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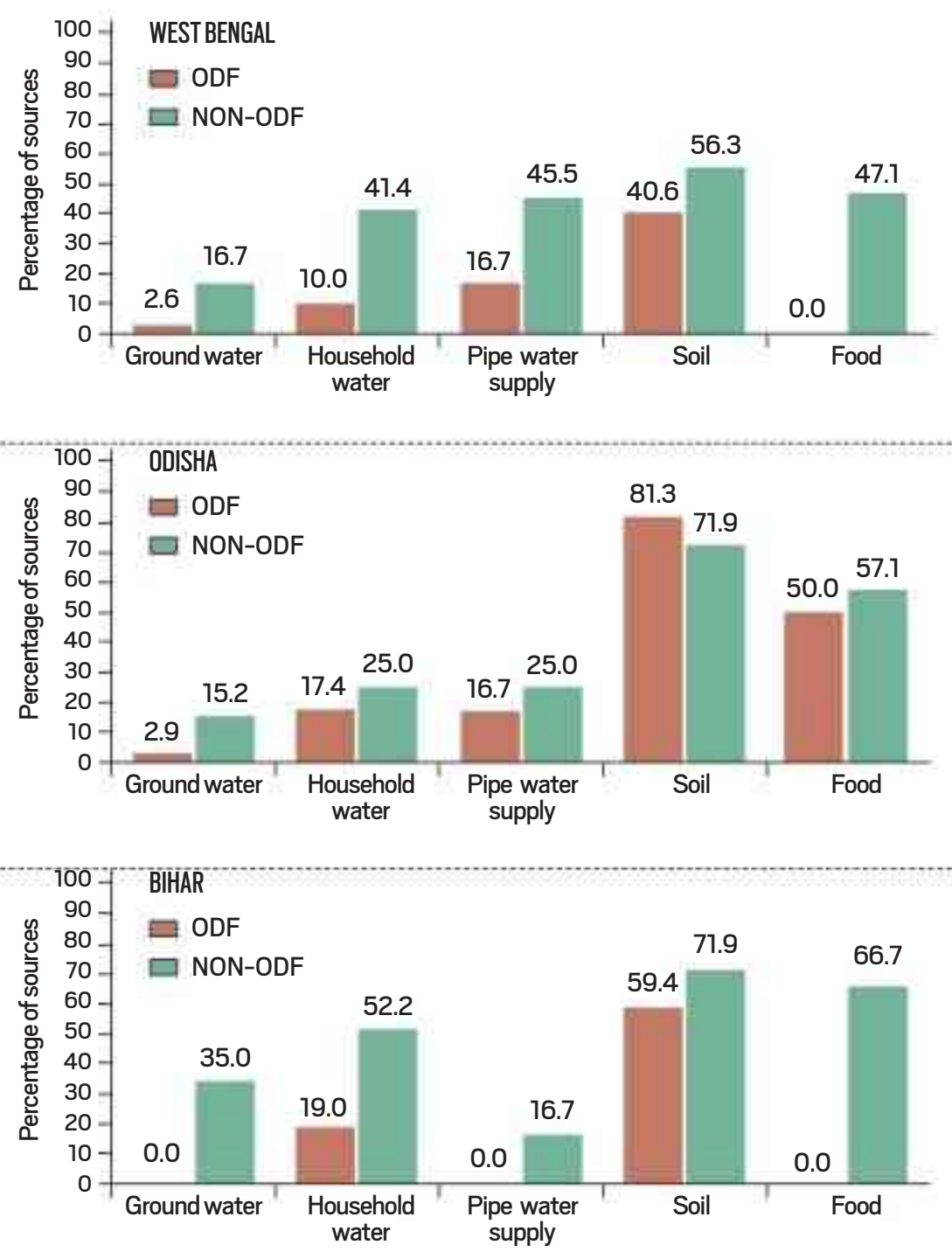11 | E.EXPLAINED

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, FRIDAY, JUNE 7, 2019

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TELLING NUMBERS

In 3 states, how the absence of toilets contaminates water, soil

CONTAMINATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL MEDIUMS WITH HuBac (FAECAL INDICATOR BACTERIA OF HUMAN ORIGIN)

WEST BENGAL

	ODF	NON-ODF
Ground water	2.6	16.7
Household water	10.0	41.4
Pipe water supply	16.7	45.5
Soil	40.6	56.3
Food	0.0	47.1

ODISHA

	ODF	NON-ODF
Ground water	2.9	15.2
Household water	17.4	25.0
Pipe water supply	16.7	25.0
Soil	81.3	71.9
Food	50.0	57.1

BIHAR

	ODF	NON-ODF
Ground water	0.0	35.0
Household water	19.0	52.2
Pipe water supply	0.0	16.7
Soil	59.4	71.9
Food	0.0	66.7

Source: UNICEF report via Swachh Bharat Mission

A STUDY released by the central government has found that villages that are not yet open defecation-free (non-ODF) is 12 times more likely than ODF villages to carry the risk of faecal contamination of groundwater (*The Indian Express*, June 6). The study, carried out by UNICEF, looked at the environmental impact of the Swachh Bharat Mission in 12 ODF and 12 non-ODF villages in three states — West Bengal, Odisha and Bihar — and was based on 725 samples of water, soil, and food. The overall findings were that non-ODF villages are:

12.7 TIMES more likely to have their groundwater sources contaminated (from contaminants traceable to humans alone)

2.40 TIMES more likely to have their piped water contaminated

2.48 TIMES more likely to have their household water (stored) contaminated

1.1 TIMES more likely to have their soil contaminated

2.16 TIMES more likely to have food contaminated and 2.48 TIMES more likely to have household drinking water contaminated

Among the three states, the levels were the worst in Bihar where non-ODF villages showed 35.7 times higher groundwater contamination than ODF villages, as compared to 6.6 times higher in West Bengal and 5.3 times higher in Odisha. For piped water, the relative risk of contamination (non-ODF to ODF) was 1.33 times more in Bihar, 2.73 times more in West Bengal and 1.50 times more in Odisha. For household water (stored), the relative risk was 2.74 times more in Bihar, 4.14 times more in West Bengal and 1.44 times more in Odisha.

For soil, the relative risk of faecal contamination traceable to humans, in non-ODF villages as compared to ODF villages, was 1.21 times more in Bihar, 1.39 times more in West Bengal and 0.89 times more in Odisha. And for food, the relative risk was 6.67 times more in Bihar; 8.47 times more in West Bengal and 1.14 times more in Odisha.

In its interpretation of the variations observed among states, the UNICEF report stated that in Odisha, the sudden onset of rain during sampling resulted in decreased impact. It said this indicates that systems for solid and liquid waste management, including faecal sludge management and drainage need improvement to realise the full benefits of residing in ODF environments.

SIMPLY PUT

Free rides, fare perspective

Delhi government's proposal to make bus and Metro rides free for women has drawn reactions ranging from approval to rejection. What are the precedents for the idea; what do studies on other cities show?

MALLICA JOSHI
NEW DELHI, JUNE 5

MINISTER FOR Housing and Urban Affairs Hardeep Singh Puri described the Aam Aadmi Party as "disruptionist", and spoke mockingly of "broken window economics" and "broken window fraud" while criticising the Delhi government's proposal to make buses and the Metro free for women Thursday. Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia, however, insisted that the government has both a concrete plan and the funds to implement the proposal.

Under the proposal announced by the Delhi government Monday, women will have the option to not pay for rides. The move, which is at the stage of feedback and planning, has drawn reactions ranging from enthusiastic approval to vehement rejection.

Government's logic

Cities in the United States and Europe have experimented with the idea of free public transport since at least the 1950s. Germany, France, Belgium, and Estonia have taken initiatives to make public transport free, either for the entire population or for sections such as students or senior citizens. Luxembourg has pledged to become the first country to make public transport free for everybody by 2020. The most common reason for any city incentivising the use of public transport has been to tackle congestion on the roads.

The reasons given by the Delhi government are different.

One, to make it easier for women to move from informal and more unsafe modes of transport such as shared autos and cabs to more formal and safer modes such as the Metro.

Two, to help more women enter the workforce. A report prepared by the Delhi Labour Department in 2018 found that of the 19.6 lakh workers engaged in trading, service and the manufacturing sector in the city, only 11.4% were women, and nearly half of them worked as "informal hired workers". The government hopes that with women being able to travel for free, more of them, especially from the economically disadvantaged groups, would start working.
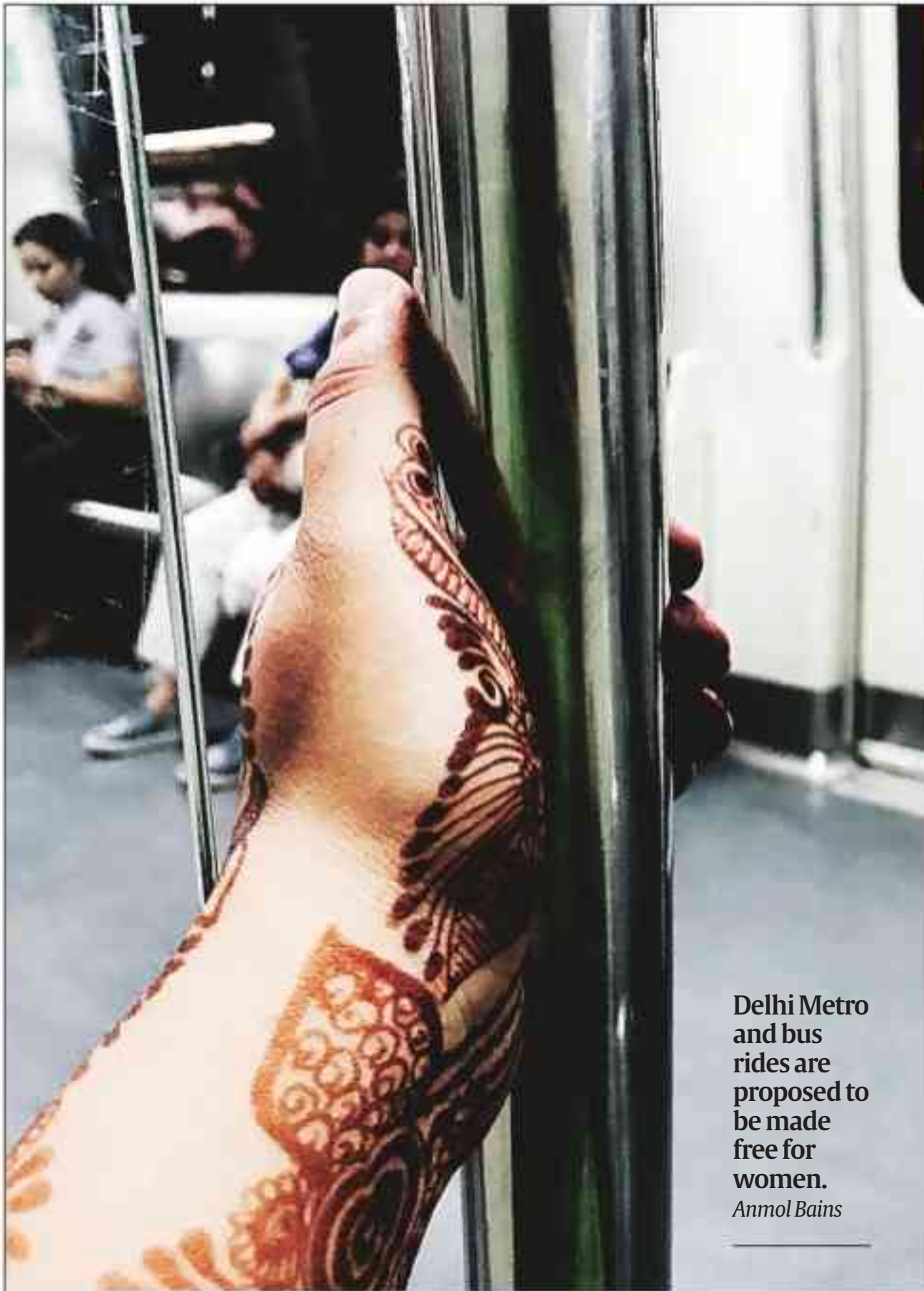
Globally, conversations around free public transport have revolved around decongestion and affordability, rather than safety. One reason is that many of these experiments have been carried out in highly advanced Scandinavian countries with mostly safe public spaces and better reporting rates of crime against women.

A November 2017 study of 4,000 Delhi University students by Brown University PhD candidate Girija Borker (Safety First: Perceived Risk of Street Harassment and Educational Choices of Women) found that women were willing to choose a lower ranking college if it ensured a safer commute.

"... For the average woman, selecting a safe travel route will require her to choose a college that is lower quality, leading to trade-offs between travel safety and college quality. Women also face similar tradeoffs between travel time and college quality... Alternatively, women are willing to spend an additional Rs 18,800 (USD 290) per year, relative to men, for a route that is... safer," Borker wrote.

Precedents elsewhere

The proposal to make public transport free for women has no well known precedent anywhere in the world, and could be the first of its kind. Studies on fully free public transport systems have underlined both positives and challenges.

Hasselt, Belgium, made public transport free in 1996, and also expanded its transport fleet. A decade later, a study reported a tenfold increase in ridership ['Subsidies in Public Transport': *European Transport* (2006), by Cees van Goeverden and others, quoted in 'The Prospects of Fare-Free Public Transport: Evidence From Tallinn': *Transportation* (2017), by Oded Cats and others]; however, rising operational costs forced Hasselt to do away with the scheme in 2014.

The small German town of Templin made public transport free in 1997, and continues with the policy even today. Within three years, ridership increased 1,200%, with children and the youth making up the vast majority of the increased numbers. This, however, led to increased vandalism. Also, "the vast majority of the substitution effects were due to shift from soft modes — 30-40% from biking and 35-50% from walking. Only 10-20% of the substitution effects were associated with previous car trips." [Cats *et al.* (2017)]

In 1991, the Netherlands introduced a seasonal free-fare travel card for higher education students, which led to the share of trips made by students rising from 11% to

Delhi Metro and bus rides are proposed to be made free for women. *Anmol Bains*

HOW FREE TRANSPORT HAS FARED

NORWAY
The Norwegian city of Stavanger experimented with free public transport between August and December 2011. An evaluation found no evidence of reduced car use, and the increase in ridership was attributed to more walkers getting on, as well as more 'fun riders'.

SWEDEN
In 2008 and 2013, Gothenburg offered tens of thousands of motorists free public transport for a limited period. Later, 25% of motorists were recorded as having moved to public transport as primary commuting mode. Long-term effects were not measured.

DENMARK
In 2009, 373 car owners in Copenhagen were given a free month travel card. The share of participants who used public transport doubled from 5% to 10%, but six months later, fell to 7%.

UNITED STATES
In Ashville, North Carolina, in 2006, ridership rose 59% when public transport was made free. An increase of 9% was retained after the experiment ended.

BELGIUM

The Belgian city of Hasselt made public transport free for residents and visitors in 1996. A decade later, it was reported that ridership had increased tenfold, with more than half the new users taking public transport instead of walking or cycling.

The city finally concluded that the scheme was unviable and withdrew it with effect from January 1, 2014, leaving only some specific concessions. The scheme had no long-term impact on car ownership.

21%. Fifty-two per cent of cyclists, and 34% of car users moved. [van Goeverden *et al.* (2006)]

However, small European cities can hardly be an indicator for Delhi. The population of all of the Netherlands is around 1.7 crore, much less than Delhi's estimated 2 crore. Average income levels are not comparable, and the public transportation system in Delhi is weaker than in most European countries.

Jasmine Shah, vice-chairperson of Dialogue and Development Commission of Delhi, where the proposal was framed, said: "There is very little academic data to go by when it comes to a scheme like this in our context. The West has done it to battle road congestion and pollution. We haven't really found a similar project in developing countries. But perhaps this will make us the pioneers."

The way forward

The challenge for the Delhi government is to find the funds for the project — which it says it has. According to the Delhi government, the cost of subsidising women's travel will be around Rs 1,200 crore annually. However, studies show that operational costs frequently rise in the long run, and schemes become increasingly less viable.

Then there are the challenges of implementation. Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) is looking at special passes for women. But the Metro has automated fare collection (AFC) gates that require tokens or Metro cards — the Metro will have to either isolate entry and exit points for women where AFC gates can be done away with, or come up with special cards or tokens for women.

Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has said that the move is primarily to ensure that women can travel safely. The Metro network has CCTV cover, guards, marshals, Metro police and the CISF, and is the safest mode of transport in the city. The Delhi government had announced CCTV cameras and marshals for buses too, but the plan is hanging fire.

Along with safety on public transport, last mile connectivity is a big issue. For women, walking to and from the nearest bus stop or Metro station, especially during the early mornings and late evenings, remains unsafe in many places in the city.

Sewa Ram, transport expert at the School of Planning and Architecture, has suggested that the Delhi government start a last-mile connectivity pilot project in one neighbourhood by ensuring adequate street lighting and making available modes such as smaller buses to commuters.

Why Cabinet Committees are formed, what are the functions of each

PRADEEP KAUSHAL
NEW DELHI, JUNE 6

ON THURSDAY, the Union government released the composition of eight Cabinet Committees, including two new ones — one on Investment, the other on Employment and Skill Development. What are these Cabinet Committees for?

Transaction of Business

The executive works under the Government of India Transaction of Business Rules, 1961. These Rules emerge out of Article 77(3) of the Constitution, which states: "The President shall make rules for the more convenient transaction of the business of the Government of India, and for the allocation among Ministers of the said business." The Rules mandate the minister-in-charge of a department (ministry) to dispose of "all business allotted to a department" under him or her.

However, "when the subject of a case concerns more than one department", no decision can be taken "until all such departments have concurred, or, failing such concurrence, a decision thereon has been taken by or under the authority of the Cabinet". The Prime Minister constitutes Standing Committees of the Cabinet and sets out the specific functions assigned to them. He can add or reduce the number of committees.

Ad hoc committees of ministers, including Groups of Ministers, may be appointed by the Cabinet or by the Prime Minister for specific matters. A policy paralysis had hit the UPA-II government because it had passed on numerous issues to Groups of Ministers.

Key Committees

APPOINTMENTS: Of the eight panels constituted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday, the most vital is the Cabinet Committee on Appointments. This panel makes appointments to posts of the three service chiefs, Director General of Military Operations, chiefs of all Air and Army Commands, Director General of Defence Intelligence Agency, Scientific Adviser to the Defence Minister, Director General of Armed Forces Medical Services, Director General of Ordnance Factories, Director General of Defence Estates, Controller General of Defence Accounts, Director of Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, Solicitor-General, Governor of the Reserve Bank of India, Chairman and Members of the Railway Board, Chief Vigilance Officers in Public Sector Undertakings and Secretariat posts of and above the rank of Joint Secretary in the Central Government. This Committee decides on all important empanelments and shift of officers serving on Central deputation.

ACCOMMODATION: The Cabinet Committee on Accommodation determines the guidelines or rules with regard to the allotment of government accommodation. It also takes a call on the allotment of government accommodation to non-eligible persons and organisations as also the rent to be charged from them. It can consider the allotment of accommodation from the General Pool to Members of Parliament. It can consider proposals for shifting existing Central Government Offices to locations outside the capital.

ECONOMIC AFFAIRS: The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs is supposed to review economic trends, problems and prospects "for evolving a consistent and integrated economic policy", coordinate all activities requiring policy decisions at the highest level, deal with fixation of prices of agricultural produce and prices of essential commodities. It considers proposals for investment of more than Rs 1,000 crore, deal with industrial licensing policies and review rural development and the Public Distribution System.

PARLIAMENTARY AFFAIRS: The Cabinet Committee on Parliamentary Affairs draws the schedule for Parliament sessions and monitors the progress of government business in Parliament. It scrutinises non-government business and decides which official Bills and resolutions are to be presented.

POLITICAL AFFAIRS: The Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs addresses problems related to Centre-state relations. It also examines economic and political issues that require a wider perspective but have no internal or external security implications.

SECURITY: The Cabinet Committee on Security deals with issues relating to law and order, internal security and policy matters concerning foreign affairs with internal or external security implications. It also goes into economic and political issues related to national security. It considers all cases involving capital defence expenditure more than Rs 1,000 crore. It considers issues related to the Department of Defence Production and the Department of Defence Research and Development, Services Capital Acquisition plans and schemes for procurement of security-related equipment.

The new panels

INVESTMENT: The Cabinet Committee

Prime Minister Narendra Modi with his newly formed Cabinet on May 31. *PTI*

An ocean of neighbours

PM Modi's visit to Male and Colombo is an opportunity
to affirm the salience of the Indian Ocean island states

C Raja Mohan

PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA Modi's first visit abroad in his second term to Maldives and Sri Lanka is being billed as the reaffirmation of Delhi's traditional diplomatic emphasis on "neighbourhood first". Hopefully, it is a little more than that — an effort to redefine what our neighbourhood is.

The visit to Male and Colombo offers the opportunity to firmly place the Indian Ocean island states into India's regional geography. A beginning was indeed made in his first term, when Modi travelled to Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka in early 2015 and outlined an Indian Ocean strategy called SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region). Modi must now expand the ambit of the strategy to draw in Madagascar, Comoros, Reunion and Diego Garcia. Reunion is part of France and Diego Garcia hosts a major American military facility.

Similarly, Delhi should focus on a number of small islands that dot the sea lines of communication in the eastern Indian Ocean — the Cocos and Keeling islands belonging to Australia come readily to mind. In both the east and the west, India's own island territories — the Andaman and Lakshadweep — have a critical role in reshaping our maritime neighbourhood.

But first to the conceptions of India's strategic geography. Nothing has diminished India's geopolitical thinking than the idea of South Asia. The shrinking of India's regional vision was also reinforced by India's inward economic orientation and the sundering of historic commercial ties with the maritime neighbours.

Maps of the neighbourhood, those of the Foreign Office, barely showed countries like Myanmar, Thailand, or Indonesia with whom India shared land and/or maritime boundaries. The unfortunate conflation of "neighbourhood" with "South Asia" and SAARC was complete.

When he came to power in 2014, Modi seemed to go by the traditional South Asian framework. He invited all the leaders of the SAARC for his swearing-in-ceremony to signal the commitment to putting the neighbourhood first. There was one exception though — it was the invitation to the political leadership of Mauritius to join the swearing-

in. The invitation probably reflected Modi's sensibility to India's deep diasporic connection with the Indian Ocean island republic.

Whatever the intent might have been, it set the stage for visualising a region that transcends South Asia and puts the maritime neighbourhood back into India's strategic consciousness.

At the only SAARC summit during his first term, held in Kathmandu at the end of 2014, Modi saw the forum's dysfunction. It could not wrap up regional connectivity agreements negotiated for years before, thanks to Pakistan's decision to pull the plug at the last minute. With SAARC going nowhere, Modi turned to the BIMSTEC grouping, invited its leaders to join the BRICS summit at Goa during 2016, and again last month for the inauguration of Modi's second term.

The limitations of SAARC are structural and enduring. Before "South Asia" became the dominant moniker, our region was known as "the Indian Subcontinent". Many of the problems afflicting SAARC today are a legacy of the Subcontinent's tragic Partition in 1947. As new sovereignties emerged out of undivided India, there were problems aplenty to deal with.

Any number of SAARC summits are not going to resolve the quarrels in the post-Partition Subcontinent. Most of them are bilateral between India and each of its neighbours. The one exception is the nature of the disputes between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Answers to these quarrels too will have to largely come through bilateralism. Where there has been progress in addressing these problems — for example with Bangladesh — the consequences have been huge and positive.

Delhi should have no problem recognising that Islamabad is not ready for economic integration with India; it wants a settlement of the Kashmir question to precede any economic and political cooperation with India. That might take a while. But should we hold up the rest of the region until Pakistan is comfortable with India-centred regionalism?

Modi's focus on BIMSTEC was as much about rediscovering a forgotten regional organisation as it was about putting the Bay of Bengal on India's mental map. Equally im-

portant was Modi's focus on the Indian Ocean islands. His 2015 trip to Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka was to include Maldives, but had to be cancelled at the last minute because of the crackdown on opposition leaders. Modi travelled briefly to Maldives at the end of last year to celebrate the restoration of democracy in the island state.

Over the last few years, Colombo has been persistent in claiming an "Indian Ocean identity" rather than a South Asian identity. The future of the Maldives, sitting astride one of the world's busiest sea lines of communication, is in the Indian Ocean. Both of them are acutely conscious of their growing maritime salience and have not been hesitant to develop all-round political leverage.

As Modi travels to the southern seas, Delhi must come to terms with a number of realities. First, it needs to recognise that island states and territories — including the smallest pieces of real estate — are coming into strategic play amidst the return of great power rivalry to the littoral. Second, the island states in the south western Indian Ocean form a coherent group and must be dealt within an integrated framework. In eastern Indian Ocean, a focus on developing the Andaman Islands opens up possibilities for sub-regional cooperation with Thailand, Indonesia and Singapore. Third, India needs to develop its own national capabilities — especially in the delivery of strategic economic and security assistance to the island states. Without that the ambitious goals identified under the SAGAR vision will remain elusive.

Finally, in his SAGAR vision, Modi signalled India's readiness to work with other powers in promoting regional prosperity and security. There are big possibilities for collaboration with France, the US, Australia and Japan in different corners of the Indian Ocean. The joint bidding by India and Japan for the development of East Container Terminal in the Colombo port underlines the potential.

The writer is director, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore and contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express

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EYE ON GROWTH

RBI cuts rates, but its impact on economic activity depends on
banks transmitting it to borrowers

AS WAS EXPECTED, the monetary policy committee (MPC) of the Reserve Bank of India delivered its third consecutive rate cut of 25 basis points, citing significant weakness in growth impulses. The repo rate now stands at 5.75 per cent. Significantly, all six members of the MPC, including Viral Acharya and Chetan Ghate who had earlier voted against monetary easing, opted not only for a loose monetary policy, but also a shift in stance from neutral to accommodative, opening the door for more rate cuts in the future. The message is clear: Inflation remains contained, while the slowdown in economic activity is deeper than what was believed.

On the inflation front, recent data points towards a broad-based pick up in prices of several food items, increasing the prospects of higher retail inflation in the coming months. However, the MPC isn't perturbed, as it expects a larger reversal in prices during autumn and winter. Further, with demand weakening, core inflation has moderated, as have households expectations of three months ahead inflation. The RBI now expects retail inflation at 3-3.1 per cent in the first half of FY20, rising thereafter to 3.4-3.7 per cent in the second half, well within the 4 (+/-2) per cent band. In the economy though, there is reason to worry. In February, the RBI had projected the economy to grow at 7.4 per cent in FY20. It then lowered its forecast to 7.2 per cent in the April, and has now cut it to 7 per cent. But with the underlying drivers of growth sputtering, private consumption, investment and export growth remain subdued, and with limited fiscal space, achieving even this may be difficult.

The fundamental question of transmission remains. Will cuts in the repo rate translate to lower lending rates? Will it boost consumption and investment demand? In the policy document, the RBI noted that while the transmission of the previous two repo cuts was 21 bps to the lending rate on fresh rupee loans, the lending rate on outstanding loans increased by 4 bps as "past loans continue to be priced at higher rates". This is indeed worrying as it suggests limited capacity to stimulate the economy. Perhaps, with liquidity moving into surplus mode — liquidity in the system turned into an average daily surplus of Rs 66,000 crore after being in deficit in April and most of May — transmission will improve. The decision to review the liquidity management framework by constituting an internal working group is a positive signal. The dovish tone of the policy increases the likelihood of another rate cut in August, presumably once concerns over fiscal slippage are addressed after the budget is presented, and greater clarity emerges on the monsoon. Further rate cuts though will depend on the extent of the growth slowdown and the trajectory of inflation.

LIVING IN DENIAL

President Trump deploys familiar rhetoric against China, India
and Russia. He must know world has left behind climate deniers

ANY HOPE THAT Donald Trump would tone down his global warming-related rhetoric against India, China and Russia after pulling his country out of the Paris Climate Change Pact, two years ago, was extinguished on Wednesday. In an interview to a British TV channel, the US President said these countries "don't have good air and water and don't fulfill their responsibility to the environment". It would be easy to laugh off Trump's performance as another display of his illiteracy on textbook environmental knowledge — at one point he even said, "I believe that there is a change in the weather and I think it changes both ways". The world has, after all, come to accept that the US president is clueless about the difference between weather and climate, let alone the distinction between pollution and global-warming. Even then, it's worrying that the president of arguably the most powerful nation in the world continues to be ill-informed of basic facts about his country's track record on climate change. His assertion that "US is amongst the cleanest climes in the world" – rather rich coming from the head of a country that emits the second-most amount of GHGs — is another signal that the US will continue to be stingy in funding climate initiatives in the developing world.

Much like the then US President George W Bush, who walked out of the Kyoto Protocol in 2001 – or the senior Bush whose statement that American lifestyle is not negotiable once topped the list of infamous climate quotes — Trump has denied his country's culpability in climate change. However, the world has changed much from the times of senior and junior Bush. While Trump has been giving a new lease of life to his country's coal industry, India and China have made long-term plans to decarbonise their economies. India's target of producing 40 per cent of its installed electricity capacity by 2030 from non-fossil fuels outstrips that of the US by more than 10 per cent. The EU also has a set of binding emission targets for 2030. And, even in the US, governors of at least 14 states have reassured the world that that they would keep up the country's climate progress despite Trump upturning Obama-era federal programmes.

At the international level, groups such as the India-helmed International Solar Alliance hold the promise of global technology cooperation despite US braggadocio. The trouble, however, is that arresting global warming problem deserves concerted global action — climate rogues such as Trump stymie it.

D-DAY LESSONS

The 75th anniversary of Normandy Landings brings to focus
erosion of values and systems set in place after World War II

AS LEADERS FROM across Europe, the US and beyond came together in France to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Normandy Landings on Thursday, they were understandably effusive in their praise for the veterans and the fallen on D-Day for "saving freedom" and the sacrifices made for a democratic, liberal world order. And, as much as the anniversary provides an occasion to remember and celebrate, it is also an opportunity to pause and reflect on the state of Europe and the West as a whole in terms of how much the values and systems set in place after World War II are now being eroded.

The elections to the European Parliament saw a strengthening of right-wing populist forces, such as the European Alliance of Peoples and Nations, and far-right groups increased their presence within more "mainstream" parties and alliances. While many expected the tide of populism in Europe to be far more sweeping, the decline of liberal values, internationalism and the consensus around it, is no doubt increasing. And one of the reasons could well be that D-Day, and the most devastating war and the political backdrop that led to it, are fading from memory to become the lessons of history that few seem willing to learn.

The end of World War II was marked by fatigue. The results of a parochial and militarised nationalism were that the large part of an entire generation was either killed or injured, mighty economies were in tatters and the boasts of my nation right or wrong were faced with the gruesome realities of nuclear devastation and the Holocaust. Those who saw the war in Britain, for example, did not re-elect their victorious leader, Winston Churchill, but preferred a man who wanted peace and to put an end to the empire of exploitation. As that generation has almost entirely passed on, people seem to be once again taking refuge in ideas of borders and race, and turning to strongmen who fan their insecurities. But this time, hopefully, it won't come to another D-Day to turn the tide.

BREAKING THE ALGORITHM

Public policy must regulate algorithms and AI to avoid adverse impact on society

Simrit Kaur and Kamaldeep Kaur Sarna

BUSINESSES ARE INCREASINGLY utilising algorithms to improve their pricing models, enhance customer experience and optimise business processes. Governments are employing algorithms to detect crime and determine fines. Consumers are benefitting from personalised services and lower prices. However, algorithms have also raised concerns such as collusions and malfunctioning, privacy, competition issues, and information asymmetry.

Automated systems have now made it easier for firms to achieve collusive outcomes without formal agreement or human interaction, thereby signalling anti-competitive behaviour. This results in "tacit algorithmic collusion", an outcome which is still not covered by existing competition law. This can occur in non-oligopolistic markets too. In 2015, US Federal Trade Commission fined David Topkins (former e-commerce executive of a company selling online posters and frames), for fixing the price of certain posters sold through Amazon Marketplace using complex algorithms, impacting consumer welfare and competition adversely. In 2011, two third-party Amazon merchants, Bordeebook and Profnath, attempted to use algorithmic pricing to sell an out-of-print version of Peter Lawrence's *The Making of a Fly*. The first seller algorithmically priced the book at 1.27059 times the price of the second seller. The second seller's price was thus automatically set at 0.9983 times the price of the first seller. Over

time, the price shot up to an unimaginable high of over $23 million — before dropping to $106.23 and $106.05 respectively! But, the relative pricing between the booksellers remained unchanged, indicating endless possibilities for both "collusion" and "chaos".

Security concerns too remain paramount. In order to enjoy services at low or zero price, consumers neglect the value of their data. Access to easily procurable data such as Facebook "likes" can be used to target only advantageous customers circumventing anti-discrimination mechanisms. Application of advanced algorithms have also resulted in an increase in ransomware attacks. Ransomware is a form of malicious software that blocks access to a victim's data and threatens to make it public unless the ransom demanded by the hacker is paid. A devastating cyber attack — the WannaCry ransomware attack — hit the world in May 2017, affecting around 2,30,000 computers across 150 countries. Through the use of EternalBlue, an exploit leaked by the Shadow Brokers hacking group, the malware spread on Microsoft Window's Operating System across the globe without any human interaction. Such attacks require prompt action by regulatory authorities.

Important concerns pertain to "competition" as well. Processing of large datasets through dynamic algorithms generate real-time data "feedback loops", impacting competition adversely. As more users visit select

platforms, not only more data, but data with greater reliability is collected, allowing firms to more effectively target customers. Consequently, more users feedback into this loop. Such feedback loops have the potential of creating entry barriers which are a cause of concern for competition authorities. Also, better monetisation of platforms reinforces such loops as the additional revenues generated are reinvested to improve services, thereby, further attracting more users — leading to dominance. That Google has been estimated to charge a higher cost-per-click (CPC) than Bing, a competitor, suggests that advertisers attribute a higher probability of converting a viewer of Google's ads into a customer.

Then, we have evolving machine-learning algorithms ranging from voice recognition systems to self-driving cars. Even high-profile programmers/developers may not be able to trace the working of such algorithms making nearly impossible the identification of any anti-competitive practice. Such algorithms may have the capacity to identify a dominant strategy on their own to maximise profits.

A rethink of public policy is absolutely essential if non-desirable impacts of artificial intelligence on human race are to be arrested.

Kaur is principal, Shri Ram College of Commerce and professor of economics and public policy, University of Delhi. Sarna is assistant professor, department of commerce, SRCC

JUNE 7, 1979 FORTY YEARS AGO

STATE CMs' MEET
STATE CHIEF MINISTERS met at a conference in New Delhi and broadly agreed on a series of steps to improve the working conditions of policemen. They accepted the central guidelines on the formation and recognition of associations of policemen and endorsed the move to provide institutional arrangements at district and state levels for the consideration of their grievances. No time-bound programme was evolved to implement the plan. The one-day conference accepted the Centre's approach to six major problems which were reviewed in depth. The Union home minister, H M Patel, presided over the deliberations.

NON-ALIGNED UNITY
SRI LANKAN PRESIDENT J R Jayewardene formally opened what has the makings to be the most controversial non-aligned conclave yet: The conference of the foreign ministers of the co-ordinating bureau of non-aligned countries. Jayewardene struck a hopeful note in his address: "It is argued that the bipolar world does not exist any longer and that non-alignment as a middle course between two contending power blocs is no longer relevant." He went on to add that, "The end of bi-polarity as the dominant feature of international relations makes non-alignment to my mind even more relevant than before, because the existence of different centres of

power makes it all the more necessary that the non-aligned countries pursue even-handed relationships with all of them."

ASGHAR ASSERTIONS
AIR MARSHAL ASGHAR Khan has given an interesting account of the 1965 Indo-Pakistani war for which, he said, his country was not adequately prepared and yet the late president, Ayub Khan, agreed to launch an adventure against India on the advice of the late Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. He said he was convinced that Bhutto deliberately misguided Ayub Khan expecting that Pakistan would suffer a defeat. Khan made these assertions in his book *The First Round: Indo-Pakistan War 1965*.

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THE IDEAS PAGE

The liberal professional?

The idea of energising professional education with elements of liberal education in draft education policy hints at some possibilities of resolution of conflict between the two streams

SAIKAT MAJUMDAR

A FEW YEARS ago, Yale president Peter Salovey explained the rationale behind the Singapore government's investment in the Yale-NUS College, a liberal arts institution co-founded by Yale and the National University of Singapore. As I had described in these very pages, Salovey had credited the politicians with recognising that the impending arrival of a messy democracy in Singapore made a more open, liberal-arts education essential for the country's citizens.

The ground reality of the relation between the government and liberal education in India, especially of the public universities of arts and sciences, has been an ironic opposite, never more so under the government led by the current political alliance, in power since 2014 and now more powerful than ever since the electoral mandate on May 23.

Liberal thought is exactly what has made these universities suspect in the eyes of the government, and this mistrust has spread far and wide in the general population, deepening the perception of universities as bastions of "anti-national" ideologies, propaganda, and action. Leading the charge of the reputation of "anti-nationalism" are the three universities which have been bastions of academic excellence in India — Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, Jadavpur University in Kolkata, and Hyderabad Central University in Hyderabad.

While the dominant model of the Indian public university is traceable to the British colonial model ushered in the three Presidencies in 1857 — Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay — it is not coincidental that these three universities were either set up as part of an anti-colonial movement (Jadavpur) or as parts of a wholly different educational enterprise in independent India (JNU and HCU). But the enmity with the government is simply emblematic of their loss of favour with the Indian population at large, which has, of late, upheld the rhetoric of nationalism that has brought the NDA government back to power and has doubtlessly also led to the electoral defeat of young, radical student leaders such as Kanhaiya Kumar.

It is in the light of this government's troubled relation with liberal thought that a particular feature stands out in the draft New Education Policy submitted to the Ministry of Human Resource Development by the Kasturirangan Committee. This is its foregrounding of liberal arts education. It comes as striking news not only in the context of India but the world today that the policy imagines the liberal arts as foundational to higher education of any kind. "The needs of the 21st century," the draft states, "require that liberal broad-based multidisciplinary education become the basis for all higher education." This includes fields of training that are usually held in direct contrast to liberal arts education: "Such a liberal education would be, in the long run, the approach across all undergraduate programmes, including those in professional, technical, and vocational disciplines."

This is a welcome hue of innovation in a nation trapped in a sharp binary between an antiquated colonial model of general education in the arts and sciences on one hand, and on the other, a fevered fetish of professional,

mainly engineering education. Even champions of liberal education, myself included, have tended to define it against professional education. This is the continued acknowledgement of the binary that goes back to Cardinal Newman's idea of liberal knowledge as its own end and Immanuel Kant's formulation of the "higher faculty" of clergy, law and medicine against the "lower faculty" of "philosophy" — which, in today's formulation, would be the faculty of general arts and sciences. However, here is where the NEP committee has gone beyond the modern western notion of the liberal arts. It has traced the liberal arts as a "liberal definition of the arts" that goes back to the idea of the 64 "kalas" or arts canonised in India's ancient books, which included singing, playing musical instruments, and painting, but also "scientific fields" such as engineering, medicine, and mathematics".

Sometimes I worry that the expansive definition of the arts obtained from "kala" threatens to make it almost shapeless. But I can also see that the committee's understanding of the symbiotic relation between the liberal and the professional stems from this very expansive definition. It helps this narrative of the arts go beyond the modern western notion of the opposition between the two. As such, even as it recognises the liberal and the professional as two different tracks of education, it is able to imagine their mutual energisation as and when possible.

The idea of energising professional education with elements of liberal education is not far from the original vision behind the IITs, which were always meant to go beyond mere technological competence and create a holistically educated technocrat. But this vision has tended to fall by the wayside in the feverish dream of quick upward mobility offered by an engineering degree from an elite

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institute. "Given that professional and vocational fields are also better served in many cases by those obtaining a liberal education," the policy states, "professional, technical, and vocational education programmes will arrange to enable arrangements and room for students to pursue a truly liberal undergraduate education." It is common in the US for professional training in law and medicine to follow a foundational education in the liberal arts and sciences. Whether a developing nation like India can approach this longer and more expensive route is debatable; however, a policy that makes a strong recommendation to bolster professional with liberal education might go some distance to dissolve what has become sharply polarised tracks of Indian higher education.

The policy also recommends the reverse: "All undergraduate liberal education programmes shall have a robust element of skills and professional competence." It is important not to see this not as an instrumentalisation of liberal education, which would defeat its very purpose — but rather as a broadening of its range to include aspects of experiential learning and community service, that would denude the rarefied, elitist aura around the classical western meaning of liberal education as that meant for the privileged gentleman of leisure.

The unwitting subtext of the bitter conflict between the liberal university and anti-liberal nationalism around the world has often been that between an expansive humanistic education and a sharply instrumentalist one. The proposal of mutual symbiosis between professional and liberal education in the draft of the New Education Policy hints at some possibilities of resolution.

The writer is professor of English and creative writing at Ashoka University

C R Sasikumar

Lessons from the verdict

The idea of India may have lost its political currency

RAVINDER KAUR

THE SHEER SCALE and size of Narendra Modi's electoral victory poses fundamental questions beyond the usual election analysis. The BJP has not only defied anti-incumbency to increase its overall voteshare, but has also made inroads into new regions and constituencies to consolidate its grip on power across large parts of India. What has been puzzling is that the time-tested "it's the economy, stupid" argument does not fully explain this political outcome. Unlike the 2014 general election, where the idea tapped into the simmering discontent against corruption and accusations of "policy paralysis" of the UPA government, the 2019 election was fought against ill-thought policy interventions like demonetisation, farmer distress, and an overall shaky economic performance of the NDA government. The prime minister's (well publicised) micro-welfare schemes are not an adequate explanation because the UPA government too had invested substantially in pro-poor policy measures. According to the material logic, then, the voters should have penalised the BJP. Yet, the voters have not only not penalised the BJP but also decided to give it a second chance. The repeat performance is a critical indicator that the 2014 election was most likely not a chance occurrence but perhaps the first signpost of a more persistent trend.

If 2019 is indeed an affirmation of the 2014 verdict, then what precisely is being affirmed? What futures does the emergence of a majoritarian coalition portend for India's minorities? Put differently, what remains of the "idea of India", to invoke a familiar and over-used phrase, in the face of unabashed majoritarian politics? These questions are critical primarily because the voters have given near carte blanche powers of legislation and government to the BJP. This in itself is a cause of anxiety in a democratic order where the Opposition is too marginal to make a difference or play a meaningful role. So what kind of India is emerging in this shifting political landscape?

The debate has naturally turned to the realm of ideas. While some worry that the soul of India risks being corroded, others contend that it is not an ideological preference for Hindu nationalism as such but "money, media, and tech" which upset the balance. Amartya Sen has recently stated that what Hindu nationalism has won is power but not the battle of ideas. Implicit in this range of responses is the assumption that the "idea of India" is intact and untarnished even in this momentous change —

the people have been merely hoodwinked through a dazzling spectacle produced through unfair means. A part of this belief is correct — the BJP's media machinery oiled by nearly unlimited funds is without parallel in the history of contemporary India. That the party does not hesitate to forge a victory through all available means is too well known. The other part is incorrect — that the idea of India is stable and constant. Ideas are never permanent; they are always work-in-progress that require constant attention and nurturing. The assumption that a permanent core of India — secular and inclusive — exists, and will continue to exist despite all challenges, is part of the problem. It presumes a spiritual core of the nation that is unalterable, and one that exists outside the material world (money, media, tech). This presumed unmediated stability of the idea of India, I propose, is a barrier to any new political imaginaries.

Take a look at how the story of the idea of India has unfolded thus far.

The glue which bound the postcolonial nation together has long been "unity in diversity", a powerful principle that tried to accommodate a vast range of competing interests and identities into a singular fold. The model wasn't without its flaws or critique but it did create a potential framework in which multiplicity could cohere. As India shifted towards capitalist reforms in the 1990s, the idea of India became the key articulation of the nation's story of survival and emergence from colonialism. Increasingly, the idea of India came to be seen as an inalienable quality shared by its people — Indians were naturally argumentative, they squabbled sometimes but came together to celebrate democracy. India's DNA was different than Pakistan's, or so was the claim repeated alternately with relief and pleasure. This abiding belief in the permanence of the idea of India was on display in the 2014 election. A number of liberal commentators believed that India's political institutions will constrain the actions of any government in power. The idea of India came to be seen as the bulwark that would automatically check the majoritarian impulse. In other words, actors may change but the script will remain the same.

The 2019 election points at the possibility that the script too can change. Pay attention to how the term "majoritarianism" has quietly tip-toed into our political lexicon. It not only articulates the new reality of political-cultural assertion of the majority groups, but also the passing of the old unity-in-diversity era. If anything, the past five years have shown that no idea, no matter how powerful, is immortal.

But the thing about ideas is that they can be unmade and made. This impermanence is precisely what opens up the possibility of new political imagination. The first step is to recognise that, this time round, the idea of India may have lost its political currency.

The writer is a Copenhagen-based historian

The burden of elections

Debate electoral reforms, but refrain from sullying the reputation of institutions

ASHISH KUNDRA

ON MAY 23, the people of India delivered their verdict in electing members of Parliament, who would echo their voice in the Lok Sabha. In the biggest democratic exercise of the world, 613 million people, nearly twice the population of the US, exercised their franchise. It was the culmination of a prolonged and acrimonious election campaign, which is expected in a democracy of the scale and complexity of India. Yet, this time around, the political rhetoric dragged even the Election Commission into the battlefield. Players of the game sought to question not only the referee, but also the instruments and the rules of the game. Now that the exercise is over, it is perhaps germane to ponder over some key issues raised during this election.

First, let us address the tool of elections — the Electronic Voting Machine (EVM). Aspersions were cast on its integrity, and by implication, on the whole election machinery. Some people even argued for a reversion to the paper ballot, jettisoning decades of reform in the conduct of elections. Questions were raised on the statistically correct sample of Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) machines to be counted for certainty of results. The matter went up to the Supreme Court, which ordered a mandatory count of five randomly selected VVPAT machines per

assembly segment. In smaller states like Mizoram, it amounted to nearly a fifth of machines being validated. The results were astounding. In over 20,000 counts, there wasn't even a single instance of mismatch between the EVM and VVPAT count. This wasn't just an endorsement of the humble EVM, but also a tribute to the 12 million officials engaged in the conduct of elections. It should be a matter of pride for all Indians that no nation has taken a bold leap of faith in venturing into the use of such machines for elections at such a scale.

Second, let us look at the integrity of electoral rolls, which is the basis of entitlement for franchise. This time around, the EC intensified the use of technology for greater transparency. The ERONET is an integrated national electors database, armed with data analytic tools to throw up cases of data inconsistency, redundancy and duplication, which become red flags for the Electoral Registration Officers, requiring mandatory physical verifications. Acknowledging that there may still be room for error, the Commission passed on the onus of verification to the voters. A Voter Helpline app was launched, empowering all voters to apply online for registration. This was linked with a universal toll-free number (1950), which allowed voters to verify the entries in the rolls. A special emphasis was given

to enroll physically challenged voters and a PwD (persons with disabilities) app was launched to enable people to mark themselves on electoral rolls. In order to ensure "accessible elections", special arrangements were made across the country for voter facilitation, including provision of ramps at polling stations, training of polling parties in sign language, braille ballot papers etc. More than 6 million persons with disabilities (those who had marked themselves on the electoral rolls) cast their ballot across the country.

Last, the "Model Code of Conduct" and its enforcement by the EC. The Model Code draws upon the powers vested in the EC under Article 324 of the Constitution for "superintendence, direction and control" of elections to Parliament and legislature of every state. It lays down the guiding principles for conduct of political parties, especially the party in power, to ensure that there is a level-playing field during elections. However, for most part, since the code is issued by way of an executive order, only certain cases of violation invite action under the Representation of Peoples Act, 1951 and the Indian Penal Code. Perhaps, the debate around enforceability of the code could be a trigger for a wider discussion on according statutory backing to the code, with clearly

defined penalties for violation.

However, during this election, as a step towards greater citizen empowerment, the "C-vigil" app was launched. Citizens could geotag pictures and report cases of violation on the portal, with assured action within 100 minutes of reporting. For the first time, there was a decentralisation of reporting, which saw thousands of cases being reported and redressed through this portal.

The degree and nature of electoral reforms will require wider debate and political consensus. The EC can be an enabler of this dialogue, which must embrace not only the processes required for ensuring greater fairness in the conduct of elections but also transparency in electoral funding, measures to curb the use of money power. In the meantime, let us not sully the reputation of institutions or question the hard work of millions of officials who work tirelessly for their national duty. For all the doubting Thomases, let us lean on the words of Charles Dickens: "Men who look on nature, and their fellow-men, and cry that all is dark and gloomy, are in the right; but the sombre colours are reflections from their own jaundiced eyes and hearts."

The writer is an IAS officer. Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

FOR SURVIVAL

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'UP shows the way?' (IE, June 6). National and state elections are very different. The rout of opposition alliances in the recently concluded Lok Sabha elections does not necessarily mean that such alliances will not work in future and that votebank politics on caste and religious lines has seen its demise. Notwithstanding the fact that the Bahujan Samaj Party has chosen to go it alone in the Uttar Pradesh bypolls, alliances will remain a force to reckon with at the state level. On the national stage, it will, however, be a question of survival for the regional parties. They would prefer to assert their independence.

Vijai Pant, *Hempur*

LANKA TURMOIL

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Forgotten lessons' (IE, June 5). The resignation of nine Muslim ministers and two Muslim governors in Sri Lanka is a testament to the policy of appeasement being followed by the country's current government. Pressure exerted by extremist Buddhist and Hindu monks following the Easter blasts is being cited as the reason for the resignations. This pandering to extremist and conservative voices within the Sinhala community was a reason for Sri Lanka's Tamil problem, which led to years of civil war and turmoil.

Sauro Dasgupta, *Kolkata*

CASTE AND POLITICS

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Attack the system' (IE, June 6). The caste-based stratification of Indian society has taken new forms in contemporary

times. Caste hierarchy has now become a tool to fulfill the political aspirations of many. It has become easy for the political parties to identify people on the basis of their castes and target the vulnerable communities with freebies before the elections. This is the major reason behind political parties being consistently unwilling to enact legislation to abolish the caste-based hierarchy in all its forms. Stratification based on caste has also been a reason for lynchings and riots at various times in Independent India. The need of the times is to target welfare programmes to the economically weak sections of the society, irrespective of their caste and formulate policies to bring them into the economic mainstream.

Sukhpreet Singh, *Gurdaspur*