

WORDLY WISE
AT BOTTOM, YOU SEE, WE ARE NOT HOMO SAPIENS
AS ALL. OUR CORE IS MADNESS.
— STEPHEN KING

The Indian EXPRESS
FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA
BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

STIRRINGS IN HOUSE

Crossing of TDP MPs to BJP in Rajya Sabha raises questions, puts parties under watch

THE CROSSING OVER of four of the six Rajya Sabha MPs from the Telugu Desam to the BJP passes the anti-defection test — the law treats more than one-third of legislators leaving a party as a split. The splinter group has also merged with the BJP. According to paragraph 4 of the Tenth Schedule to the Constitution, “the merger of the original political party of a member of a House shall be deemed to have taken place if, and only if, not less than two-thirds of the members of the legislature party concerned have agreed to such merger.” The group that crossed over to the BJP has the numbers to pass this test as well. One of them, Y S Chowdary, justified his move as a step to facilitate “the development of Andhra Pradesh”, which he believes can be achieved only by cooperation, and not confrontation, with the Centre. This may well be the case. It may even be a coincidence that the Income Tax department had raided the residential and official premises of Chowdary and CM Ramesh, another one of the MPs in question, last year for alleged financial misdeeds, prompting BJP MP G V L Narasimha Rao, ironically, to write to the Ethics Committee of the Rajya Sabha demanding action against them.

It could be argued that the movement of legislators across the aisle is part of the churn in politics in states including Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, after the general elections. The Congress and TDP were decimated in the polls and the few legislators who won on these party tickets seem to be exploring greener pastures — 12 of the 18 Congress MLAs in Telangana crossed over to the ruling Telangana Rashtra Samiti soon after the May 23 verdict. Even so, these movements of legislators will be under watch, and especially so in the Rajya Sabha, where the BJP is keen to address its lack of numbers, and which, in recent years, is being seen as a bulwark against the attempts by a government with a large majority in the Lok Sabha to have its way. The importance of the Upper House, which is also home to the voice of the states, has only grown in times when the federal character of the republic is seen to be increasingly under strain from centralising tendencies.

The Rajya Sabha has been in progressive decline since many years now, with political parties regularly accused of selling their nominations to the highest bidders. However, the House also witnesses debates of the highest order and acts as an important check on the government. It is in the interest of all parties, and important for the sake of the democratic process, that the dignity of the Rajya Sabha is upheld, especially in times when it performs a more crucial role than before.

AUGUST EASING?

A rate cut seems to be in the offing. Primary objective appears to be reviving growth, discounting concerns of fiscal slippage

IN ITS LAST meeting, the six members of the monetary policy committee (MPC) of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) had voted unanimously in favour of a 25 bps cut in the benchmark repo rate and for a shift in the policy stance from neutral to accommodative. But the minutes of that meeting, released on June 20, suggest that members are divided on the future course of action. Deputy RBI governor Viral Acharya and economist Chetan Ghate continue to be perturbed by the upside risks to food inflation and a likely fiscal slippage. But the other members seem to have discounted these concerns, placing more weightage on arresting the slowdown in economic activity. They have indicated that a minor fiscal slippage is unlikely to have a bearing on their vote in the next policy meeting in August.

In the run-up to the budget, there has been debate over the government's revenue numbers, the true extent of the fiscal slippage, off-budget borrowings by public sector companies, and their impact on monetary policy. Tax collection data shows that central goods and services tax collections (CGST) would have to grow by 34 per cent in FY20, and income tax collections would have to rise by 35 per cent to meet the FY20 interim budget targets. Meeting these targets is a tall order. While the finance minister could consider revising the interim budget targets, adhering to expenditure targets could imply a minor fiscal slippage resulting in higher government borrowings. Apart from the possible inflationary consequences, higher government borrowings could crowd-out the private sector in the face of declining household savings. This concern was articulated by Deputy Governor Acharya in the last MPC meeting. Chetan Ghate, too, flagged these risks. But MPC member Ravindra Dholakia has argued the opposite. Making the case for counter-cyclical policy — greater government spending during a cyclical downturn — Dholakia has argued that a minor fiscal slippage is unlikely to be inflationary in the current environment when demand continues to be subdued.

Dholakia's view seems to resonate with other MPC members, including RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das. Other members, Pami Dua and Michael Patra, too, appear to be more mindful of growth concerns. With the slowdown in economic activity more entrenched than was previously believed, clearly the primary objective appears to be that of reviving growth, discounting concerns of fiscal slippage and upside risks to inflation. On balance, it appears that the committee may end up voting 4-2 in favour of a further easing in August, irrespective of the fiscal slippage.

NO HORN, PLEASE

Reaction to research that points to physiological changes due to excessive smartphone use reveals deeper anxieties

THE FIRST HOMO sapiens — anatomically the same as their descendants that populate the earth today — evolved around 2,00,000 years ago. The first call on a cellphone was made in 1973. But technology, it seems, is giving evolution a run for its money. Recently published biomechanics research by two Australian scholars suggests that the extensive use of hand-held devices — smartphones, tablets, etc — is causing “horns” to grow in the skulls and necks of young people, among various other musculo-skeletal growths. Essentially, there appears to be a possibility, even a likelihood, that hunching over screens is ruining posture and in the developing frames of children and adolescents, this can cause permanent changes.

Those who see permanence in change argue that the science behind the panic is weak, that all technology since human beings first settled down has caused various stresses and changes in the body. So, while orthopaedists may be treating an increasing number of patients for “text thumbs”, why should this cause more panic than carpal tunnel syndrome? Or, they argue, should there be anxiety over keyboards and typewriters too? The reason for the seeming over-reaction to the physiological consequences of contemporary technology may lie in anxieties beyond just biology.

The true consequence of the personal computing revolution has been that it has turned human beings into cyborgs, the half-man half-machine that once belonged in science fiction. People do not remember phone numbers any more, nor birthdays. The compendium of human knowledge is not tucked away behind the Dewey Decimal System — just call on Siri. Even the burden of child-rearing is being shared by screens and games. The anxiety around horns and thumbs and stressed neck muscles is likely because the denial of these fundamental changes is becoming more difficult. It's hard to ignore a teenager with horns.



ARUNDHATI ROY

I FIND MYSELF thinking of the essays in this book as pieces of laundry — poor people's washing — strung out across the land-scape between these two monuments, interrupting the good news bulletins and spoiling the view.

They were written over a period of twenty years during which India was changing faster than ever before. The opening of the Indian markets to international finance had created a new middle class — a market of millions — and had investors falling over themselves to find a foothold. The international media, for the most part, was at pains to portray the world's favourite new finance destination in the best possible light. But the news was certainly not all good. India's fleet of brand new billionaires and its new consumers was being created at an immense cost to its environment and to an even larger underclass. Backstage, away from the razzle-dazzle, labour laws were dismantled, trade unions disbanded. The state was withdrawing from its responsibilities to provide food, education, and healthcare. Public assets were turned over to private corporations, massive infrastructure and mining projects were pushing hundreds of thousands of rural people off their lands into cities that didn't want them. The poor were in free fall.

At the very same time that it unlocked the protected market, the Congress government of the day (which calls itself liberal and secular on its CV), with an eye to the “Hindu vote”, opened another lock, too. The lock on an old sixteenth-century mosque. The Babri Masjid in Ayodhya had been sealed by the courts in 1949 following a dispute between Hindus and Muslims, who both laid claim to the land — Muslims asserting it was a historical place of worship, Hindus that it was the birthplace of Lord Ram. Opening the Babri Masjid, purportedly to allow Hindus to worship at the site, changed India forever. The Congress was swept aside. Leaders of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) travelled the length and breadth of the country orchestrating a storm of religious frenzy. On 6 December 1992, they, along with members of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, gathered in Ayodhya and, while a shocked country and a spineless

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They were written when a certain political space closed down, when a false consensus was being broadcast, when I could no longer endure the relentless propaganda and the sheer vicious bullying of vulnerable people by an increasingly corporatised media and its increasingly privatised commentators. Most often I wrote because it became easier to do that than to put up with the angry, persistent hum of my own silence.

Congress prime minister watched, exhorted a mob of 150,000 “volunteers” to storm the structure and bring down the Babri Masjid.

The demolition of the mosque and the simultaneous opening of the markets was the beginning of a complicated waltz between corporate globalisation and medieval religious fundamentalism. It was obvious quite early on that, far from being antagonistic forces that represented Old and New India, they were actually lovers performing an elaborate ritual of seduction and coquetry that could sometimes be misread as hostility.

For me, personally it was a time of odd disquiet. As I watched the great drama unfold, my own fortunes seemed to have been touched by magic. My first novel, *The God of Small Things*, had won a big international prize. I was a front-runner in the line-up of people who were chosen to personify the confident, new, market-friendly India that was finally taking its place at the high table. It was flattering in a way, but deeply disturbing, too. As I watched people being pushed into penury, my book was selling millions of copies. My bank account was burgeoning. Money on that scale confused me. What did it really mean to be a writer in times such as these?

As I thought about this, almost without meaning to, I began to write a long, bewildering, episodic, astonishingly violent story about the courting ritual of these unusual lovers and the trail of destruction they were leaving in their wake. And of the remarkable people who had risen to resist them.

The backlash to almost every one of the essays when I first published them — in the form of police cases, legal notices, court appearances, and even a short jail sentence — was often so wearying that I would resolve never to write another. But equally, almost every one of them — each a broken promise to myself — took me on journeys deeper and deeper into worlds that enriched my understanding, and complicated my view, of the times we live in. They opened doors for me to secret places where few are trusted, led me into the very heart of insurrections, into

places of pain, rage, and ferocious irreverence. On these journeys, I found my dearest friends and my truest loves. These are my real royalties, my greatest reward. Although writers usually walk alone, most of what I wrote rose from the heart of a crowd. It was never meant as neutral commentary, pretending to be observations of a bystander. It was just another stream that flowed into the quick, immense, rushing currents that I was writing about. My contribution to our collective refusal to obediently fade away...

What I wish I could have done for the readers of this book is to recreate the prevailing atmosphere in which I published each essay. They were written when a certain political space closed down, when a false consensus was being broadcast, when I could no longer endure the relentless propaganda and the sheer vicious bullying of vulnerable people by an increasingly corporatised media and its increasingly privatised commentators. Most often I wrote because it became easier to do that than to put up with the angry, persistent hum of my own silence. I also wrote to reclaim language. Because it was distressing to see words being deployed to mean the opposite of what they really meant. (“Deepening democracy” meant destroying it. “A level playing field” actually meant a very steep slope, the “free market” a rigged market. “Empowering women” meant undermining them in every possible way.) I wrote because I saw that what I needed to do would challenge my abilities as a writer. I had in the past written screenplays and a novel. I had written about love and loss, about childhood, caste, violence, and families — the eternal preoccupations of writers and poets. Could I write equally compellingly about irrigation? About the salinisation of soil? About drainage? Dams? Crop patterns? About the per unit cost of electricity? About the law? About things that affect ordinary people's lives? Could I turn these topics into literature? I tried.

Excerpted with permission from
Arundhati Roy's *My Seditious Heart*
(PenguinRandom House)



KHALED AHMED

IF THERE IS anyone in Pakistan's history who is bypassed by state historians, it is the wife of Liaquat Ali Khan, Pakistan's first prime minister who was assassinated in 1951. Her ignored life is being recalled by a much-awaited book, and the facts revealed about Begum Ra'ana Liaquat Ali Khan will bemuse most Pakistanis.

The story is told in the biography, *The Begum: A Portrait of Ra'ana Liaquat Ali Khan, Pakistan's Pioneering First Lady* (OUP 2019) by Namita Gokhale and Tahmina Aziz Ayub. She was born as Irene Ruth-Margaret in 1905, in a Brahmin clan whose founder, Taradutt Pant, her grandfather, had turned Christian, dooming his offspring to lifelong ostracism by the Hindu upper caste community.

Pushing back against this legacy, Irene grew up as a fiercely independent person unafraid of challenges. She went to Lal Bagh High School in Lucknow, and passed school standing first in her class before moving to college. Here she was in outstanding company: Ismat Chughtai, Qurratulain Hyder, Rashid Jahan and Attia Hosain.

Irene passed BA in first class and joined MA economics, for which she had to move to Lucknow University where her thesis on “Women's Labour in Agriculture in the United Provinces”, was adjudged the best in the university. After MA, she entered the Diocesan College in Calcutta for the Graduate Teachers' Training Course. Here too, she stood first, both in the theory and practice of teaching in the Licentiate of Teaching Examination of the Calcutta University. After that, in 1930, she got ap-

PAKISTAN'S FIRST LADY

A recent book frames the life and legacy of Ra'ana Liaquat Ali Khan

In 1954, Begum Ra'ana Liaquat Ali Khan was sent to The Hague as Pakistan's first ambassador to Holland where she was to spend two tenures lasting six years before being sent to Italy on her second posting. Back in Pakistan after her diplomatic stint, Ra'ana was made the governor of Sindh and Chancellor of Karachi University in 1973 by Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

pointed as a lecturer in economics at Indraprastha College for Women, Delhi, at a salary of Rs 200.

This was the year when she met the upcoming politician from Karnal, Liaquat Ali Khan, deputy president of the UP legislative council, who was, needless to say, struck by her personality and ready wit. They were married in 1930, Ra'ana converting to Islam, changing her name from Irene to Ra'ana. At Partition in 1947, the Liaquat Alis, instead of selling their grand Delhi residence on Hardinge Road, willed it to Pakistan as the permanent ambassadorial residence, now renamed Pakistan House.

In Pakistan, things got off to a bad start. Jinnah went back on earlier pledges and declared, on August 11, 1947, that Pakistan would be a secular state and Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan had to live with it. After his assassination in 1951, Ra'ana devoted herself to social work and created the All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA) in 1969 on Jail Road Lahore. As economist of the All-India Muslim League — appointed by Jinnah — she knew the nitty-gritty of running organisations, and was indefatigably devoted to the upliftment of women in Pakistan. Her husband, the late prime minister, had left her precious little to survive on.

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Sindh and Chancellor of Karachi University in 1973 by Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. In 1980, she fell and suffered a hip fracture while travelling abroad and never recovered her health after that. It didn't stop General Zia from suspending her monthly official support of Rs 2,000 which compounded her problems. She witnessed the Islamisation of Pakistan in the years that followed, and was able to comment on it before she died in 1990, when she was buried alongside Liaquat Ali Khan next to the mausoleum of Jinnah in Karachi:

“The idea of Pakistan when it first started was completely different from what we see today. There was no question of religion coming into politics. Everybody was free to follow their worship as they pleased, nobody interfered; it was between you and your God. We never talked of religion: there were Shias and Sunnis, we didn't know who was who; we were just working together. Qauid-e-Azam himself said the basis was religious but Pakistan was visualised as secular and democratic.”

Way back in 1950, she had clarified in Town Hall, New York: “In Pakistan, we are not going in for any sort of domination by priests or fanaticism or intolerance. What we wish to emphasise are the basic Islamic principles of equality, brotherhood, and social and economic justice.”

Alas, she was wrong. Pakistan went the way she didn't want it to go and betrayed her.

The writer is consulting editor,
Newsweek Pakistan



JUNE 22, 1979, FORTY YEARS AGO

REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT THAILAND HAS SUSPENDED its plan to send more than 40,000 Kampuchean refugees back across the border into Kampuchea, with negotiations under way to resettle them elsewhere, BBC reports. A Thai military spokesman told newsmen in Bangkok that the repatriation plan was halted after the United States ambassador agreed to resettle more than 1,000 refugees and promised to urge France, Canada and Australia to increase their intake of refugees. At a news conference in Paris addressed by many prominent French personalities, including philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, on Wednesday, France and other European nations were urged to set up

transit camps for the thousands of Vietnamese Kampuchean and Laotian refugees now flooding South East Asia.

MIZO UNREST THE MIZORAM GOVERNMENT has sent an SOS to the regional headquarters of the Border Security Force as well as the Central Reserve Police Force in Shillong to rush reinforcements of Para Military Forces. The government has also started a phased programme to repatriate the non-Mizos from the curfew-bound Aizawl town under a tight security cover, as the underground Mizo National Front (MNF) “quit notice” to all non-Mizos neared the deadline of July 1.

PAK N-BOMB PAKISTAN IS EXPECTED to explode a nuclear device this autumn, possibly in Multan, 475 km south of Islamabad, according to a weekly magazine, 8 days, published every Thursday in London. In its cover story, the magazine explains how, for five years, the Pakistanis fooled the nuclear powers into believing that they had neither the scientists, the material, nor the know-how to make the bomb. All the while, using a series of “front” companies, bogus purchasing orders, shadowy intermediaries, and foreign trained scientists, the Pakistanis got all they needed to out-trump the world and build a hydrogen bomb.



The most off-track of them all

Arvind Subramanian's method of estimating GDP suggests that Germany over-estimates and Brazil under-estimates it the most. India is only a mild outlier



NO PROOF REQUIRED

BY SURJIT S BHALLA

RECENT MEASURED GDP statistics for India (and the world) suggest trouble. No misestimation here. Indian GDP growth has declined from the 8.2 per cent recorded in 2018 Q2 to 5.8 per cent in 2019Q1 — one of the largest three-quarter declines in the last 15 years — and if fiscal years 2009, 2010 and 2012 are excluded, it is the third-worst decline.

In the recent debate over ex-CEA Arvind Subramanian's (AS) allegations that GDP growth in India was over-estimated by an average 2.5 per cent a year, many commentators have commended AS for his astuteness and bravery in making a much-needed call over the "fudging" (there is no other word) of India's official GDP statistics. The argument goes as follows. Motor vehicle sales are down, two-wheeler inventory are at the highest levels ever, no private investment and animal spirits have disappeared: See, AS is right, GDP growth is being overstated. But as just documented above, official GDP data is documenting the reality of GDP growth being way down.

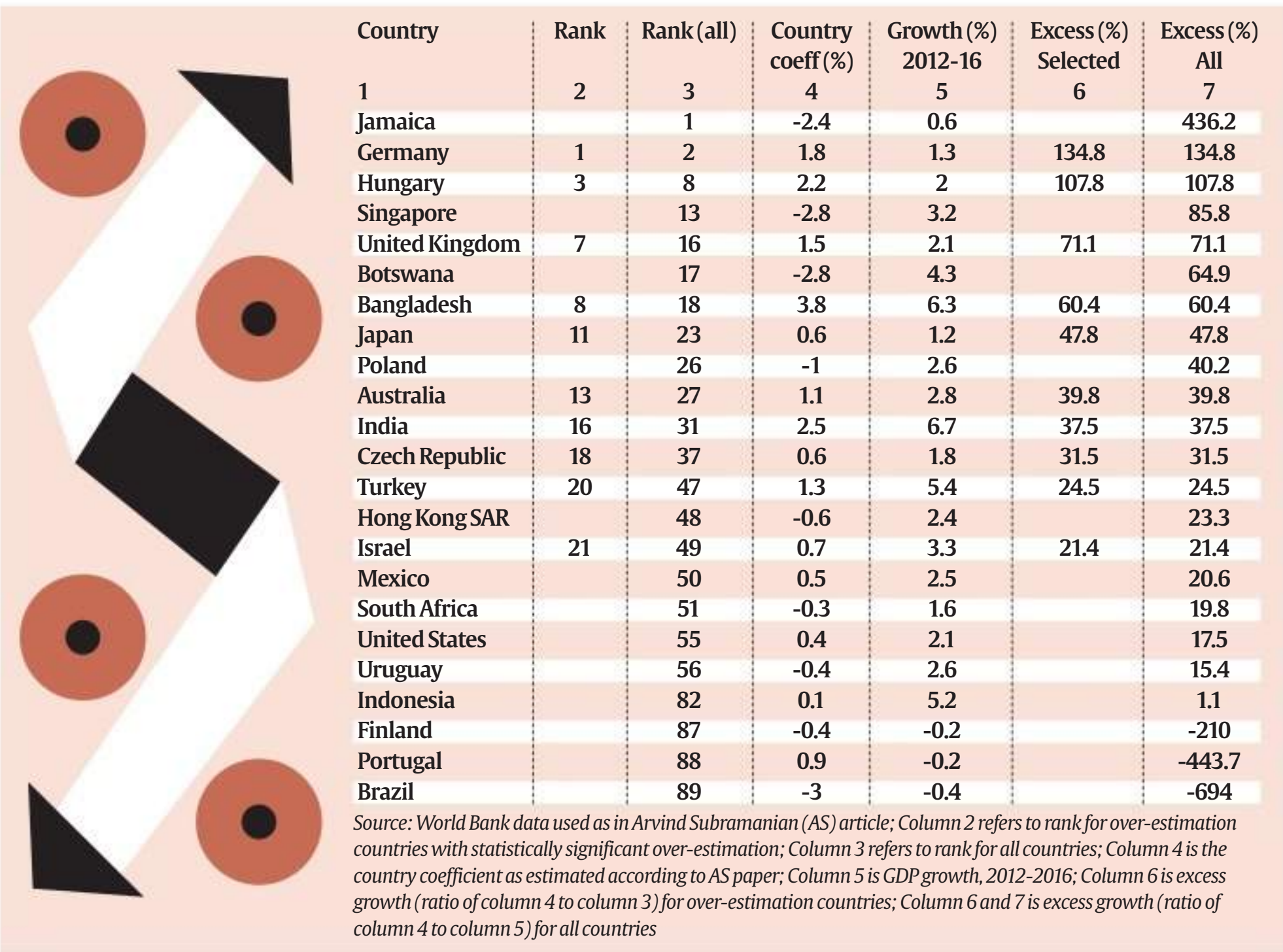
The government also gets it. Every day there is an announcement of concern and the admission that the economy is in trouble. All eyes (and ears) are rightly on the Budget to be presented on July 5. It is to be seen whether Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman listens to the voices of the "old" economists and bureaucrats who want to continue with business as usual, be concerned with the minutiae of the fiscal deficit, and ask for restraint on changing course on three world records that India holds — highest real interest rates, highest effective corporate tax rates, and the worst labour laws.

The same "experts", bureaucratic or otherwise, who are demanding that international experts be called in to look at Indian statistics (because they are allegedly not capturing one of the worst domestic, and global, downturns) are also arguing for restraint on any policy action — for example, don't change policy rates, don't lower tax rates, and indeed raise them to gather more revenue to finance the increased fiscal deficit brought about by the slowing economy. It does not get crazier than this.

But maybe it does, in the form of AS's "academic" calculation that Indian GDP growth is being overstated since 2011. Before looking at this miscalculation, I have to remind readers that AS was among the very few (along with self) who had the courage to point out that the MPC under the then RBI Governor Ujit Patel was leading India to a downward growth spiral and real policy rates needed to be 200 bp lower than where Patel's MPC had kept them. That was in June 2017. In June 2018, Patel and the MPC were busy hiking interest rates and expecting growth (and inflation) to accelerate; a year later, RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das's MPC has reduced rates by 75 bp but real rates, at 3 per cent+, have been where they have been for more than two years.

Real interest rates in India are high(est) because of three policy failures — failure on the part of the Ministry of Finance (MoF) to not reduce government-controlled deposit rates (for example, rates on small savings), the RBI for keeping repo rates so high in the hugely mistaken belief that there is an inflation dragon waiting to be slayed, and the policy makers' belief that we should not open up our capital markets, including well capitalised NBFCs, to investment from foreign individuals and institutional investors.

GDP growth is low because of policy failures — true today as well as before and hope-



Source: World Bank data used as in Arvind Subramanian (AS) article; Column 2 refers to rank for over-estimation countries with statistically significant over-estimation; Column 3 refers to rank for all countries; Column 4 is the country coefficient as estimated according to AS paper; Column 5 is GDP growth, 2012-2016; Column 6 is excess growth (ratio of column 4 to column 3) for over-estimation countries; Column 6 and 7 is excess growth (ratio of column 4 to column 5) for all countries

fully, recognised by all. But now to AS's allegation that the Indian GDP during 2012-17 had been misestimated and that the "correct" or "actual" GDP growth between 2012-16 was as little as 3.5-5.5 per cent, rather than officially reported 7 per cent — an over-estimation of 2.5 per cent a year. I want to examine AS's hypothesis and results with the view that he is entirely correct in his assumptions, and method of analysis. AS's model/assertions rests on the following three pillars:

Pillar 1: Growth in four real variables (exports, imports, credit and electricity—hereafter X variables) can more than adequately proxy real GDP growth for all non-oil exporting countries with a population greater than 1 million. Pillar 2: That for all countries, the relationship is robust for two different time-periods — Period I, 2001-2011 and Period II, 2012-16. Pillar 3: Only for India is there a problem with official GDP data. Hence, AS's entire analysis is geared to examine how much Indian GDP in Period II veered of the (AS) predicted path.

AS brings all his statistical acumen to confirm that the gap between actual and predicted GDP was as much as 2.5 per cent and that this gap was statistically significant (it could not have happened by chance). Since AS believes that he has a model which can proxy growth, he is broadly right in also believing the "only" explanation for the gap between official and predicted GDP growth is that the former, and not the latter, is in error — either fudged by the political masters, or via the incompetence of statistical authorities around the world that vetted India's GDP measurement, or both.

I want to accept AS's method and conclusions if only because the two of us were lonely warriors against the Patel RBI/MPC crusade against inflation and growth. For 89 countries, I collected the data for the four AS variables from the World Bank website (as he does). I successfully reproduced his preferred estimate of 2.5 per cent.

When I first read AS's paper a week ago, I was struck by the absence of any discussion on the statistical possibility that his method could yield mis-estimation errors for other countries. He does have a throwaway line that there were four outlier countries — Cambodia, Tajikistan, Ireland and Ukraine — which were excluded from analysis, but no more. I decided

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to estimate the AS model for all 89 countries — that is, estimated the gap between measured GDP and AS predicted GDP in Period II.

Here is what I found. Out of 89 countries, for 46 countries the AS country dummy was not significant. For 22 of these 46 countries, the individual country effect was negative — the measured GDP was less than predicted GDP, by an average 0.5 ppt; for the remaining 24 countries, measured GDP growth was above predicted growth by 0.4 ppt. The remaining 43 countries, with significant individual country effects, were almost equally divided between over-estimation (1.7 ppt) and under-estimation (1.8 ppt).

This last result is significant. There is equal over-estimation and under-estimation of GDP in the world (at least for 43 countries). AS is concerned with overestimation. There are 21 such countries, and Germany tops the list, that is, according to AS, German (ECB take note), GDP data is being over-estimated the most. AS should fire his statistical guns at Germany for systematically overestimating GDP by an average of 1.8 ppt a year in Period II.

One final calculation. Reported GDP growth for Germany in Period II was 1.3 per cent; AS's over-estimation number is 1.8 per cent; hence, excess GDP over reported GDP (ratio of 1.8 and 1.3) is a high 135 per cent, the highest in the world. Number 8 on the list is Bangladesh with an excess magnitude of 60 per cent; India is 16th (out of 21 countries) with an excess magnitude of 38 per cent (ratio of 2.5 and 6.7 per cent).

The table also reports the excess magnitude calculation for several other countries. For example, reported GDP growth in Brazil was -0.4 per cent; the AS method suggests that Brazil GDP growth is under-estimated by as much as 3 per cent. Jamaica has a positive average GDP growth in Period II of 0.6 per cent and AS seems to have under-estimated growth each year by 2.4 per cent.

Maybe a happiness index can be constructed on the basis of the AS methodology, rather than a GDP misestimate. One strong result — Brazilians are a lot happier than the Portuguese and the Jamaicans are the happiest. I would have believed that if the West Indies were playing well in the World Cup.

Bhalla is contributing editor, The Indian Express. Views are personal

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"For the first time, a prime minister of the UK will be chosen by Conservative party grassroots activists. This means the new leader will largely be the choice of middle-class white men over 55."

—THE GUARDIAN

The litchis of wrath

Muzaffarpur is a national tragedy, as much as Gujarat earthquake was, or Kerala floods. But has anyone given thought to next year, a long-term policy?



NARAYANI GUPTA

THE BITTER CRY of Children was the title of a book (1906) by the American writer, John Spargo, one of the group labelled "The Muckrakers". It described in graphic detail the conditions of child labourers. Earlier, in 1883, Mearns and Preston had published *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*. History can be written as the tragedy of little children — subject to abuse by relatives and by employers, frightened and lonely in war and exile and, at the moment, felled by a disease that viciously targets only them.

Today, one does not have to wait for the definitive book. There are short-cuts to gathering information which bypass long spells of interaction as was done by Charles Dickens, and door-to-door surveys by social workers and academics (like Sidney and Beatrice Webb) and later by committed middle-class women in India in the 1930s and 1940s. Communications are faster, day-to-day news, statistics, videos are immediately available. But has this speeded up response? In the stillness of the night, the sobbing of the parents of Muzaffarpur gets no relief.

And what we see is only the tip of the iceberg — the children who actually got a few inches of bed-space in the hospital. What of those who could not make the journey? The shadow gets bigger, goes further. And before the deaths, there was the infection. And before that, there was hunger. The assumption that we are ahead of Africa in every way is given the lie by the statistics on malnutrition.

The Vellore doctors explained that litchis eaten after having had a full meal before bedtime does no harm, but eaten on a pitifully hungry stomach can be fatal. Reading that really hurts. I was reminded of Oxfam lunches for volunteers — the charge was 2 pounds, for which you got a slice of bread and a thin slice of cheese. It is not enough to give money to the hungry, they explained. You must experience hunger yourself.

Maybe it is the short-cuts that are the reason for us not showing any insaniyat (untranslatable). We talk, we write, and assume someone else somewhere is doing what officials refer to as "the needful".

There was a report about the deputy chief minister of another state offering help to Muzaffarpur. The rest, including those of Bihar, resort to a standard answer, or rather, a counter-question: What did

earlier political leaders do for 70 years? Or, what did the preceding government do? They hallucinate about the past, and fantasise about the future, while the present slips away under their feet. When the tsunami strikes, they will be standing on the beach, holding forth about an earlier tsunami, another time.

Officials and ministers are not over-eager to go and see the situation for themselves, photo-op though it is. And if they do, there is a lack of empathy — a telling phrase used by a TV commentator was "vyavhaar ka ahankaar". Has it to do with age — are younger people, whose children are still small, more likely to react with passion? Does a long life spent thinking, acting, talking politics, inure you to the suffering of children? It is too much of an effort for tired minds and limbs, particularly when the World Cup matches are in progress. And, after all, to wish to defeat Pakistan at cricket makes you a true nationalist, to comment on official apathy makes you anti-national.

It was not always so. In the 1940s, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay was a one-person National Disaster Management Agency. And how she galvanised middle-class women during the Bengal Famine, giving them a sense of exhilaration as they devised ways to help the hungry villagers (my mother-in-law told me how she started to rear poultry in the garden of their government bungalow, so that the children at Shishu Sadan could have an egg a day. Try to imagine the well-guarded sarkari bungalows in Patna or New Delhi doing that now!).

Social work was a vocation. For some years now, it has been a profession. Can we look to the students enrolled for under-graduate and post-graduate degrees in Social Work, and the volunteers of the National Service Scheme? In these vacation weeks, students could get some first-hand experience of how to make the life of the parents bearable, console the grieving, counsel the others?

The NDMA was set up in 1999. Its brief is to co-ordinate the response to "man-made and natural disasters". Muzaffarpur is facing a disaster which is partly natural and certainly aggravated by being man-made. But it does not qualify. "Disaster" has to be dramatic. Floods and earthquakes elicit immediate response, but not long epidemics or drought.

Muzaffarpur is a national tragedy, as much as the Gujarat earthquake was, or the Kerala floods. Has anyone given thought to next year, to a long-term policy? Or will June 2020 newspapers echo those of 2019?

(If the NDMA or the NSS is active in Muzaffarpur, and I have missed reading about it, I apologise. And the Ramakrishna Mission or KhalsaAid?)

The writer is a historian of Delhi

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

AGAINST FEDERALISM

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Pollarising' (IE, June 21). The "one country, one election" concept does have the advantage of obviating frequent elections which often disrupt governance. It will also lead to savings on time, energy and money. At the same time, for a nation of India's size and diversity, holding such elections would be a Herculean task. Moreover, we would be back to square one if the ruling party loses majority before the completion of its tenure. The idea puts regional parties at a disadvantage. There is genuine fear of local issues getting suppressed by the national narrative. A dilution of the Model Code of Conduct allowing some sort of leeway for policy execution during state election time would be a better idea.

Vijai Pant, Hempur

PATRIOTISM, LOVE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial 'Campus control' (IE, June 20). Patriotism cannot be taught in educational institutions. Neither can it be inculcated as a value. It is a sentiment that can only be inspired. True patriotic sentiment can only mean absolute well-being of people in the country without discrimination. The moment we judge others on a self-defined scale of patriotism, we ourselves are being less than patriotic. Patriotism can only co-exist with love.

Anirudh Bhatjwale, Indore

ELECTION WEEK

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The next structural change' (IE, June 20). Simultaneous election to the Lok Sabha and state legislatures is premised on the grounds that national resources are

LETTER OF THE WEEK

LANGUAGE, WISDOM

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The enigma of English' (IE JUNE 13). The approach must not be to de-value English rather it must be to work for language and culture of the non-English speakers. We can't deny the fact that mother tongue only inculcate values and basic knowledge. The Constitution's Article 343(1) laid down that: "Over period of 15 years from enactment, use of English as an official language was to cease, unless Parliament decides otherwise". But it still holds the status of the "subsidiary official language" of the union. English emerged as a lingua franca for commercial, diplomatic and administrative convenience. But the language one is born into is apt for foundation knowledge.

Arshpreet S Ekhnoor, Fazilka

scarce and need to be deployed efficiently. But the existing constitutional scheme demands flexibility on account of unforeseen political development that might necessitate untimely elections. The imposition of the model code of conduct around the year to facilitate the electoral process is detrimental to the developmental projects. A pre-decided election week along the lines of that in the US could be a suggestion to ponder upon.

Sudip Kumar Dey, Kolkata



K M CHANDRASEKHAR

TO ME, THE 2019 election has been a unique, rather disturbing, experience. It was back in 1991 that a similar shake up of my thinking occurred when the socialist, anti-rich, pro-labour, protectionist mindset to which I had been accustomed had to suddenly re-adjust to an entirely new economic thought process.

The most obvious change is the shift from an all-encompassing approach to policy, built carefully into our Constitution. In this election, consolidation of the majority community and aligning it to nationalism played a larger role than ever before, particularly in the Hindi heartland. What effect this will have on policy and legislation remains to be seen.

Clear divergences across states could be perceived. The North-South divide was pronounced, except in Karnataka. The states in which minorities were stronger voted one way while another process of choice prevailed in areas in which the majority community formed the bulk of the population. Caste divisions do not seem to have influenced the voter as much as Hindu consolidation, as in Uttar Pradesh. Regional parties have gained

in strength, which augurs well for federalism.

The vote seems to have been for stability. Economic issues, such as declining growth rates, higher unemployment, low rate of domestic investment and farmer distress did not create any impact. Indians, by and large, seem to be used to the fluctuations in the economy and hence do not pay much attention to them.

The Congress manifesto, compiled by many experts, did not cut much ice, probably because of its complexity and the fact that it came too late. NYAY was a good concept but it got lost in the cacophony on the economy, Rafale, untruth and on love juxtaposed to hate. The ruling front had a clear agenda and uncontested leadership. The Opposition seemed confused and cut into each others' votes.

Most of what I have said above is based on wisdom gained from hindsight. During the elections, there was no indication of a "wave", unlike in 2014. Most opinion polls, non-aligned media and commentators predicted a hard battle, even a hung Parliament. It is astonishing that a swing of such dramatic proportions went unnoticed. This could well be

an indication of a new pattern of voter behaviour with a large proportion of voters deciding only towards the end of the campaign.

The elections are now behind us and it is time for both the ruling parties and Opposition to look ahead. The government has the greater responsibility. This has been an ill-tempered, bruising election. It is necessary now to heal the wounds. India is a land of many cultures and our rulers must accept such diversity. The beginning gives hope. The choice of Maldives, a predominantly Muslim country, for the PM's first visit, preceded by worship at the prominent Guruvayur temple, located in a state that voted heavily against the BJP, his utterances both in Kerala and in the Maldivian Majlis — all this sends subliminal messages both to the apprehensive and extremist elements.

In this election, disparity in money power between the ruling parties and the Opposition was visible. This disparity will widen over the next five years. With less money, the Opposition will have no choice but to go to the people in old Gandhian ways, tramping on foot to remote villages with their message,

winning the hearts of people. Rahul Gandhi could initiate the process in his own beautiful constituency.

The Opposition has also to unite, setting aside their differences, eschewing claims to leadership for a larger cause. This cannot be an on-off affair. Sustained effort is required, spanning perhaps even more than five years. In the interim, some of them will win state elections. This is no indication of a national trend. The people have proved, time and again, that they think and vote differently at different levels of governance.

Voter behaviour in the present political milieu needs to be studied and understood. The ruling parties obviously have a clearer understanding presently, but the opposition parties have the time to regroup. That they have the will to do so is not apparent from the decision to fight the UP Assembly by polls from different platforms.

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