No surprises

The RBI has played conservative in announcing a rate cut of just 25 basis points

There were no surprises in the second bimonthly monetary policy announcement by the Reserve Bank of India. A 25 basis point (0.25 percentage point) cut was widely expected, and the RBI delivered that. Whether a deeper 50 basis point cut was necessary, given the sharp slowdown in the economy, is now a purely scholastic question. With inflation well under the benchmark figure of 4%, the stage was probably set for the RBI to spring a surprise but it chose to play conservative. Maybe the idea is to keep the powder dry for a further rate cut, if needed, in the next policy. If the economy fails to recover well enough from its slumber by August, the onus will, after all, shift back to the RBI. That said, there is enough in the latest policy to indicate that the RBI's focus is now on growth. The change of stance to 'accommodative' from 'neutral', the statements by RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das at the press conference that ensuring systemic liquidity will remain a priority for the central bank, and the setting up of an internal working group to review the existing liquidity management framework, all clearly point to a central bank that is not only listening to the demands of the key stakeholders in the economy, but also acting on them.

The one area where the RBI has some work to do is in the transmission of rates. By its own admission, only 21 of the cumulative 50 basis points rate cut effected by the RBI in the February and April policies has been passed on to borrowers by banks. The excuse from banks, at least in the last few months, was that liquidity was tight and so deposit rates could not be cut. However, liquidity has considerably improved in the last week, and more so with the new government loosening the purse strings. There cannot be any more excuses from banks to not pass on the cuts fully. The RBI's decision to do away with its charges on RTGS/ NEFT (Real Time Gross Settlement System/ National Electronic Funds Transfer) transactions is welcome provided it can, again, ensure that banks pass on the benefit to customers. The central bank has also proposed measures such as a reduction in the leverage ratio under Basel norms for banks, which will increase their lendable resources. The projected growth rate for this fiscal has been lowered to 7% from the 7.2% projected in April, and the first-half growth is estimated at 6.4-6.7%, which by itself appears ambitious given the current trends in the economy. With the RBI having done its bit, the focus shifts to the Finance Ministry. There are tremendous expectations from the government over the next round of reforms, backed as it is by a strong mandate. The onus is now on the budget, to be presented on July 5, to unleash the animal spirits again in the economy.

Sudan on the brink

The military rulers must climb down and transfer power to a civilian government

When Sudanese dictator Omar al-Bashir was toppled on April 11 after a months-long popular uprising, the generals had two options before them. One was the Tunisian model in which the army allowed a smooth transition of power to a civilian government after Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was removed from power in 2011. The other was the Egyptian model in which the army, after losing power to a civilian ruler following Hosni Mubarak's ouster as President in 2011, staged a coup in 2013 and reinstalled itself at the helm. Unfortunately, the Sudanese generals chose the latter, setting the stage for a prolonged showdown. The protesters had demanded a transfer of power to a transitional civilian government, followed by free and fair elections. But the generals used the crisis to concentrate more powers in their own hands. They established a military council which took over governance, while angry protesters continued a sit-in in front of the Defence Ministry in Khartoum. As talks between pro-democracy activists and the military rulers collapsed, paramilitary groups unleashed deadly violence this week to break the sit-in, killing at least 100 people and injuring hundreds. The Rapid Support Forces, the paramilitary troops notorious for atrocities committed in the impoverished western province of Darfur in the early 2000s, reportedly threw the dead into the Nile.

It is evident that the military will not easily give up power. After the crackdown, Lt. General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the military ruler, has offered to hold elections in nine months, upturning an earlier plan of a two-year transition. But there is no immediate plan to transfer power to a civilian transitional government, a key demand of the protesters. Unsurprisingly, they have rejected the military's offer. At present, Sudan's generals enjoy regional and international support. The UN Security Council couldn't even condemn the violence as China, backed by Russia, blocked the move. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which offered financial aid to the junta as soon as Mr. Bashir was removed from power, also support the generals. This gives the military rulers a sense of impunity even when they unleash murderous paramilitaries on peaceful protesters. This has to change. Arab countries as well as the UN should put meaningful pressure on the military council to pay heed to popular demands and hold those responsible for the June 3 massacre accountable. There is no easy solution to the crisis. If the military wants to keep its grip on power, there could be more bloodshed as the protesters are defiant. It will have to necessarily build a more oppressive regime, as in Egypt after the 2013 coup. The other, wiser option is to compromise, resume talks with the protesters and facilitate a quick and orderly transition to civilian rule. The choice the generals make will determine the future of Sudan.

Language, the opening move

The 'Hindi' controversy foretells the larger political narrative for the coming years

G.N. DEVY

Language makes us human. During the process of natural evolution, the human brain acquired the ability to engage with the world primarily through linguistic transactions. Language, therefore, has become the mode of knowing for Homo sapiens. Being the foundation of knowledge, language plays a pivotal role in formal institutions of knowledge. It is as necessary for thought and knowledge to exist as are air and water for the survival of life.

Scientific evidence shows that humans came to use language, a semiotic system made of verbal icons, some 70,000 years ago. The species continued to develop the brain's linguistic ability as well as the semantic complexity of languages in use throughout these millennia. The intermittent prolonged spells of the ice ages did not deter the species in its language pursuit. We are now at a stage when a newborn manages to learn the entire language capability of the brain developed over the last 70,000 years.

By the time a child enters school, she already has the language competence that schools promise to give her. This is not to undermine the importance of formal education. Schooling can indeed bring a greater self-awareness of the language one uses. It can, under ideal conditions, help the learner in acquiring a greater ease in processing abstraction and judgment, the two highest cognitive abilities that the human brain has developed. It is now established beyond doubt that if a child receives formal instruction in the language of its home environ, the ease of doing cognitive transactions is enhanced.

The second language

As one tries to understand the nature of the language controversy that erupted last week, it should be instructive to ask how many languages children in most other countries are required to learn. The answer to this question can leave us ashamed and angry. In England, Germany and most European Union countries, children are required to study only one language in primary school and another language of their choice in middle school. In the U.S., it is English and Spanish or some other language as a 'second language'. In Japan, it is Japanese and English from the primary level. In Hong Kong, it is primarily English, but also Mandarin and, if children wish, some Cantonese. In Egypt, Arabic is the primary language of instruction with a six-year stint in English as a 'second language'. Almost all over the world, with the exception of some former colonies, children are required to study primarily one language and another one as a 'second language'. In India they are asked to tackle three languages, and if their home language happens to have no formal status, they are faced with the daunting task of having to

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

cope with four languages.

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics and Global Education Monitoring had reported in 2016 that there were 47 million drop-outs by the 10th standard in India. Of course, gender discrimination, absence of toilets for girls, economic marginalisation, poor infrastructure, inadequate teacher training and lack of employment at the end of high-school education contribute to the 'expulsion' of young learners from schools. But equally crucial a reason is the language challenge. If we have to bring this great injustice to an end, sooner or later India will have to accept the scientific premise that education in the mother tongue is the key to the life of the mind. 'Mother tongue' does not, however, mean the language determined by the state as a desirable 'first' language but a language that parents think will give the child the ease of learning.

A colonial legacy

The question of language education as well as that of the language for education has three important facets – linguistic (including neurological and pedagogical), political and administrative. Since Independence, we have laid a disproportionately high emphasis on the administrative side of this question. For purely administrative considerations we have kept oscillating between one position and another, bringing in its trail bitterly fought language battles. The colonial legacy of English as a language of modernity and knowledge has made it difficult for us to bring the vacillations to any rational conclusion. The nation appears to have forgotten the violent language movements in the past in Telangana, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka; now the draft National Education Policy (NEP) has opened a festering wound once again.

The face of the controversy stoked through the draft is of a political nature. During the last two decades, NEPs have become an old habit with us, though none of them resulted in any genuinely fresh breakthrough in education. The new NEP draft comes at a time when the nation is sharply divided, thanks to the no-holds-barred abusive rhetoric during the recent election. It is not surprising that what was post-haste deleted came to be seen as imposition of Hindi in violation of the linguistic sovereignty of the States guaranteed by the Constitution.

The BJP's zeal

The zeal of the BJP to spread Hindi in non-Hindi States is based on deeply flawed premises. To begin with, the government does not have any authentic data on the linguistic composition of the country. The 2011 Census data on languages, published last year, was heavily doctored. It presents Hindi as the 'mother tongue' of over 52 crore people by subsuming more than 5 crore claimants of Bhojpuri and more than 9 crore speakers of nearly 61 other languages – claimed as 'other' by their speech communities – from Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Haryana, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. 'The Hindi' is probably spoken by not more than 30% of the population, but it is not the mother tongue for the remaining 70%. Knowingly causing risk to any indigenous language has been described by the UNESCO as 'an act amounting to genocide'. I will use the term 'phonocide' to describe the expansionist aspirations in the name of nationalism. The aspirations are not to be attributed to the speakers of Hindi, but to the politics of the pseudo-nationalists who have no patience with the cultural diversity of India, so sensitively enshrined in the Constitution.

The sharp reaction that came up reflects democratic aspirations of the non-Hindi languages. The sparks that flew – before the controversy was hurriedly doused, probably temporarily so – foretell the larger political narrative for the coming years. In numerous ways, it is likely to be a conflict between the pseudo-nationalists and the constitutional democrats, a conflict over culture, language, knowledge, faith, history, worldviews and approaches to modernity. One hopes it does not take the form of a north against south conflict. Language, being the foundation of both civilisation and knowledge, has naturally become the opening move in what is to come.

G.N. Devy is Chairman, the People's Linguistic Survey of India

Pakistan's blasphemy ordeal

Just the accusation of blasphemy can be punishment for the accused and their defenders

FARAHNAZ ISPAHANI

Barely two weeks after Pakistani Christian Asia Naureen (usually referred to as Asia Bibi), whose ordeal over false blasphemy charges attracted international attention, was allowed to leave the country, Pakistan's blasphemy laws claimed new victims.

In Mirpurkhas

A Hindu veterinary doctor, Ramesh Kumar, was arrested in Sindh province on May 27 after a local cleric filed a police complaint accusing him of committing blasphemy. Mr. Kumar's village Phulhadiyon, in Mirpurkhas district, has a population of about 7,000 people, the majority of whom are Hindus. As is often the case when blasphemy allegations are made in Pakistan, riots broke out in the area and an angry mob burnt down Mr. Kumar's establishment as well as other property belonging to him and his family. The mob also tried to attack the police station and caused some damage in the process. Although six suspects were soon taken into custody for rioting and damaging the vet's property, it is Mr. Kumar's family that will now be living in fear while his prosecution meanders through Pakistan's judicial system.

Ms. Bibi's experience highlights the difficult path ahead for Mr. Kumar. Her relocation to Canada does not reflect substantive change in the persecuted state of Pakistan's religious minorities. Pakistan's draconian blasphemy laws remain in force, and there is no sign that the authorities plan to drop prosecution of hundreds of blasphemy cases.

Between 1987 and 2012, Pakistani authorities prosecuted 1,170 people for blasphemy. That number has only increased over the years. The Pakistani legal system offers little protection to someone charged with blasphemy and mere accusation is tantamount to punishment. Judges and lawyers fear religious vigilantes who violently attack anyone they deem to be supporting a blasphemer.

Salmaan Taseer, Governor of Pakistan's Punjab province, was killed by his own bodyguard in 2011 for supporting reconsideration of blasphemy laws; the judge who convicted his murderer had to flee the country; and a shrine was built for the assassin after his execution.

Ms. Bibi's case attracted international attention. She was an unlettered berry-picker convicted by a Pakistani court of insulting Prophet Mohammed after being framed by neighbours who objected to her, as a Christian, drinking water from the same glass as them. She was sentenced to death for her comments in response to her neighbours' mistreatment. Support from church-goers and human rights defenders around the world meant that the U.S. government and the Pope paid attention to her case. Parallel efforts were initiated by the EU's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief to secure her release.

Last year Pakistan's Supreme

AFP

Court decided to hear her appeal after having ignored it for years. She had spent more than eight years in solitary confinement before being acquitted by the Supreme Court in October 2018. But Islamist groups took to the streets to protest that decision, and a review petition against her release was put in to block the Supreme Court's decision. Even after the review petition was dismissed, Ms. Bibi remained under 'protective custody' at an unknown location. Eventually, pressure from Western governments and the Vatican, coupled with threats of EU sanctions at a time when Pakistan sought its thirteenth bailout from the International Monetary Fund in three decades, worked.

Pakistan's all-powerful military and the civilian government installed last year are obsessed with improving Pakistan's international image, without really changing its reality. They wanted Ms. Bibi's flight to safety to be projected as reflecting a change in Pakistan's treatment of its minorities. It is nothing of the sort, as the persecution of Mr. Kumar amply indicates.

Lonely struggle?

Unlike Ms. Bibi, Mr. Kumar is unlikely to have the support of Western governments and the Vatican. Any action by Hindu organisations in India or abroad on his behalf will only be misrepresented in Pakistan's officially directed media as part of the 'ongoing conspiracies' against the country that are used as an excuse to maintain Pakistan's semi-authoritarian power structure.

Ms. Bibi was eventually smuggled out of Pakistan. Those who fought for her freedom for over eight years rejoiced in a way usually reserved for a member of one's own family. We all hope that she may know peace and happiness for her remaining life abroad. But we must not forget that, without major reform in its legal and political environment, Pakistan continues to have one of the worst track records in protecting its religious minorities.

Christians, Hindus, and Ahmadi Muslims continue to face persecution and the country's blasphemy laws, under which Ms. Bibi was targeted, enable that repression. Blasphemy charges are filed routinely by Islamist extremists for political gain, by neighbours for revenge over a slight, and sometimes even by corrupt landlords for advantage in property disputes.

Pakistan's blasphemy laws, which date back to the military dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq, have only encouraged the unleashing of extremist religious frenzy. According to an Amnesty International report, the mere accusation of blasphemy is tantamount to punishment. Several cases illustrate that point.

Junaid Hafeez, a visiting lecturer of English at Bahauddin Zakaria University in Multan, has been in prison for the last six years after being accused of blasphemy by Islamist student activists. He was charged because he invited a speaker to a seminar who had allegedly "penned blasphemous passages in her book".

His lawyer dropped him as a client after being mobbed by over 200 fellow lawyers; when human rights defender Rashid Rehman took up his case, he was shot dead in his office. The killer has never been apprehended and judges do not want to hear the case, which has been transferred from one court since 2013.

For Pakistan's religious minorities to feel safe, Pakistan's blasphemy laws must be tackled, amended or removed as a crucial first step. After that, or alongside, must begin the decades-long process of removing the seed of hatred sowed soon after the death of Pakistan's founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah. That would involve an effort of mammoth proportions starting with the defanging of terrorist groups, changing school curriculum, and banning hate speech in all public venues. Political and religious leaders as well as the mass media must become a partner in confronting hate. So far, it seems that they would rather benefit from spreading the poison of communal hatred than confronting it.

Farahnaz Ispahani, a former member of Pakistan's Parliament, is author of 'Purifying The Land of the Pure: Pakistan's Religious Minorities'. She is Global Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, DC and Senior Fellow of the Religious Freedom Institute

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Slow growth

With the World Bank forecasting slow global growth, it is necessary for the government to take proactive economic measures ("PM to head committee in economic growth," June 6). With the balance sheets of corporates and banks deteriorating, there is concern about the fiscal policies that are being pursued by the government. Apart from this, data transparency is found wanting, as seen in the delay in releasing figures on unemployment. There should be a proper briefing on the deliberations of these committees so that citizens can distinguish between rhetoric and reality.

V. SUBRAMANIAN,
Chennai

After suggesting that all is well through his pakoda example and refusing to talk about unemployment in his election campaign, the Prime Minister has now constituted a Cabinet committee to look into the problem. Problems like these cannot be solved overnight. If sincere efforts are taken now, it may yield results after three or four years, perhaps to enhance confidence in the campaign for the next general election.

A.G. RAJMOHAN,
Anantapur

Language problems

The main argument of those advocating Hindi is that it would help in national integration ("Hindi or English, comparing apples and oranges", June 6). India is already a well integrated country. In fact, it is the fear of imposition of Hindi by the Central government that is seen as discriminatory and that is causing disquiet in non-Hindi speaking regions. Our language policy's primary objective of replacing English with Hindi will be counterproductive in a globalised world. It would be in the larger national interest if English is adopted as a compulsory second language in all schools and colleges. Hindi may be offered as an optional subject for students who wish to learn a third language.

KOSARAJU CHANDRAMOULI,
Hyderabad

In 1965, as a young boy I had participated in the anti-Hindi agitation only to realise years later the mistake of refusing to learn Hindi. I got a job in a public sector undertaking in Bombay and in a batch of 35 officers, only four of us from Tamil Nadu could not understand Hindi. This was a great handicap. Students of Tamil Nadu should be provided an opportunity to learn Hindi as they only stand to benefit from learning the language.

V.J. SINGH,
Tirunelveli

Breathing clean air

This year's theme for World Environment Day, 'Beat air pollution', must be taken seriously by India ("Make ecological problems a political issue: Rahul," June 6). It would be irresponsible to completely put the onus on the government to tackle this problem. Citizens must adopt eco-friendly lifestyles and reduce conspicuous consumption. Carpooling, using bicycles and retaining a certain percentage of green cover within their houses are some measures that citizens can take.

Y. MEENA,
Hyderabad

MORE LETTERS ONLINE:
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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS: The report headlined "Studying Olive Ridleys" (some editions, June 6, 2019) had erroneously referred to them as *endangered* marine turtles. They should have been described as *vulnerable*.

It is the policy of The Hindu to correct significant errors as soon as possible. Please specify the edition (place of publication), date and page. The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300 (11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday); Fax: +91-44-28552963; E-mail:readerseditor@thehindu.co.in; Mail: Readers' Editor, The Hindu, Kasturi Buildings, 859 & 860 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002, India.
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Is this the end of the road for the Congress party?

PARLEY

It needs an organisational reboot and a firm ideology to differentiate itself from other parties

The BJP's massive victory in the Lok Sabha election has thrown the Congress into disarray. With Rahul Gandhi insisting that he does not want to continue as the president of the party, Mridula Mukherjee and Rahul Verma talk about the Congress's ideology and what could keep it afloat today. Edited excerpts of a conversation moderated by **Varghese K. George**:

Mridula Mukherjee *is a historian and former director of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library*

Rahul Verma *is a political scientist and co-author of 'Ideology and Identity: The Changing Party Systems of India'*

Scan the QR code to listen to the full audio online

Is the Congress history?

Mridula Mukherjee: No, the Congress has a long history but it is not history. I think it has a future. I think we need the Congress more than the Congress needs us at this crucial juncture, to provide ideological and organisational leadership to the forces that are now tasked with the job of defending the basic idea of India, which is in the Constitution. I don't think we can afford to let the Congress become history.

Rahul, does the Congress have an ideology and is it relevant?

Rahul Verma: I think that's the biggest challenge the Congress is facing. It does not have a clear ideological vision. Whenever you question them on what their ideological vision is, Congress leaders say they are focusing on welfare policies and that the party is going to lift people out of poverty. This cannot be an ideological vision because no political party is going to take an opposing stand on some of these issues. On the question of social justice and secularism, the Congress fails to distinguish itself from many of the State-level parties. Say, in U.P., how is the Congress different on the issue of social justice from the BSP? Or the RJD in Bihar?

So, what do you think could be a distinguishing ideological character for the Congress, particularly in a society polarised on religious lines?

RV: See, on many questions related to social justice, the Congress has not been clear from the beginning. Even the granting of SC/ST reservation happened under historical compromise. The Congress did nothing on OBC reservation for a long time. The Kaka Kalelkar Commission was formed, submitted reports in 1955, nothing happened till Indira Gandhi came to the scene, Emergency happened. The Mandal Commission came to the fore. So, the Congress can hang on to issues of social justice and secularism, but because it does not have a clear line on these questions it fails to distinguish itself from other parties.

On the question of social justice, particularly on accommodating the rights of lower caste movements, the Congress has been very slow, if at all responsive. Do you think the Congress's dominance by upper caste groups has led to the party losing its grip on rural India, particularly in places where lower caste politics became an appealing tool of mobilisation?

MM: In the struggle for freedom, which is the bedrock of the Congress and I don't think we can understand it even today without that background, this is not true. Mahatma Gandhi, from the time he took charge of the Congress, made the most important issue of untouchability a basic plank of the Congress. Then through the 1920s and '30s, not only did we have movements such as the Vaikom Satyagraha and the Guruvayur Satyagraha, but also many other movements for social reform. Gandhiji himself devoted almost two years of his life almost exclusively to the issue of caste and the struggle against caste oppression. He went on a tour, which lasted almost a year, and visited the most remote, rural parts of India. He travelled by train, by foot, and sat in village compounds and argued with village pandits and the upper castes. The point I am trying to make is, it's not true that the Congress leadership has not grappled with the issue of social justice. Obviously Gandhi's way and the Congress's way was different from Ambedkar's way, but that happens very often. A party which is appealing to the whole electorate cannot take a plank of either a leader of a group or a party which by necessity appeals only to one section of the electorate.

PTI

That's a fair point. However, a logical question that follows from that is regardless of what Gandhi may have done and what Nehru may have believed, the fact is that power under Congress regimes was invariably in the hands of upper caste people.

MM: In various parts of the country, the middle caste movements, non-Brahmin movements merged with the Congress from the late 1930s and threw up many leaders.

But has the party been willing to share power adequately with upper castes and Dalits since 1947?

MM: I think the trouble is that we are looking at things from today's lens and essentially a lens that started in the 1980s and '90s. The earlier perspective was not so much a question of sharing power at individual levels. It was not a question of representation, it was more a question of programmes and policies. And there, of course, was the Congress perspective, the Nehru perspective, with the focus on economic development and poverty alleviation. Now, you can argue that it was not right or wrong but that does not mean that there was no perspective.

Rahul, Mridula is saying you should judge a political party by the programmes and policies it advocates. Do you think that will be a good enough case to get backward caste and Dalit votes in India?

RV: I don't know whether policies and programmes can bring votes for the Congress. I partially agree with the argument that one should not judge a political dispensation just by looking at whether it managed to provide representation to groups or not. But you cannot deny the fact that the making of the Indian Constitution at its very heart had group representation, and even the Congress party was not advocating individual rights during the making of the Constitution. Representational blockage of certain groups became the starting point of the rise of socialist parties, which in some cases became the backward caste parties in the '60s and '70s. Even on the question of economic policies and programmes, what I think is that the Nehruvian era was in some ways contested. We equate it with the idea of India but even in those times, in the '50s and '60s, the Nehruvian idea was contested from the right as well as from the left. And what we see is that once you stop giving representation to groups, the left and the right get an opportunity to mobilise groups. So, in the '30s and '40s, there was the socialist left. Once Indira Gandhi came to power, she started moving the Congress towards the left of centre, which opened the space for right-wing parties to coalesce there, and also right-wing groups within the Congress started moving out of the Congress. You would remember that the interim Prime Minister Gulzarilal Nanda was also one of the founding members of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. So, the point I'm trying to make is, if the model you are building is based on group representation and you fail to provide that in the policies or within the party organisation or in the government, then this is bound to happen.

> **Secularism cannot be an ideological vision out of compulsion or convenience. There must be some sort of conviction that secularism is the only way to go about believing in the idea of India or whatever the Congress's vision of India is.**

What should the Congress do to get renewed ideological identity and focus?

MM: I still believe that secularism is at the core of the Congress's ideology but I, of course, see that there are many deviations from it and I would argue that here you have to get back on firmer ground. One should not get frightened by accusations of appeasement. One must come out very clearly against communalism of all kinds, whether Sikh or Christian or Muslim or Hindu. And one's secularism has to be clearly asserted. You can define it in various ways, you can talk about social harmony, you can talk about love and peace, but secularism has to be at the core.

RV: One needs to understand what the ideological space of Indian politics looks like today. The BJP now has become the dominant party. It occupies the space from the centre-right to the extreme right. The Congress cannot be playing a little bit here and a little bit there. It has to be very clear that if it is about the question of inclusivity, diversity and secularism, it needs to have a very clear position on that. Secularism cannot be an ideological vision out of compulsion, out of convenience. There must be some sort of conviction that secularism is the only way to go about believing in the idea of India or whatever the Congress's vision of India is.

Second, even on the question of social justice, how do you want to accommodate various groups into the body politic? This is a challenge even the BJP is going to face sooner or later. Once you become an umbrella party, if you fail to give representation to people who are voting for you, they are going to find new political entrepreneurs who will be mobilising on the issue of giving exclusive representation.

Do you think there is a Congress without the Gandhis?

MM: In the short run, no, because you cannot displace established political leadership. And this is true for all political parties. No party undergoes this kind of a complete overhaul. There is a certain leadership in place. It always takes time for an alternative leadership to emerge. So, I think going away from Rahul Gandhi's leadership would not be wise at all today; it would be suicidal for the Congress. They should not come under pressure, they should look at the interests of the party and not what others are talking. Every party in India virtually has dynasty now at its core, but somehow it's pure for them and impure for the Congress.

RV: The Congress is in real trouble. The problems are intertwined in a way which makes it hard to see. The party has an ideological crisis. It does not have an organisation in most parts of the country. If you look at the bigger States, it has not been in power for 30-odd years and the States are also facing leadership challenges. All of this is tied to the idea that they have a dynasty sitting at the national level and in many States. Now, you cannot have a new ideological vision without a new leadership and you cannot have troops on the ground who can mobilise and change a party structure from the bottom to the top without an ideological vision that they are convinced about. So, in a way, I don't know what the solution is. But the problems are intertwined in a way that there are two ways of going about it. Dismantle the whole structure and think afresh, or wait for some time and think that there will be some miracle that will change all of these three or four variables. I agree with this argument that perhaps the Gandhi family has the authority within the Congress party to get it to overcome the crisis of ideological vision, but can the dynasty or the first family think of a new ideological vision for India?

SINGLE FILE

A new Bengal?

We ought to preserve the old Bengal that was inclusive and did not tell people what to wear or eat

KUNAL RAY

TWITTER/ PTI

Every summer, I visit my family home in West Bengal. Summer is the worst time to visit as it is unbearably hot in eastern India. This summer, however, feels different. The Lok Sabha election results are out, a new government has been sworn in at the Centre, and the West Bengal I have returned to is deeply polarised.

Political consciousness was part of our upbringing. Animated political discussions were the norm at home. I saw my father regularly disagree with my grandfather. They voted for different parties. My grandfather would taunt my father before going to vote. These discussions were issue- and ideology-based. The criticism was primarily based upon the performance of a candidate or the party she represented. Religion never featured in these discussions. We didn't even know that religion could be an election issue, a site for contestation of the kind we saw in this election.

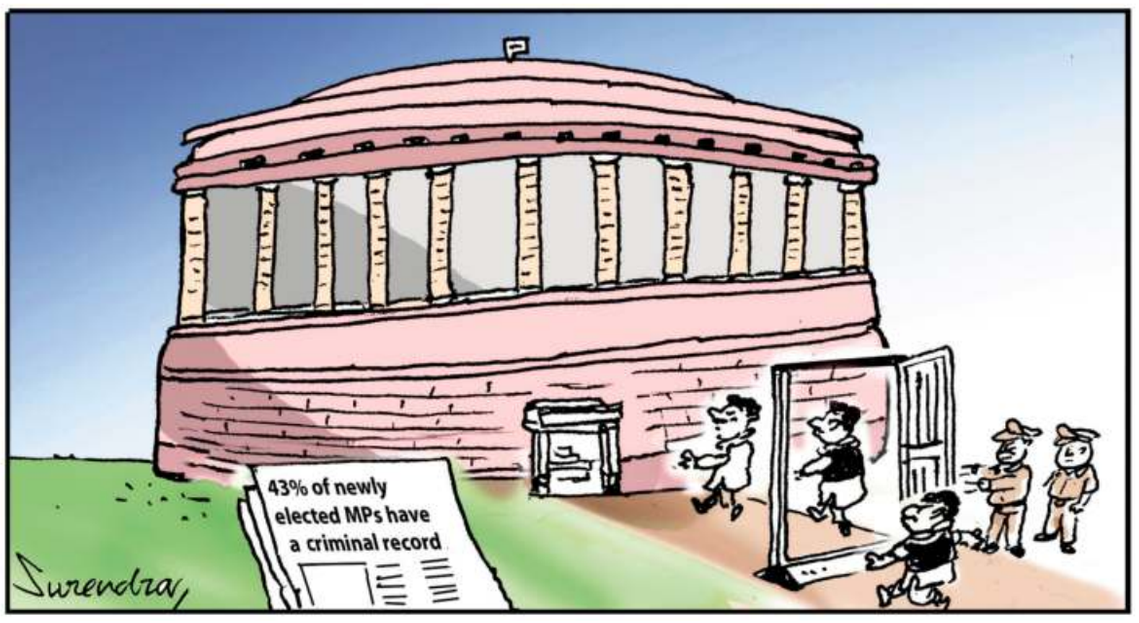
I don't want to get into evocations of the 'intellectual, progressive Bengali'. Having grown up here and then lived away, I have come to realise that a certain kind of conservatism was always part of the social fabric of the State. Some of the literature, music, films and art of West Bengal helped counter that conservatism and aided in the creation of a distinct cultural identity.

The closest that Bengal got to experiencing religious fervour was during the Durga Puja festivities. More than religiosity, it was a social occasion for friends and families to meet. Muslim friends and neighbours did not stay away from the celebrations either. Categories such as 'them' and 'us' didn't exist. Ram Navami and Hanuman Jayanti didn't feature in the religious calendar of the State until a few years ago.

Today, I see 'them' and 'us' as the new narrative of the State. From tea shops to bazaars to metro stations, everybody seems to be talking about how a certain community is being appeased by the current political dispensation in the State, succumbing to vote-bank politics. The majority feel threatened because their wishes have been ignored. Their religious identity is apparently endangered.

Somebody recently took to social media to complain that two recently elected women parliamentarians posing in front of Parliament wearing western outfits were not dressed appropriately, that their behaviour was not fitting of Bengalis. The Bengal that I knew and grew up in was inclusive and did not tell people what to wear or eat or how to behave in public. It is that Bengal we ought to restore and preserve.

The writer teaches literary and cultural studies at FLAME University, Pune



NOTEBOOK

Turning the tables: when respondents ask reporters questions

A dilemma journalists grapple with during election time

SOBHANA K. NAIR

As reporters sometimes we take for granted our licence to probe the political views of strangers. We demand to know their castes as well as their voting preferences.

I have forgotten the number of times I pushed gates, sat cross-legged on verandahs, interrupted tea sessions and caught hold of people while they were working in the fields in the run-up to the recent election. I cajoled them into conversation and most of them obliged.

But what happens when an interviewee turns the tables on you and asks, "Who did *you* vote for? Which side are you on? What ideology do you subscribe to? Who according to you is the right candidate this election?"

I was speechless when an insistent group in a village near Ajmer asked me these questions while pointing at my left index finger which was freshly marked with indelible ink.

Next came nervous laughter. I tried to evade the question using humour. Then I replied that I was a mere observer who was sent to record their reactions; that I had no views of my own. The group would not buy any of it. They were adamant. In the political war that was playing out across the country, they wanted to know which side I was on.

I then tried giving vague replies about the race in the Lok Sabha constituency that I voted in. Not satisfied with my response, a young man in the group decided for himself my ideology and my political inclination. With the spread of fake news on WhatsApp and the derisive use of the term 'left liberals' while referring to the media, I was an easy target. "If you can ask us, why can't we ask you?" he demanded. A fair request, after all.

I deflected the question by asking them about the board game they were playing. The cement floor had a frame drawn on it with chalk, and rounded grey pebbles. The game was called *char-maar* or *naukante*, they explained. I still don't know anything about the game, but asking about it did get me off the hook.

Of course, not everyone is always so persistent. On the same trip, I sought out a beautiful Rajasthani woman dressed in a parrot-coloured dupatta, silver bangles, armlets, a necklace and a nose ring. We did not speak each other's language, yet we managed to converse. In a thick Rajasthani dialect she asked, "You tell me, who should I vote for?" I redirected the conversation to the everyday rigours of life.

Many respondents ask this question indirectly but politely to learn about a journalist's views.

From the first day in the newsroom, we reporters are told that we are not the story. We are told that we have to try to fade into the background and imagine that we are wearing Harry Potter's invisibility cloak while our ears do most of the work. We must probe a little and provoke a little in order to ensure that the conversation goes on. We are told to keep a tight lid on our own opinions and not let the 'confirmation bias' creep in. We are told to honestly reflect what we hear.

I have started questioning this age-old wisdom though, especially with Twitter being ablaze with opinions and forcing reporters to pick a side.

Why should journalists not be entitled to their own views? As a respected journalist recently said, in divisive times you can't be neutral; you have to be objective.

I am still looking for answers.

FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JUNE 7, 1969

Stowaway's freezing ordeal

Doctors and aircraft technicians to-day [June 6] puzzled over the apparently impossible feat of a young Cuban who survived the freezing ordeal of an 8-hour flight to Spain squeezed in the undercarriage of a DC-8 jetliner. The man, an 18-year-old welder A. Socarras, hid in the wheel compartment before the aircraft left Havana, and eight hours later tumbled unconscious and half-frozen onto the runway of Madrid's Barajas airport. He appears to have survived virtually unscathed after flying 5,600 miles at heights of up to 29,000 feet in an unpressurised and unheated compartment, with temperatures dropping below minus 40°C. One medical theory to-day was that Socarras spent the entire flight in a state of frozen hibernation similar to that induced in patients prior to complicated heart operations or transplants. This state is produced in operating theatres at minus 28°C. The heart stops, leaving the patient frozen in suspended animation during the operation.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JUNE 7, 1919.

Prohibition Movement

The Lord Bishop of Madras yesterday [in Coonoor on June 5] presided at the annual conference of Missionaries in connection with the South Indian Missionary Association at Stanes School. The Rev. J. M. Baker read the report of the last year's work. The following resolution was adopted: Believing that the consumption of alcohol in India is on the increase and is causing injury to the Indian people; and believing that in spite of all regulations the injury is sure to increase unless there is prohibition; and sympathising with the aspirations of Hindu and Mahomedan reformers to make all India dry, the Coonoor Conference of the S.I.M.A. records its hearty approval of this association uniting with other bodies throughout the land in the effort to make India a prohibition country in the fullest sense of that term, and that as a step towards that ultimate goal the Government should be requested to give a wide extension in the principle of local option.

CONCEPTUAL

Cultural learning

SOCIOLOGY

This refers to how people living in a society learn various things from others around them and further spread such knowledge to more people. Children, for instance, learn new things by socialising with other children they meet as well as with adults around them. So the kind of culture into which they are born influences the behaviour of people right from their childhood. Many believe that human beings and other organisms may be naturally wired to engage in cultural learning as it helps them to better adapt to the environment around them, thus improving their chances of survival.

MORE ON THE WEB

Jungle Jewels: promoting eco-friendly jewellery

http://bit.ly/EcofriendlyJewels