originally recommended. On the Kashmir question too, the document seems to differ with the incumbent government's muscular policy, and Gen. Hooda's wise words should be a wakeup call for everyone: "Killing terrorists is an integral part of military operations to ensure that the state does not descend into chaos. However, this is not the primary measure of success or conflict resolution. Serious efforts are required for countering radicalisation. There is a need to initiate structured programmes that bring together civil society members, family groups, educationists, religious teachers and even surrendered terrorists in an effort to roll back radicalisation."

Let's hope that this document is the beginning of a tradition in India of thinking about national security and strategy more systematically, consistently and comprehensively.

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Why China changed its stand on Masood Azhar

A well-structured India-China dialogue may go a long way in convincing Beijing to sustain pressure on Islamabad



SUJAN R. CHINOI

Masood Azhar was listed as a global terrorist on May 1 by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) 1267 Committee after China withdrew its hold. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson said this decision flowed from a lengthy consultative process with all the concerned parties.

Shift in position

The shift in China's position after a decade-long stalemate can be attributed to many reasons, the first being the changing geo-strategic dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region and mounting U.S.-China tensions. Against this backdrop, China's support for Azhar, whose organisation, the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), was already proscribed by the UN, would only have nudged India closer to the U.S. Second, the escalation by the U.S. of the matter in the UNSC would have compelled China to openly provide convincing reasons for its stand.

Third, instead of letting the U.S., France and the U.K. take credit for helping India, China would have seen merit in reassuring India on a key concern, which, alongside the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and India's membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, had emerged as a major bugbear in bilateral ties. India's air strikes on Balakot in Pakistan had also placed China in a quandary over escalation in hostilities due to terrorist attacks in India by the JeM. China could not have been unmindful of the public sentiment in India over this issue and the fact that reassuring India could pave the way for greater convergence at the second round of the Wuhan Summit in India, possibly later this year. China would also expect such accommodation to soften India's cut-and-dried position against the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Fourth, with more terror attacks in India and the neighbourhood emanating from Pakistan, and the growing influence of Pakistan-based groups on radical elements throughout the region, China must have realised that the game was simply not worth the candle. Its continued hold would have raised

questions about its commitment to fighting global terror, and adversely impacted its image at a time when the country is projecting its "new major power diplomacy" and propounding an alternative narrative on developmental issues such as President Xi Jinping's "community of common destiny".

Any change in China's stand may have been difficult when the UN Sanctions Committee last considered the matter on March 13 because it came too soon after the Pulwama incident. As an "iron brother", China would have been loathe to let Pakistan down and endorse India's claim that Pakistan was complicit in the attack. Moreover, China would not have wanted to give other political parties in India the impression that it was aiding the BJP's electoral prospects by vacating the hold on the eve of the elections. Notably, its turnaround came after the main phases of the election were over.



Like in the case of Hafiz Saeed of the Lashkar-e-Taiba in 2009, Pakistan is most unlikely to bring Azhar to justice. The 'deep state' of Pakistan, backing him since his release from an Indian prison in 1999, will ensure that he remains safe and capable of organising attacks against India without direct attribution.

Looking forward

The next step for India would be to sustain the pressure on Pakistan to take conclusive action against terror outfits operating from its soil. China's changed position does not in any way dilute its close ties and support for Pakistan, as was reiterated by Mr. Xi in his meeting with Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan during the BRI conference in Beijing before the listing. Nevertheless, China had condemned the Pulwama attack and cooperated at the Financial Action Task Force Plenary Session in Paris in ensuring that Pakistan remained on the "grey list". Significantly, it had not reacted to India's 'pre-emptive strikes'.

Post-Wuhan, India and China have embarked on a path of closer engagement. There is growing room for responding to each other's concerns. A well-structured India-China dialogue on regional and global terrorism may go a long way in convincing Beijing of the need to sustain pressure on Islamabad to act against terrorists, which is in the interest of the entire global community.

Sujan R Chinoi is Director General, Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis, New Delhi. Views are personal

SINGLE FILE

Rohingya repatriation

India could be a force for positive change

MEENAKSHI GANGULY



Nearly two years after they fled Myanmar following a brutal crackdown, more than 270,000 Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh have been provided with identity cards, the United Nations said recently, to safeguard their right to voluntarily return home to Myanmar.

This is a welcome development for the Rohingya, who are considered Muslims of colonial-Indian origin by Myanmar and have thus long been denied proper citizenship rights.

The humanitarian crisis began in August 2017, when the Myanmar military reportedly responded to an attack on police posts by Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army militants in northern Rakhine State. The widespread violence in that restive region led to more than 700,000 Rohingya fleeing across the border in just over three months. Human rights agencies said that thousands were killed, rape was used as a weapon of war, and villages were burned to the ground.

An independent investigation by the UN determined that Myanmar's military chief and other leaders should be investigated and prosecuted for genocide and crimes against humanity. Although the evidence is overwhelming, Myanmar's leaders, including the Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, refuse to accept the allegations, much less responsibility.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh is struggling with the ongoing influx of Rohingya refugees. Bangladesh authorities, who often said that improved conditions would only serve as a pull factor, had for long sought to block services from international humanitarian groups. That changed under public pressure when the mass influx began in August 2017, with many Bangladeshis recalling the protection and assistance they had received from India in 1971. While Dhaka may have hoped that the Rohingya would be short-term guests, Myanmar refuses to bend two years on, and the Bangladesh government's welcome is wearing thin. The 1.2 million refugees there are crammed into camps without freedom of movement and restrictions on their rights to obtain employment, education, and social services.

Under pressure from China, in January 2018, Bangladesh and Myanmar signed an agreement to repatriate refugees. However, one such attempt failed last November. "Not a single Rohingya has volunteered to return to Rakhine due to the absence of conducive environment there," the Bangladesh Foreign Secretary told the UN in March 2019.

It is likely that Myanmar will only agree to create the environment for safe and voluntary return if the costs of continued defiance become too high to bear. Thus far, veto-wielding members China and Russia have blocked action at the UN Security Council, such as an International Criminal Court referral, targeted sanctions or even a global arms embargo. India could be a force for positive change if, instead of deporting its own Rohingya refugees to Myanmar, it joined the international community to insist that Myanmar protect the Rohingya's rights and ensure their safe return.

The writer is the South Asia Director at Human Rights Watch



DATA POINT

Projections off the mark

The record of exit polls has been poor in recent Lok Sabha elections. In 2004 and 2009, pollsters overestimated the National Democratic Alliance's (NDA) seat shares, while in 2014, they overestimated the United Progressive Alliance's (UPA) shares. By **Varun B. Krishnan**

2004

NDTV-AC-Nielsen's survey came closest to the results, predicting the UPA's numbers with a margin* of 22 seats. The darker the shade, the higher the margin of error

Channel/Agency	NDA	UPA	NDA diff	UPA diff
AajTak-ORG-MARG	248	190	-61	29
NDTV-AC Nielsen	230-250	190-205	-53	22
Sahara-DRS	263-278	171-181	-83	43
Star News-CVoter	263-275	174-186	-82	39
Zee News-Taleem	249	176	-62	43
Actual results	187	219	-	-
Vote share %	33.3	35.4	-	-

2014

The NDA outperformed pollsters' estimates, a reversal of 2004 and 2009. The News 24-Chanakya poll came closest in predicting seats for both alliances

Channel/Agency	NDA	UPA	NDA diff	UPA diff
CNN-IBN-CSDS-Lokniti	276	97	60	-39
India Today-Cicero	272	115	64	-57
News 24-Chanakya	340	70	-4	-12
Times Now-ORG	249	148	87	-90
ABP News-Nielsen	274	97	62	-39
India TV-CVoter	289	101	47	-43
NDTV-Hansa Research	279	103	57	-45
Actual results	336	58	-	-
Vote share %	38.5	23	-	-

Source: News reports

2009

The exit polls were again way off, predicting a nearly equal number of seats for both major alliances. However, the UPA won close to 65 seats more than what was predicted

Channel/Agency	NDA	UPA	NDA diff	UPA diff
CNN IBN-DB	165-185	185-205	-16	67
Star-Nielsen	196	199	-37	63
India TV-CVoter	183-195	189-201	-30	67
Actual results	159	262	-	-
Vote share %	37.1	24.6	-	-

DB: Dainik Bhaskar

2019

Most polls have predicted an absolute majority for the NDA. They have also predicted that the UPA will improve its seat share from 2014

Channel/Agency	NDA	UPA	Others
Times Now-VMR	306	132	104
Republic-CVoter	287	128	127
Neta-NewsX	242	164	136
India-News	298	118	127
News18-Ipsos	336	82	124
ABP-Nielsen	277	130	135
India Today-Axis My India	339-365	77-108	69-95

*NDA diff and UPA diff: Difference between actual and predicted results

FROM THE HINDU ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO MAY 23, 1969

Sarabhai assails faltering nuclear policy

Dr. Vikram Sarabhai, Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, to-day [May 22, Bombay] said the "halt and go policy" in nuclear power generation, adopted by the Planning Commission in the Draft Fourth Plan, was "really suicidal" for the country. "When the whole world is going in for nuclear energy generation in a big way, we must not falter at this point," he told a Press conference. He said India's nuclear power generation by the middle of 1972 would be 1,000 mW when the Rana Pratap Sagar and the Kalpakkam plants would go into commercial production. The Planning Commission had suggested in the Draft Fourth Plan that the development of further nuclear power programme should be considered after studying the economics of operation of the Tarapur, Ranapratap Sagar and Kalpakkam plants. Dr. Sarabhai said India should have an installed nuclear power capacity of 2,000 mW in five years and 3,000 mW in less than ten years.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MAY 23, 1919.

Co-operation in Mysore.

(From an Editorial)

The Report on the working of the co-operative movement in Mysore for the year 1917-18, just issued, contains, as usual, some matters of interest to co-operators outside the State as well as to those within it. Those who have learnt to see in Mysore rapid increase in the number of societies year after year will be somewhat disappointed this time; for, compared with the previous year, the increase in the number of societies in the year under report is not a striking feature. As a result of new registration, the number of societies newly brought into being was 141. As against this, however, must be set down the cancellation of registration of some 18 societies found to be too unfit to be allowed to exist. Owing to increased caution in the registration of societies and what appears to be the very necessary process of pruning, the net increase in the number of societies in the year under report was only 123 as against 179 in 1916-17.

POLL CALL

Strike rate

This refers to the share of seats won by a party of the overall seats it contested in an election. The BJP had an extraordinary strike rate in 2014 despite only an overall vote share of 31% because of its performance in the northern and western regions (it won 190 of the 225 seats in 10 States in the Hindi belt, which is a strike rate of 85%). The BSP, on the other hand, had a very poor strike rate (it did not win a single seat of the 503 seats it contested though it got the third largest vote share of 4.2%).

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