



At the high table

India must think big as it takes a step towards a non-permanent seat on the UNSC

By winning the unanimous endorsement of the 55-nation Asia-Pacific Group at the United Nations Security Council, India has cleared an important hurdle in its quest for a non-permanent seat for 2021-22. The decision of the grouping this week was taken as India was the sole candidate for the post. In the next step, all 193 members of the UN General Assembly will vote for five non-permanent seats in June 2020, when India will need to show the support of at least 129 countries to go through to the UNSC. It will then occupy the seat at the UNSC for a two-year period, as it has previously on seven occasions since 1950-51. There are several reasons why India decided to pursue its candidature for 2021-22. The government at the time had felt it was necessary to have India's voice at the high table as many times as possible, and therefore began the process for another seat shortly after it had ended its previous tenure in 2011-2012. By rotation, that seat would have reached India only in the 2030s, and India had to reach out to Afghanistan, which had put in its bid already for the 2021-22 slot, to request it to withdraw. Afghanistan did so because of the special relationship between the two countries. India has a unique role to play at the UNSC, given the near-complete polarisation among the permanent members (P-5 nations), with the U.S., the U.K. and France on one side, and Russia and China on the other. India's ability to work with both sides is well known. The year 2022 also has a sentimental value attached to it, as it marks the 75th year of India's Independence, and a place at the UNSC would no doubt add to the planned celebrations that year. Since 2013, when it first announced the bid, the government has run a quiet but consistent campaign towards this goal.

It is significant that despite the poor state of bilateral relations with Pakistan, and the many challenges India has faced from China at the UN, both the countries graciously agreed to the nomination. From this point on, it is necessary for the government to think beyond the campaign for the UNSC, and work out a comprehensive strategy for what it plans to do with the seat. In the past, India has earned a reputation for 'fence-sitting' by abstaining on votes when it was required to take a considered stand on principle, and the seat will be a chance to undo that image. Given the twin challenges of a rising China, and the U.S. receding from its UN responsibilities, India must consider how it will strengthen the multilateral world order amid frequent unilateral moves by both the world powers. An even bigger challenge will be to nudge all five permanent members on the one issue they have unitedly resisted: towards the reform and expansion of the UNSC, which would include India's claim to a permanent seat at the high table.

Prudent prescription

An RBI panel's suggestions on the MSME sector cut to the heart of crucial issues

The micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) sector in India is not only a key engine of growth, contributing more than 28% of the GDP and about 45% to manufacturing output. It is also a true reflection of economics where people really matter. Providing employment to about 111 million people, the sector's health is crucial to the economy's vitality and society's well being. An expert committee constituted by the Reserve Bank of India has in this context submitted a substantially germane study on the issues bedevilling MSMEs and made a fairly exhaustive set of recommendations to redress them. The panel is emphatic that the policy environment needs to be urgently reformed. To that end, it is imperative that the thrust of the enabling legislation – a 13-year-old law, the MSME Development Act, 2006 – be changed to prioritise market facilitation and ease of doing business. Observing that many Indian start-ups that are at the forefront of innovation are drawn to look overseas, given the conducive business environment and the availability of infrastructure and exit policies, the experts suggest that a new law ought to address the sector's biggest bottlenecks, including access to credit and risk capital. A substantial part of the study is justifiably devoted to reimagining solutions to improve credit flow to MSMEs. For instance, the experts recommend repurposing the Small Industries Development Bank of India. In its expanded role, it is envisaged that the SIDBI could not only deepen credit markets for MSMEs in under-served regions by being a provider of comfort to lenders including NBFCs and micro-finance institutions, but also become a market-maker for SME debt.

With technology, especially digital platforms, having become so ubiquitous, the panel has made a case for greater adoption of technology-facilitated solutions to a plethora of problems encountered by the sector. To address the bugbear of delayed payments, the mandatory uploading of invoices above a specified amount to an information utility is a novel approach. The aim is to name and shame buyers of goods and services from MSMEs to expedite settlements to suppliers. While it does sound simplistic, it is a task worth trying. Another suggestion entails expediting the integration of information on the Government e-Marketplace, or GeM, platform with the Trade Receivables Discounting System. The goal here too is to boost liquidity at MSMEs. A noteworthy recommendation urges banks to switch to cash flow-based lending, especially once account aggregators are operational and able to provide granular data on borrowings. The RBI and the Centre clearly have their work cut out in acting on this prudent prescription to help actualise the sector's true economic potential.

A democratic requirement

India's brooding parliamentary Opposition needs to study its historical legacy to chart the road ahead



VALERIAN RODRIGUES

Today the parliamentary Opposition in India is not merely fragmented but also in disarray. There seems to be hardly any Opposition party with a vision or strategy for its institutional working or for the Opposition as a whole. Such a state of affairs is probably worse than the defeat most of the Opposition parties have suffered in the elections to the 17th Lok Sabha. Given this impasse, some of them may seek an alternative in strengthening their State-level bases either to ward off poaching by the ruling dispensation or to work to better their prospects in the elections in the offing. There would also be much show-casing of Opposition unity particularly during a Lok Sabha session. While such exercises could be defended as modes of survival in hard times, or even as inevitable tactics, should the Opposition limit itself merely to them? Should not the Opposition reinvent a distinct and broader role for itself? Is the despondency the parliamentary Opposition is caught in conducive to the pivotal role it is called upon to play in a post-colonial democracy such as India?

An early assertion

At the time of India's first elections, there was little doubt regarding the potential ruling party of the country. The matter of concern, however, was the state of the parliamentary Opposition. There was little doubt in anyone's mind, unlike probably today, that without a viable and effective Opposition, parliamentary democracy would largely be a sham. Without it there would not be an effective oversight on representative con-

cerns, in eliciting responsiveness from wielders of power and enforcing accountability. While there could be other organs of the state for specific purposes, it was the parliamentary Opposition, it was believed, that held the popular trust to its safe-keeping. In other words, India's claim to be a working democracy rested not in posting an electoral majority, but in engendering a parliamentary Opposition that would be the conscience of the nation.

Jawaharlal Nehru was acutely conscious of the absence of an effective Opposition in the House, and once wrote provocatively, under the pseudonym Chanakya, saying, "a little twist and Jawaharlal might turn into a dictator sweeping aside the paraphernalia of a slow-moving democracy". He repeatedly cajoled Jayaprakash Narayan, who had opted for public service outside the electoral arena, to enter Parliament and lead the Opposition. It is a different matter, though, that when such an Opposition came to crystallise, it was not much to his liking! This Opposition was made of disgruntled leaders moving out of the ruling party and the existing parliamentary Opposition largely made of socialists and communists. The Bharatiya Jan Sangh and the Swatantra Party were to soon foist their distinctive markers on the Opposition. The development produced dozens of truly outstanding parliamentarians – Hriday Nath Kunzru, J.B. Kripalani, A.K. Gopalan, H.V. Kamath, Ram Manohar Lohia and M.R. Masani, just to name a few. India's parliamentary Opposition was an invention of its own and a development of momentous significance with certain distinct characteristics.

Bound to social movements

From the early 1960s powerful movements broke out all over India on issues such as land reforms, rights of the industrial working



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class, unemployment, foodgrains and their distribution, ethnic demands and language rights. While the strength of the parliamentary Opposition continued to be puny and divided till 1967, it was enormously bolstered by linking itself to these social movements, and vice-versa. Such a bonding, however, went alongside a reflective commitment to constitutional and parliamentary democracy. It encompassed the broadest spectrum of the Opposition, including the communists, a section of whom had initially entertained doubt regarding the prospects of social revolution under the aegis of constitutional democracy. While the government proceeded against some of the leaders for their role in the social movements, there was obviously a limit to which it could go.

In the early 1970s, the parliamentary Opposition became the site that reflected a comprehensive critique of the direction charted by India's democracy. The parliamentary communists, with all their internal ideological and political squabbles, continued to employ the frame of class struggle – imperialism, big capital and landlordism on the one hand, and working class, peasantry and middle classes on the other. But it was the socialists who made the terrain of democracy in place as their anchor, developed a critique of the path of industrialisation, cen-

tralisation and concentration of power, deployment of institutions of constitutional democracy as instrumentalities of the ruling regime as well as the resultant outcomes of agrarian crisis, devastation of traditional crafts and small-scale industry, assault on citizenship rights, intolerance of dissent, aversion to federalism and decentralisation of power, rise in bureaucratic stranglehold and security apparatuses, muzzling of the media and disregard to languages and local cultures.

It was this Opposition that issued the call for civil disobedience as foundational to democracy when the parliamentary Opposition came to be subdued. Jayaprakash Narayan became the rallying symbol for this Opposition, bringing down the authoritarian regime of the Emergency (1975-77), and enabling it to ride to power with huge popular support in the elections.

It is a different matter that the internal squabbles within the ruling Janata Party, its inability to order its priorities, and its susceptibility to the insinuations of the Opposition in place gave this expedition a short shrift. The Congress party in Opposition (1977-1979) too experimented with an oppositional stance which was largely to discredit the party in power, and seek a restoration of the post-colonial regime. The strategy of merely discrediting the ruling regime as an oppositional stance does not hold much prospect today, given the unity of the ruling regime and its hold over media and communication networks. Besides, it does not reflect the creativity and ingenuity that the Opposition has imparted to parliamentary democracy in India.

Conceptions of nationalism

From the 1980s parliamentary Opposition came to make a place for itself by advancing one or the other conception of nationalism.

There are clearly three significant conceptions in contention. The first is a majoritarian conception which argues against any special consideration to minorities and disparages pluralism. The second is a secular conception that upholds equal citizenship while extending special considerations to distinct concerns and ways of life. The third argues that Indian nationalism and the post-colonial polity have largely been in the service of a privileged strata and measures should be taken to tilt this balance in favour of the disadvantaged as well as reflect India's deep diversity. It is important to bear in mind that while each one of these conceptions has tried to outwit the others, they have selectively reached out to some elements of the rest with the aim of securing electoral majorities.

A majoritarian conception of the polity, avowing a strong state that has an overriding say with regard to rights and freedoms, but with a pronounced tilt to the market, has been triumphal today. But it can hardly be said that other perspectives in contention have lost their salience and the legacy of the parliamentary Opposition in India has lost its mettle.

In this context, the parliamentary Opposition in India has much to learn from its own legacy. It can draw from it lessons to position itself as the representative voice of democratic and egalitarian urges that is at the same time critical of the idea of the nation that has left behind a significant section of its population from any meaningful sense of belonging to it. But it also may be the opportune context to think of new ways by which dissent and opposition can be sustained in a new media-induced public culture that invariably breeds docility and compliance.

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A policy to regulate coaching centres

Coaching institutions undermine mainstream education and impose a huge cost on students



YUGANK GOYAL

In May, a deadly fire at a coaching centre in Surat snuffed out 22 young lives. The rate of suicides in Kota, where many students converge to prepare for entrance exams, remains high. And yet, the coaching industry is rapidly growing. Data from the National Sample Survey Office's 71st round reveal that more than a quarter of Indian students (a stupendous 7.1 crore) take private coaching. Around 12% of a family's expenses go towards private coaching, across rich and poor families alike.

What purpose do coaching institutions serve in society? Do they enhance human capital? If they do, they serve the same purpose as schools and colleges. But if they don't, then they are imposing a huge emotional cost to society. They crush creativity. In most cases, they only help a student to swiftly secure marks in some entrance exam, which is widely understood to be a sign of merit. This is a questionable connection. To signal merit, exams are only one

criterion, and not necessarily the best one. So, coaching institutions exist to help people achieve only one idea of merit. This is a small benefit. They do not enhance human capital. Confining students in classrooms and making them study subjects they often hate destroys their natural talent. Hence, the social cost of these institutions outweighs their benefit by far. The industry needs a re-look.

Unregulated spaces

First, why must anything be regulated? Economic theories suggest that when markets fail, governments need to be brought in. Market failure may occur because of the presence of externalities or asymmetry in information. Governments are also important because they act to coordinate moral norms. On all these counts, coaching institutions emerge as the proverbial villains. Hidden behind legislations meant for tiny shops (Shops and Establishment Act) as 'other' business, they run an empire of evening incarcerations that arrest creative freedom. The big ones draw an entire generation of young minds and systematically erode their imagination. They ignite psychological disorders in students, undermine mainstream education, impose huge opportunity costs to students, charge an



SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

exorbitant fee which is often untaxed, and yet remain unaccountable (several court cases on breach of promise of refund are underway). This paints a picture of coaching centres as market bulies. The social costs are exacerbated by the absolute disregard for the well being of students, who are shoved into tiny rooms with little ventilation, let alone a fire exit. Society bears the burden – only for the sake of finding out who is marginally better than the other in cramming for some exam.

The building in Surat had an illegally constructed terrace. It had a wooden staircase that got burnt, thus disabling any possibility of escape. It had no fire safety equipment, nor any compliance or inspection certificate. The response of the State government was to shut down all coaching institutions in Gujarat until fire inspections were completed. This was a typical knee-jerk reaction.

The building which caught fire was located in a premise that was supposed to be a residential space, according to the approved plan of 2001. In 2007, a two-floor commercial complex was illegally built. It was legalised in 2013 under Gujarat's regularisation laws. The other floors where the fire broke out were constructed illegally later. With such patterns of violating the laws, these inspections will only serve a tick-mark purpose. But here is the point. Although government measures are more emotional than rational, they have achieved the purpose of drawing our attention to coaching centres. In the last six months, three fire incidents have involved coaching institutions in Gujarat.

Valueless idea

Why do people start coaching institutions? Barring a few exceptions, coaching institutions sell a valueless but costly idea. Only those enterprises which have no value themselves play with the law. To blame the systemic flaws in the implementation of safety laws and to blame corruption in the government is to normalise the lack of integrity in the entrepreneur who decided to violate the law. To harp on lapses by the government is to turn a blind eye towards what kind of ethics we are drawing out

of our enterprises, particularly those which purport to provide 'education'. Coaching institutions, of course, are not necessarily ethical entities. Most of them do not add to the value of education.

While the reason for the growth of coaching institutions is the entrance exam culture of India, what is urgently required is a policy on regulating them. Some States have already passed laws to regulate the coaching industry – centres have to register with the government and meet certain basic criteria – for instance, they cannot employ teachers of government-recognised schools. Existing State laws, however, do not evince a consistent rationale that could aid in framing national regulations. There is also the Private Coaching Centres Regulatory Board Bill, 2016 in discussion. A PIL was recently filed in the Supreme Court on regulating coaching institutions. But we must recognise that a bad law is worse than no law. While the discourse being triggered is a welcome step, it is now important to ensure regulations that emerge are agile, forward-looking and empowering.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Lawless land

The Prime Minister finally broke his silence on the incident, but his responsibility seems to end with offering lip service ("Modi says he is pained by Jharkhand lynching", June 27). Was it right on his part to defend Jharkhand? The Supreme Court urged Parliament to enact a law to curb mob lynching, but the Central and State governments continue to do nothing about this. Simply saying that the law will take its own course is meaningless when there are no sincere efforts taken to enforce the rule of law.

D. SETHURAMAN,
Chennai

In search of a home
The photograph of the

migrant and his daughter in Mexico was deeply distressing ("Drowned dream", June 27). It reminded me of the photograph of the Syrian toddler, Aylan Kurdi, who had drowned in the Mediterranean Sea while attempting to escape to Europe in 2015. Photos like these highlight the perils faced by migrants fleeing their countries due to war and poverty. It's shocking and sad that so many people are losing their lives in search of a home. How many more photos do we need to shake our conscience before we find a lasting solution? Nothing, not even borders, is more valuable than lives.

TALA B. RAGUNATH,
Thanjavur

State of health

While it is heartening that Kerala ranks first among States in the NITI Aayog's Health Index, the State cannot afford to be too happy as it continues to have the highest incidence of diabetes and cancer in the country ("Kerala tops list for best performing State in health", June 27). Even the dreaded Nipah virus first came to Kerala. Changes in lifestyle, new food habits and other reasons are responsible for this. Prevention is more important than cure.

S. JAGATHSIMHAN NAIR,
Thiruvananthapuram

It saddens me that Uttar Pradesh is unable to improve its position even after so many years. There

are too many loopholes in the healthcare system. While these cannot be corrected quickly, the State can use its large population to its advantage. It can deploy this manpower in hospitals and ensure that there are a higher number of well-trained doctors and researchers, and better infrastructure.

KHUSHAL TRIVEDI,
Kannur

Mamata in a bubble

Now, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee wants to join hands with the CPI(M) and the Congress just to oust Prime Minister Narendra Modi ("Left, Congress and Trinamool should unite, says Mamata", June 27). Does she think that Mr.

Modi can be ousted by a mere alliance of three parties? She is yet to understand that people prefer a stable government over unholy alliances. People want a strong leader and voted for one. Ms. Banerjee seems to have learnt nothing from the alliance experiments in U.P. and Karnataka where the

parties are now blaming one another for their debacle. People are not swayed so easily by promises. They know fully well when parties come together only to fulfil their own interests.

V.S. GANESHAN,
Bengaluru

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

>>Instagram post, not a tweet: The Titanic hero, Leonardo DiCaprio, actually took to Instagram to alert his followers on Chennai's drought. A front-page headline (June 27, 2019) and text had erroneously called it a tweet.

>>Wrong photograph: One of the photographs carried along with the report, "Balakot air strike planner named by government as RAW chief" (June 27, 2019), was not that of Arvind Kumar as the caption said.

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Will the idea of ‘one nation, one poll’ work in India?

PARLEY

The proposal will undermine the federal structure by pushing the regional parties out

Last week, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi convened an all-party meeting to discuss the idea of ‘one nation, one poll’, several parties stayed away, calling the idea “anti-democratic” and “anti-federal”. In a discussion moderated by Anuradha Raman, Tiruchi Siva and Jagdeep S. Chokkar speak of the implications of the proposed move. Edited excerpts:

When Prime Minister Modi floated the idea of ‘one nation, one poll’ yet again and invited the Opposition for a discussion last week, many prominent parties, including the DMK, stayed away from the meeting. What are your concerns?

Tiruchi Siva: One of the reasons the ruling party puts forth [to hold simultaneous elections] is the huge expenditure involved in the election process. In a democratic country, it the right of the people to exercise their franchise. It is the discretion of the people to elect or unseat a government. Citing expenses incurred in elections is not such a big issue in a country as vast as ours.

Our main contention is that as long as we have Article 356 in the Constitution, which allows any State government to be removed by the Central government, how can you be sure that the Centre will not unseat a State government for its own personal reasons by using Article 356 if simultaneous elections are held? What will happen to the remaining tenure of that elected Assembly? As long as Article 356 is in the Constitution, no State government is assured its full term of five years. Will somebody give us an assurance that Article 356 will be removed from the Constitution?

Some argue that simultaneous elections will be long-drawn, drain manpower, that the role of money is questionable, and that the Model Code of Conduct will stall government activities. How valid are these reasons?

Jagdeep S. Chokkar: Well, are we trying to get the cheapest possible democracy or are we trying to get the most effective and representa-

tive democracy? I think it is wrong to put a monetary value on democracy and elections.

The point on the issue of expenses is, who spends this money? The money that the Government of India and the Election Commission spend, which is public money, is minuscule compared to the money that political parties and candidates spend. If political parties and candidates want to reduce expenditure, they can do that. Nobody is asking them to spend that money. They spend this money because no political party is internally democratic.

The Model Code of Conduct only says that if the government wants to introduce a programme or a policy which may have a bearing on the result of the elections, it has to seek clearance from the Election Commission. There are a number of cases where the Election Commission has given such permission. The Model Code does not say that all existing schemes should be stopped. So, to say that development stops because of the Model Code is strange. The reason is that parties which are in power think of development programmes in the last six months or three months before the elections.

Then there’s the point about the government machinery getting caught in the election process. Every State has two elections every five years – one for the Assembly and one for Parliament. Today, elections to a small and remote State Assembly are considered to be a referendum on the national government, so much so that the national government and the political establishment gets into that election. A State election should be fought by the people of the State. Why should Ministers of the Central government and the Prime Minister go to every State to campaign? As a matter of fact, a case can be made that the Minister who takes an oath to fulfil his ministerial duties to the best of his ability for five years and then goes on electoral campaigns violates the oath of office which requires him to do his work as a Minister. If there are people required to campaign everywhere in the country, let them not be made Ministers. If elections are held in one or two States, why should the administra-



S.R. RAGHUNATHAN

tion in the remaining States stop functioning?

The Law Commission, a Parliamentary Standing Committee, and the Election Commission have supported this idea in principle.

TS: Adding to what Mr. Chokkar said, till 1967, simultaneous elections were in vogue. The situation changed after that. All the reasons Mr. Chokkar gave are valid. You see, in a democratic country, an election is the core thread through which people can express their views about the government. At other times, the government has the upper hand. Saying that a few crores being spent on elections is a waste is not a valid argument.

Then I come to the Lok Sabha. In 1977, the Lok Sabha’s term lasted only for three years. In 1989 it lasted only for two years. In 1996, the 11th Lok Sabha lasted for 18 months, and the 12th Lok Sabha lasted 13 months. Even the Lok Sabha cannot be assured of a full term. And if the Lok Sabha is dissolved and the State governments are stable, what is the solution to that?

Does the proposal display a contempt for the parliamentary system and the federal arrangement?

TS: Yes, there is an apprehension that it is so. What is the urgency when there are so many issues to debate? There are serious concerns about the federal structure and its

Are we trying to get the cheapest possible democracy or are we trying to get the most effective and representative democracy?

future against the backdrop of this proposal.

JSC: Part VI of the Constitution concerns the States. The States have an independent constitutional entity and existence. They have their own rhythm of elections. To forcibly change a constitutional entity’s natural progression is unconstitutional. And as has been said by Siva, it is a violation of the federal structure. So, one, there is independent constitutional existence, and two, there is the famous *Kesavananda Bharati* judgment in which a 13-judge Bench said, yes, Parliament does have the power to amend the Constitution, but that power does not extend to the point where the basic structure can be changed. The basic structure has been defined variously by several Supreme Court judgments. And in all those descriptions the federal character of the Constitution is a permanent component and prevents Parliament from amending the basic structure of the Constitution. Therefore, I maintain that even if all parties agree that simultaneous elections should be held, it is unconstitutional and it will not stand the test of judicial scrutiny. It is against the spirit of democracy and it should not be done.

If the party in power wants to

have absolute control over all the States, it should move a formal proposal to have a presidential form of government. I have no problem with that, but that should be discussed in that form and not through this devious and circuitous way.

How unfair is this proposal to smaller parties and particularly regional parties?

TS: Importance to States was accorded only after the emergence of regional parties. Till then, the national party dominated. After the emergence of regional parties, importance was given to local issues, and regional importance, of course, gained momentum. That cannot be sought to be undermined or underestimated in the future. If a simultaneous election comes through, the national party may take that as a sign for a simultaneous verdict. There are chances that the prevailing situation will help a party to remain in power at the Centre and in the States. This proposal will undermine the federal structure by pushing the regional parties out.

JSC: Absolutely. I feel that this is perhaps one of the unstated intentions. To get rid of all the minor parties, so to say, is to get rid of the Opposition. Regional parties will lose out because it will be argued that we are also voting for Parliament and for national issues. So, should the voter be voting on national issues in the State elections or on regional issues?

I had written a piece with Sanjay Kumar for your newspaper [in 2016] where I had said that [from the 1989 general election onwards], out of 31 instances where elections for State Assemblies and Parliament were held simultaneously, in 24 cases the same party was voted for the State Assembly and Parliament. So, the chances of voters voting together for the same party for the State and the Centre are high.

Even when the Congress was in power, and during Indira Gandhi’s time, there was a proposal for a presidential form of government, though the slogan of ‘one nation, one election’ was not used. So, it is a fact that any party which finds itself in a rather strong position feels itself perpetuating its rule. But that does not mean that it is democratic. The third issue is that in the last

three years, there have been a number of discussions on simultaneous elections. And this government, even before Parliament meets, calls a meeting of the political parties on this issue. This makes me wonder whether it is a diversionary tactic of the government so that people don’t think about other issues.

What do you have to say about electoral bonds brought in by the NDA government to ensure transparency?

JSC: It is ironic that there is a limit on the expenditure that a candidate can incur during elections but there is no limit on the expenditure that a party can incur. What is the source of income of political parties? Nearly 70-80% of the income of parties on an average is from unknown sources. And now, on top of that, we have this new scheme called electoral bonds. This is a blatant way of converting black money into white. Data show that in 2017-18, 95% of the bonds were received by the party in power. Now, this is a way of choking the funding to all Opposition parties, big or small. And if funding to all Opposition parties is choked, obviously other parties will be unable to function. That’s why we are in the Supreme Court and the matter is under the consideration of the Court. Our contention is that it is against all the apex court’s judgments on transparency. I mean, the whole exercise of making electoral bonds a Money Bill, which it is not, is questionable. There are many things wrong with electoral bonds and they will make the election expense issue even more opaque.

I repeat, election expenses are not an issue. If political parties are going to be truly democratic in their internal functioning, they have to stop choosing candidates on their winnability quotient, the exact definition of which is not known to anybody, but we do know that money and muscle power form two very important parts. Till that is corrected, the election expenditure issue is not going to be sorted out.

TS: I would like to know how much money can be saved by holding simultaneous elections. We will oppose the move and continue to do so. The government cannot paralyse the best practices which have been followed so far.



Tiruchi Siva
is a DMK member in the Rajya Sabha from Tamil Nadu



Jagdeep S. Chokkar
is one of the founding members of the Association for Democratic Reforms



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SINGLE FILE

BIMSTEC, a viable option

Unlike SAARC, it provides an opportunity for economic, cultural and social cooperation in the region

RADHIKA CHHABRA



PTI

S. Jaishankar’s first foreign visit as External Affairs Minister to Bhutan might be indicative of the government’s attempt to rekindle India’s ‘Neighbourhood First’ policy that started with Prime Minister Narendra Modi inviting SAARC leaders to his swearing-in ceremony in 2014.

The shift of focus from other regional initiatives such as SAARC to BIMSTEC in the past five years can be attributed to the inability of SAARC to foster regional cooperation and make progress. Regional cooperation under SAARC saw no progress, as indicated by the fact that the group has not met since 2014. Further, the summit stood cancelled in 2016 because it was boycotted by India, along with three other member states, owing to terror attacks in India allegedly sponsored by Pakistan-linked operatives. This prompted the Indian government to shift its focus to BIMSTEC to enhance regional cooperation, as manifested by the BIMSTEC state heads being invited to the oath-taking ceremony of the incumbent Modi government.

The Indian government, however, needs to be cautious in its approach toward BIMSTEC, otherwise it may meet a fate akin to previous attempts at cooperation in the region. Indeed, the trajectory of regional cooperation is driven by the nature and success of previous attempts at regional cooperation because there tends to be an acquiescence to the way states interact in a region. This is not to say that states will interact only in that manner. As seen in Europe, the relationship dynamic has changed time and again over the decades.

Regional initiatives in Asia, like SAARC, have been defined along the tangents of strategy and security more than they have been along economic, cultural and social lines. This can be attributed to contemporary geopolitical concerns and the mistrust that exists among the countries that are party to these organisations. Nevertheless, it is likely that looking towards BIMSTEC for regional economic, cultural and social cooperation may prove fruitful. This is because it does not include Pakistan, which has been an impediment to SAARC’s success and has kept the group’s relational dynamic focused on security and strategy. Further, China’s absence in BIMSTEC could mean that there may be fewer obstacles hindering the achievement of the organisation’s mandate. This is because bilateral and contentious issues will be excluded from the group’s deliberations, especially given that India and China have conflicting world views and sometimes clash on regional goals. As the renegotiation of SAARC remains unattainable, BIMSTEC might be a viable option for India to maintain its foreign policy discourse. However, New Delhi will have to take into account the fact that in Asia, economics and politics have historically been deeply integrated, and not fall into the acquiescence trap.

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NOTEBOOK

Drought teaches people the value of water

Tamil Nadu has become receptive to the idea of water conservation only now

T. RAMAKRISHNAN

Twelve years ago, I asked the then Agriculture Secretary of Tamil Nadu whether his department was undertaking any programme to promote the concept of water conservation without compromising on yield. I had just returned from the U.S. where I had seen people conserve water in different ways. I told the officer that in Minnesota, the place of origin of the Mississippi river, farmers were taking to sprinkler irrigation in a big way.

The officer clearly did not like my question, nor did he like the U.S. example. He curtly replied that his department was doing everything it could. The implication was that he did not need a lecture on water conservation.

The officer’s attitude was not an isolated case. Around the same time, I went to Mayiladuthurai in Nagapattinam district in

Tamil Nadu and asked a relative whether he would be receptive to the idea of water conservation, even while maintaining the same level of yield. The relative, a post-graduate and a resourceful farmer, shrugged off the question. “We are used to utilising water in a particular way, whether there is enough water in the Cauvery or not. This is how society has been treating water for thousands of years,” he replied. Would people be willing to change their ways even after experiencing droughts and trying times, I wondered.

Thankfully, changes do happen. Over the last couple of weeks, I have been in touch with farmers from different regions in Tamil Nadu. The State is now facing a severe water crisis. I broached the subject of water conservation with them, just like I did with the State Agriculture Secretary and my relative more

than a decade ago.

I was in for a pleasant surprise with the relative. The tables had turned. This time he gave me a lecture on how to save water while raising paddy. He is an avid practitioner of the System of Rice Intensification (SRI), a method of cultivation involving less water and seeds. The spell of drought that the Cauvery delta had faced seven years ago had convinced him of the idea of using water efficiently. He realised that he could no longer rely on the “traditional” practice of using more water than what was required.

R. Muthukumar, a young farmer of Tiruvannamalai district, which is not known to be a water surplus area, said he could not spot anyone who was interested in concepts such as SRI six or seven years ago, despite the groundwater in their lands going down steeply. But this has changed, he said. Now the

people in his village are interested in knowing about the various ways in which water can be conserved. Drought teaches people the value of water.

Micro-irrigation is gaining currency in several parts of Tamil Nadu due to a host of factors including the support from the State government. Sugarcane, banana, coconut, and vegetables like brinjal and tomato are being raised through this method. Drip irrigation for sugarcane is becoming popular in many parts of the State.

This is not to say that the problem has been solved. There continues to be enormous scope for efficient utilisation of water. But in a moment of crisis such as this, the silver lining is that no one now, whether a farmer or an officer, scoffs at the idea of water conservation.

People are waking up to reality now, and hopefully it’s not too late.

FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JUNE 28, 1969

Forward trading in scripts

The Union Government has banned with immediate effect forward trading in shares at all stock exchanges. A notification has been issued to this effect today [June 27, New Delhi] in the Gazette of India Extraordinary. The existing contracts entered into upto the date of the notification and remaining to be performed are permitted to be liquidated in accordance with the rules, bye-laws and regulations of the stock exchanges concerned. It is explained that this step has been taken to curb the unhealthy trends that have lately developed into the shares and securities business. If they are allowed to continue unabated, there is a danger to the health of the stock market and to the investment climate, particularly at a time when there is a revival of public investment interest in the capital market. The Central Government has, therefore, banned forward trading in shares to prevent undesirable speculation.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JUNE 28, 1919.

Cholera in Calcutta.

In reply to a question on Cholera among the Rangoon passengers, the chairman of the Calcutta Corporation said [in Calcutta]: On the afternoon of the 13th June [Friday] the Port Health Officer reported to me through telephone that there was a large congregation of passengers for Rangoon by the B.I.S.N. Company’s Steamer at Nos 7 and 8 jetties and that a number of cases of cholera had occurred. These cases were removed to the hospital. He considered this as a serious menace to the health of the city and suggested that the segregation station at Surinam should be at once utilised for the accommodation of these passengers. This was arranged by the Health Officer working in concert with the Port Health Officer and the next day arrangements were completed for accommodating these passengers.

CONCEPTUAL Futarchy

POLITICS

This refers to a form of government where voters get to vote on the values that need to be upheld by their government, but the best policies that need to be adopted in order to achieve these popular values is decided through the means of prediction markets. It is believed that prediction markets, where investors bet money on the future outcomes of various policies, can offer better policy ideas than regular democracies where politicians decide the policies of the government. Futarchy was first proposed by American economist Robert Hanson who summarised the idea as “vote on value, but bet on beliefs” in a manifesto released in 2000.

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