



Andhra spectrum

Jagan Reddy is showcasing his widened social base with his choice of Ministers

Starting off as an unsure heir to his father Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy's legacy 10 years ago, Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy has since transformed himself into a mass leader. He has done this by sheer tenacity, but his political rise was devoid of an ideological thread. Deeply aware of this inadequacy, which is more pronounced amid the BJP's dominance nationally, Mr. Reddy has made an early move to fortress the wide-spectrum social coalition that accorded his YSR Congress Party a landslide victory, by appointing five deputies. The death of his father, then Chief Minister and better known as YSR, in 2009 had pushed the Congress over the cliff in the State, a downslide in fortunes that befell it nationally too. Humiliated by the Congress and jailed during its rule, Mr. Reddy continued his tireless travels across the State, finally arriving this summer at his destination, the CM's chair. The constitution of his Council of Ministers, including Mekathoti Sucharita, a Dalit woman, as the Home Minister, and five deputies, is evidently aimed at nurturing the coalition of social groups that he singlehandedly built up through his travels. The five Deputy CMs are from the Scheduled Caste (K. Narayana Swamy), Scheduled Tribe (Pamula Pushpa Sreevani), backward caste (Pilli Subhash Chandrabose), Muslim (Amzath Basha) and Kapu (Alla Kali Krishna Srinivas) communities.

Unitary projects such as nationalism have strong homogenising tendencies that consider particular identities and their aspirations for representation irrelevant or even fissiparous. Weaker sections of society are often at the receiving end of such projects, even if they are enthusiastic subscribers. Mr. Reddy's success in weaving together a political base that denied the BJP a foothold in Andhra Pradesh, a State where it could not win a single seat, and vanquished the Telugu Desam Party was built on a sensitive appreciation of the aspiration for representation among diverse sections of society. Mr. Reddy's predecessor, N. Chandrababu Naidu, had two deputies, one a Kapu and one from another backward caste; that was aimed more at accommodating formidable interest groups rather than empowering the weakest. YSR had won in 2004 and 2009 with an expansive welfare agenda. Mr. Reddy believes that welfarism alone is not sufficient and representation is critical in the changed situation. YSR's victories were the bedrock of the Congress in 2004 and 2009; Mr. Reddy's victory signals the decimation of the party in the State. But his politics holds out some useful lessons for the Congress and other parties seeking to challenge the Hindutva juggernaut: that material betterment of the citizenry needs to be complemented with wider social coalitions.

St. Petersburg consensus

Russia and China are strengthening ties amid tensions with the U.S.

The bonhomie between China's and Russia's leaders at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum last week was demonstrable. In a sign of the heightened tensions between the U.S. and the two countries, Russia's annual investment gathering was boycotted by the U.S. Ambassador to Russia, Jon Huntsman. His absence was ascribed to the prevailing environment in Russia for foreign entrepreneurs, typified by the detention of U.S. private equity investor Michael Calvey on allegations of fraud. Conversely, the Chinese telecommunications equipment manufacturer Huawei signed an agreement with Russia's principal mobile operator to start 5G networks, in a rebuff to Washington's attempts to isolate the firm internationally. Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping made it clear in St. Petersburg that the tensions with the West had only drawn them closer. The rift with Russia began with Moscow's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the stand-off in eastern Ukraine that continues. Russia's tensions with the U.S. and some EU countries stem also from their opposition to the 1,200-km-long Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia to Germany. U.S. objections draw in part from its eagerness to export liquefied natural gas to Europe, besides thwarting Moscow's ambition to dominate the region's energy market. Far more sensitive has been U.S. Special Counsel Robert Mueller's inquiry into possible Russian meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Washington's blacklisting of Huawei, prohibiting it from selling technology to the U.S. and barring domestic firms from supplying semiconductors to Beijing, falls into a class of its own among international trade disputes.

Amid these tensions, in St. Petersburg Mr. Xi and Mr. Putin emphasised that bilateral relations were at a historic high, marked by increased diplomatic and strategic cooperation. China participated in Russian military exercises on its eastern border last September, marking a watershed. Moscow and Beijing, hostile rivals of the Cold War era, have for a while been adopting common positions at the UN Security Council on critical international issues. Bilateral relations are also guided by pragmatism. Russia appears realistic about the growing Chinese economic clout in Central Asia, once firmly in its sphere of influence, thanks to China's massive infrastructure investments under the Belt and Road Initiative. Chinese cooperation would moreover prove critical for Russia's elaborate plans to exploit the Northern Sea Route along the Arctic as an alternative transportation hub. International sanctions have not been very effective in isolating Russia. European states, notably Germany, recognise the importance of engaging with Russia to contain Mr. Putin's expansionist aims. Equally, President Donald Trump's "America first" policy is compelling potential rivals to make common cause.

Inhumane, and utterly undemocratic

Mohammad Sanaullah's case must serve as an urgent call for rethinking the National Register of Citizens



GAUTAM BHATIA

On June 8, upon the orders of the Gauhati High Court, Mohammad Sanaullah was released on bail from a detention camp in Assam. He had been detained on May 29, after a Foreigners Tribunal had declared him an illegal immigrant. The Gauhati High Court's bail order came after a week of sustained public pressure, occasioned by the revelation that Mr. Sanaullah had served for three decades in the Indian Army.

In the intervening period, a shocking number of irregularities surfaced. In its inquiry report, the Assam border police had written that Mr. Sanaullah was a 'labourer'. The three men who signed the case report claimed that the investigating officer had fabricated their signatures. The investigating officer himself admitted that it might have been an "administrative mix-up". Yet, it was on the basis of such shoddy material that the Foreigners Tribunal – a quasi-judicial body expected to follow the rule of law – came to the conclusion that Mr. Sanaullah was a "foreigner", and packed him off to a detention camp – until the High Court stepped in to set him at liberty.

But Mr. Sanaullah is among the luckier ones. Investigative journalists have revealed over the last few years that 'administrative errors' of this kind are the rule rather than the exception. As Mr. Sanaullah acknowledged in an interview after being released, there were people in the detention camps with similar stories, who had been there for 10 years or more. For these individuals, without the benefit of media scrutiny, there may

be no bail – only an endless detention. But by forcing the conversation onto the national stage, Mr. Sanaullah's case has provided hope that we may yet recognise the unfolding citizenship tragedy in Assam for what it is, and step back from the brink while there is still time.

NRC, Foreigners Tribunals

According to the Assam Accord, individuals who entered Assam after March 24, 1971 are illegal immigrants. There are two parallel processes to establish citizenship: the Foreigners Tribunals operating under the Foreigners Act, and the National Register of Citizens (NRC), which is under preparation. While nominally and formally independent, in practice, these two systems bled into each other, with people who have been declared as foreigners by the Foreigners Tribunals, and even their families, dropped from the draft NRC.

For something as elemental and important as citizenship, one would expect these systems to be implemented as carefully as possible, and with procedural safeguards. This is especially true when we think of the consequences of being declared a non-citizen: disenfranchisement, exclusion from public services, incarceration in detention camps, statelessness, and deportation. Before treating an individual – a human being – to such drastic consequences, the very least a humane and civilised society can do is to ensure that the rule of law has been followed to its last degree.

The reality, however, is the exact opposite. In a vast number of cases, the legally mandated initial inquiry before an individual is dragged before a tribunal as a suspected "foreigner" simply does not happen – indeed, it did not happen for Mr. Sanaullah. The Tri-



RITU BALAKONWAR

bunals themselves are only constrained by a very limited number of procedural safeguards. This has led to situations where Tribunals have issued notices to entire families, instead of just the suspected "foreigner". Additionally, reports show that Foreigners Tribunals habitually declare individuals to be "foreigners" on the basis of clerical errors in documents, such as a spelling mistake, an inconsistency in age, and so on. Needless to say, the hardest hit by this form of "justice" are the vulnerable and the marginalised, who have limited documentation at the best of time, and who are rarely in a position to correct errors across documents. On occasion, orders determining citizenship have been passed by tribunals without even assigning reasons, a basic *sine qua non* of the rule of law. In addition, a substantial number of individuals are sent to detention camps without being heard – on the basis of *ex parte* orders – and the detention centres themselves are little better than concentration camps, where families are separated, and people not allowed to move beyond narrow confined spaces for years on end.

The process under the NRC is little better. Driven by the Supreme Court, it has been defined by sealed covers and opaque proceedings. For example, in a behind-closed-doors consultation with the NRC Coordinator, the Supreme Court developed a new

method of ascertaining citizenship known as the "family tree method". This method was not debated or scrutinised publicly, and ground reports found that people from the hinterland were not only unaware of the method, but those who were aware had particular difficulties in putting together "family trees" of the kind that were required (the burden fell disproportionately upon women). And recently, it was found that a process by which individuals could file "objections" against people whose names had appeared in the draft NRC – and on the basis of which these people would be forced to once again prove their citizenship – had resulted in thousands of indiscriminate objections being filed, on a seemingly random basis, causing significant hardship and trauma to countless individuals. However, when the people coordinating these "objections" were contacted, they brushed it off by saying that it was mere "collateral damage" in the quest to weed out illegal immigrants.

The role of the judiciary

In a process riddled with such flaws, and where the consequences are so drastic, one would expect the judiciary, the guardian of fundamental rights and the guarantor of the rule of law, to intervene. Instead, the Supreme Court, led by the present Chief Justice of India, has played the roles of cheerleader, midwife, and overseer. Not only has it driven the NRC process, as outlined above but it has repeatedly attempted to speed up proceedings, pulled up the State government when it has asked to be allowed to release people detained for a long time, and instead of questioning procedural violations and infringement of rights, has instead asked why more people are not in detention centres, and why

more people are not being deported. Most egregiously, the Court even used a PIL about the inhumane conditions in detention centres in order to pursue this project.

However, what the Supreme Court has failed to understand is that in questions of life and death, where the cost of error is so high, it is not "speed" that matters, but the protection of rights. But through its conduct, the Supreme Court has transformed itself from the protector of the rule of law into an enthusiastic abettor of its daily violation. And the Gauhati High Court has been no better, passing a bizarre and unreasoned order stating that it would be a "logical corollary" that the family members of a declared foreigner would also be foreigners, on the basis of which the border police have sent the names of entire families to NRC authorities. This is the very antithesis of how constitutional courts should behave.

Focus the spotlight

Mohammad Sanaullah is, for now, a free man. But a society in which his case is the exception instead of the rule, where it needs a person to be an ex-Army man, and his case pursued by national media for a full week before interim bail is granted, is a society that has utterly abandoned the rule of law. Yet Mr. Sanaullah's case can do some good as well: it can prompt some urgent national introspection about a situation where, in the State of Assam, thousands of people languish in detention camps for years, victims of a process that, to use an old adage, would not be sufficient to "hang a dog on". If anything can trigger an urgent and imperative call for change, surely this will – and must.

Gautam Bhatia is a Delhi-based lawyer

A clear arc from India to Nigeria

The leadership in both countries must take the initiative to energise bilateral ties



MAHESH SACHDEV

It was a coincidence straight out of the silver screens in Mumbai or Lagos: the leaders of India and Nigeria both began their respective second terms within a day of each other following their unexpectedly decisive election victories. The challenges faced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari during their first terms were uncannily similar: security against terror, monetary and fiscal conundrums, a communal and sectarian divide, chronic unemployment, rampant corruption, rural distress and a fragile neighbourhood being the recurrent themes.

Each of the two leaders is widely acknowledged as an outlier to the system riddled with corruption and nepotism and is admired for his personal probity, hard work and discipline.

For instance, Mr. Buhari, 76, returned to power in 2015 – 30 years after he ruled Nigeria as a military dictator. The intervening decades were spent variously in detention, farming and as challenger-candi-

date in three presidential elections.

Diverse trade

It may be tempting to both Indians and Nigerians to shrug at these similarities as banal trivia; however, under them lies plenty of substance and potential linking the two countries and aspirations of their people. First, Nigeria being Africa's most populous country (191 million) and economy (\$376 billion) as well as the world's sixth largest oil exporter (about 2 million barrels per day) is evidently important to us. According to the latest Indian Department of Commerce statistics, Nigeria is India's largest trading partner in Africa (19th overall) with total trade estimated at \$13.5 billion in 2018-19. As official Nigerian data show, thanks to our booming oil imports, India is Nigeria's largest trading partner. For the same reason, Nigeria enjoys 4:1 surplus in bilateral trade. Nevertheless, it is still a sizeable market for India's manufactured exports, such as (2018-19 figures) miscellaneous machinery (\$500 million), vehicles (\$495 million), pharmaceutical products (\$447 million), textile items (\$299 million), iron and steel articles (\$152 million) and plastics (\$109 million).

In contrast to the stagnancy in India's global exports, its exports to Nigeria surged by 27% last year



FILE PHOTO/PTI

to reach around \$2,880 million. Indian investments in Nigeria are estimated at around \$15 billion with a further \$5 billion in the pipeline. There are at least 180 Indian companies operating in Nigeria with pharmaceuticals, steel, power, retailing, fast-moving consumer goods and skillings as their mainstay. Approximately 50,000 Indians reside in Nigeria, some of them for decades. Most of them are professionals, such as engineers, accountants, bankers, trainers and health-care experts.

Success despite apathy

While all these facts go to underline the substantive nature of India-Nigeria ties, they also point to two important contextual factors. First, all these achievements are the outcome of valiant attempts by individual stakeholders with scant official encouragement or support.

For instance, some simple tweaking in our visa procedure can help thousands of Nigerians avail of our medical and educa-

tional facilities, benefiting all sides and creating huge people-to-people goodwill. Despite the encouraging numbers, the two governments have not yet been able to facilitate direct connectivity of air travel, banking and shipping – steps which could have promoted the ease of doing bilateral business.

Second, enormous potential still waits to be leveraged in such sectors such as upstream hydrocarbons (despite India being the largest buyer of Nigerian crude), agriculture, health care and skillings. Despite their growth, Indian exports to Nigeria are still around a quarter of China's.

Much potential

Although bilateral ties have had to face strong headwinds during the past five years, more could have been accomplished. Mr. Buhari, who was trained in India as a military officer and holds this country in high esteem, attended the third India-Africa Forum Summit held in October 2015 and met Mr. Modi for bilateral talks. Then Vice President Hamid Ansari's bilateral visit in September 2016 broke the hiatus in top-level contact since Manmohan Singh's Nigeria visit, as Prime Minister, in 2007.

Though some ministerial-level visits took place in the past five years, these were mostly for multilateral events in India. The last ses-

sion of the Joint Commission Meeting was in 2011 and the Foreign Office Consultations were held in 2003. Bilateral ties have not drawn commensurate proportion of the resources offered by India to its African partners largely due to some systemic issues. Defence cooperation has been mostly episodic and training oriented.

As the two leaders begin their respective second innings, they need to give a push to India-Nigeria ties sooner rather than later. Actions along few force-multiplier axes suggest themselves. With oil and other commodities becoming a seller's market, an early summit between the two leaders is an obvious imperative. It could evolve a multi-pronged strategy to leverage evident economic complementarities in sectors such as hydrocarbons, infrastructure, institution-building, defence and agriculture. A purposive follow-up session of the joint economic commission soon thereafter could provide an incremental and sustainable road map empowering the relevant bilateral stakeholders. If handled deftly and with political will, it could usher in an India-Nigeria economic synergy that has been untapped for some decades.

Mahesh Sachdev was the Indian High Commissioner to Nigeria during 2008-13. He is the author of the book, 'Nigeria: A Business Manual'

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 word of advice

One wonders which direction Indian democracy is headed upon hearing Congress president Rahul Gandhi's renewed attack on the Prime Minister ("Modi's campaign filled with hatred: Rahul", June 9). The campaigning during the general election was marred by personal insinuations. Practically no short- or long-term policies for the welfare of people and steps to strengthen democracy were discussed. Mr. Gandhi knows very well that his 'chowkidar chor hai' line did not find resonance with the people. The Opposition must let the government begin work, while maintaining vigil.

P. R. V. RAJA,
Pandalam, Kerala

Party travails

The emerging fault lines within the Congress party,

right from its AICC headquarters to almost every State unit, are a serious setback to the party ("Congress travails go from bad to worse", June 9). The epidemic of open dissidence explains the parochial mindset of Congress leaders. The lack of ideological commitment is evident. The leaders of the party are supposed to be its soldiers who strengthen it during crises, but we have the reverse happening here.

N. SADHASIVA REDDY,
Bengaluru

Creeping fear

The report, "A thread of fear and hate" ('Ground Zero' page, June 8), holds a mirror to the harsh reality of fear gripping the minorities predominantly in north India as well as highlighting the danger posed to lives and

livelihoods by right-wing elements. The Prime Minister's pronouncement of 'Sabka Vishwas' immediately after the general election, his declared intention to win over the minorities and his dramatic gesture of highlighting the importance of the Constitution raised hope of a new beginning. It should not be allowed to fade away. The right wing should know that the greatness of India can never be realised by suppressing its multiple identities.

MANOHAR ALEMBATH,
Kannur, Kerala

Use with care

In our school days in the 1950s and 1960s, paper and stationery use were important especially in large families that worked hard to make both ends meet. In our family, for instance, we were given

strict instructions by elders not to leave any blank space in notebooks ('Open Page', "Go for the blank space", June 9). Any blank space was later combined with other such papers and bound afresh into small rough notebooks 4 inches by 5 inches in size. There were occasions when the opening side of a notebook and the pages thereafter were used for one subject, with the reverse end (upside down) used for another subject. I still remember how some of us did combined studies in mathematics. We used chalk pieces to work out the problems on a red oxide floor in order to save paper, and then used a duster cloth to wipe off our work. The 'use with care' habit was reflected in postcard writing too.

SESHAGIRI ROW KARRY,
Hyderabad

The wink

It was a delight to read the writer's delectable account of variants of the wink ('Open Page', "The simple pleasures of a momentary wink", June 9). I wonder whether the present generation, so busy with gadgets, has found time to even think about the fading of this 'simple pleasure'.

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In the 'Life' page article titled "A glorious yellow bloom in honour of botanist E.K. Janaki Ammal" (June 9, 2019), a sentence that read "Mrs. Viraraghavan, who claimed that the rose named E.K. Janaki Ammal is the only tropical rose species in the world ..." should be corrected to say: "Mrs. Viraraghavan said that the rose named E.K. Janaki Ammal was bred from *Rosa clinophylla*, which is the only tropical rose species in the world..."

A sentence in the Business page report headlined "Banking system on the cusp of a transformation: Das" (June 8, 2019) read: "However, if we take into account the capital conservation buffer (CCB), some banks, especially public-sector banks (PSBs), are falling short of the required 10.875%." It should have been 1.875%.

In the story titled "Can't stop, won't stop: the rise of Tamil rap" (The Hindu Weekend, June 8, 2019), the reference to Singapore-based Lady Kash should be corrected to read as Singapore-born Lady Kash.

The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in

Is NITI Aayog old wine in a new bottle?

There must be a review of what the think tank has achieved to adopt the new role described in its charter



ARUN MAIRA

The Narendra Modi government has its plate full. It needs to increase employment and incomes; revive investments and growth; untangle the financial sector; navigate muddled-up international trade; solve the perennial problems of poor education and health, and the growing problems of environmental pollution and water scarcity. Even though statistical confusion was created in the run-up to the election to deny that problems of unemployment and growth were serious, high-powered Cabinet committees have been formed to tackle them.

Regardless of whether or not India has the fastest growing GDP, it has a long way to go to achieve economic and social inclusion, and restore environmental sustainability. India's problems are complex because they are all interrelated. Fixing one part of the system alone can make matters worse. For example, providing skills to millions of youth before there are enough employment opportunities is a bold fix that can backfire. The complexity of the task demands a good plan and a good strategy.

Under scrutiny

Does the Indian government have the capability to make good plans and strategies to address its complex challenges? Since India has not done as well as it should have to produce faster growth with more inclusion and sustainability, one would have to surmise that it has not developed the requisite capabilities. Mr. Modi has known this. Indeed, the first major reform he announced in his first term was to abolish the Planning Commission. He replaced it with the lofty titled 'National Institution for Transforming India' (NITI Aayog).

Now, when the country's economy has not performed to the high expectations Mr. Modi had created, and citizens' aspirations for 'acche din' have not been realised, the performance of the NITI Aayog is under scrutiny, as it should be. Many people are even nostalgically recalling the Planning Commission, including



KAMAL MARANG

some who were very critical of it and wanted it overhauled.

Mr. Modi's predecessors, Manmohan Singh and Atal Bihari Vajpayee, had faced similar, large, economic, social, political and global challenges. When Vajpayee was presented a nine-point plan by a global think-tank to increase the economy's growth to 9%, he famously retorted, "We know all that. The question is, how will it all be done?" He highlighted that many stakeholders must be involved in the implementation of a plan in a large, diversified and democratic country – the States, the private sector, civil society and even the political Opposition. Therefore, it is not good enough to have a plan, there must also be a strategy for its cooperative implementation too.

Dr. Singh declared that reform of the Planning Commission was long overdue. An intensive exercise was undertaken. Many stakeholders were consulted. International practices were examined. An outline was drawn of a substantially reformed institution which would, in Dr. Singh's words, have a capability for "systems reform" rather than making of Five-Year Plans, and which would have the "power of persuasion" without providing budgets.

A commission chaired by C. Rangarajan, then Chairman of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council, examined budgetary processes, divisions of responsibilities between the Finance Ministry and the Planning Commission, and distinctions between 'plan' and 'non-plan' expenditures. It concluded that budgetary responsibility must be concentrated in the Finance Ministry, and it was no longer desirable for the Plan-

ning Commission to have powers for financial provisions.

Some in the Planning Commission were worried that it would lose its teeth if it did not have any financial power. How else would it persuade the States to do what it wanted them to do? Chief Ministers retorted that the Planning Commission must improve its ability to understand their needs and to develop ideas that they would want to adopt because they accepted the ideas as good for them, not because they would have to if they wanted the money. Mr. Modi, as a powerful Chief Minister, understood well the limitations in the Planning Commission's capabilities and what it needed to do to reform itself, which the investigations commissioned by Dr. Singh had also revealed. It is not surprising, therefore, that the bold charter of NITI Aayog that Mr. Modi announced in 2015 was consistent with Dr. Singh's and Vajpayee's insights. He was implementing an idea whose time had come.

A good starting point

Implementation of radical change is never easy. If things don't go well soon, nostalgia will rise for the old order – even though there was dissatisfaction with it. And the change-maker will be blamed for the disruption. The NITI Aayog charter is a good starting point for a new journey in transforming the governance of the Indian economy. The NITI Aayog and the government would do well to conduct an open-minded review of what NITI Aayog has achieved so far to adopt the new role described in its charter – that of a catalyst of change in a complex, federal, socioeconomic system. And assess whether it has

transformed its capabilities sufficiently to become an effective systems reformer and persuader of stakeholders, rather than merely be an announcer of lofty multi-year goals and manager of projects, which many suspect it is.

There is deep concern that NITI Aayog has lost its integrity as an independent institution to guide the government; that it has become a mouthpiece of the government and an implementer of the government's projects. Many insist that NITI Aayog must have the ability to independently evaluate the government's programmes at the Centre and in the States. Some recall that an Independent Evaluation Office set up in the last days of the UPA-II government was swiftly closed by the NDA government. Others counter that the Planning Commission had a Programme Evaluation Organisation all along and which continues. They miss the need for fundamental transformation in the approach to planning and change.

The traditional approach of after-the-fact evaluation sits in the old paradigm of numbers, budgets and controls. The transformational approach to planning and implementation that 21st century India needs, which is alluded to in NITI's charter, requires evaluations and course-corrections in the midst of action. It requires new methods to speed up 'organisational learning' among stakeholders in the system who must make plans together and implement them together.

The NITI Aayog's charter has provided a new bottle. It points to the need for new methods of cooperative learning and cooperative implementation by stakeholders who are not controlled by any central body of technical experts with political and/or budgetary authority over them. Merely filling this new bottle with old ideas of budgets, controls and expert solutions from above will not transform India. The debate about NITI Aayog's efficacy must focus on whether or not it is performing the new role it must, and what progress it has made in acquiring capabilities to perform this role, rather than slipping back into the ruts of yesterday's debates about the need for a Planning Commission.

Arun Maira was a member of the Planning Commission

FROM THE READERS' EDITOR

A debate that divides

An ideological prism should not be used to malign a journalistic inquiry



A.S. PANNEERSELVAM

Polarisation is not restricted to our body politic alone; it is seeping into the vitals of our social fabric, leading to a situation where there is little dialogue. Nothing exemplifies this divide better than the debate over the feature, "The politics of food" (Magazine, June 2).

A range of interviews

As a news ombudsman, I have to address two questions. One, what did the story say that provoked such angry responses and counter-responses? And two, did the story meet the crucial requirements of journalism or was it just lazy opinion masquerading as a feature? The story asked why Akshaya Patra Foundation (APF), run by Iskcon, refuses to add onion or garlic to the mid-day meals (MDM) it provides in Karnataka even though the children crave the familiar taste.

It was a story based on interactions with the beneficiaries of the affirmative action, the children. It was neither a quick opinion piece quoting just one critical expert, nor did it black out the opinions of those who support the programme. If children find the food unpalatable, is it right for anyone else to say that they should not complain and instead eat what is provided to them? Isn't this an indication that the purpose of the affirmative action has been turned on its head? The report drew its larger conclusion based on interviews with a range of people, including the children, the director of the National Institute of Nutrition (NIN), the principal secretary of education in Karnataka, and Right to Food activists. It also quoted APF.

Was the story hurriedly written as some Twitter warriors claim? If it failed to provide the arguments advanced by the defenders of the scheme, then it would be fair to term it an attack. But the report recorded the opinions of most of the agencies involved. It cited what NIN said when it gave a formal nod to APF's menu: "The nutritive values of menus with ingredients used in the mentioned amounts certainly meet and often exceed the prescribed energy (Kcal) and protein requirements prescribed by MHRD (Ministry of Human Resource Development) for the MDM." It also recorded the view of the principal secretary of education in Karnataka:

"Under the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, what the government has prescribed are the nutrient levels required in a meal – the level of carbohydrates, proteins, etc. They have not prescribed the ingredients. So when we got this particular complaint, we referred it to CFTRI and NIN asking them about the advantages of onion and garlic and if we have to use them. NIN has said that APF meets the nutrition standards, so why should we cancel the contract with APF? Except for this one small reason (the refusal to use onion and garlic), there are a lot of advantages for the govern-



M.A. SRIRAM

ment to continue its contract with Iskcon. They provide hygienic meals and cater to a large group of children in the State as well as in the country. We aren't delving into philosophical and religious issues. And we cannot punish them unnecessarily for somebody's objections."

Understanding a complex reality

In a fair journalistic manner, the report questioned the arguments advanced by the defenders of the scheme but never did it attempt to silence any one of them. In fact, it is the only place where we find the technical reading of the NIN: "We computed macronutrients and micronutrients from the MDM menus recommended by the Karnataka government and the MDM menus provided by APF from the published scientific data of the Institute (Indian Food Composition Table and Nutritive Value of Indian Foods). It is an accepted norm to assess the nutritional quantity and quality of food using the computational methods from the quantities of ingredients that go into making it."

Partisanship and polarisation should not come in the way of our understanding a complex reality. A few years ago, a story dealing with the nutrient content of a noon-meal scheme meant for underprivileged children would not have drawn the ire of anyone. An ideological prism should not be used to malign a journalistic inquiry.

readerseditor@thehindu.co.in

SINGLE FILE

Crossing the barrier

PM Modi has adopted an aspect of the presidential system by appointing S. Jaishankar as External Affairs Minister

T.P. SREENIVASAN



In the management of international affairs in parliamentary democracies, there is a barrier between politicians who formulate policies and the professionals who implement it. To cross the barrier, professionals have to join politics and move up the hard way to ministerial positions. By appointing former Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar as the Minister of External Affairs, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has created history by adopting an aspect of the presidential system, in which professionals do not need to go through the parliamentary process. A rare chemistry between the Prime Minister and his former Foreign Secretary has led to this step, about which there are dissenting murmurs in political and bureaucratic circles. Therefore, this is likely to be an isolated event. But its significance will be discussed in the days to come.

Diplomatic outcomes are difficult to measure and no one person can claim credit or blame, as many people work over time to ensure that initiatives fructify. For instance, the nuclear deal took several years to accomplish right from the days of the Vajpayee government. Many diplomats, scientists and politicians worked at different levels. But as the point person for the U.S., Mr. Jaishankar was credited with the success of the negotiations. Though much of the 123 Agreement was not implemented, every word was fiercely fought. The deal still remains a major accomplishment of Indian diplomacy. Mr. Jaishankar has a consistent record of successful tenures in Moscow, Colombo, Budapest, Prague, Singapore, Beijing and Washington with intermittent key postings at headquarters. Successive governments rated Mr. Jaishankar high, and finally Mr. Modi appointed him Foreign Secretary by curtailing the tenure of his predecessor. Mr. Jaishankar provided the professional touch to Mr. Modi's disruptive and innovative ideas, which made waves around the globe. It is no wonder that Mr. Jaishankar was inducted as a Cabinet Minister in Mr. Modi's second term.

When Mr. Jaishankar was appointed the Foreign Secretary in 2015, I had written, "The 60th year in Jaishankar's life is just an important landmark and it is too early to assess his lifetime achievements. He has much more to do and to tell before he hangs his diplomatic boots." As predicted, he has to do much more in his new post. Indian foreign policy is at a crossroads. The present trajectory needs to be changed because of the unpredictability of the U.S., and the growth of influence of China and Russia. The spirit of Wuhan and Sochi needs to be nurtured with a view to creating a niche for India in an emerging multipolar world. It is here that Mr. Jaishankar will be an asset to Mr. Modi.

T.P. Sreenivasan is former Ambassador of India and Governor for India of the IAEA



DATA POINT

State of NEET

States with a higher proportion of CBSE schools have a good NEET qualification rate in general. Despite having the lowest student dropout rate by Class XII, Tamil Nadu has a relatively low NEET qualification rate (better by 9 percentage points since 2018), unlike Punjab and Kerala. By **Varun B. Krishnan**

State	Children aged 17-18 (lakh)*	Dropout rate (%)	NEET qualification rate 2019 (%)	Change since 2018	% aged 17-18 who cleared NEET 2019	No. of students per CBSE school
Delhi	6.54	21.4	73.73	-1.19	3.46%	305
Haryana	10.43	14.8	72.59	-0.82	2.16%	628
Andhra Pradesh	29.81	N/A	72.55	1.83	1.31%	9,033
Rajasthan	33.77	20.4	69.66	-4.64	1.92%	2,981
Punjab	10.00	16	68.61	2.68	0.95%	733
Kerala	11.00	14.4	66.74	0.15	6.67%	819
Karnataka	20.74	N/A	63.51	0.26	3.13%	2,121
Bihar	63.08	53.6	60.15	2.54	0.70%	7,119
Odisha	16.90	32.1	59.44	-1.24	1.14%	3,657
West Bengal	35.75	44.9	59.38	0.8	1.03%	10,578
Uttar Pradesh	106.96	25.8	58.61	-1.22	0.79%	3,180
Madhya Pradesh	35.04	28.1	50.15	-0.79	0.76%	2,830
Tamil Nadu	24.30	13.8	48.57	9.01	2.46%	2,500
Gujarat	24.46	31.7	45.09	-1.26	1.44%	5,150
Maharashtra	42.76	14.4	39.26	-0.31	1.90%	4,559

* No. of students aged 17-18 is projected from the 2011 Census. Figures in the table are approximations based on this. Dropout rates for Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh were not available in the District Information System for Education

■ In States such as Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan, the NEET qualification percentage could be higher because of coaching centres despite the availability of CBSE schools being lower

■ Calculations projected from the Census 2011 figures show that Tamil Nadu and Kerala are among the States where the proportion of 17-18-year-olds who appear and qualify for NEET is high (compared to the total no. of 17-18-year-olds in other States). This is because these States have a low dropout rate

■ Tamil Nadu has shown the highest improvement in NEET qualification percentage since 2018. With comparatively lower dropout rates, States like Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra have the potential to train a higher percentage of 17-18-year-olds

Source: NEET results, Census 2011, DISE, CBSE

FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JUNE 10, 1969

Nixon announces troops withdrawal from Viet Nam

President Nixon yesterday [June 8] announced at his summit talks here [Midway Island] with the South Viet Nam's President Nguyen Van Thieu that 25,000 American troops would be withdrawn from Viet Nam by the end of August and that more pullbacks would take place as events justified. Shortly after Mr. Nixon disclosed the first unilateral U.S. withdrawal in the war, President Thieu denied that he and Mr. Nixon had differences over political problems blocking a peace settlement. The two Presidents displayed a united front when they appeared before reporters to issue a joint communique after their five hours of talks on this desolate mid-Pacific island. The two Presidents rejected any attempt to impose a coalition Government on South Viet Nam, but said they would respect any decision arrived at by the South Viet Namese people through free elections.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JUNE 10, 1919.

Education of Mahomedans.

The subject of improving the education of the Mahomedan community is receiving the anxious attention of the Travancore Government. It is reported that the number of Mahomedans of school-going age is about 34,000 and the number attending schools and colleges is 11,106, of which 10,505 are in vernacular schools, and 556 in English schools. The educational opportunities offered to the community, such as free primary education, and half-fees in higher classes of schools and colleges, have not helped to raise the community out of the slough of apathy. The Director of Public Instruction in Travancore was requested to enquire into the reasons for this indifference. He has come to the conclusion, and Government agree with him, that for securing better attendance of Mahomedan pupils, it is necessary to afford facilities for teaching the Koran.

CONCEPTUAL

Miracle of aggregation

POLITICS

This refers to a theory in favour of democracy which states that even when a large number of uninformed people vote in an election, the policy outcomes of such an election can turn out to be rational. This is said to happen because the ignorant choices of some voters, it is believed, will be more than compensated for by the intelligent choices of the rest of the voters who will sufficiently influence the final verdict. The miracle of aggregation theorem is considered to be an example of the wisdom of crowds. It has, however, been criticised by certain political scientists who claim that voting data suggest irrational voters heavily influence election outcomes.

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