



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

TEAM MODI

How Party President Shah works with Home Minister Shah will be watched; Sitharaman has her task cut out

PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA Modi's team for his second term is ready and there are some unmistakable and unmissable signals. Amit Shah, Home Minister, makes an important statement about the new government. As party president, Shah has not just been credited with toning up the BJP's organisational muscle, but also with delineating in sharper and unarguably harsher ways, its ideological agenda. This was mirrored in the party's renewed insistence and stridency, in the just concluded campaign, on some critical issues.

The Shah-led BJP, and Shah himself, have promised that the process to update the National Register of Citizens, which has caused turmoil and is yet inconclusive in Assam, will be extended to the rest of the country. Under Shah, the BJP, during the election campaign, weaponised the NRC to press home some ideological points — more than seven decades after Independence, the onus is on citizens to prove their Indianness, and (Muslim) illegal immigrants from Bangladesh are to be seen, in Shah's words, as "termites" even as proposed amendments to the Citizenship Bill paved the way for non-Muslim minorities to citizenship. Shah has helped inject a similarly unforgiving lexicon on the Kashmir issue — in election rallies, he promised, or threatened, to scrap the special status to J&K under Article 370 of India's Constitution if the BJP is re-elected. On "national security" in general, catapulted by the BJP into the highest priority issue in this Lok Sabha campaign, Shah led from the front, accusing political opponents of patronising Naxals, and drawing associations between student protests in JNU, surgical strikes in the wake of Uri and India's attack on terror camps in Balakot. As home minister now, at the very least, the home ministry will be more pro-active. It could, in fact, become the hub for efforts to lend government imprimatur to the BJP's controversial ideological positions on critical issues, re-drawing the battlelines. How party president Shah works with Home Minister Shah will be watched in a government that has promised to win *sabka vishwas* (everyone's trust).

If Shah deals in battlelines, Nirmala Sitharaman continues to break glass ceilings — she was India's first full-time woman defence minister, she is its first woman finance minister in decades (since Indira Gandhi, as PM, held the portfolio). Her shift to the finance ministry carries forward her breathtaking rise and also points to the absences she steps into — her elevation is so startling only because there are so few women in the nation's top jobs. She comes to the office in challenging times — she will need to find ways of reviving growth amid a general stasis or slowdown, from employment to investment to jobs and exports. And last, but certainly not least, the allocation of the important External Affairs portfolio to lateral entrant S Jaishankar promises to burnish the second Modi government's engagement with the world, especially the big powers. Ground level campaign reports suggest that foreign policy as photo-op was widely popularised in the first Modi regime. Now, with Jaishankar on board, it gets more strategic depth.

ECONOMY IS NOT WELL

With underlying drivers of growth sputtering, the slowdown is deeper and more entrenched than was believed

INDIA'S ECONOMIC GROWTH slowed to a 20-quarter low of 5.8 per cent in the fourth quarter of 2018-2019, well below expectations. Growth for the full year came at 6.8 per cent, the slowest pace in the last five years, according to data released by the Central Statistics Office (CSO). While leading indicators had pointed towards sluggish economic activity, the slowdown is deeper and more entrenched than was believed, with both consumption and investment weakening. Coupled with recent data, these numbers would suggest that economic activity is likely to continue to be subdued in the first half of the current financial year as well.

Latest data shows that gross value added (GVA) grew at a mere 5.7 per cent in Q4FY19, driven by a contraction in agriculture, and slower growth of manufacturing, construction, and trade, hotels, transport and communication. Agriculture contracted by 0.1 per cent in Q4FY19, down from 2.8 per cent in the previous quarter. Part of the decline could be attributed to the base effect. The sector had grown by a 6.5 per cent in the fourth quarter of 2017-18. Much of the sector's performance depends on how the monsoon fares this year. The IMD has predicted an average monsoon, with rainfall to be 96 per cent of the long term average, though greater clarity, especially over its distribution, will emerge in coming weeks. Manufacturing was another area of weakness, as the corporate results season has shown. The sector grew by a mere 3.1 per cent in Q4, down from 6.4 per cent in Q3. Though, on the flip side, public administration, defence and other services and financial, real estate and professional services, grew at a robust pace. The former, which largely connotes government spending, grew by a healthy 10.7 per cent in Q4, up from 7.5 per cent in Q3, presumably on account of higher spending by state governments.

On the expenditure side of the data, private final consumption expenditure, which is largely household demand, slowed down to 7.2 per cent in Q4, from 8.1 per cent in Q3, in line with the trends suggested by leading indicators. The twin balance sheet problem continues to drag down fresh investments, with gross fixed capital formation, which connotes investments, slowing to 3.6 per cent in Q4, down from 11.7 per cent in Q3. With the underlying drivers of growth sputtering, the new finance minister has an unenviable task ahead.

STRUCK DUMB

Congress announces it will give media the silent treatment for a month. Is it just a clever way of saying it has nothing to say?

THERE IS NO denying the element of schadenfreude among the many detractors of the Congress after the party's abysmal performance in the Lok Sabha elections. And while there ought to be no pride in kicking someone when they are down, India's oldest political party isn't helping its own cause by giving the silent treatment to the media.

The party leadership's decision not to have its spokespersons appear on TV news debates for one month does, arguably, make strategic sense. As it picks up the pieces of yet another electoral rout and contemplates assigning blame, or shielding people from it, it may be best to do so without its leaders making, or being provoked to make, any untoward public statements. But the manner in which the *maun vrat* has been announced, and is being imposed, is a tactical error. First, as anyone who has ever thrown a tantrum — or been at the receiving end of one — will tell you, the "silent treatment" loses much of its edge when no one's actually talking to you. In the wall-to-wall coverage following the BJP-led NDA's massive win, there appears to be little space — except among mean detractors and disappointed supporters — for what the Congress wants to say. Second, the request by the Congress media cell to channels not to invite its spokespersons to their shows betrays a lack of faith in its own. Why the advisory to journalists if Congressmen know this is a time to be circumspect?

The reason for keeping mum may be neither strategic nor tactical. India's Grand Old Party has been most visibly in crisis since 2014, and the 2019 verdict has provided no hope of a revival, no galaxy of new leaders that can catapult the party to future success. Perhaps the imposed month-long silence of its leaders is a means to stoically contemplate these questions. Or maybe, Congressmen just have nothing to say.



AMARTYA LAHIRI

A FEW NUMBERS are useful to put in perspective the development challenge that India faces today. India's current gross domestic product (GDP) is around \$2.5 trillion while its GDP per person is \$2,000. With an annual population growth of 1.1 per cent and aggregate GDP growth of 6.6 per cent, India's per person GDP is currently growing at 5.5 per cent annually. At these growth rates, India's per person GDP would be around \$19,000 in 2060.

To put this scenario in perspective, Greece's per person GDP today is around \$20,000. Even if India manages to sustain an average growth rate of 7 per cent for the next 41 years, India's per person GDP would still be barely above the current per person GDP of Greece. And, Greece isn't exactly a development role model.

The uncertainties around these scenarios are also huge. If the average aggregate growth rate drops to 5.6 per cent, India's per person GDP in 2060 would be around \$12,000, which is only slightly above the per person GDP in China today. This is the risk inherent in India slipping even slightly from its current growth path and the scale of its development challenge.

Development is a challenge globally, not just in India. The per person GDP of the richest 5 per cent of countries in the world is over 50 times larger than the per person GDP of the poorest 5 per cent. What explains such large disparities across countries?

Output is produced by combining labour of different skill types, land, capital, energy and public infrastructure. Combining these inputs also requires entrepreneurship and management. For example, at the level of the firm, managers who are better at matching the skills of individual workers to tasks are able to generate higher revenues. This applies at the level of the country as well. It is the unmeasured X-factor that is commonly referred to as productivity.

India should learn from its past, and speed up critical reforms

Forty years is the working life of a whole generation. The period 1950-1990 already saw a generation barely experiencing any growth in incomes. India cannot let that happen again. Development is a long game. India needs to act now and stay the course.



KHALED AHMED

ON MAY 11, three terrorists attacked the only five-star hotel in Gwadar, the new port city of Balochistan being built with assistance from the Chinese Belt-and-Road Initiative. They killed four hotel employees and a navy soldier before being shot by the army. The attack was claimed by the outlawed Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA).

The official view was that "sudden intensification of attacks is linked to the launch of the second phase of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the progress on border fencing and the fluid situation in Afghanistan". This statement encapsulates the new threat perception in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. The reference to "border-fencing" points to the threat to a state that felt threatened only on the eastern border in the past. And border-fencing with Afghanistan is not going to be easy as there is no agreed formula of demarcation of the Durand Line.

In the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) — now merged with Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province and thus "regularised" — a new protest movement, the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM), complains of the "disappeared" people of FATA. The complaint is similar to the one made by the BLA in Balochistan but with a difference: PTM is a regular political party with two seats in the National Assembly.

The trouble in Balochistan is seen as connected with the ongoing covert conflict with India. The BLA is composed of the "disappeared" (through extrajudicial killing) men that the Baloch nationalists in the Quetta assembly blame on the Pakistan army, accusing it of capturing and eliminating them. Pakistan wavers between belief in the two versions because of the capture of

THE ALLY'S NUDGE

Push from China could force Pakistan to operate as a normal state

In Pakistan too the 'Kashmir first' mind is changing under pressure from the Chinese Belt and Road project, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is crucially dependent on the development of the Gwadar Port and its hinterland. CPEC is viewed by Pakistan as a game-changer. But without peace on the borders, this transformation may not be achieved.

Kulbhushan Jadhav from Balochistan in 2016.

The PTM too is accused by the army of being funded by the Kabul government in tandem with India. It is evident that Pakistan is now worried about its western border more than its eastern one which is already fenced against infiltration by India. Prime Minister Imran Khan's India policy — backed by the army — is that of normalisation, which to many looks like putting aside Pakistan's "revisionism" over Kashmir in favour of concentration on the western border which it never thought of protecting in the past.

The move away from "India centrism" has come in the wake of internal upheaval in the two tribal areas — comprising almost half of Pakistan's territory — where lack of development has caused the population to move. The Baloch, small in number, have lost their youth across the border or in the badlands of Balochistan while the Pashtun of FATA have migrated inland — mostly to Karachi where they form the largest group after the Urdu-speaking refugees from India — and to Saudi Arabia and the Emirates of the Gulf. Lack of development in Balochistan, from where Pakistan extracted gas and spent it lavishly in Punjab and other provinces till it was exhausted, has alienated the Baloch intelligentsia and caused the emergence of the BLA.

The lack of development of infrastructure in FATA has made this crucial northwestern region unlivable. Moreover, by allowing the Afghan Taliban and their Arab and Uzbek fellow-warriors to locate themselves in FATA and infiltrate Afghanistan to fight the American war against the Soviet-supported government in Kabul completely destroyed the local hierarchies that had kept the "tribal museum" of Pakistan intact.

acquisition and labour policies.

Businesses also need capital which they acquire from financial markets. This requires a healthy credit culture wherein debts are repaid, insolvencies are dealt with in a quick and orderly way, and banks are free to lend to the most productive borrower. Our banking sector is mostly state controlled. Banks face myriad constraints on lending due to targets for priority sector lending, statutory liquidity ratio and informal pressures on directed lending. Repeated loan waivers have vitiated the credit culture making it harder for banks to recover loans. The introduction of the insolvency and bankruptcy code has been an excellent initiative but resolutions under it are still slow. All of this bids up the cost of funds for private businesses. Financial sector reforms, including bank privatisation, are clearly needed.

More generally, private businesses, locally and globally, need to feel that India is business friendly — its industrial and trade policies are not subject to sudden reversals, enforcement agencies are independent, public data is reliable, and the country values domain specialists in overseeing its market infrastructure. This is about generating confidence in the institutional structure of India to encourage greater investment and newer technology inflows through foreign direct investment.

As we saw above, relatively small changes in performance can induce wide divergence in potential outcomes over a sustained period. Forty years is the working life of a whole generation. The period from 1950 to 1990 already saw a generation barely experiencing any growth in incomes. India cannot let that happen again. Development is a long game. India needs to act now and stay the course.

The writer is director, Centre for Advanced Financial Research and Learning, Mumbai and professor of economics at the University of British Columbia (views are personal)

Imran Khan's talk of normalising relations with India has caused many to do a double-take. Everyone knows "making peace" with Prime Minister Narendra Modi means forgetting Kashmir. In Pakistan too the "Kashmir first" mindset is changing under pressure from the Chinese Belt and Road project, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is crucially dependent on the development of the Gwadar Port and its hinterland. CPEC is viewed by Pakistan as a game-changer. But without peace on the borders, this transformation may not be achieved.

Peace with India becomes crucial because of the neglected western border and the offended countries beyond it: Afghanistan and Iran. In 1998, the Taliban, along with infiltrators from Pakistan, tried to take the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif in Afghanistan, killing its anti-Taliban Shias and the five Iranian diplomats in the city's Iranian consulate. Pakistan has spent half a century facing trouble on both eastern and western borders, including Uzbekistan.

It is time for change in Pakistan and it is going to be difficult, given the tough man expected to be ruling India for some time — Modi. Pakistan's economy is in deep crisis. Meanwhile, China's persuasion to "normalise" the state of Pakistan is becoming intense, judging from the way it has abstained from vetoing the resolution on Jaish-e-Mohammad chief Masood Azhar at the UN. China wants its corridor through Pakistan to run normally and that requires Pakistan to live normally as a state.

The writer is consulting editor, Newsweek Pakistan

JUNE 1, 1979, FORTY YEARS AGO

MRS GANDHI INDICTED  
INDIRA GANDHI HAS been indicted by the Maruti commission for exerting undue influence over the government machinery to promote the business interests of her son, Sanjay Gandhi, during her tenure as prime minister. The report, according to informed sources, has also indicted the former Haryana chief minister, Bansilal, for helping Sanjay Gandhi obtain land and several senior officers for showing undue favours to the three concerns of Sanjay Gandhi. The report prepared by the commission's chairman, Justice Alak Chandra Gupta, was taken to the home ministry by a commission official, N K Prasad, in a sealed cover and handed over to

J C Pandey, joint secretary.

ARMY IN AHMEDABAD  
THE ARMY WAS called out in Ahmedabad to control the situation arising out of violence by agitating policemen. Jawans took control of the city police headquarters, according to a senior police official. The Border Security Force had also been alerted, he said. The policemen, who were returning after holding a meeting, attacked the city police control room and destroyed the entire furniture and the telephone exchange. A car in which M D Patel, secretary of the Public Works Department, was travelling, was attacked and set afire, the official said.

BENAZIR IN LARKANA

BENAZIR BHUTTO, DAUGHTER of the executed former prime minister of Pakistan, arrived in Larkana last night and heard thousands of supporters chant "long live Bhutto" and "Bhutto will live for thousands of years". A tearful Benazir told welcoming crowds at the railway station, "The entire nation of Pakistan is in the grip of this mood today. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto belonged to Larkana. So long as he lived, he never bowed to anything wrong. Let us all pledge that we should follow the late Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's guidelines of politics" she said. She added that she would stay in Larkana and meet anybody who knew about the last days of her late father.





# 15 THE IDEAS PAGE

## Why chemistry trumps arithmetic

All indicators lead to the same conclusion: Modi's BJP recorded a spectacular victory in 2019 due to its provision of inclusive growth — very close to the best in the world in 2014-18



NO PROOF REQUIRED

BY SURJIT S BHALLA AND KARAN BHASIN

BEFORE WEGO into policy mode, one last attempt at explaining what caused the great electoral victory of Narendra Modi/BJP in 2019. At the risk of over-simplification (but not really), one view is that it was Balakot that really turned people's minds. National security was a prominent concern, and the voters felt that their future would be more "secure" with Modi. We don't have any disagreement with that conclusion — the issue for us is whether the security issue was the most important factor. It was not.

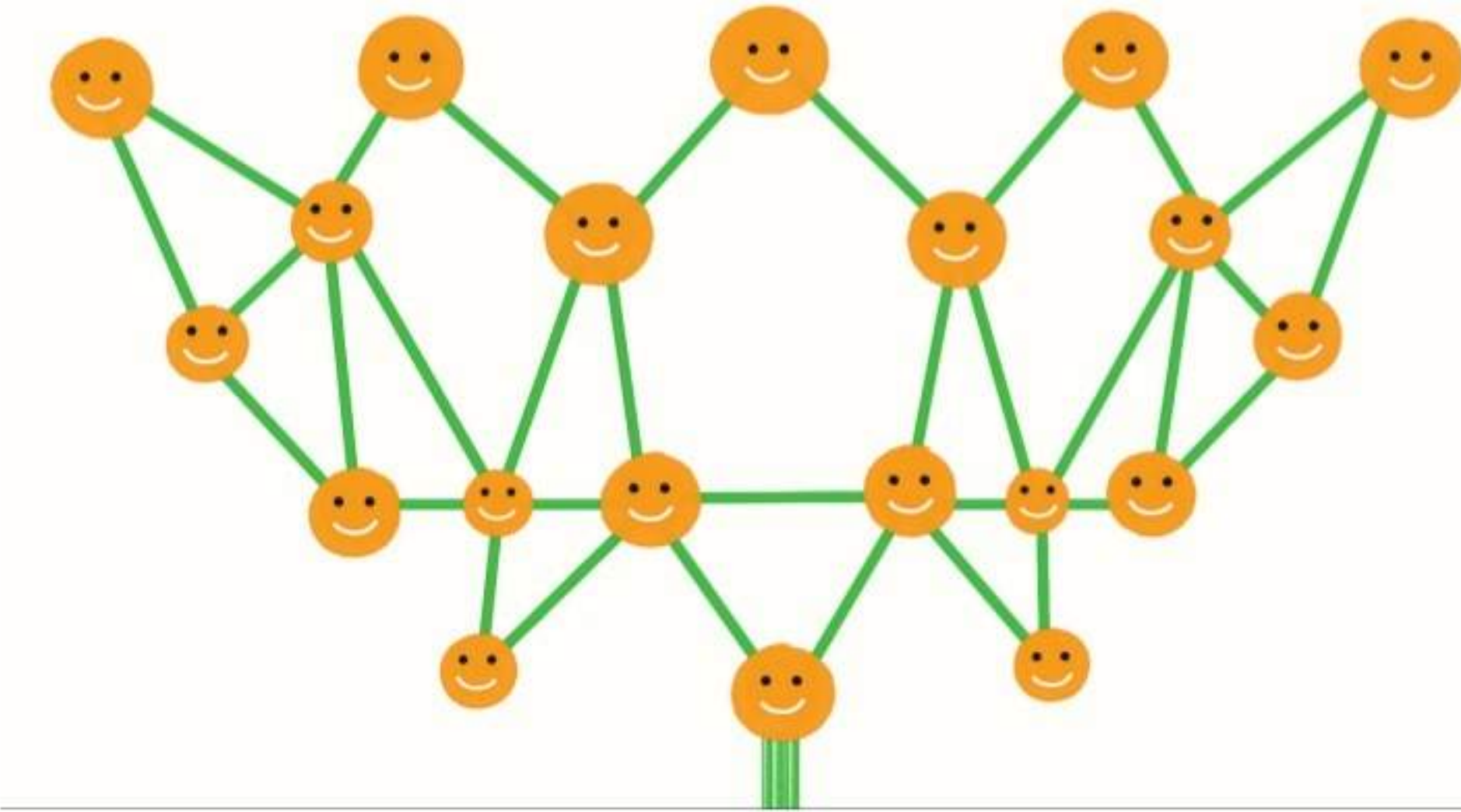
An associated view, and one that pre-dates Balakot, is that people primarily vote on the basis of caste. This is the arithmetic in the title, that is, caste accounting suggested that in several states, especially Uttar Pradesh, the caste and religion arithmetic (votes cast by the lower castes and Muslims) would easily approximate the vote share of the upper-caste non-Muslim support for the BJP. Hence, the expectation in January 2019 that the most likely outcome of the election was a hung Parliament.

The chemistry perspective is that PM Modi is a charismatic politician and the others (the diverse set of Opposition candidates) are not and, therefore, Modi won. Note that this explanation, like the invisible hand, was nowhere to be seen in January 2019, and especially unseen in December 2018, when the BJP lost three state elections.

An alternate explanation (and which one of us has claimed to be the main reason behind Modi's victory, and explained in detail in a pre-election analysis in the book, *Citizen Raj*) is that in this whodunnit case, it was the economic redistribution policies of the Modi government, which were primarily responsible for the large gains made by the BJP. There was charisma, yes; chemistry, yes. And Balakot and the weak faces of the Opposition, yes. But by far the most important factor was the accelerated nature of inclusive growth unleashed in Modi 1.0.

Let us count the components of this inclusive growth. The much-criticised demonetisation was the first salvo. It made possible a sharp increase in direct tax collections, an increase which made possible expenditure on the poor (here defined as the bottom 37 per cent of the population or 500 million people). To ensure that there were no leakages in the expenditure on the poor, the government decided to create the JAM trinity — Jan Dhan, Aadhaar and Mobile. The Jan Dhan accounts made it possible to transfer funds directly into the banks of beneficiaries using the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) mechanism while Aadhaar ensured that the identification errors were minimised.

Over the last five years, the government has made a total transfer, in 2011 prices, of Rs 2.15 trillion in subsidies which include LPG, the PM Kisan Yojana and other social security programmes. The government has also managed to create collective assets at an unprecedented scale. Roads: In 2013, only 56 per cent of villages in India were connected; in 2018, the road coverage is over 91 per cent. Electricity: Under



CR Sasikumar

the Saubhagya scheme, an additional 20 million houses have been electrified. While these assets may not directly affect the measurement of consumption poverty, their availability is critical for future productivity gains, and gains that will have an impact on the economy (and poverty reduction).

Additionally, the government has made an asset transfer amounting to Rs 1.21 lakh crore or Rs 1,210 billion in 2011 prices. This asset transfer is primarily in terms of the construction of toilets and houses. The benefits for poverty reduction in this transfer should not be underestimated. Toilets lead to better health, and less spread of disease. The psychic and happiness "income" worthy of a pucca roof is also beyond an economic calculation.

Our contention is that the Modi government provided inclusive growth, and the recipients of this were thankful to the government and hence voted for it. The above government programmes did not differentiate on the basis of caste or religion; and many surveys have documented that the people felt "touched", possibly for the first time, by the Centre's redistributive policies. Many states have been known for being efficient in the execution, and delivery, of public welfare programmes. The same, unfortunately, cannot be said for most programmes run by the Central government.

But that was before Modi 1.0. We have mentioned the various types of transfers that have taken place over the last five years. These programmes, if effective, must have had an impact on reducing absolute poverty. There is an abundance of data on poverty alleviation, both for India and the world (primarily through the World Bank). This poverty effect is measurable, and relatively non-controversial and free of subjective biases associated with voting behaviour (for example, voters were happier with a toilet and therefore voted for Modi/BJP).

We offer two sets of poverty calculations for India. The reduction in absolute poverty according to the middle-income poverty line of PPP \$3.2 per capita per day (pppd); and the reduction in poverty associated with just the pure asset transfer (houses and toilets) of Rs. 1.2 trillion. For our sample of comparable countries, we use World Bank data for non-oil developing economies with a minimum population size of 10 million (a total of 54 countries).

Two time-periods are chosen — the 10-year period 2004-2013 (UPA I & II) and the Modi 1.0 period (2014-2018). In case you for-

It was the economic redistribution policies of the Modi government which were primarily responsible for the large gains made by the BJP. There was charisma, yes; chemistry, yes. And Balakot and the weak faces of the Opposition yes. But by far the most important factor was the accelerated nature of inclusive growth unleashed in Modi 1.0.

got, our purpose is to assess the "inclusive growth equal to poverty reduction performance" under UPA and Modi 1.0.

During the period 2004-2013, the best-performing economy was Vietnam with a reduction in poverty of 50 percentage points (ppt). China was second with a 37.5 ppt reduction and India 18th with a 17.2 ppt reduction. Between 2014-2018 Ethiopia is the best poverty reduction economy (28.8 ppt), Bangladesh second (21.5 ppt), Cote d'Ivoire third at 15.5 ppt and followed by Cambodia and India (both at 14.9 ppt reduction). Note that for the same poverty line, poverty was reduced by 17 ppt over 10 years (UPA) and at nearly twice the rate during five-years of Modi 1.0 (15 ppt).

We now proceed towards an estimate of additional absolute poverty reduction due to asset transfers. These asset transfers accrue mainly to the bottom 500 million; hence, total transfer of Rs 1,210 b for 500 m amounts to Rs 2,420 per person. At a 7.5 per cent discount rate, this asset will result in an annual flow of (2420\*0.075) Rs. 181 in perpetuity. Given a PPP exchange rate of Rs 20, this asset transfer is equal to a transfer of nine PPP\$ a year or PPP\$ 45 over the five years of Modi 1.0 (since we are looking at poverty reduction from 2014 to 2018). The average consumption level of the 40th percentile in India in 2018 is PPP\$ 3.18 per day or PPP\$ 1160 annually. Hence, the asset-income transfer amounts to approximately an additional 4 per cent of consumption.

One final calculation and then we are done. An increase of 4 per cent in the consumption level of the bottom 40 per cent will result in approximately an additional 2.4 ppt reduction in poverty in 2018. In other words, poverty in India in 2018 was not 41.1 per cent as observed but rather 38.7 per cent (middle income poverty line of 3.2 PPP\$ a day), and this was the third best poverty reduction in the world.

No matter what the calculation, the Indian record on inclusive growth was spectacular during 2014-18; and much better than the good record during 2004-2013. We think this performance (delivery of welfare) was noticed by the poor voter; and why the 2019 election result was not a surprise to us. Chemistry delivered — because it was backed by a solid performance.

Bhalla is contributing editor, The Indian Express. Bhasin is a New Delhi-based policy researcher. Views expressed are personal

### WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The path of peace in Afghanistan continues to test the patience of all those involved in the task of bringing security to the war-torn country." — DAWN

## Slow and steady loses the race

Congress and other Opposition parties are up against a regime whose leaders have a 24x7 commitment to electoral politics. Their time for 2024 starts now



ANIL DHARKER

THE DRAMA around Rahul Gandhi's resignation hides a central fact: The Congress party became a slow, lumbering elephant quite a while ago, and the failure of 2019 shows it's a very slow learner indeed.

Looked at objectively, none of the Gandhis after Indira wanted to be in politics with the sole exception of Sanjay (had he lived, he would have out-Modied Narendra Modi, but that's another matter). Rajiv Gandhi was content being an airline pilot, Sonia being a home maker, Priyanka being a mother and Rahul drifting along doing a bit of everything. All of them answered a "higher call" and became reluctant politicians because the Nehru-Gandhi name was conjoined to the Congress party.

If Rajiv had said no when he was air-dropped into the PM's post, the political trajectory of India would have been different, but that's one of the ifs and buts of history. At the same time, it is easy to forget that after the 1998 elections were won by Atal Bihari Vajpayee's NDA, Congress was in dire straits, and Sonia's entry rejuvenated the party. She refused the prime ministership, which was admirable; she didn't let go the levers of power, which was not.

The ambivalence to a full-fledged career in politics has resulted in a vacillating reluctance to plunge headlong into the hurly-burly of politics. Look at the dates: Rahul's elevation to Congress President was talked about for years but he took up the position only on December 16, 2017, less than 18 months before the 2019 elections. Similarly, the will-she-won't-she question about Priyanka's political entry was a matter of speculation for months, but she was made general secretary of UP East only in February 2019, a mere three months before the general elections.

This Hamletesque equivocation doesn't work in politics. In fact, it induces a soporific attitude to fast-changing circumstances, rather than the pro-active, dynamic action which changing situations demand. Consider the central theme of the recent elections. Narendra Modi — fully aware of the multiple economic failures of his government — made his campaign a presidential-style one and happily positioned it as a Modi versus Rahul Gandhi contest.

The absurdity of this was obvious: Here

was a leader of a party which had won 282 seats in 2014 against someone whose party had just 44. This was a David-Goliath story with a twist — Goliath had all the ammunition. It was necessary to change this narrative as quickly as possible, yet Sonia Gandhi got in touch with leaders of Opposition parties to make the point that Rahul wasn't necessarily the PM candidate as late as May 15. By then, six of the seven voting phases in the country were already over.

Even the perennial Rahul bashers would have to admit that Rahul Gandhi fought the unequal battle against Modi valiantly and courageously, and that each passing day saw him grow in stature. However, to add to his handicap, he wasn't just battling an outsized Modi; he was also battling the "Pappu" image, created and viciously propagated by the BJP's trolling factory. He needed to fight that first, yet his revelatory television interview with NDTV's Ravish Kumar took place only on May 11, when five of seven polling phases were over. A spate of other interviews followed — all open and unscripted — in which Rahul impressed with his frank and thoughtful answers to often difficult questions. But what use were these when they came so very late?

People like Narendra Modi and Amit Shah have no interests outside politics. Whether such a single-minded focus, which excludes all other aspects of human existence, is good for the country is another matter. What their attitude does show is that this 24x7 commitment is essential for electoral success: Politics is not for the dilettante. You can't work for a few months and hope that miracles will happen. "Miracles" are nothing but the result of a long hard slog put in over years and years.

The Modi wave is so strong that it will engulf all in its way unless the other parties get together and form pre-poll alliances. Even thoughtful supporters of the BJP (yes, there are a few) agree that the kind of massive mandate given to Modi is not good for the country: Democracy needs a unified and coherent Opposition to apply the occasional brake and prevent the government in power from going out of control. For this cohesion to happen, the Mayawatis of the world have to give up unrealistic ambitions, the Sheila Dikshits have to go into retirement and the Mamata Banerjees have to dampen their fire with reason and logic. It's a herculean and almost impossible task but it's the leader of the Congress Party (still the biggest Opposition party in parliament), who has to play the facilitator. For the Congress, and for non-BJP parties, 2024 starts now.

Dharker is a writer and columnist

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### TASKS AT HAND

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The new order' (IE, May 31). With Arun Jaitley and Sushma Swaraj unavailable for a place in Narendra Modi's cabinet, a paucity of ministerial level talent, an internal problem of the BJP, has once again come to the fore. The induction of Amit Shah and S Jaishankar in the Union cabinet is more of a necessity than anything else. How the government functions will be the real test of this new order. Right now, let's not jump to any conclusion.

Vijai Pant, Hampur

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The new order' (IE, May 31). After being inducted into Narendra Modi's cabinet and leading his party to phenomenal success, Amit Shah will have to pave the way for someone else to take up the BJP president's job. Whoever is given that responsibility will have to fill very big shoes. One potential replacement is a close confidant of both Modi and Shah. J P Nadda has delivered 61 seats in an intensely fought election in Uttar Pradesh, despite a SP-BSP alliance.

Bal Govind, Noida

#### TALK, PLEASE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Play the long game' (IE, May 31). While the writer asserts that the current government's — "terror and talks can't go together" — suits India's interests, Delhi needs to acknowledge the relation between the elected representatives and military in Pakistan and also take cognisance of the role non-state actors play there. For a stability in South Asia, both countries need to be come to the negotiating table without any baggage.

Aishwarya Shetty, Mumbai

#### INVEST IN PEOPLE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'How to use

#### LETTER OF THE WEEK

##### TMC's TASKS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'What Didi does' (IE, May 30). After his victory in the General Elections, the Prime Minister said that there are two classes: "Haves" and "Have nots". Both need to be taken care of for development and growth. Mamata Banerjee needs to remember that the protests she led in 2008 paved her way to power in West Bengal and led to the exit of Tata Motors from the Nano Project in West Bengal to Gujarat. The present PM was then the state's Chief Minister. But in the run up to the elections, TMC flaunted the presence of Tatas in West Bengal. Such changes in position does not seem to have done the party any good. The TMC has much to introspect.

Krishan Kumar Chug, New Delhi

the mandate' (IE, May 31). If India has to progress, we have to do away with culture of freebies and seriously invest in infrastructure, health, education and labour-intensive industries. As unemployment is one of the pressing problems of the country, the first task of the government is to create employment opportunities for the younger generation. Also, a workforce without medical benefits is less productive than the workforce which is healthy. Hence, a substantial amount should be reserved for health facilities of the people of the country. It is pathetic to see villages and tribal areas not having enough health facilities.

Veena Shenoy, Thane



ASAD ALI

Ek hammam mein tabdil hui hai duniya  
sab hi narige haiin, kise dekh ke sharmaaun maini  
— Sulaiman Areeb

THERE IS SOMETHING we need to be grateful for to Prime Minister Narendra Modi. No, not the injection of a testosterone-fuelled nationalism that now seems to course through the veins of every patriotic Indian. He has revealed the sanctum sanctorum of the people's personal politics in all its nakedness. Like political predilections. Modi has, thankfully, tripped a switch in our subconscious and ensured we have enough confidence to show the world who we really are as political creatures.

This big reveal has meant the foregrounding of the "right" liberals, ignored first cousins of the "left" liberals. Let's call them RLs and LLs. RLs are tolerant of diverse people and open to political engagements at dinner parties and social media. They don't want to ban things. Most things their celebrated LL cousins do, really. Except, they believe in the might of the right — at least now they do. And now is when they are gloating under the glorious rays of a massive mandate.

However, just as the LLs were, mostly, circumscribed by class privilege, just as the LLs skimmed the surface of issues before form-

## In their own ivory towers

The ascendant right liberal is as elitist and parochial as his left counterpart

ing opinions and outraging on social media, and, just as they often fit an arguably pre-set narrative in their heads to an assortment of facts before them — the RLs too, suffer from this malaise.

The RLs feel the mandate doesn't have much to do with Hindutva. They assert the voters have chosen a man who can make India stronger. Pulwama and Balakot are the new markers of patriotic fervour and those questioning this hate the country. But just over a month ago, more than 150 retired military officers including former chiefs of the army, navy and air force wrote an open letter to the president urging to "take all necessary steps to urgently direct all political parties that they must forthwith desist from using the military, military uniforms or symbols, and any actions by military formations or personnel, for political purposes or to further their political agendas". Do the RLs feel these officers have denuded the idea of India and national security by speaking out? In a report in this publication (IE, January 24), it was revealed how woefully short the IAF will be in the next two years when it comes to squadrons of fighter aircraft. Did the national security enthusiasts outrage then?

Another RL topic is how the mandate reflects a people united in their recognition of a singular identity, as an Indian, negating

caste. This is as facile an argument as the idea of soya "meat" is in biryani. Multiple publications including this one have tried to contextualise how the BJP has been exceptionally efficient in rewiring caste equations. The party's understanding, for instance, in the Hindi heartland and UP in particular, of the OBCs. The Yadavs being a core SP votebank, it focused more in ticket distribution on smaller OBC castes and "Other OBCs", which worked in their favour. Among Dalits, BJP gave tickets to even smaller jaatis. All this isn't nullifying caste currents. It's creating and capitalising on newer eddies in the caste pool to the benefit of the BJP.

The fear that minorities feel is one aspect about which there isn't much the RLs can say with conviction. The violence, they know, will never stop — whether it is Adivasi professor Jeetraj Hansda's arrest or the regulation Muslim/Dalit man being lynched. The only option is to generously apply the palliative of "these are fringe elements". That we still consider ideology-driven goons (of any party) as fringe is indicative of the intransigence of some to look reality in the eye.

A steely resolve to evade reality that strikes a dissonant note with their personal politics unites RLs and LLs. Consider these: A Muslim domestic help in Mumbai says she has enough savings to buy a house in the

suburbs but she'd rather rent one owned by a Hindu. The financial gain acts as incentive for the landlord to ensure "goons" don't come to throw her out because of her religion. If she buys a house, the chances of getting targeted are higher. Another Muslim domestic help who hails from a Saharanpur village in UP says that, in the past women in her village had to wait for certain times of the day to use the toilet, which was some distance away from their homes. Now, because of PM Modi's schemes, she finally has some dignity. The RLs would likely be silent at the former and the LLs would dismiss the latter as a rarity (both verifiable instances).

For both, their leftist and rightist tendencies are incidental, a function of their lived experience. Their concerns display a common lack of acknowledgement of class-caste privilege and they share the same enthusiastic disdain for diametrically opposite viewpoints. One category has simply been at the wheel longer than the other, which now feels compelled to take over and drive in the wrong direction with the same sense of urgency and confidence as the former. A new grammar of political consciousness has to evolve that goes beyond the teflon uniformity of the liberal identity.

asad.ali@expressindia.com

