

CHATTERBOX

Praise for Modi

“On May 23, not the political weather but the political climate of India changed. Prime Minister Narendra Modi began his first term as a novice. He opens his second innings as a statesman. Jawaharlal Nehru was the maker of the India of the 20th century. Modi is perhaps destined to be the maker of the India of the 21st century. Modi is the third Prime Minister to serve a second consecutive term with a majority. The other two being Nehru and Indira Gandhi. Prime Minister Modi is now in the same league as Presidents Donald Trump, Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, Chancellor Angela Merkel and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan.” Guess who said this? K Natwar Singh, former foreign minister of India and the pointsperson in the Congress party for at least three decades.

Three vacancies in RS

Three vacant Rajya Sabha seats (possibly a fourth); and at least three claimants (or not). Smriti Irani, Amit Shah and Ravishankar Prasad have all won Lok Sabha elections and have already given up their Rajya Sabha membership. The fourth is Birender Singh who is supposed to have promised the BJP leadership that he would resign his seat if his son Brijendra Singh, contesting the Lok Sabha seat from Haryana (Hissar) won. The question is: whom will the BJP nominate to these seats. LK Advani, Murali Manohar Joshi and the latest *margdarshak*, Sushma Swara? Or some new, upcoming leaders? Swaraj has already begun making preparations to move out of her official residence. Where she will move is not known.



OPINION

VIJAY GOKHLE

Our bilateral efforts will benefit us and countries involved

News24: Cricket World Cup is under way right now and you have informed that India will be helping Maldives in setting up a cricket team. What kind of help would it be, is there any particular player being sent there and is BCCI going to do everything there, what kind of information you would like to share with us on this?

The Print: If you can say something on if there will be any discussion on the action plan for defence cooperation between India and Maldives and also there are reports that India is building the Colombo port along with Japan, if you shed some light on that please?

Foreign Secretary, Vijay Gokhale: As far as cricket cooperation is concerned, a team from BCCI visited the Maldives earlier this month. There are a whole range of ways in which we can assist. One of them is to build a cricket stadium under a line of credit or some other means of financial assistance, which we are ready to do. They have requested for some coaching programmes in India of young Maldivian players that includes both men and women. They would like us to do some training programmes in the Maldives which we are also willing to do and we have actually already given them some cricket kits and training kits. These have been actually given by the government of India not by the BCCI but we would hope that the BCCI takes on additional responsibilities in this regard.

They want to have training in coaches, in umpires, scorers, match referees, so across the board, till we can we will assist the government of Maldives to build a national cricket team or to bring cricket to a national level. We see this as an important people to people relationship building exercise in the same way that we did for Afghanistan, if you recall, a few years ago.

So far as the action plan on defence cooperation is concerned, there are a few issues that we have already resolved which is, if you recall, there were some issues that we had with the previous regime to the Advanced Light Helicopter (ALH) that we have stationed for search and rescue operations. That matter has been resolved to mutual satisfaction. By the way, the Coastal Surveillance Radar System and the CTC are also under this action plan on defence cooperation. We have recently refurbished one of their coastguard vessels, the Maldives ship Huravi and we will also continue to maintain that for them. So a number of action points are already ongoing. As far as ISIS influence is concerned, of course this is a matter of concern for us. We have seen reports of alleged activity in many parts of South Asia. We are ready to cooperate with those governments and any other government that wishes to cooperate. Naturally the demand and the kind of cooperation that they desire has to come from them and on receipt of that information, as I said, our government will be happy to cooperate with them on that.

Further, you know this is a trilateral arrangement that India, Japan and Sri Lanka will do in the East container terminal of the Colombo port. So we have reached an initial agreement what is called a Memorandum of Intent for a trilateral arrangement under which the Sri Lankan Port Authority which is the PSU under the government of Sri Lanka will hold the majority share and the remaining share will be held between entities of Japan and India.

The exact shareholding pattern still has to be worked out but the intention now is that we will now go into discussion about the scope of the port, the manner of the financing, the time line and so on. This is an important achievement and the fact that we are partnering with Japan is also, in a sense, not something just of bilateral significance but shows that we are willing to partner with other countries in developing infrastructure in our region.

See News: You said that some of the issue of previous regime have been solved. During the last regime it was seen that Indians living in Maldives were facing certain issues, so have they been solved now?

Reuters: Is this a strategy of India to partner with Japan to counter the rising influence of China in Sri Lanka or maybe are we going to our neighborhood to address that issue with Maldives as well?

Vijay Gokhale: As far as first question is concerned, this is an important subject and this is something which we have taken up both with the previous government and the current government. I am happy to inform you we have very positive information on this from the current government. A number of work permit related issues that were held up, has been wholly or almost wholly addressed. We are also in discussion in ensuring that the future work permit process is smoothened out. So this is certainly a priority for us and we are in constant discussion with them. It may not necessarily figure at the highest level because we have a good working understanding between the foreign ministries of the two countries on this issue.

As far as the last question is concerned, I don't think we should see our cooperation with any country in our region as necessarily having some ulterior motive or being directed against another country or being part of some grand strategy. I think our objective is that infrastructure development in our region benefits our economy and the economy of that country. We recognise that we have limited capabilities, within those capabilities we are making all efforts bilaterally but when major foreign investors like Japan are also willing to join projects that are of our national interest, we have no objection in doing it with them. This is a model I can say you will see not just in Sri Lanka but in the coming days in a couple of other neighbouring countries as well.

Edited excerpts from a briefing by Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale on the PM's ongoing visit to Sri Lanka and Maldives, 6 June in New Delhi

DID THEY REALLY SAY THAT?



"It was the Congress which ruled the country after Independence from 1950 to 1977. I assure you that Modi-ji is going to break that record. There will be BJP in power till the time we enter 100th year of independence in 2047

Bhartiya Janata Party National General Secretary Ram Madhav in an interview, June 7



ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

Prakash Ambedkar, the grandson of the late B R Ambedkar, is a prominent Dalit leader. Through his party Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi, Ambedkar sought to stir up Maharashtra politics. Despite the Lok Sabha setback, he insists he will be in the driver's seat in the Assembly polls due in October. Edited excerpts from an interview with Sunil Gatade:

'Our agenda is our leader'

How do you see the coming Assembly elections in Maharashtra in the backdrop of the Lok Sabha polls?

I will be putting certain data, from the Lok Sabha election in Maharashtra, out in the public domain in a week. I will raise enough doubts about the process. People will have to believe what I say. As of now, all is not well.

People are saying that aggressive nationalism is one of the reason behind the win in Lok Sabha election. But I don't think that's true. According to my data, this theory is incorrect.

The Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) could win only one (Aurangabad) out of the 48 seats and that too through the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) with whom you had an alliance. Reports suggest, you are the 'B' team of the Bharatiya Janata Party. Could you elaborate?

Those who are saying this are probably from

the Congress or the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP). Those who are accusing us have committed frauds themselves. The government has itself made statements, in some cases, before the high court. These affidavits were filed a year ago. The question is why have they not been arrested? Why is there no prosecution?

The reason is: These people have made a settlement with the ruling party, which has given them the line that they should accuse us of being hand in glove with the BJP. By making these accusations, they have bought time, protecting themselves from possible arrest.

The VBA is one of the most vociferous opponents of the government in the state and at the Centre. Even after their accusations 24X7, we secured about 14 per cent of the vote.

Who are these people?

Basically they bullied the Muslims. The national leadership of Muslims was of one unanimous view: That Muslims should vote for anyone who

CHECKLIST

NARENDRA MODI'S FOREIGN ENGAGEMENTS

■ He is currently on a state visit to the Maldives and Sri Lanka. Maldives and Pakistan are the only two South Asian neighbours where Modi has not been on a state visit. Though he attended President Ibrahim Solih's oath-taking ceremony in 2018 when he won the elections, this is Modi's first visit to the group of atolls which have shown a marked China preference in the regime of the ousted president Yameen. It is self-evident how important his Sri Lanka visit is, both for New Delhi and Colombo, though Sri Lanka is itself headed for parliamentary and presidential elections at the end of this year and early 2020. ■ He goes to Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan later this month for a summit meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). There might be a 'chance' meeting with Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan. Or then, maybe not...

■ The PM will likely visit Nepal and Bhutan before the year is out. ■ This will be followed by the G-20 summit to be held in Osaka, Japan in mid-June where Prime Minister Modi is likely to have bilateral meetings with most world leaders. He is expected to meet President Donald Trump on the sidelines where protectionism and trade wars, along with strategic issues are expected to be discussed. ■ In August, he is expected to go to France for the G7 leaders' summit (August 24-26) on the invitation of President Macron. ■ August-September will also see the United Nations General Assembly in New York that the PM himself is expected to address.



is in a position to defeat the BJP. But in Maharashtra, the Muslim clergy (Maulvis) amended the line, saying that Muslims should vote for the Congress and the NCP instead of following the line of the central Muslim Maulvis.

If you analyse the NCP and the Congress vote, 80 per cent of their vote is from among the Muslims and only 20 per cent vote is from the Hindus. In fact, the Marathas have deserted the NCP and the Congress.

The Congress-NCP is a declining force while we are a rising force. Our 14 per cent vote is basically non-Muslim vote. We hardly got one per cent of the Muslim vote. If we had got Muslim votes, the results would have been a little different.

What is the significance of Aurangabad victory?

The message that went across to all Muslims was that we can win and defeat BJP if we go with Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi and not with the Congress.

Elections are fought on issues, but you are contesting on the basis of caste. Will this not divide the society?

I am basically breaching caste. The so-called intellectual class has become blind to the fact that the Congress-NCP and even the BJP is now playing the family rule card by allocating tickets to the wife, son, daughter. Democracy has been converted into a family democracy where others are mere rubber stamps for voting. What we have done in this election is to bring democracy to the last person by giving him representation as candidature. Therefore, we could garner 40 lakh votes.

In fact, we have hammered all political parties for accepting family rule: Even Rahul Gandhi pulled up three important leaders of his party for campaigning only for their sons.

In Maharashtra, every candidate of the Congress and the NCP is basically from a family that is in politics.

Are you against upper castes?

Caste boundaries are being broken. Lower castes follow the leadership of the upper castes, but the upper castes do not accept the leadership of the backward castes. By giving them (lower castes) the opportunity of candidature, we are trying to bring about equality in leadership: That whatever my caste, you will have to vote for me.

How do you look at upper castes, say Brahmins, Jains, Marwaris?

They will also become irrelevant once you start giving candidature to different communities and castes. When that becomes generalised principle, then the next step will be for all political parties to go by the formula at one go; and then going in for a programme that will bring you to power — which in turn, will lead to programme-oriented election.

How do you see Raj Thackeray's Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) in the Assembly polls?

Absolutely nil. He has spoiled his chances again by campaigning for no candidate. (Editor's note: MNS had not put up any candidates in the Lok Sabha polls. Thackeray campaigned for the opposition on an anti-Modi plank). He has shown that he is a commodity. A commodity has no value unless someone is ready to purchase it. It is as good as being on shelf unless there is a buyer for it, it has no value.

Will you still press for a separate Vidarbha state? Will it be part of your campaign in the Assembly polls?

I have always said that a state has to be a manageable state. A manageable state means a small state. Therefore, if one wants the nation to progress, the division of bigger states into smaller states is one of the biggest agenda before the country. And, I shall push for it during my election campaign.

What will be your response if the BJP, like in West Bengal, use the Ram card in Maharashtra? Will it not puncture your caste card?

The BJP, the Congress and the NCP are caught in a catch 22 situation. For them to change their character overnight is not as simple as it seems. The moment they try to change their character, they antagonise the voters and communities that are with them.

I am asking about the Ram card...

The question is that adjusting the backward classes, the most backward classes in the structure is not possible because 122 seats are with the BJP, 59 seats with the Shiv Sena and together this is around 200. So if you want to change, you can't change the social composition of 200 seats. You have only 88 seats. (Maharashtra Assembly strength is 288).

What do you want to say?

We are in the driver's seat in the Assembly elections in Maharashtra due to the strategy adopted in the Lok Sabha polls.

Will you fight the elections in alliance with any other party?

We will decide our future course of action in the next 8-10 days.

The BJP is projecting Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis as the CM candidate. Will you project yourself as the CM candidate?

Good luck to him. We will not be falling into the trap of BJP. We will project our agenda as our leader. That agenda could either be beneficial or non-beneficial to the voter. This trap that the BJP has laid, of converting parliamentary democracy into a Presidential election, that is where we would be attacking the BJP.

Knitting a livelihood

A design studio in Almora is helping women become self reliant while reviving the art of handmade and naturally-dyed traditions, writes Sneha Bhattacharjee

Sunita Tiwari of Uttarakhand used to work with a pharmaceutical company counting medicines bottles, day in and day out. It was not something that interested her particularly but an economic necessity: the sheer pressure of supporting her family. But Tiwari sought opportunities that both earned her an income and also gave her job satisfaction.

Amazingly, the solution was something that she had never considered a vocation: the job of a knitter with a design studio in Almora, Uttarakhand. Like all women who have grown up in the hill areas, Sunita was taught knitting when she was a little girl and had been knitting for long, but for her family. What was a chore became a vocation for her.

There are many like her in Almora, who are unaware of the monetary potential of their skill. And, that is what Peoli — a design studio that produces handmade, hand knitted, hand-sewn garments from Almora — is trying to bridge. An initiative of two textile designers, Abhinav Dhoundiyal and Vasanthi Veluri, the studio has been working with women in the hill town, upskilling them, and helping them earn a livelihood.

The name Peoli stems from a Kumaoni folktale. Peoli was a young maiden who lived in the forest. She spent her days tending to the plants and trees of the forest with whom she shared a deep bond of love. One day, a prince who came to the forest for hunting, saw her and fell in love with the *li* (girl, in local language). They got married and she left the forest to live with him in the palace. Life at the palace, away from nature

gradually made *li* sick and she eventually died. She was buried at a spot from where a plant with yellow flowers sprouted (Peo: Yellow). The spring-yellow coloured flower was named Peoli, in memory of the girl.

“The philosophy at Peoli has emerged from this love for nature. A strong belief in celebrating indigenous textile traditions forms the basis of our work approach. Simple, functional and aesthetic products have been derived from the local craft vocabulary using natural materials and dyes, for consumers who are sensitive about the resources used in the making of the item they purchase,” says 31-year-old Veluri.

Veluri and Dhoundiyal were in the north-east in 2013, documenting craft, textile and natural dye traditions there when they had an epiphany. “There was a sense of reviving what's lost in time,” says Veluri. Dhoundiyal, being from Almora, was familiar with the people and market. “There was also this realisation that such traditional set ups require less infrastructural investment,” Veluri adds. That the women in hills were already knitting and earning a little through their sales, helped Veluri and Dhoundiyal to bring them on board.

However, setting up a studio in a hill town has its own set of challenges. The weather can hinder the process of natural dyeing. Accessibility can be cumbersome and can cause delays in shipping orders or sourcing materials from outside the town. Getting women out of their homes and into the discipline of a workplace was another major challenge. “It took us a year to discipline them, make them understand unifor-

PHOTO COURTESY: PEOLI



Through Peoli, Veluri and Dhoundiyal are hoping to give maximum work to people, build a roadmap for naturally-dyed, handcrafted products and also make people mindful and conscious about how and what they produce

mity in size and colour,” says Veluri adding, “often, families would just call them back home on the pretext of guests, etc.”



THE OTHER INDIA

‘Conquering’ nature

Why adventure tourism is becoming a threat

The mounting death toll on Everest has focused global attention on the Nepal government’s irresponsible and indiscriminate distribution of climbing permits, which caused a deadly traffic jam on the world’s highest mountain. Recent history suggests that these tragedies will be forgotten once the monsoon arrives and the climbing season ends. This has been the routine every year, and is likely to continue unless the impoverished Nepal government chooses to exercise some fiscal self-control. But Everest, its human traffic jams and the 11 tonnes of garbage collected by a clean-up expedition — not by any means the first of

them — reflects the perils to the planet posed by humankind’s singular egotistical desire to “conquer” nature. Under the broad rubric of “adventure tourism”, this impulse has imperilled the earth’s fragile eco-systems from the Himalayas to the Antarctic, and is prompting conservation scientists to urge governments to impose more stringent controls. Everest may be the world’s highest mountain, at 29,035 feet, but it is by no means the hardest to climb (that honour would go to Annapurna and Nanda Devi). Thanks to technological advances in terms of oxygen and lightweight equipment, the south face route, pioneered by Tenzing Norgay and Edmund

Hillary in 1953, became the favoured line up the mountain. Far fewer expeditions attempt the North Face on the China side because it is by far more technically difficult. Because of its relative simplicity, the south face route came to be known — much to Hillary’s fury — as the “milk run”, and by the nineties, western tour adventure companies were offering “guided tours” along it. As a result, the small band of seasoned mountaineers who understood and accepted the risks associated with their sport came to be outnumbered by amateurs with zero experience. Anyone of reasonable fitness and who could afford anything between \$45,000 and \$80,000 for a tour could be “short-rope” (literally hauled) up by teams of sherpas for the privilege of standing on the peak. Poverty and poor economic development in Nepal have fuelled this business and brought down tour costs. The dangerous consequence of Everest’s

tourist boom became evident in 1996. Six tourists who had paid \$70,000 each and two famous guides died in a single night when congestion on the fixed ropes delayed their descent and trapped them in the open when one of the worst storms of the century lashed the mountain. Each year, the traffic jams caused by amateurs on the “milk run” have raised the risk levels for all, including genuine mountaineers. Each year, mountains of human waste and a mounting number of bodies are compounding the dangers posed by global warming in damaging this beautiful 60 million-year-old eco-system. The travails of Mount Everest may represent the pinnacle, so to speak, of the ecological damage of adventure tourism, which is growing exponentially thanks to advanced equipment and falling costs. In developed countries such as Australia and Switzerland, for instance, local awareness is

encouraging authorities to restrict tourism in areas such as the Great Barrier Reef in Australia (which is also threatened by global warming) and the Alps, in Switzerland. In the latter, for instance, climbing permits are restricted every season, issued only to those of proven mountaineering expertise and all mountaineers are required to follow specified waste-management norms. At the bottom of the world, tourism has added a sinister dimension to the ecological problems of human activity assailing the Antarctic, where pollution caused by visiting ships and disturbances caused by tobogganning and skiing tourists are threatening a range of local fauna and flora. Adventure tourism is but a sub-set of other deleterious human activity that is destroying our planet. Addressing it requires, to echo the Dalai Lama, overcoming the Everest of our minds.

China is the real threat

India’s national security concerns should focus more on China than Pakistan, the threats from which are marginal compared to those that could come from our north



Indian and Chinese soldiers jointly celebrate the New Year at Bumla along the Indo-China border in Arunachal Pradesh, on January 1 this year

PREM VIR DAS

With the noise and din of the elections behind us and a new government in place, it is time to reflect on the issues that were in the forefront of the campaign — national security and nationalism. While the latter can be subject to different interpretations, all difficult to analyse, the former is a much more precise term. The surgical strike two years ago was followed by the Pulwama terror attack in February this year, leading to the Balakot retaliatory strike soon thereafter, and the electioneering was full of assertive rhetoric, with Pakistan identified as the adversary which would be dealt with sternly, unlike in the days gone by. Interestingly, China found no mention in these articulations. Yet, for the 700-odd kilometres of the Line of Control that India shares with Pakistan, that with China, all of it disputed, is nearly 4000 kilometres. Not just that, China sits on our territory in Aksai Chin, and also lays claim to Arunachal Pradesh. It is, therefore, necessary to look at national security a little more realistically. A country’s security has many dimensions, of which the military angle is only one; yet it is the most crucial. Looked at from this point of view, let us examine the relevant equations. On land, despite our commitments on the northern borders, it is difficult to see any Pakistani Army headquarters recommending military confrontation with India. Much the same can be said of the balance between the two air forces. It is true that that the Pakistan Air Force retaliated on the very day after the Balakot strike, downing one of our MIG-21 aircraft, but its aircraft stayed away from our territory. At sea, the balance of advantage lies predominantly with us. So, the probability that our territorial integrity can be compromised, even threatened, by Pakistani military action is remote. Yes, indirect support to terrorist acts in India and especially in the Kashmir Valley from Pakistan can be

expected to continue, though its extent will be constrained by that country’s own critical economic state as well as international pressure, as also the likelihood of an assertive Indian response. Seaborne terror such as in the Mumbai attacks in 2008 or in the 1993 blasts, when explosives were brought across by sea and landed on the Ratnagiri coast, has been there. But the seminal region of concern is the Valley. In short, while the terrorism aspect will need to be countered, politically and otherwise, Pakistan’s ability to militarily challenge our national security is not all that credible. With China the situation is quite different. First, in any confrontation across the land border it has decided superiority. In the air, there is some degree of parity, since Chinese aircraft have to operate from high altitudes, thus suffering some degradation in capability. But even then, to say that we are equal to them would be optimistic. In the Indian Ocean Region, we presently have clear advantages, but these could be fast eroding, given the increasing Chinese naval presence in this part of the world, including access to base facilities at Gwadar and Djibouti. Their territorial claims are potentially confrontational, as was seen at Doklam and elsewhere in earlier years. As India grows in economic power and seeks a larger stature in Asian and even global geopolitics, it is certain to face direct and indirect hostility from China, of which its close relations with Pakistan are only one facet. Trade will continue to remain one-sided and pressures might even be mounted on us in the South China Sea, through which more than half of our overseas trade traverses. So, China, much more than Pakistan, is a credible potential adversary with the ability to hurt our interests. It must figure higher in our national security concerns. It might be argued that some redeeming features in the India-China relationship have emerged in the last few

years. After some tense moments, Doklam faded away. The Wuhan meeting of the two heads of government was more cordial than might have been expected, and the most recent Chinese gesture of agreeing to brand Jaish leader Masood Azhar an international terrorist is a positive. China is also facing increasing trade-related pressure from the United States, which might see it gravitate it to a more amenable position towards us. That having been said, in seeking power parity with the US, as it does, it will always find India on the “other side” and that it cannot wish away. So, differences between the two countries will remain, which can be “managed or escalated”, depending on the geopolitical needs of the times. We must be prepared for them. Its close relationship with its all-weather friend, Pakistan, is certain to continue. In sum, our national security concerns should centre more on China than on Pakistan. The potential threats that we face from the latter are marginal, compared to those that could come from our north, and our military preparedness must be structured accordingly. Our areas of strength, such as at sea, must be maximised, just as weaknesses elsewhere must be plugged, inadequate road connectivity to the borders — which constrains quick deployment of land forces — being one. It will be desirable to look at these issues and force compositions in their totality and holistically. Fortunately, in the new external affairs minister we have a person who knows better than most how the cards are placed. The continuance of National Security Advisor Ajit K Doval is a bonus but should not inhibit fresh thinking. The new government should take a second look at national security, now that the elections are behind us.

The writer has been a member of the National Security Advisory Board

RANJAN MATHAI

The possibility of a military confrontation in our Gulf neighbourhood should bring the government’s focus back on oil, as it embarks on a second mandate. Having served in Iran during the 1990-91 Gulf crisis, the visit of Iran’s foreign minister a few weeks ago, brought back to me past memories of that tense period, when the spike in oil prices nearly drove us into national default. The crisis atmosphere then was aggravated by a panic over oil supplies, as we had only a few days’ consumption requirements in stock in the country. If hostilities break out, there can be no assurance that supplies from the entire Gulf region will not get disrupted. India has come a long way since 1990, having built a Strategic Reserve and acquired oil assets in over 25 foreign countries. However, our oil imports have grown from fewer than one million barrels per day (bpd) to about 4.5 million bpd, in the same period, which means our Strategic Reserve holds just over a week’s oil requirements. Ramping up supplies from Indian-owned oil fields abroad will require long lead times. Refineries now hold stocks that might see us through a temporary supply disruption, but the risk, and costs, of shortages will loom large over the economy. The risk arises because of our increased dependence on imports — from less than 50 per cent of oil demand in 1990, to over 80 per cent today — most of it coming from the Gulf region. The bulk of our imports pass through the Straits of Hormuz; even a short-term closure of shipping through the Straits will hit us hard, at a time when our current account deficit is mounting and industrial growth is slowing. The dramatic growth trajectory of renewable energy will not cut our dependence on oil, which meets almost all transportation fuel needs (including that of the armed forces) and almost 25 per cent of total energy demand. And current projections are that oil imports are set to increase to eight million bpd in the next decade. Prime Minister Narendra Modi set a target back in 2015, for increasing domestic crude production to reduce import dependence by 10 per cent by 2022. Since then, oil production has actually declined, and imports have grown from about 77 per cent to 83 per cent of total consumption, costing about \$8 trillion -- some four per cent of GDP! The government has proactively begun to reduce regulatory constraints on exploration and production (E&P); discovered small fields were bid out for faster development, and the first rounds of open acreage licensing have begun. There has been a fairly encouraging response, mainly from Indian companies, but investment plans are not on the scale required to achieve

The dramatic growth of renewable energy will not cut India’s dependence on oil, which meets almost all transportation fuel needs and close to 25 per cent of total energy demand

the PM’s goal; and the new licensing will at best yield oil many years from now. Globally significant players in the oil E&P space have in the past largely stayed out of India, partly because India’s geology is perceived as relatively unfavourable, but more because of policies and regulations that act as disincentives, and unending tax problems. ENI gave up on exploration in India (and went on to uncover massive gas reserves off Mozambique and Egypt), while Cairn, after discovering the Mangala field in Rajasthan, was slapped with retrospective tax demands. Mr Modi initiated policy reforms after personally engaging with international experts, and the government brought in the Hydrocarbon Exploration Licensing Policy (HELP) regime, which included the open acreage licensing policy, and later an Enhanced Oil Recovery incentive policy. While HELP improves the Ease of Doing Business in the E&P sector, it impacts future operations; and it has been held back by North Block’s pursuit of revenue maximisation. Corporate boardrooms continue to prefer jurisdictions with more reasonable tax regimes, and hence investment has declined. More than 50 per cent of India’s sedimentary basins remain unexplored. The Niti Aayog, in its February report, made a useful contribution to policy by focusing on the immediate national priority of raising domestic production. It proposed production enhancement contracts, maximising recovery from existing fields (our recovery rates are below the global average), accessing international expertise, incentivising E&P in both explored and unexplored basins, marketing and pricing freedom for gas, as well as a review of tax provisions. The government has accepted many of the key recommendations, but it is time for a renewed thrust to meet the PM’s target. We need to incentivise our national oil companies — ONGC and OIL — as well as private oil and gas companies to step up production, by putting all legacy issues behind us, quickly bringing a new regime of greater operational and marketing freedom, as well as incentives for enhanced recovery, without adding new layers of bureaucratic delay. A review of the self-defeating burdens of tax and cess, which increase costs and inhibit production — and therefore revenue growth — will also stimulate investor interest. In 2014, the UK turned around a declining offshore oil industry by reducing taxes and implementing more industry-friendly regulation; which kept international investments flowing in. It has had four years of increased production since then, with major benefits for its economy, employment, and indeed revenue. We too should recognise that energy security, like charity, begins at home.

The writer is a former foreign secretary

▶ OTHER VIEWS

No surprise from RBI, though it has been conservative

The impact of the rate cut will depend on banks transmitting it to borrowers

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 four per cent, the stage was probably set for the RBI to spring a surprise but it chose to play conservative. If the economy fails to recover well enough from its slumber by August, the onus will, after all, shift back to the RBI. 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 point 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. With the RBI having done its bit, the focus shifts to the finance ministry. The onus



is now on the budget, to be presented on July 5, to unleash the animal spirits again in the economy.

The Hindu, June 7

No more captive vote banks

Opposition must reinvent its politics

The electoral arithmetic seems to be changing in India. The numbers, for instance, have not added up for the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh where the famed *mahagathbandhan* — an alliance put together by the two traditional rivals — received a drubbing at the hands of Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party. The consequences of the debacle have been predictable. Mayawati has declared that the BSP would contest the upcoming assembly by-elections on its own: Akhilesh Yadav has accepted the decision of his former ally without rancour. The rationale for the BSP and the SP joining forces for the Lok Sabha elections had been based on the understanding that combining the numerical strengths of their respective vote banks would be enough to blow the BJP away. This year’s general elections have shown that vote banks are no longer captive constituencies. The perception that Ms Mayawati and Mr Yadav are leaders of specific caste groups instead of being representative in a truly democratic sense may have undermined the electoral fortunes of the Opposition in Uttar Pradesh. India, at present, has a fractured, squabbling Opposition. The BJP’s opponents must first reinvent their politics for their own survival and that of democracy.

The Telegraph, June 7

India can eradicate malaria

It is headed in the right direction

India has sustained significant decline in malaria cases, halving numbers to 5.1 million in 2018 from 9.6 million the year before. This followed a 24 per cent decline in 2017, according to the World Malaria Report 2018. This year, the cases have fallen across all states except Himachal Pradesh, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh and Lakshadweep. Despite the success, it is early days yet to declare that the country is on track to reach its goal of zero indigenous cases by 2027. The learnings from the polio eradication drive that led to India being declared polio-free by the World Health Organisation in 2013 show that the last mile is the most difficult, when missing a single case can lead to outbreaks that infect dozens before they are contained. Vaccination made eradicating polio and smallpox possible, but malaria is a more complicated case. Malaria, which is a parasitic infection that spreads between people through the bite of the infected female anopheles mosquito and causes symptoms like fever, headache, chills and vomiting, can be eliminated only by stopping indigenous transmission of the infection. Rapid diagnostic tests make it possible for trained health workers to test all cases of fever in makeshift camps and treat everyone with malaria. India has a long way to go, but the data indicates it is headed in the right direction.

The Hindustan Times, June 7