

CHATTERBOX

Publicspat

Telecom Minister Ravishankar Prasad and BJP MP from Bihar, Rajiv Pratap Rudy sparred publicly in Parliament although they are from the same state and party. The issue was the response of state run telecom operators BSNL and MTNL during natural calamities. Prasad, being the minister said only they offer free services to subscribers, to which Rudy replied that even private operators provide free services during floods, cyclones and droughts. To this, Prasad countered that it was only for a brief span of time unlike the state-run operators. Rudy retorted that the problem with state-run operators was that they also charged for call drops. To this of course, there was no answer.

Resolving differences

Last week, Chief Minister Kamal Nath and top leader Jyotiraditya Scindia put their differences aside and met behind closed doors to strategise on how to keep the party together from a BJP assault that everyone believes is imminent on the ruling Congress government. The meeting stemmed from a clash between ministers loyal to Nath and those from Scindia's camp during a meeting of the state cabinet. The two leaders discussed this issue for nearly 25 minutes at a dinner thrown by Health Minister Tulsi Silwat, said to belong to the Scindia camp. While 27 ministers in the council of ministers and 90 MLAs attended the dinner, significant absentees were Ajay Singh, Digvijaya Singh and PC Sharma. Interestingly, Scindia told MLAs the same thing that Prime Minister Narendra Modi told his MPs when he held his first meeting with them. The message: don't issue unnecessary statements, don't talk to the press too much.



OPINION

RAJEEV CHANDRASEKHAR

Amendments are necessary to make Aadhaar succeed

The determination to ensure government programmes and subsidies reaches the poorest of poor, farthest of the far is an article of faith of this government. Aadhaar and Jan Dhan Yojana (JDY) have become the core platforms to do this.

Of course, what is amusing is the Congress stand on this stronger and much more effective Aadhaar now. I don't envy their situation — On one hand they want to claim ownership of it but on the other hand, they want to pretend to apostles of cause of privacy and oppose it. So as our PM said in this house a few days ago — when everything is looked at either from so high in the sky or with tinted political lens — then even the best of initiatives will look bad — be it EVMs or Aadhaar. I urge the Congress to work with the government on the development of this powerful micro-architecture of Aadhaar and JDY that is truly making a difference to crores of Indians lives.

The Narendra Modi government has recognised that new areas like this — legislation needs to keep evolving and hence these amendments. Aadhaar and the wider JDY architecture — together and separately have many more roles it can play in use of technology to deliver better public services and governance in coming years. I welcome these amendments.

I will explain these amendments. These go to make Aadhaar stronger, with more oversight to those concerned about data protection but its important goal is to spreading its coverage and ensuring more and more of the poor get their subsidies and rights without leakage.

Offline verification of Aadhaar number holder: Under the Aadhaar Act, an individual's identity may be verified by Aadhaar 'authentication'. Authentication involves submitting the Aadhaar number, and their biometric or demographic information to the Central Identities Data Repository for verification. The Ordinance additionally allows "offline verification" of an individual's identity, without authentication, through modes specified by the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) by regulations. During offline verification, the agency must (i) obtain the consent of the individual, (ii) inform them of alternatives to sharing information, and (iii) not collect, use or store Aadhaar number or biometric information.

Voluntary use: The Act provides for the use of Aadhaar number as proof of identity of a person, subject to authentication. The Ordinance replaces this provision to state that an individual may voluntarily use his Aadhaar number to establish his identity, by authentication or offline verification. The Ordinance states that authentication of an individual's identity via Aadhaar, for the provision of any service, may be made mandatory only by a law of Parliament.

The Ordinance amends the Telegraph Act, 1885 and the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002 to state that persons with a licence to maintain a telegraph, banking companies and financial institutions may verify the identity of their clients by: (i) authentication or offline verification of Aadhaar, (ii) passport, or (iii) any other documents notified by the central government. No person shall be denied any service for not having an Aadhaar number.

Entities using Aadhaar: Under the Act, usage of Aadhaar number for establishing the identity of an individual, by the State or a body corporate under any law, is permitted. The Ordinance removes this provision. An entity may be allowed to perform authentication through Aadhaar, if the UIDAI is satisfied that it is: (i) compliant with certain standards of privacy and security, or (ii) permitted by law, or (iii) seeking authentication for a purpose specified by the central government in the interest of the State.

Aadhaar number of children: The Ordinance specifies that at the time of enrolling a child to obtain an Aadhaar number, the enrolling agency shall seek the consent of his parent or guardian. The agency must inform the parent or guardian of the manner in which the information will be used, the recipients with whom it will be shared, and of their right to access the information. After attaining 18 years of age, the child may apply for cancellation of his Aadhaar.

Disclosure of information in certain cases: Under the Act, restrictions on security and confidentiality of Aadhaar related information do not apply in case the disclosure is pursuant to an order of a District Court (or above). The Ordinance amends this to allow such disclosure only for orders by High Courts (or above). Further, under the Act, an officer not below the rank of a Joint Secretary may issue directions for disclosing information in the interest of national security.

UIDAI Fund: Under the Act, all fees and revenue collected by the UIDAI will be credited to the Consolidated Fund of India. The Ordinance removes this provision, and creates the Unique Identification Authority of India Fund. All fees, grants, and charges received by the UIDAI shall be credited to this fund. The fund shall be used for expenses of the UIDAI, including salaries and allowances of its employees.

Complaints: Under the Act, courts can take cognizance of an offence only if the UIDAI registers a complaint. The Ordinance amends this to allow the individual to register complaints in certain cases, including impersonation or disclosure of their identity. The Ordinance defines the Aadhaar ecosystem to include enrolling agencies, requesting agencies, and offline verification-seeking entities. It allows the UIDAI to issue directions to them if necessary for the discharge of its functions under the Act.

Penalties: Under the Ordinance, the UIDAI may initiate a complaint against an entity in the Aadhaar ecosystem for failure to (i) comply with the Act or the UIDAI's directions, and (ii) furnish information required by the UIDAI. Adjudicating Officers appointed by the UIDAI shall decide such matters, and may impose penalties up to one crore rupees on such entities. The Telecom Disputes Settlement and Appellate Tribunal shall be the appellate authority.

Edited excerpts from BJP MP Rajeev Chandrasekhar's speech on the Aadhaar and other laws (Amendment) Bill in Rajya Sabha, July 8

DID THEY REALLY SAY THAT?



"Mob lynching has emerged as a dreadful disease across the country, and the loss of lives is a matter of serious concern. There is a strong need for a stringent countrywide law, but the Centre's approach towards it is lackadaisical"

Bahujan Samaj Party Supremo Mayawati in a party statement, July 13



ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

M V Rajeev Gowda, a former professor at IIM Bangalore and Congress Rajya Sabha MP from Karnataka, tells Archis Mohan why the Congress-Janata Dai (Secular) coalition government will survive in the state and how the Union Budget has little to prevent India from sliding into an economic recession or, as he terms it, a "Modi slump".

'Coalition will restore balance and survive'

What is the latest on the political drama in Karnataka?

I think the coalition will restore balance and most likely survive the trust vote (scheduled tentatively for later this week in the Assembly). The situation is certainly looking better than the initial stages. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is trying to engineer that the government falls down, but the party in the state is itself a divided house. There is infighting in the BJP and they are busy plotting against their only vote getter in the state.

The Congress and JD(S) leaders have blamed the BJP for the situation. However, there are enough internal contradictions within the Congress, and between the alliance.

A couple of things have happened after the Lok Sabha results came out (in which BJP won 25 of the state's 28 seats). Some people have become reckless and adventurous. They are emboldened and believe their power to

threaten has increased, and that by lining up these MLAs wanting to quit they can bring down the government. However, this counter threat of disqualification will take care of that.

What has actually happened is that several MLAs wish to be ministers, but any council of ministers can accommodate only so many. A large number of MLAs have been multiple times legislators, and there is very little to argue that somebody does not deserve (to be minister). In such a situation, there is a need to come up with a formulae or criteria that would decide who gets a ministry and not, that includes being able to persuade people who have been ministers for a long time to step aside and give scope to newer people. Many issues need to be sorted internally by the party leadership by taking the MLAs into confidence. I think that has been going on, and every time a cabinet is formed it is formed after certain amount of time is spent arriving at a consensus.

CHECKLIST EVERYTHING YOU WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT DEFECTIONS

- Within a brief span of 4 years (1967–71), there were 142 defections in Parliament and 1969 defections in state Assemblies across the country. Thirty-two governments collapsed and 212 defectors were rewarded with ministerial positions.
- In October 1967, four Jan Sangh members in Haryana defected to the Congress party. One legislator, Gaya Lal, changed party affiliations thrice in a fortnight. It was his name which gave Indian politics the idiom *Aya Ram* and *Gaya Ram* to describe political turncoats.
- Harish Rawat, the Uttarakhand CM from Congress party could stay as chief minister for all of two days — May 21 to 22, 2016. Trouble for Rawat began when nine MLAs of his party defected to BJP. During the floor test Rawat could manage the support of only 33 of the 61 MLAs. It was a case of quick

- attrition of support.
- YS Jaganmohan Reddy, now chief minister of Andhra Pradesh spoke recently in the assembly about defections engineered by then chief minister Chandrababu Naidu (2014–19). He referred to 23 MLAs from his party, the YSR Congress who were 'inducted' into the Telugu Desam Party and how four of them were even made ministers in the Chandrababu Naidu Cabinet.
- Defections in Goa are nothing new. Sudin Dhavalikar, deputy CM after the death of popular CM Manohar Parrikar, tried to boost numbers for his Maharashtrawadi Gomantak Party (MGP). But both his colleagues moved over to BJP CM Pramod Sawant's camp. As two members represent two-thirds of the small party, the defection rules did not apply to them. That's how Sawant became CM.

The developments in Karnataka, Goa, Telangana... Are these also a sign of hopelessness among Congress leaders because of the confusion bedevilling the party at the top?

Not at all. Actually, the Congress is a well-structured organisation. The state units, their heads, general secretary in-charge of state units — all those systems and processes are absolutely in place. We are eagerly looking forward to working on the transition and with the leadership of the party, guided by our former president (Rahul Gandhi) in active role.

As for Goa, of the two Lok Sabha seats in the state, we won one. Many of the MLAs who have defected are Christians, who have benefitted from the Congress support base but are just using this opportunity to become ministers right now. So one of the larger themes is, just as we saw in Telangana (where Congress MLAs joined the ruling Telangana Rashtra Samithi) and Andhra Pradesh, people want instant gratification. They were elected as MLAs, and they need the next step now (of becoming ministers) and that is pretty much what is going on.

In your Rajya Sabha speech during the Budget discussion, you said the country was on the verge of recession. Are you not being alarmist when the government has promised investments of Rs100 trillion in infrastructure?

Oh really! You know that is the biggest jumla. They have given us a committee in response to questions on where is that money going to come from. Why would anyone trust this government's management of the economy? Look at the GDP figures, which have seen continuous decline in the last four quarters. Look at any of the economic indicators — automobile sales are down, foreign direct investment is low, savings are down, consumption is down, and revenue from GST is down. However, the government is talking 8 per cent growth and a \$5 trillion economy.

We are concerned that the government is in denial about these things. By the way, I do not have to make these statements about recession myself. This is what I hear from industry, from other economists. I had written an article sometime back stating that this is going to be a "Modi slump". This is a "Modi slump".

The government has identified disinvestment a key area to generate resources, but you say they have no strategy.

Look at their previous track record. They had the ONGC and LIC buy stakes in other PSUs

in the name of disinvestment. I am not saying they do not have the capability. Some of the initial disinvestment was done by Arun Shourie during the Atal Bihari Vajpayee-led NDA government. However, they certainly are not doing anything of significance that would make it work properly. The things about disinvestment to watch out for are whether the government would sell the family jewels to crony capitalists. This is not the kind of disinvestment we expect. I would certainly like to see who comes and buys Air India, or Jet Airways.

On the face of it, there seems confusion on disinvestment within the Congress. Some oppose all disinvestment, but people like P Chidambaram and you have a more nuanced approach to the issue.

There is a difference. We say we should move out of non-strategic non-core sectors, and that is what our manifesto for the Lok Sabha election said. What is happening with this government is that it is selling out of desperation. They do not know how else to raise the money. They are unable to run the economy in the manner that it generates resources of its own. One part is desperation and the other part is bringing back crony capitalism, with a leading defence public sector undertaking in the process of being sold to industrialist Anil Ambani.

When senior Congress leader P Chidambaram said this government has mooted no structural reforms, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said the previous Modi government carried out as many as 16 structural reforms.

Out of the 16, which are the ones that qualify as structural reforms under the BJP government? I would readily concede that the goods and service tax and the insolvency and bankruptcy code are two structural reforms under the BJP. To claim that Start Up Stand Up India was a structural reform in the absence of having created anything dramatic, or Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana is such a reform, these hardly count. The FM's effort was more to mock Chidambaram.

Journalists have been barred from entering the Ministry of Finance unless they have an appointment. How do you see this?

It is part of this government's effort to control and stifle the media. It has increased tax on newsprint and stopped advertisements to some of the country's most reputed media houses and now this. These are all ways of strangling media freedom.

'Clicking' on nostalgia

With 300 typewriters in his possession, a third-generation trader's passion for the vintage classic might get the country its first typewriter museum, writes Sneha Bhattacharjee

Selling typewriters for the past 45 years from the counters of the Universal Typewriter Company in New Delhi's Kamla Market is surely a feat that the third-generation typewriter trader Rajesh Palta wears with pride. He sits in his tiny hole in the wall shop, sending mails to prospective clients or responding to queries from buyers from across the country. "Give me two minutes," he says and gets going with his business.

His shop is old but standing tall. It is hard to believe that it could be a home to ageless antiques like typewriters. A look around will get you face to face with typewriters stacked up on shelves, with or without covers, just like the files stacked below them.

"Before I begin talking about my journey or the history of typewriters, let me tell you that am quite intrigued by the number of youngsters looking out for typewriters," says an enthusiastic Palta after sending his response to an email query. "Some ask for their creative use, some use it as props, some want to even shoot with it. Some want to use it for training purpose in their typing institute. I enjoy the conversation with them," he adds. And, why wouldn't he?

Palta narrates the journey of his family and that of the typewriter like oral history. "The first commercial typewriter was invent-

ed in 1884 in the US by the Remington brothers and June 23rd is called the International Typewriter Day, that's the day some 150 years ago, the first typewriter patent was awarded. In 1910, typewriters came into the Indian subcontinent," says Palta adding how in 1912, his grandfather joined the company Remington in Lahore as a sales manager. "He was in-charge of India, Afghanistan, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and Burma and in 1937, my father established the name Universal Typewriter Company in Lahore," he says.

After a good run for over a decade in Lahore, the journey of the Paltas to Mumbai (then Bombay), is like other stories of Partition-hit families. Tough and challenging but the satisfaction of having the family by your side -- priceless. "With four typewriters, he moved to Bombay and started the shop from a table-space in the office of a friend.

Today, my 82-year-old brother is running it in whatever capacity he can," says the youngest of the siblings.

The Universal Typewriter Company in Delhi was started in 1956 when Palta's father received it from the government in lieu of the property they lost in Lahore. "My father had opted for a commercial property and that's how this came into being," he says with



Rajesh Palta with one of his treasured typewrites — Valentine. Of the 22 such similar typewriters in the world, Palta owns two of them. The typewriter and its design is mentioned in the textbooks of almost all design institutes in India, says Palta

a childlike glee, "you are sitting in the oldest typewriter shop of the country".

Until about a decade ago, Palta would sell those machines that were so degraded that they could not be fixed, to scrap dealers. But after his children introduced him to the world of internet and showed him how these vintage machines fetch a good price in the interna-

tional markets, Palta realised he needed to keep his 'antiques' close to his heart. "Today, I have over 300 typewriters with me. Of these, I will be putting up 80 for display in the museum that I plan to set up in this very shop in the next few months," says Palta.

He not only repairs those machines and keeps them for his museum, but also repaints and sells them to prospective buyers. However, terms and conditions apply here. "I usually do not sell a machine if I don't have another piece of the same model," he adds.

A clientele that spans the country, from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, Palta is happy that there is demand for typewriters even in this day and age. "Digital detox is one reason why young people are turning towards typewriters because there is no distraction," says Palta on the rising interest in typewriters among youngsters.

However, there is one thought that always lurks in his mind. "If I don't sell, how will I pay my staff. I am worried about what will happen once the orders stop coming. What will they do? They haven't done anything else in their lives except repairing typewriters," says Palta pointing at a 38-year-old staff-member who has been working with them since he was 20. The challenge of sourcing spare parts to repair a typewriter is more than actually sourcing a typewriter. How does he manage? "We make our own spare parts using metal sheets," says he.

As Palta continues to sell typewriters for as low as ₹5,000 to as high as ₹45,000, he is patiently waiting for his designer son to come and work on the layout of the museum at his shop. It is as if the future of this vintage classic rests in his hands. And, he is in no mood to let go of it.

50 years later

Chandrayaan-2 is a shining example of Apollo 11’s legacy

Fifty years ago, on July 20, 1969, the Apollo 11 Mission landed two men on the moon. That was the culmination of the first era of space exploration, and it was also the beginning of a new era. One of those astronauts, Neil Armstrong, remarked as he stepped off the Eagle Lander on to the moon, “It was one small step for a man and a giant leap for mankind.” The first satellite to successfully orbit the Earth, the Soviet Sputnik, was launched in 1957. That sparked a race between the Cold War rivals, as they competed to demonstrate space-going capabilities. Soon, both the US and the USSR put men and women in space, and sent unmanned probes to the moon. America

embarked on an ambitious programme to send men to the moon. It took only 12 years to go from an 83-kg Sputnik to gigantic rockets that could carry multi-person crews across half a million km. The legacy of that mission is immense and its impact spanned science, culture, and politics. The next phase of space exploration took research in many different directions. More nations also got into the act. The Shuttle missions, space stations orbiting the Earth with crews rotating in and out, armies of satellites with different capabilities, telescopes that probed the Universe, and unmanned missions to explore Mars, Venus, comets and deep space are just some

of the achievements. India has also been taking giants strides. A decade after its first mission — Chandrayaan 1 — discovered water on moon’s surface, India is set to launch Chandrayaan-2 at 2.51 am on July 15. It will be the first of its kind as it will shed light on a completely unexplored section of the moon — its South Polar region. The Lander, Vikram, will land near South Pole of the moon on September 6. The region is expected to have a rich, but as yet unexplored source of water. The mission would also analyse the moon soil for minerals and Helium 3, a potential energy source for the future. Now, America’s NASA aims to put men on Mars (so does Elon Musk); and China is exploring the dark side of the moon. Man’s exploration of space has not only helped to satisfy the collective curiosity of the species; it has transformed the daily lives of the people. It has inspired countless young

people to devote their lives to scientific research. The technologies that cope with alien, harsh and hostile environments have been deployed to improve our mundane lives. The “Blue Sky” research, which has improved our understanding of Mars, Venus, and Luna has also buttressed the understanding of climate change. Many of the foundations of 21st century existence are built directly on applications from space programmes. The entire system of communication (and entertainment) is based on satellite systems. So are the navigational systems, pollution-monitoring systems, and our weather forecasts. Remote-sensing technology and satellite-based mapping have not only enabled exploration; they have been used to design roads, map traffic, and help farmers make decisions on what to plant, and also for municipalities to gauge population densities and raise taxes. Keeping people alive and sane in space

is a difficult task. Astronauts endure the impact of high gravitational forces under acceleration, and then live for months in weightless conditions. They cope with extreme radiation and are cooped up in extremely confined spaces. The medical data collected from those brave individuals has transformed health care. The recycling systems have been scaled up to help with water purification and recycling. The ubiquitous solar panels and heating systems are descended from space units. A major thrust for the development of autonomous vehicles and AI came from space. Space research could be the salvation in mitigating climate change. As a last resort, the establishment of space colonies could preserve our species in the event of a catastrophic meteor strike. Space exploration had paid for itself many times over in the past five decades. There’s no telling where it could take us in the next 50 years.

As yet, just a protest vote

In the absence of fundamental legal changes, ‘NOTA’ is only a means of expressing disapproval of all the candidates in an election, with no ability to influence the result

ATANU BISWAS

The ‘none of the above’ (NOTA) option, the last button in electronic voting machines (EVMs), came into force owing to a September 2013 judgment of the Supreme Court. The apex court said: “When the political parties will realise that a large number of people are expressing their disapproval with the candidates...there will be a systemic change and the political parties will be forced to accept the will of the people and field candidates who are known for their integrity.” It is not easy to evaluate how NOTA is evolving in the country, and how people are adapting and using this tool of expressing dissatisfaction over candidates contesting an election. This is because one needs more than one election to understand and evaluate changing patterns. Since NOTA was introduced only a few states — such as Delhi, Madhya Pradesh and Mizoram — have had more than one Assembly election until 2018. And, interestingly, the popularity of NOTA was seen to be decreasing in those states. However, is the enthusiasm over NOTA increasing or decreasing in the country as a whole?

The 2019 Lok Sabha election was an excellent opportunity in this context, as this was the second general election after the NOTA option had been introduced in late 2013. Let’s compare how the NOTA option was exercised in the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections in 542 constituencies (except Vellore, where the election was withheld in 2019).

If we take constituency-wise percentages, the average NOTA vote share in 2014 was 1.11, which declined to 1.08 in 2019, the reduction being statistically insignificant. However, the maximum values of NOTA percentages recorded in these two years are formidable — both being 5.04 — in Bastar (Chhattisgarh) in 2014, and Gopalganj (Bihar) in 2019. The number of Lok Sabha constituencies with at least three per cent NOTA votes increased to 16 in 2019, from 11 in 2014. And the number of constituencies with at least four per cent NOTA votes increased to five in 2019, from four in 2014. On the other hand, the minimum NOTA percentages registered were 0.14 in Hisar (Haryana) in 2014 and 0.17 in Bidar (Karnataka) in 2019. Interestingly, the maximum change in NOTA votes in a constituency is more than three percentage points — a 3.07 percentage-point increase in Gopalganj, and a 3.19 percentage-point decrease in Nilgiris (Tamil Nadu).

Although the average NOTA vote shares remained almost constant during these two elections, the 2019 percentages exceeded the corresponding 2014 figures only in about 45 per cent of constituencies. Among the states, Andhra Pradesh experienced the highest increase in NOTA votes (0.84 percentage points), while Kerala registered the maximum decrease (0.63 percentage points) over these two Lok Sabha elections.

Thus, assuming that different states might behave differently in expressing disapproval through NOTA, I carried out some simple statistical test procedures, and found that Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh exhibited a significant increase in NOTA percentages; Gujarat, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan and West Bengal experienced significant declines; and Assam, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu saw no significant change.

Also, the correlation coefficient between the 2014 and 2019 NOTA percentages in India is 0.6, which can be treated as a high positive association, indicating that the constituencies which voted for NOTA in high percent-



ages in 2014 also voted more favourably for it in 2019; and those that voted for NOTA in low percentages in 2014, also voted in low percentages in 2019, on average.

If voters believe that their negative voting to reject all contesting candidates didn’t bring the desired change, they would have forced political parties to field candidates with “integrity” by voting more strongly in favour of NOTA. On the other hand, if voters feel that the system is at the desired level, this kind of negative voting would automatically be reduced. However, surprisingly, the percentage of NOTA votes remained almost constant, and that too at a meagre one per cent. Does that reflect the confused state of voters?

Or, is there a tremendous possibility just confined within the apparently tiny one per cent NOTA votes?

True, NOTA as a whole didn’t move much in either direction during the last five or six years. Many believe that unless NOTA gets teeth, its popularity will not increase and its usefulness will remain limited. As per current rules, NOTA has no electoral value. Even if 90 per cent of the votes favour NOTA, it would not prevent the candidate having the maximum votes among the contesting candidates from winning the election.

State electoral authorities in Maharashtra and Haryana have ruled that if in an election the NOTA option gets more valid votes than the candidates, a fresh poll will be held

By contrast, take the example of Makassar in Indonesia where the only candidate in the 2018 election for mayor received 35,000 fewer votes than NOTA, forcing a repeat election which will be held in 2020. Things are also moving in India. In June 2018, the Maharashtra State Election Commission (SEC) issued the following order: “If it is noticed while counting that NOTA has received the highest number of valid votes, the said election for that particular seat shall be countermanded and a fresh election shall be held for such a post.”

In November 2018, the SEC of Haryana also issued an order stating that if all contesting candidates individually receive fewer votes than NOTA, not only would none of the contesting candidates be declared elected, but all such contesting candidates who secured fewer votes than NOTA would not be eligible to re-file their nomination or contest in the event of a re-election. Who knows the consequences of such an expansion of the NOTA option in the near future? And, more importantly, what would happen if such a rule is introduced by the Election Commission for the whole country?

For the time being, NOTA remains a useful tool for people who do not wish to vote for any of the candidates in an election, but are not comfortable disclosing their identities by staying at home instead.

The writer is Professor of Statistics at the Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata

Why is India not capitalising on the US-China trade spat?

SITHARAM GURUMURTHI

In the article “A China Trade Deal will be a Triumph for Donald Trump” by this writer (*Business Standard*, March 16, 2019), it was reported how China’s decision to hike its imports from the United States from a meagre \$111.16 billion to \$1.3 trillion would be a great boost to the US economy. China’s proposal to buy \$30 billion worth of agricultural products from the US, including soya bean, corn and wheat, will undoubtedly provide great relief to American farmers who have been hit badly by the retaliatory taxes imposed by China on soya bean in the recent past.

In this connection, one should not miss the point that China is the world’s largest holder of US treasury bonds, and that it reduced its treasury holdings from \$1.184 trillion in December 2017 to \$1.123 trillion in December 2018. China is expected to dump US treasury holdings to buy goods and services worth \$1.3 trillion from the US. Though it was widely expected and even announced by US President Donald Trump that the deal would get the stamp of approval by the end of March, this did not happen and there was a lull in the negotiations.

From the tweets of Mr Trump at the conclusion of the G20 meet in Tokyo last week, it was evident that the US-China trade deal would go through shortly. It was apparent that Mr Trump’s meeting with President Xi Jinping of China went “far better than expected”, when the US president said talks were back and new tariffs would be put on hold until the talks were over. In fact, Mr Trump was threatening to impose fresh tariffs on smart phones, toys, footwear and fish.

Mr Trump is confident that Beijing will agree to a deal as the tariffs imposed by him are driving business out from China. In an interview to CNBC last month Mr Trump had said: “Companies are getting decimated in China and have started moving out of China and some are returning to the United States”.

Mr Trump’s policy of high tariffs has made several consumer items manufactured in China less attractive to US buyers, such as baseball caps, luggage, handbags and bikes,

washing machines, dishwashers and their spares. Cap America, a Missouri-based firm that imports baseball caps from China and embroiders them for use in the US, has started looking for a supplier from Bangladesh, though this supplier may not be able to supply more than 20 per cent of Cap America’s requirements.

An interesting aspect of this ongoing tussle between China and the United States over almost one year has been brought out in an analysis on July 3 by Katie Lobosco of CNN Business that shows there are four clear winners in this trade war — Vietnam, Taiwan, Bangladesh, and South Korea. As the trade talks between China and the US have remained inconclusive, US imports from China have registered a 12 per cent decline during the first five months of this year, compared with the corresponding period of last year.

At the same time, imports by the US from Vietnam went up by 36 per cent, while imports from Taiwan rose

by 23 per cent, those from Bangladesh were up by 14 per cent and those from South Korea increased by 12 per cent. While Taiwan and South Korea are more focused on high-tech items such as semi-conductors, Bangladesh and Vietnam (which offer competitive wages) have

focused on the export of apparel and footwear.

It is painful to see that India, one of the large economies in Asia, figures nowhere on this list. This omission is quite glaring. While much smaller economies such as Bangladesh and Vietnam have been smart enough to penetrate the US market, the Federation of Indian Exporters Organisations, the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, and Confederation of Indian Industry all owe an explanation for this lapse on the part of Indian exporters. Prime Minister Narendra Modi should take a serious view of this phenomenon and have the matter studied by the ministry of commerce. Indian exporters have missed a great opportunity to enter the US market.

The writer, a retired IAS officer, was Member, State Planning Commission and Additional Chief Secretary, Government of Tamil Nadu

▶ OTHER VIEWS

India threatened by growing mountain of plastic garbage

Recycling is integral to addressing problems posed by packaging material

The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) has put 52 producers, brand owners and importers, including big online retailers such as Amazon and Flipkart, and companies such as Patanjali Ayurved and Britannia, on notice, for failing to take responsibility for their plastic waste. These and other entities with a large plastic footprint need to respond with alacrity. Mountains of garbage with a heavy plastic load have been growing in suburban landfills, out of sight of city dwellers. Without determined steps, the crisis is certain to worsen. The two prongs of the solution are packaging innovation that reduces its use by using alternatives, and upscaling waste segregation, collection and transmission.

Recovering materials from garbage should be a high priority, considering that India is the third highest consumer of materials after China and the US; the Economic Survey 2019 estimates that India’s demand for total material will double by 2030 at current rates of growth. Plastics may be less expensive than other inputs in manufacturing, but recycling them into new products extends their life and provides a substitute for virgin material. Keeping them out of the environment reduces clean-up and pollution costs. Recyclable waste is rendered



useless when it gets mixed with other articles. Online retailers have not felt compelled to take back the thousands of polybags, plastic envelopes and air pillows used to cushion articles inside cardboard boxes. These companies can form waste cooperatives in India, employing informal waste-pickers. Making municipal and pollution control authorities accountable is also equally important.

The Congress is rudderless

It badly needs strong leadership

Rahul Gandhi made an impassioned speech in the Lok Sabha on Thursday, contrasting the plight of indebted farmers with pampered businessmen who are regularly offered lifelines and write-offs. Parliamentary performance — interventions, speeches and sloganeering — is important, but more important is the organisational integrity of a party within and outside legislative bodies. In post-independent India, there has not been a worse phase for the Congress, which now desperately needs strong leadership to steer it in the choppy waters of electoral and structural turbulence.

The split in the Congress legislature party of the Goa unit is immensely significant. The Leader of the Opposition

Wage code is well-meant

But it may have unintended outcomes

Last week, the Union cabinet approved the revised version of the Code on the Wages Bill. The bill envisages a national minimum wage, linked to factors such as skill level and geographical region. This national wage would effectively serve as a floor wage, with states having the option of setting higher wages. Minimum wage legislation forms a vital component of the architecture for social protection.

Having said that, the government must carefully think through the consequences of this move for the very constituency it seeks to address. There is concern that if wages are pushed up, without being linked to productivity, companies will respond by hiring fewer workers. In a country

where preference for capital-intensive production is well documented, despite the abundance of labour, a high minimum wage may further skew the capital-labour ratio. By pushing up costs, a high minimum wage could erode competitiveness, making certain segments economically unfeasible. The duality of the labour market, characterised by the presence of a large informal sector — 93 per cent workers are in the informal economy according to the latest Economic Survey — suggests that enforcement is likely to be problematic. Lowering the costs associated with formalisation, creating more flexible labour laws, might be a more prudent approach.