



GST buoyancy

With collections hitting a record high, the next step should be to simplify the tax regime

The final month of financial year 2018-19 has given the government some reason for cheer. Targets for indirect tax collections may have been missed for the last year, but collections from the Goods and Services Tax in April for economic activity in March scaled a new high. The GST inflows of ₹1,13,865 crore in April are the highest recorded since the tax regime was introduced in July 2017. They represent an increase of over 10% compared to the same month a year ago, and over 15% buoyancy over the average monthly GST collections in 2018-19 of ₹98,114 crore. To be clear, GST revenues have crossed the ₹1 lakh crore mark in March, January and October as well. The government has acknowledged that economic growth did slow down in 2018-19, owing to declining private consumption growth, a tepid increase in fixed investments and muted exports. The hope would be that the latest GST numbers are a harbinger of better growth momentum for 2019-20. The growth rate of the economy fell from 8.2% in the first quarter to 7.1% in the second and 6.6% in the third, so any improvement in the final quarter numbers due at the end of May should provide some succour. Healthier GST collections, if sustained, will also mean less pressure on the Centre to cover its fiscal deficit.

The April GST numbers have come as a surprise to many experts, given the lacklustre economic activity witnessed across many sectors in recent months, which should normally have impacted tax collections adversely. This perplexing trend may be attributed to increasing compliance among businesses amidst the aggressive push by the tax authorities to widen the tax base. GST filings, for instance, were the highest in March this year. However, the April surge has occurred despite a decrease in the total number of GSTR-3B returns filed by businesses, from 75.95 lakh in March to 72.13 lakh in April. In the absence of more disaggregated data, it could be argued that tax rate cuts by the GST Council in December too may have spurred higher volumes for some goods and services. The rush to pay tax arrears at the end of the financial year may have been another seasonal factor contributing to better tax collection during the last month. Enforcement action by the taxman to collect more revenue from registered taxpayers who have not been filing returns could be yet another factor. It is still too early to assume that this is the beginning of a secular trend. One must not lose sight of the need for further simplification of the GST regime once the election season is over. A significant number of businesses have already been brought into the tax net since the advent of the GST. In order to encourage greater compliance, there must be efforts to make it easier for small firms to remain in the tax net by cutting down the time and energy required to fill myriad tax returns. A nudge would be preferable to the stick.

Spanish steps

Election results give Pedro Sanchez an opportunity to deepen centre-left politics

A convincing victory for the Socialist party (PSOE) in Spain's general election on Sunday has dealt a blow to the prospect of a rightwing coalition with the far-right Vox. The verdict is a personal triumph for Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, who failed to save his minority government in February despite having regained the party leadership. The PSOE is short of the 176 required for a governing majority. Yet, it is in some ways spoilt for choice: it can either enter into a formal alliance or rule on its own. Mr. Sánchez can count on issue-based support. Encouragingly, the anti-capitalist Podemos has indicated a readiness to work in a PSOE-led coalition. It had nurtured ambitions of overtaking the PSOE as the principal force on the political left after the 2015 elections, but now its current stance stems from what it sees as a larger role to isolate the conservatives and the far-right. The chances of the liberal Ciudadanos supporting the PSOE are remote, as the former seems set on replacing the conservative Popular Party as Spain's main centre-right alternative. In any case, Ciudadanos's more recent proclivity to cohabit in a coalition with the Vox may not go down well with the PSOE rank and file. Collaboration with the Catalan secessionists would be equally hard. They had in February joined the Opposition to vote out Mr. Sánchez's government, which insisted on negotiating a settlement within the framework of the Constitution. One of the parties has demanded a second Catalan referendum and the withdrawal of the sedition trial against separatist leaders as a condition for supporting Mr. Sánchez again.

The victory in Spain is the latest in a string of successes for social democrats in the European Union, since the xenophobic backlash in many countries after Germany welcomed about a million Syrian refugees in 2015. Yet, the unfolding political fragmentation and the erosion of two-party dominance across Europe also means these gains cannot be exaggerated. As voters in the 28-nation bloc brace themselves to elect a parliament this month, this new reality could become more manifest. Halting the populist surge — as exemplified in Britain's vote to leave the EU — opposed to freedom of movement and closer European integration is their biggest challenge. Centrist forces have responded to the extremist threat by leaning either too much to the left or to the right, hollowing out the middle ground. Such pandering to populists has cost them dearly. It is time moderate parties abandoned this perilous course. The near-unambiguity of Mr. Sánchez's latest mandate is the envy of most governments around Europe. Having been handed one, he must ensure a full term in office, something that has eluded Spain for some years.

The essence of democracy

What the candidature of Pragma Singh Thakur reveals about the BJP's election campaign



GOPALKRISHNA GANDHI

What does Sir William Garrow (1760-1840) have to do with the elections now under way in India? The well-known and much-invoked phrase "innocent until proven guilty" was coined by that British barrister in the course of a 1791 trial at the Old Bailey. He turned the tables on legal practice at that trial by saying that the accusers, not those accused, must be tested, made to establish and prove their accusation in court. The English Court of Appeal in 1935 described Sir William's concept as the "golden thread" connecting the burden of proof and the presumption of innocence "within the web of English criminal law".

The report card

And that connects Sir William with the Indian polls directly. The National Election Watch is a grouping of NGOs and others working for transparency and accountability in elections. The Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) is a non-partisan NGO working for electoral and political reforms. They have given us telling statistics for four out of the seven phases of elections that have taken place so far. In the first phase of the elections, 17% of the candidates had criminal cases pending against them. In the second phase, the figure went down marginally to 16%. In the third phase, with the largest number of seats in any phase, the percentage of candidates figuring in criminal cases

climbed to 21%. In two-thirds of these, the accused have been charged for serious offences like rape, attempt to murder, and murder. In the fourth phase, the last one held so far, according to ADR, a total of 210 candidates faced criminal charges, with 158 being "serious". Five candidates had declared cases related to murder, 24 related to attempt to murder, 4 to kidnapping, 21 to crimes against women, and 16 candidates to hate speech. The phenomenon is not peculiar to any one party. The BJP, Congress, BSP, and the Shiv Sena have fielded criminally charged candidates, the BJP being on top of the scale numerically. Even some independent candidates are criminally charged.

The numbers in the three phases remaining are not likely to be very different. Around 20% of all the candidates in the seven phases, it may be, will be candidates with one criminal charge or another pending against them.

Sir William would have exclaimed, "That does not matter; they may all be found to be innocent!" They will may. Also, they may be the ones who get defeated. On the other hand, studies have shown that those with criminal records (muscle power) plus a seemingly unlimited power of spending (money power) have a distinctly higher chance of succeeding over those with just one of those 'powers' and over those who have neither. So, some of these this time round may well get elected, their dates in court rubbing shoulders with their dates in and with Parliament. And business will be as usual for them, with Garrowian logic and ethics and the notion that many, if not most, of these cases are 'politically foisted' winning the day. The Election Commission has asked for an amend-



A.M. FARUQUI

ment to the Representation of the People Act to bar, with some caveats, those charged with criminal offences from contesting. But after hearing the matter, the Supreme Court declined, in 2018, to enter this area, 'leaving the decision on criminal netas on Parliament'.

Illiberal intent

It is precisely this 'liberal' arrangement that the most illiberal take advantage of. It is exactly this democratic legerdemain that the most undemocratic occupy. It is this very legal latitude that the most law-disdaining use, abuse.

Mitesh Patel is perfectly entitled under the law to contest from the Anand seat in Gujarat. And we should grant him the presumption of innocence. Whatever else he may be accused of, he cannot be accused of hiding anything. He has declared in his poll affidavit that he was an accused in the 2002 post-Godhra riots, that an FIR was registered against him in Anand district in 2002 for engaging in arson, rioting, stone-pelting and theft, among other charges. And, he has declared, he was booked under Indian Penal Code Sections 147 (rioting) 148 (rioting, armed with deadly weapon), 436 (arson), 332 (causing hurt to deter public servant), 143 (unlawful assembly) and 380 (theft). He may well be found to be innocent of all these crimes.

The point, however, is not that.

The point is that the Anand Sessions Court acquitted him in 2010. Sir William, there you go! But the matter does not end there. The Government of Gujarat, yes, the BJP Government of Gujarat, acting with amazing rectitude and objectivity, filed an appeal in 2011 against his acquittal. (We shall not go into how it could not have but done so.) So, the charge has not gone away. On the one hand, the BJP government appeals against his acquittal, on the other the BJP gives him a ticket to contest from Anand. Perfectly legal, of course. Consistent with liberal, democratic nostrums. But what about the ethics of it? Eth... what? What in 'Elections 2019' is that?

The case of Pragma Thakur

As I am sure with millions of others, when I heard of Pragma Singh Thakur's candidature from Bhopal, I had but one thought: Malegaon, 2008. We know she is an accused in the 2008 Malegaon bombings, was granted bail following the dropping of charges by the National Investigation Agency and is currently under trial for multiple charges in terms of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. Technically, she can contest. Technically, she is as yet 'innocent'. Technically, no one can fault her or the BJP for making her its chosen candidate from Bhopal.

But what does her candidature, of Mitesh Patel, and of others, say of the party that has selected them? Why, from so many hopeful applicants for tickets, have they been favoured? Because they can deliver a very particular electoral product. They can deliver polarised victories. Pragma Singh Thakur's comments on Hemant Karkare, the valiant police officer who was martyred in the Mumbai terror attack known as '26/11', do not

bear repetition. They belong to the world of curses, hoodoo, jinxes, 'the evil eye', not to the world of rational humanity. And though the BJP 'has distanced' itself from those comments, it has remained as near as near can be to her candidacy.

Narendra Modi is a candidate from the temple-town of Varanasi, Amit Shah from the heart-core of the Gujarat riots, Ahmedabad. One is the BJP's leader, the other its president. Yet, it is not these two leaders but the two candidates "presumed innocent till proven guilty" who represent the face, mind and heart of the party that seeks India's mandate to govern its one billion people. Face, mind and heart are incomplete without a soul.

Where is that to come from? From our deepest feelings as a people. We are not at war. But 20 years ago, in 1999, we were: the Kargil War. Our soldiers became the soul of the country. In any war, they become that. It so happened, by the inexorable calendar of parliamentary democracies, that elections had to be, and were, announced, right in the middle of that war. Then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee kept the war and his election campaign distinct. BJP registers will show anyone interested in history that at a political meeting in Haryana when he noticed photographs of our defence chiefs displayed in the backdrop, he said, 'No, this is not proper.' And the arrangement was rectified.

Not proper, not done. That is what ethics are about. Not presumptions of innocence till proven guilty, but presumptions of intention that need no proving.

Gopal Krishna Gandhi is a former administrator, diplomat and governor

An image makeover of the Belt and Road Initiative

India's attitude has to be set in the larger picture of the relationship with China



P.S. RAGHAVAN

As the Second Belt and Road Forum (BRF), reviewing progress of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), concluded in Beijing on April 27, China had reason to be satisfied. The summit segment was attended by 37 heads of state or government. The list included strategic partner Russia and almost all from Central and Southeast Asia, two important areas of BRI operation.

If the attendance from South Asia was somewhat disappointing (only Pakistan and Nepal at the leaders' level), South Asian countries, except India and Bhutan, joined various initiatives launched at the forum. The east coast of Africa, which is on the Maritime Silk Road, sent five leaders. Particularly in the context of recent U.S. tirades against the "predatory economics" of the BRI, it was significant that nine European leaders attended, including seven from the European Union. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe sent a special envoy, conveying that the BRI "is a grand vision with great potential". The UN Secretary General and IMF Managing Director were in attendance, the latter extolling the BRI's achievements, "from stimulating infrastructure investment to developing new global supply chains". China claimed

participation from 150 countries at the forum, which included a CEO conference, where agreements worth \$64 billion were signed.

Litany of complaints

The Chinese leadership claimed the attendance rebutted allegations that BRI is a geopolitical tool and exploitative "debt trap" driving countries into dependence on China. It would be more realistic to see it as indicating China's economic clout and the desire of most countries to hedge their bets in the current turbulence in great power relations. Concerns about the viability of BRI projects have not dissolved; it is just that immediate benefits sometimes obscure the direness of future consequences.

Over the years, the structure and implementation of the BRI have attracted negative comment, including from some of the countries represented at the forum. There is a litany of complaints: that projects are selected as per Chinese priorities, with inadequate consultation with recipients; terms are agreed bilaterally and non-transparently with the leadership, and benefits do not trickle down to the population; contracts go to Chinese companies, are implemented by Chinese labour, with raw materials and products from China; most projects are over-valued and economically unviable; most financing is by Chinese loans on unrealistic terms, leading eventually to "debt traps"; foreign companies and private investment are spurned; corruption flourishes in the absence of transparency, labour laws are flouted and environ-



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mental compliance is lax. Above all, the BRI exhibits China's geostrategic ambition for economic dominance and political hegemony.

China promises a makeover

President Xi Jinping's speeches and the final forum communiqué silenced this criticism by promising a total makeover of the BRI. They declared that it will be guided by extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits. Cooperation should be transparent, people-centric, green and clean, with zero tolerance for corruption. Project evaluation, tendering, bidding and implementation would meet international standards. The right of participating countries to define their developmental priorities would be respected, as also their laws, sovereignty and territorial integrity. Foreign investment would be welcomed. Economic, social, fiscal and environmental sustainability of projects should be ensured, with emphasis on debt sustainability. In short, it was a promise to transform the BRI, in one fell swoop, from all that it was into all that it should have been. The question is how this rhetoric will translate into action.

The other remarkable feature was the launch of the "Belt and Road" as an overarching framework for bilateral and plurilateral cooperation. China announced a clutch of "Belt and Road" scholarships, training courses and exchange programmes. Groups of countries launched cooperation mechanisms for ports administration, accounting standards, tax administration, banking, intellectual property, sustainable cities, energy and dispute settlement, among many others. Some of these mechanisms were facilitated by UN agencies. China listed 283 "deliverables" from the forum, comprising Chinese initiatives, bilateral and multilateral agreements, investment projects and financing arrangements. The message was the BRI is now more than a bunch of Chinese infrastructure projects; it is truly a "community of common destiny" (as Mr. Xi termed it in 2017) to reshape global governance — a sort of G-150, promoting multilateralism, globalisation, development and human rights, whose members could forge plurilateral cooperation under its umbrella.

All in all, it was a show of China's self-confidence about its place in the world at a time of churn in global politics. The U.S. absence was barely mentioned, nor did the shadow of the increasingly strident U.S. campaign against China's "militarism", "predatory economics" and "technology theft" intrude into the bonhomie of forum proceedings. India's absence was gracefully handled, with the Chinese Foreign Minister confirm-

ing that it would not affect the ongoing high-level India-China dialogue.

An important — potentially the most impactful — initiative of the BRI has gone relatively unnoticed. Mr. Xi announced in 2017 that it would enhance digital connectivity and integration of big data to build the "digital silk road of the 21st century". Digital connectivity infrastructure is to be built in tandem with physical connectivity. This arouses U.S. (and wider) concerns that with its lead in 5G network technology and deep pockets, China will establish dominance of its 5G standards and equipment in Eurasia and beyond. The sudden image makeover of the BRI may well be intended to open up a more accommodating attitude to this technology insertion.

India and the BRI

The debate in India about whether or not we should join the BRI will probably be reignited in the wake of its new avatar. The opposition to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor determined absence at the forum. There is no specific opportunity for India in any other element of the BRI. India's attitude to it has to be set in the larger picture of the relationship with China, which combines a strong economic partnership with major strategic challenges, further complicated by the global geopolitical flux.

P.S. Raghavan, a former diplomat, is Chairman of the National Security Advisory Board. Views are personal

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.

A rap on the knuckles

It is a shame that the Supreme Court has to direct the Election Commission to do its job ("Decide on Modi, Amit Shah 'hate speeches' by May 6, SC tells EC," May 3). This clearly shows that the EC has failed to combat hate speeches by leaders, for reasons unknown to us. The country needs a dynamic and unbiased Election Commission. As Chief Election Commissioner, T.N. Seshan did a stellar job of reforming the election process in India.

KSHIRASAGARA BALAJI RAO, Hyderabad

Who knew that the political discourse would come to such a low that politicians would use martyrs to gain political mileage in the name of nationalism? Vote-hungry politicians will never be able to feel the agony that families of martyrs suffer. Unfortunately, the Chief Election Commissioner seems to be a mute spectator to this shoddy electioneering. I hope voters understand that hate is being whipped up by these politicians. The failure of the EC to stem this rot is very sad.

BRJ B. GOVAL, Ludhiana

The EC was once a tall entity. If it had demonstrated its credibility in attending to violations of the Model Code of Conduct by parties and candidates with visible fairness and promptness, people would not view EVMs with such suspicion.

R. NARAYANAN, Navi Mumbai

Double standards

The fear of defeat is what prompted the Congress to keep Priyanka Gandhi Vadra out of the Varanasi contest ("Priyanka's U-turn in U.P.," May 3). The writer has said that the party's moves will help consolidate

the Muslim votes in favour of the gathbandhan. When the Muslim votes consolidate in favour of the gathbandhan alliance, it is seen as a consolidation of secular forces. However, if the majority community's votes are in favour of the BJP, it is often termed as consolidation of communal forces. Why such double standards?

C.G. KURIAKOSE, Kothamangalam

What is climate change?

The need to resolve the day-to-day issues faced by the common man has pushed to the background the urgent need of tackling

climate change ("Is India doing enough to combat climate change?" May 3). The problem in India is that the dangers of climate change are not yet known to the common people. Efforts need to be made to educate the common man

about its dangers, and about how climate change is linked to everyday issues, rather than discuss it only at an academic level.

V. SUBRAMANIAN, Chennai

MORE LETTERS ONLINE: www.hindu.com/opinion/letters/

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS: >>>An Election-2019 page story titled "Bahraich reveals communal and political faultlines of U.P." (May 3, 2019) erroneously said the OBCs and non-Jatav OBCs were largely behind Mr. Modi across the constituency. It should have been the OBCs and non-Jatav Dalits.

>>>A Business page story titled "An app to manage diabetes" (May 3, 2019) had a misspelling. The name of the app should be mySugar - not mysuger.

It is the policy of The Hindu to correct significant errors as soon as possible. Please specify the edition (place of publication), date and page. The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28412297/28576300 (11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday); Fax: +91-44-28552963; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in; Mail: Readers' Editor, The Hindu, Kasturba Buildings, 859 & 860 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002, India. All communication must carry the full postal address and telephone number. No personal visits. The Terms of Reference for the Readers' Editor are on www.thehindu.com

A new fault line in post-war Sri Lanka

After 10 years of a fragile peace, the deadly bombings on April 21 have blighted the eastern lagoon landscape of the island nation, pitting religious communities against one another. **Meera Srinivasan** reports on the simmering tensions in the aftermath of the attacks

Every few metres in Batticaloa a white poster with the words 'Kan-neer Anjali' (tribute with tears) appears, tied to trunks of trees, walls of churches, or gates of mosques. Right below the bold letters is an image of a pair of eyes, weeping.

Near town, the narrow lane leading to the evangelical Zion Church, where one of the bombers blew himself up, just as his fellow jihadists did at two Catholic churches in Colombo and Negombo, is cordoned off. A huge banner with mugshots and names of the victims hangs at the entrance. Many of them are studio pictures of well-dressed children smiling at the camera.

Sri Lankans are yet to fully comprehend the dreadful Easter blasts that shook the country less than a fortnight ago, killing over 250 people across churches and hotels in and around the capital Colombo, and in this eastern city some 300 km away. They are grappling with possible reasons and necessary responses with urgency, evident in the many statements and solidarity messages emerging from different religious and civil society groups.

But the people of Batticaloa have an additional burden.

Batticaloa's burden

While Sri Lanka's Muslims, who make up nearly 10% of the population, are scattered across the island, their highest concentration is in the Eastern Province, comprising Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Ampara districts.

Apart from losing 28 of its residents, including 14 children who were at Sunday school on April 21, Batticaloa is also where Zahran Hashim, the alleged mastermind of the Easter attacks, hailed from. Perhaps for that reason, the district has remained in the spotlight, more often figuring in tales about a radical Islamist-turned-suicide bomber and much less in those about victims of his ghastly act.

Stories of pastor Kumaran who lost his 11-year-old son, the parents of young siblings Sharon and Sarah, and the family of Ramesh Raju, who tried intercepting the suicide bomber and died, faded within days.

Even as different narratives of the distressing episode compete for credibility, Muslims and Christians suddenly find themselves cast on either side of the atrocity as "perpetrators" and "victims", despite many knowing that those who perished were not all Christians and despite much of the Muslim community vehemently condemning the attacks carried out by a small radical group as "barbaric". More perplexing is the nature of the attack itself — of Muslims targeting Christians, fellow minorities, with whom they have no known animosity. In fact, in Sri Lanka's post-war years, Muslims and, in fewer instances, Christians have faced violent attacks from hard-line Sinhala-Buddhist forces.

While scores of affected families struggle to cope with the shock and those stubborn Easter morning memories that won't leave, the people of Batticaloa appear to be bracing for other likely repercussions, not fully known, but potentially dangerous. Their scenic coastal town with lush paddy lands around, and a calming lagoon running through, unexpectedly turned into a site of horror on Easter day.

"The Christians are shattered," says Fr. Rajan Rohan, attached to the St. John's church in Batticaloa, which is run by the American Ceylon Mission. Hailing from the nearby Valaichchenai town, he returned to Batticaloa last September, after completing assignments in the northern Jaffna city during the final years of the war, and later in Nuwara Eliya, in the Central Province. "When I came back here, I was shocked to see how much this place had changed."

As a child, Fr. Rohan recalls being thrilled around Ramadan. "We loved that *kanji* (porridge) our neighbours made with beef stock. It was a delicacy that we eagerly awaited every year," he says. Muslim families sharing treats with children in the neighbourhood was not uncommon, and words like "co-existence" had no use in an effortlessly multi-religious society.

But in 2018, things were different in Fr. Rohan's home town. "There was a lot of Islamophobia among our Tamil people. In a country that has paid a heavy price because of Sinhala-Buddhist majoritarianism, it was startling to see Tamils so preoccupied with Muslims," he recalls. "They would say things like 'we can never trust Muslims' easily in conversation."

Sri Lanka's Muslims are mostly Tamil-speaking, but identify as a separate ethnic group, distinct from Tamils, most of whom are Hindus and the rest Christians. The three-decade-long civil war not only saw raging hostility between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils, who bore the brunt of the carnage, but also witnessed Tamil-Muslim relations sour.

Despite being bound by language, they grew apart, with the Tamil mili-



A policeman frisks a devotee as he arrives at a mosque to attend prayer in Colombo after the bomb blasts on April 21. (Below) Kattankudy, which is among the most densely populated areas in the island. •AFP



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FR. RAJAN ROHAN
St. John's church, Batticaloa

tants seeing the Muslims as aligned to and aiding the state security forces that they were fighting. The 1990 mosque massacres in Kattankudy and nearby Eravur, in which the LTTE mowed down nearly 150 Muslims at prayer, and the LTTE's mass expulsion of Muslims from the north later that year, have left a long shadow of bitterness and resentment.

On his return, Fr. Rohan, who leads an interfaith initiative, found it hard to bring Tamils and Muslims together. "But we were trying. And just when we had begun working on those lines, this [bombings] has happened," he says, pointing to the "daunting" task ahead.

Strained ties

It is not just Tamil-Muslim ties that witnessed a change in the past decades. The Muslim community has seen substantial changes within, according to A.L.M. Sabeel, a member of the local Urban Council and a former secretary of the Kattankudy Mosques Federation.

Starkly different from the rest of Batticaloa, Kattankudy town stands out. Short date palm trees line the median cutting through this town for some 50 metres, with shops on either side selling garments, gadgets and other essentials. Several mosques and cultural centres can be seen along the main road, while thousands of families live in crammed houses along the streets off the main road. The township is among the most densely populated areas in the island.

"Women of my mother's generation used to wear a saree, wrapping their heads with the pallu. But in the last 15-20 years, we see more women switching to the abaya [full gown]. The face veil is an even more recent thing," notes Sabeel, 45, who was raised here. Among men, the full-length white robes and long beards are recent imports. "My

father was clean-shaven. But many men of my generation, including myself, sport a beard," he says, attributing the relatively newer trends to more labour migration to West Asian countries, Arab funding for local institutions and consequent interactions, and social media exposure. "I don't think some of these ideas suit us, especially these clothes in such hot weather."

However, changes in attire, he points out, coincided with "a more significant shift". "We are a minority in this country and have historically embraced a Sri Lankan identity. But in recent times, many Muslims appear keen on asserting their religious identity, often in the name of culture." The community, in his view, also turned more insular during this time.

Meanwhile, some within the community question this new, relatively more rigid idea of "Islamic culture". Culture is about convenience, argues a 40-year-old mother of three. "I wear the abaya when I go out somewhere but prefer a salwar kameez with a headscarf when I visit my doctor. Culture is what you want to make of it. Some people might criticise you over your choices but isn't that the case in every community?"

Accommodating different shades of opinion on the practice of Islam, Islamic culture and assertion, Sri Lankan Muslims have largely remained together as a community, with trade being a key binding factor. Although Muslims of the east were engaged in agriculture, fisheries and livelihoods such as weaving in the past, they became a predominantly trading community over the years.

"It is true that Muslims mobilise well and maintain good networks within the community. And that irritates many Tamils," Sabeel notes.

A troubled youth

Thangavel Roshan, 28, took the Easter weekend off and travelled from Colombo, where he works at a construction site. "We usually work all seven days to accumulate our days off to travel home," he says, seated outside his home in Navatukudah in Batticaloa. A few metres into this locality, concrete roads give way to rickety mud roads.

His right leg is bandaged and kept raised on a plastic stool. Roshan, along with his family, was at Zion Church on

Easter Sunday when he saw the bomb explode right in front of his eyes. "I was lucky, I escaped with this injury," he says. His parents and siblings too did, as they were further away. Doctors have advised Roshan three months' rest before he can get back to work. "If there were enough jobs here, I wouldn't be working so far away. A big chunk of my salary goes for the commute [Colombo is an eight-hour bus ride away]. I haven't saved a rupee so far," he says.

His older brother Thangavel Nelson works at a highway project in Kurunegala in the North Western Province. "They say post-war development and all that; I think that happened only in the north. The east hasn't got anything... no factories, no development, no jobs. We have to struggle outside for such little money," he sulks, blaming Tamil politicians "who don't care."

"But look at Muslims," he says, voicing what appears to be a popular grievance among many Tamils. "They get government jobs, they prosper in business. Unlike us, they are very secure."

Much of the antagonism is also linked to the ongoing struggles around resources in the district, according to Sitrageela Maunaguru, retired professor at the Eastern University in Batticaloa.

"There are a lot of simmering tensions between the communities over allocation of land in many areas, and in sharing water. People of different communities accuse each other's local politicians of manipulating and favouring their people," she says, adding that conversations on these subjects often quickly escalate to anti-Muslim speech. "The recent bombings are bound to fan those tensions."

Muslim politicians and their patronage networks are common talking points among Tamils. As partners in Sri Lanka's ruling coalition, Muslim leaders hold key ministerial portfolios, while the main Tamil party is in opposition. Tamil leaders, in turn, are seen as lacking political power or the will to make a difference.

With clashing interests of the political class and the leaders' vote bank manoeuvres shaping their realities, people, especially the youth, appear to be entangled in a web of insecurities — political, economic and social.

"Their politicians take good care of them. Muslim people can get away with

anything," says Nelson matter-of-factly.

Old prejudice, new fear

This view, which is shared by many others, is precisely what makes Fr. Rohan rather nervous. Inter-community relations, which are also ethnic relations in this context, are fragile and need to be handled with great care, he observes. "We have to sensitise our [Tamil] community, including children. Even in jest, a Tamil child should not tell a Muslim friend anything like, 'we can't trust you guys, you'll drop a bomb'."

Clearly, Fr. Rohan's immediate concern was about preventing any backlash against the Muslims. "While we comfort the affected families, it is important to try and prevent adverse reactions. We don't want others to use our name and attack the Muslims for what a small, isolated group did. That will lead to more hate and clashes in our society."

His apprehension is rooted in two main reasons. One, the delicate social relations that prevail in the multi-ethnic districts of the Eastern Province, where Muslims are the single largest group, constituting 38% of the population. The province is also home to some 6 lakh Tamils (Hindus and Christians), and 3.5 lakh Sinhalese (Buddhists and Christians), making it one of Sri Lanka's most diverse regions. Two, the spate of anti-Muslim violence in varying intensities, and led by hard-line Sinhala-Buddhist groups in the last seven years, has made Muslims more vulnerable.

Further, he emphasises that Tamil society cannot afford another cycle of violence and distress. "If our youth resort to militancy again, some of us will turn targets very soon. We saw that happen with the LTTE, where the organisation we nurtured turned against us when we voiced disagreement or dissent."

The government too has a role in preventing any retaliation, he notes. "They were quick to ban the radical Islamist organisations behind the attacks as 'terrorist' outfits. They ought to show the same promptness when it comes to radical Sinhala-Buddhist organisations notorious for inciting violence."

In the current Sri Lankan context, his fears of a backlash are well-founded — where post-war reconciliation has dragged, a political solution to the Tamil question remains out of sight, and youth across ethnicities are disgruntled amid growing joblessness. Especially so in the wake of Sri Lankan authorities naming the little-known local radical Islamist group, the National Thowheed Jamaath (NTJ), and its allies as perpetrators of the Easter attacks, which the Islamic State has also claimed.

Whether it is the NTJ's links abroad, or the rationale for their targets (churches and hotels) or the extent of radicalisation within the Muslim community, questions outnumber answers at this point. But those feeling uneasy about the likely impact of the attacks say there is no time to waste.

The peril of radicalisation

With the government claiming that Hashim was among the nine suicide bombers who carried out the coordinated bombings, some may believe the problem is over, but it is hardly so, according to M.B.M. Firthous, a Kattankudy-based preacher, who also heads a lo-

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A.L.M. SABEEL
Former secretary of the Kattankudy Mosques Federation

cal school. "The conciliatory statements that different religious leaders made after the attacks talk about peace and co-existence, but those are things that have to be said. The problem, unfortunately, runs deeper," he says. The sooner it is acknowledged, the greater the chances of addressing it, he notes.

After every incident of an anti-Muslim attack in recent years, "some forces" within the Muslim community tried to radicalise youth through classes and videos, urging them to retaliate. But the community had no appetite for it and rejected it outright, according to different mosque leaders in the province.

"A few youth were perhaps ideologically drawn to a more rigid interpretation and practice of Islam, at times due to social media influences. Others, who were deeply affected by the anti-Muslim attacks, found the radical path speaking to their outrage. But they were very, very few and didn't have any support from the community," says Sabeel.

But radicalisation is not about numbers, Firthous cautions. "If the idea has been sown in even one person's mind, we have to be very worried," he says, pointing to an "urgent need" for introspection within the Muslim community. "We cannot afford to isolate ourselves. There is a lot to be done by all communities." He also blames the many peace-building efforts that followed the civil war: "They were run by NGOs and well-funded by donors, but they merely scratched the surface without any meaningful effort or reflection on the part of communities."

And today, the outrage over the disparities and injustices accumulated over years of war and peace is manifesting in new, grievous ways. About a week after the victims of the blast were laid to rest in Batticaloa, and amid several interfaith meetings and messages of assurance, a group of young men went around parts of Batticaloa on motorbikes, distributing flyers asking Tamils to boycott Muslim-owned shops and to quit working there. "We, the youth, must be aware and prevent terrorists who, in the garb of traders, enter our towns," says the provocative leaflet attributed to 'Tamil youth, Eastern Province'.

According to a resident who received it on Wednesday night, a trishaw (three-wheeler) followed the motorbikes, with someone inside speaking through a loudspeaker. They were "clearly stoking hatred", says the resident, who asked not to be named. "We don't know who got the youth to distribute the flyers. It could be anyone seeking political mileage from this tragic moment. But sadly, they might get it. Even at the cost of more violence and bloodshed, perhaps."

