

BJP's Telangana challenge

Just as the Congress party is looking for a leader for its Delhi unit, a similar hunt is on in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for a head for its Telangana unit. The BJP is keen on capturing political power in Telangana before the next elections and sees a big opportunity with the shrinking base of Congress and the beginning of anti-incumbency sentiment that is spreading against the ruling Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS).

The BJP won four Lok Sabha seats this May and an increase in the percentage of votes polled from 7 per cent to 19 per cent in five months. Secunderabad MP G Kishan Reddy has been made a minister of state for Home with the party's growth in mind.

The present state unit president, Dr K Lakshman, 63, is a senior OBC leader in the party and is respected by the cadre. But he himself lost from the Musheerabad Assembly seat in the December elections. He was also unable to get leaders from other parties to join the BJP.

In the circumstances, Muralidhar Rao who began life as an ABVP leader in Osmania University in the 1980s and later the Swadeshi Jagran Manch is being considered for elevation. Rao is a Velama (like Chief Minister K Chandrashekar Rao), and tried several times to contest for Parliament from Telangana but he could not be accommodated, largely because Ch Vidyasagar Rao (also a Velama) blocked those efforts. But Rao has since been despatched as Maharashtra governor.

Newly elected Nizamabad MP Arvind Dharmapuri has demanded publicly that Muralidhar Rao be made party president. Watch this space.

**OPINION**

P CHIDAMBARAM

Don't dismember J&K, don't do that cardinal sin

Our foremost duty is to protect the rights of the states, and by protecting the rights of the states, protect the rights of the people of those states. Day after day, we fail to protect the rights of states. We have passed numerous Bills which are on the Concurrent List. There has been no consultation with any state, yet we pass those Bills completely oblivious of the rights of the states. I wrote that we are reducing states to municipal administrations. Today, we have gone a step further. You are not even reducing states to municipal administrations; you will make states your vassal. You will reduce states to colonies, and you think you are doing something which is constitutional.

Sir, be that as it may, what have you done today? You are passing an order under Article 370, by which you are repealing the earlier Application Order and making a new Application Order. Ostensibly, the purpose is to amend Article 370, sub-Article (d), and substitute the words, "Legislative Assembly" for the words "Constituent Assembly". Well, I am sure some wise men in the law ministry may have told you that it is possible. I have no quarrel with anyone's wisdom. I could be wrong and they could be right, but I think you have forgotten that you cannot modify Article 370 by an order under Article 370. Article 370 enables you to modify such other provisions in the Constitution. It is beyond my comprehension how Article 370 order can be used to modify Article 370. I leave it there.

You are doing another thing. You are passing two resolutions today, hoping that you will pass. I am sure you will pass them. Under the first resolution, Article 370 itself will cease to exist. I know this is your manifesto promise. By this resolution, you think that you are repealing Article 370, but in repealing Article 370, you are unleashing the forces which you cannot control.

I have dealt with the fate of Jammu and Kashmir. Yes, there are a number of young men in Jammu and Kashmir, who have taken to violence, who preach secession and who want to split Jammu and Kashmir from the Union of India. No one condones their action, no one supports their action. The Congress party and every other party is implacably opposed to those young men. While, there are thousands of other young men, for reasons which they think are good, pelted stones, thousands of other young men for reasons which they think are good, called *hartals*. I have interacted with them. I led a delegation of Parliament along with Arun Jaitley. When we first visited Jammu and Kashmir, as home minister, they called a *hartal*. The whole state was shut down.

But, when I led a Parliamentary delegation, along with Jaitley and many other distinguished Members of Parliament, the whole state turned out to receive us. Thousands and thousands of people came and represented to us. It was an eye opener for all of us. Not all citizens in Jammu and Kashmir want; in fact, an overwhelming majority in Jammu and Kashmir, do not want secession; do not want to leave the Union of India. You may disagree with me, but, I believe that they want more autonomy. Now, what are you doing by repealing Article 370? I fear, I genuinely fear home minister, that you are pushing thousands and thousands of young men from this column to join the other column of a few hundreds. I sincerely hope that it will not happen. But, if it happens, you will rue this day when you repeal Article 370.

The second thing that you are doing is you are dismembering a state. You think that you are doing it to Jammu and Kashmir. But, what you are doing to Jammu and Kashmir, using these provisions, misinterpreting these provisions, in fact, I could go on to say, by mischievously interpreting these provisions, can be done to any other state. Please tell me, why the mechanism that you have devised to dismember Jammu and Kashmir will not apply to any other state? Please convince us that Derek O'Brien and I are wrong. All you have to do is to dismiss an elected government, dissolve the state legislature, promulgate President's Rule, declare Parliament to be the state legislature for the time being and divide the state.

I told my friend from Odisha, what stops our future government from carving out a Union Territory for the KBK districts? What stops our future government from creating a Union Territory or a new state for North Bengal? What stops our future government from dividing Tamil Nadu? My friends from AIADMK are here. They do not realise what they are doing. The same provisions, the same method, the same resolutions can be applied to any state. But, I think, in doing it for Jammu and Kashmir, you have made a fatal legal error. I won't tell what the legal error is now. You will discover it in due course but my greater concern is, what you are doing today sends a very, very wrong signal to all the states of this country.

Sir, all I can do is appeal, appeal to the Home Minister, even at this late stage, stop, pause, reflect on what you are doing. If you are determined to repeal Article 370, I can do nothing about it. But the other thing that you are doing, dismembering Jammu and Kashmir, for heaven's sake, in the name of the people of India, I appeal to you, don't do that. Don't dismember that state. It is one state. It came to us as one state. I do not want to recall history or those tall personalities who brought Jammu and Kashmir to accede to India. That is history. That is the historical document. It is as important as the Constitution of India but if you wish to ignore history, if you wish to ignore the pact made with Maharaja Hari Singh, if you wish to ignore what Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was able to achieve in those difficult days, it is your privilege; do what you like but what you are doing is wrong.

Repealing Article 35A is wrong. Amending the Constitution invoking Article 370 is wrong. Doing away with Article 370 is wrong. Do all these wrongs; do all these wrongs; I am willing to, oh my, I am willing to tolerate all those wrongs but for heaven's sake, don't dismember Jammu and Kashmir, don't do that cardinal sin, don't do that monumental blunder.

Edited excerpts from the speech of Rajya Sabha MP from Congress, P Chidambaram, on the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganization Bill, 2019 and the Jammu & Kashmir Reservation (Second Amendment) Bill, 2019, July 5

DID THEY REALLY SAY THAT?

"I am very glad that a lot of people referred to Ladakh, Leh and Kargil in their speeches but I want to know that do they really know what Ladakh is? In the last seven decades, Ladakh was not embraced, it was thrown in one corner and there were statements in this House that it was that land where not one speck of grass grows"

Jamyang Tsering Namgyal, MP Ladakh, on revoking Jammu and Kashmir's special status, August 5



ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

Radha Kumar was one of the three interlocutors appointed by the United Progressive Alliance-2 government in 2010 to interact with various sections of Kashmiri society and prepare a report incorporating those views. In an interview to Sai Manish, Kumar expresses anguish on the abrogation of Article 370 and the manner in which the Modi government executed a far reaching Constitutional change without the consent of the very people whose lives it was supposed to affect the most. Edited excerpts:

'Past governments eroded Article 370'

As an interlocutor, one of the options you gave was to abrogate Article 370. Are you satisfied with the way it has been achieved?

I am ashamed of this Parliament. For such a far reaching Constitutional change, there wasn't even a proper debate. No Parliamentarian barring a few raised substantive Constitutional and legal issues in either of the houses. It is shameful that a legislative body went about it in the way it did. I haven't been more depressed about anything more than this in my life. The President's order was bad in law.

How on earth can you replace a legislative assembly of elected representatives with the governor? The governor doesn't represent the people of the state but the government of India. Article 370 clearly states that any move to abrogate it must be done on recommendation of the Constituent Assembly. Wasn't it fine to interpret constituent assembly as the legislative assembly to ensure that people's voices are heard while amending the Constitution?

The way in which this was pushed crushed federalism in India. The President of India has to protect the Constitution. Instead he has blatantly violated it.

Was the time ripe for the abrogation of Article 370?

We had said in our report that Article 370 was a temporary provision. It would be fair to say that the Congress and other governments in the past eroded Article 370. We have also seen that at every point it has been eroded, there has been more turmoil and alienation among people in Kashmir. So the argument that Article 370 is the problem is completely wrong. The problem all along has been the blatant undermining and erosion of it. The founding fathers of the Constitution put it as a transient provision in the hope that one day Kashmir will be just like any other state in India. But for Kashmir to be like any other state was also to be determined by the will of its people. However, the government has decided to go

A change agent for transgenders

A transgender student has broken his silence to question taboos and create communities for them to interact, share and earn their livelihood, writes Sneha Bhattacharjee

Born in Malda, West Bengal, Koushik Hore's interest lay in everything feminine. Like every family that would want to keep such traits hidden, Hore's family too grew silent and admitted him to an all-boys school. But, Hore failed to be a boy. Like every other transgender struggling with gender identity, he too was subjected to bullying and became a recluse. What followed was typical — self-doubt, poor academic records and irregularity in school.

That's when he got in touch with a youth development organisation, Prantakatha, in West Bengal. "They were extremely gender friendly and assuring," recalls Hore. It was there he found many like him suffering in silence, facing discrimination and exclusion in all spheres of life. "With the support from Prantakatha, I started forming a space that could give voices to people like me who feel caged by homophobic silence," he says adding "I simply decided to question the silence".

That's how QueerIUs or Queer Identity and Us was born in 2015. It was a youth-led initiative to create dialogue on sexuality, gender, sexual health among queer and non-queer youth. Hore was amazed at the response he got and it made him realise how his silence could create some noise and become a strong voice. "We created queer friendly spaces in colleges and established a Bengal network of queer people mostly led by transgender women across 11 districts of Bengal in the name of Bengal Queer Collective," Hore adds.

Hore recalls how while working under unManifesto campaign supported by the UNFPA in 2016, the LGBTQ community was asked

about their demands. "One of the most significant demands was to create employment opportunities for transgender people," he says. "They are deprived of the right to education, employment and decent livelihood. They are even deprived of proper share of their paternal property because of their distinct gender identity forcing them to resort to begging or risky sex trade," he adds.

Hore realised there was a need to make the transgender community independent. With the help of communities like Prantakatha, Pravah and Youth Collective, Hore started Sathrangi, a trans-feminine Indian livelihood venture, in 2016. It was a livelihood programme for transgender in West Bengal in collaboration with four organisations, Association of Transgenders and Hijras in Bengal (ATHB), Gour Banglar Samghati Samity (GBSS), Amity Trust and Prantakatha who had been working on transgender rights in West Bengal.

It was during one such community-led initiative that he met the founder of Indian School of Development and Management (ISDM), who encouraged Hore to join ISDM's first batch of Post-Graduate programme in Development Leadership, in 2017-18. Hore considers the years at ISDM as being a gamechanger in his life. It not only provided him with the approach to look at life differently, but also honed his skills of how he needed to learn and unlearn, and develop his organisation in the development sector. "I think living life with dignity is an important factor for any human, which I was searching for long. ISDM gave me that

CHECKLIST EXIT ROUTE: MORE OPPOSITION MPs JOIN THE BJP

■ **Bhubaneswar Kalita:** The chief whip of the Congress — the man senior enough to be trusted by the party with issuing and enforcing party whips — Kalita quit the party earlier this week, ostensibly because of disagreements on Article 370. He is a Rajya Sabha member from Assam and there is no chance of his being re-elected from the state from the Congress when his term comes to an end in April next year. He contested the recently concluded Lok Sabha elections from Mangaldai constituency and was defeated roundly by the BJP's Dilip Saikia.

■ **Sanjay Seth:** On a flight from Delhi to Lucknow sometime in late 2018, Seth, a Samajwadi Party leader, who was sitting next to arch rival Satish Chandra Mishra of the Bahujan Samaj Party in the aircraft, mooted a possible pooling of resources between the BSP and SP to prevent division of votes. After extended negotiations, Mayawati

and Akhilesh Yadav reached an agreement on seat sharing. Despite their efforts, the parties posted a disastrous election result. Seth has opted to resign from the Rajya Sabha and his party, and is expected to join the BJP.

■ **Sanjay Singh:** The 'raja' of Amethi and a Rajya Sabha MP from the Congress has also quit the party and joined the BJP. He was elected from Assam and his term will end in April next year.

■ **Neeraj Shekhar:** Another SP MP, his term will end in November next year. There is no chance of being re-elected from Uttar Pradesh on an SP ticket.

■ **Surendra Singh Nagar:** Although his term doesn't end till 2022, Nagar, who was elected from the SP, has opted to retire. He quit the BSP in 2014 and joined the SP and was given a Rajya Sabha nomination. He lost to the BJP from the Gautambuddh Nagar (Noida) constituency in 2019. And now, he has joined the BJP.

about this in a very specious manner. The reliability and trustworthiness of the Indian state has been lost.

Who benefitted the most from Article 370 all these years?

Nobody. It was barely followed. Overtime, various elements like the Supreme Court's jurisdiction and the Election Commission of India's powers were extended to Kashmir. These were not originally envisaged in Article 370. There is no merit in the argument that Article 370 benefitted only two or three families in Kashmir. What has Article 370 got to do with two political families ruling the state over all these years? Have all the corrupt and venal politicians benefitted from the Constitution of India? It is a ridiculous argument to make.

What repercussions do you see in the coming days and the future?

From whatever little information is coming through from the valley, I believe that Kashmiris are in a state of shock and despair. It will lead to increased rage, alienation and very likely more people taking to the gun in Kashmir. One thing I am certain of is that Pakistan will try to multiply infiltration and try to flood the valley with guns. Experience over the last 70 years shows that whenever Pakistan is given the opportunity to foment armed violence in Kashmir, it never lets go off it. These series of far reaching Constitutional changes have not just been done without consultation; it has been executed by locking up the people of Kashmir whose voices should have been heard in this process.

How different are younger generation of Kashmiris in their attitude towards Article 370 than the middle aged and elder ones?

What I saw in my interactions across age groups in Kashmir was that the elder generation — like the leaders who headed the Hurriyat — were much more eager to negotiate things. They wanted solutions and their attitude had been suitably modified to take into account Indian concerns to arrive at solution for Kashmir.

During the 1990s there was a burning passionate belief among many of the rebels in democracy. They in many ways were fighting for democracy. I do not see this in the current generation of young Kashmiris. Many of them believed that democracy was a complete sham. They thought they would fight either for religion or their fight would be fuelled by plain hatred towards the central government's policies. The younger generation had no clear idea of what they wanted; but clearly knew what they did not want. They had no idea of their future. When you are born into blood and war, how can you envisage a rosy future for yourself. The rebels of 1990s had seen a better world before the turmoil began. The rebels of 2010 had seen nothing in their lives except conflict. Now you have demoted Kashmir to a Union Territory. Only the will of the union government will run large in Kashmir from now. You have told them that governance will be done

through panchayats. This is what the British did. Why is the government repeating a colonial pattern in a state of India?

There are concerns of a demographic change that will alter the Muslim character of Kashmir?

Kashmiris have for centuries resented outside settlers and have been protective of their land. Their history has been of one conquest after another. Communal elements in the valley and people like Syed Ali Shah Geelani have forever been taking about how the Indian government wants to change the valley demographically. This is absolute nonsense. There has been no substantive demographic change in the valley as far as reduction in the Muslim population is concerned. If there have been any changes in religious composition, it has been restricted to the Jammu region. We have seen such arguments being raised across India. Communal bigots have said that Muslims have more children than Hindus so they would change India's Hindu majority character. But over these many years the higher birth rate among Muslims hasn't made a significant difference. Hindus still form an overwhelming majority of India.

But concerns of Muslim population being diluted in Kashmir also stems from the freedom for anyone in India to now buy land in the valley.

Yes. When left to run its normal course, demographic changes happen very slowly. Now the argument being made is that people from all over India will now flood Kashmir to buy land and property. There are no land laws in Jammu & Kashmir to allow for that. So now the governor will make those laws by an executive fiat. I don't think this will result in significant reduction in number of Muslims. But it will lead to changes in other significant ways. Who will buy land or property in Kashmir? Probably people who want summer houses. Why would people from the rest of India want to go and settle in Kashmir when the state is engulfed in violence and uncertainty. It is obvious that industry and businesses won't go there. So who is left? Maybe some ideologically motivated people from the Rashtriya Swyamasevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will go and settle there.

But this Israeli type settler approach won't lead to millions of people moving into the valley. If we exclude the settler possibility, then the only plausible investment option will be Indians buying summer houses from the locals. With them not being able to live there, it would result in a large number of empty properties across Kashmir. When this happens, the sense of community that prevails in Kashmir will be lost. All of us living in cities live as disparate entities — we live in our own colonies not knowing our neighbours. When this summer house boom happens, the local community will become weaker and be transformed to a service community.



RADHA KUMAR

Author & Academician



"Sapno ki Udaan", a learning centre now supported by the UNICEF, is run by trans people and has already helped 45 kids and adolescents from the manual scavenging community

This realisation further helped me in developing my integrity towards creating safe, inclusive space where all can live without being judged. It moulded my approach in many ways and gave me the confidence to become a confident change agent. My suggestion for a gender neutral toilet in ISDM was not only accepted but also appreciated and implemented," Hore adds.

In the last four years, Hore has co-initiated several activities that aim to create positive impact in the sphere of basic human rights of transgenders. In 2017, he co-initiated an informal learning and care giving centre called "Sapno ki Udaan" that is now supported by the UNICEF. The centre is run by transgenders and has helped 45 kids and adolescents from the manual

scavenging community. In 2018, along with Prantakatha and ATHB, Hore created a LGBTQ network called "South Asian Young Queer Activists Network/SAYAN" within the South Asian countries — Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka. This initiative was supported by the US Consulate General, Kolkata. The network has been able to conduct three successful conferences till now and a WhatsApp group keeps them connected where they discuss their way forward. In 2019 saw Sathrangi set up a boutique shop in Malda in collaboration with GBSS. The shop is run by three transwomen.

In his bid to break silence, Hore with his initiatives has not only given a voice to the queer community, but also made them independent.

Human-animal hybrids

The potential payoff for such research is enormous

Japan has just cleared a controversial experiment, which could have major consequences for the future of genetics research. Hiromitsu Nakauchi of the University of Tokyo and Stanford University will be allowed to insert human stem cells into a mouse embryo and allow the resulting hybrid embryo to develop till term. While such experiments have been conducted before, there is normally a time limit of 14 days before the embryo is destroyed. Indeed, many nations have a blanket ban on such experiments.

It is hoped that this experiment will result in insights that allow for entirely new medical transplant techniques. Variations on this

theme, such as the insertion of animal stem cells into human embryos, could also yield very positive outcomes. But this experiment also opens a Pandora's Box in terms of other, potentially nightmarish possibilities.

Pluripotent stem cells can grow into many types of organs. One possible outcome of such experiments could be the development of technologies where human organs are grown in donor animals. Current transplant procedures can be carried out only by the donation of organs from somebody who is genetically compatible with the recipient. There are high rejection rates and immuno suppression drugs that prevent rejection have undesirable side effects.

However, it may be eventually possible to insert the recipient's own stem cells into a pig embryo (or sheep) and, thus, grow a replacement organ that is completely compatible. This particular experiment will start with trying to grow human pancreas cells in rodents and, if that works, attempting the same procedure in pigs. The mouse embryo has been treated to remove information about rodent pancreas cells so there should not be a genetic barrier to growing human pancreas cells.

Growing a human pancreas or liver, or even a new heart, in a surrogate animal could be a game changer. There are over a million people waiting for liver and pancreas transplants. Many lives could be saved if such a process could be developed and standardised.

The inverse process, which is not on the cards, would be even more of a conceptual and ethical reach. Various animals have unusual

genetics, which make them resistant or immune to various diseases. Sharks, for example, are immune to cancer. Some animals have unusual abilities — salamanders can regrow lost limbs. Elephants regrow entire sets of teeth through their lives. If it is possible to isolate the responsible genes and insert these, it could alter the human race.

While Nakauchi and his team intend to proceed with caution, there are obvious ethical concerns. If human DNA proliferates in an animal embryo, the resulting creature would be a new hybrid species. This could be of really special concern if the brain is affected.

The researchers say they would set a cut-off point in terms of proliferation, destroying the hybrid if the proportion of human cells in the brain exceeds 30 per cent. In practice, no experiment had ever resulted in much more than one in 100,000 cells being of human origin. But bringing an embryo to term is new

territory. The hybrid will be monitored for two years before the next experiment, which could involve pigs or sheep.

The potential payoff for such research is obviously enormous. But the risks are also high. Japan is a responsible nation, which has pondered the pros and cons of genetic engineering for years before giving the go ahead. However, this could set a precedent where less responsible governments or private researchers decide to accelerate research processes, throwing caution to the wind.

There is little practical chance of something going seriously wrong at this stage. There are very few labs with the requisite facilities and, perhaps, even fewer scientists with the necessary skills to work in this field. But as a body of work builds up, more research in this domain is inevitable. One can only hope researchers will heed the maxim "with great power comes great responsibility".

Crafting a fiscally neutral stimulus

With a slew of industries in the grip of a prolonged slump, a package of measures that will boost demand without burdening the exchequer is imperative

AJAY SHANKAR

The Indian economy is experiencing a slowdown. Demand is tepid. Market sentiment is adverse. A normal fiscal stimulus to create demand is ruled out due to the government's commitment to keep the deficit low. The Reserve Bank of India has cut lending rates to stimulate growth. One view would be to wait and hope for the downturn to end as lower lending rates and increased liquidity begin to have an impact. The other would be to also take some unconventional steps that have no — or at best marginal — fiscal implications to stimulate demand.

The auto sector is in distress and is asking for help. One measure which is required for reducing air pollution is to provide incentives for scrapping old commercial vehicles. BS VI fuel would not materially reduce air pollution from old commercial vehicles, such as trucks, buses, tempos and three-wheelers. So, these need to go off the roads if air quality is to get better. Original equipment manufacturers could be mandated to put in place state-of-the-art scrapping yards. They should absorb the cost of disposal. The "polluter pays" principle could be legitimately extended to mean that the manufacturer pays for the final disposal of the product after its useful life is over. This would lay the foundation for moving towards a sustainable circular economy.

An attractive rebate, above the market price, for trading old commercial vehicles for new ones would have a major impact on air pollution. Germany ran a very successful similar "cash for clunkers" programme to mitigate the slowdown in their auto industry following the global financial crisis in 2008. The cash rebate could come from the additional GST revenue flowing from the higher production and sales of these vehicles due to the trade-in scheme. The impact on the fiscal deficit would at best be marginal. In addition, an announcement that after three years these vehicles will not be allowed to run, but will have to be scrapped, would be enough to ensure full replacement of the old fleet. This would be a fairly substantial stimulus for the auto sector. The impact on air pollution would also be significant. In the smaller North Indian cities where highly polluting tempos are the only means of public transport, the improvement in air quality would be immediate.

There are a large number of stressed assets and bad loans arising from incomplete power and housing projects. The credit or financial institutions can take control from promoters by converting debt into equity. Thereafter, their speedy completion can be fully financed without any fear of aspersions. The resumption of work in these thermal power plants and housing projects, and their early completion, would provide another large stimulus to the economy. This would not need any budgetary outlay. The creditor public sector financial institutions would find, after completion of these projects, that the resulting write-offs would be far lower than that entailed by the National Company Law Tribunal route of bankruptcy proceedings.

Housing and related infrastructure has a large multiplier effect in generating demand for upstream industries such as cement, steel and electrical equipment. Since the economic reforms, the state housing boards and urban development authorities have gradually vacated the housing construction space in favour of private developers. These agencies could take up affordable housing projects of the kind that they used to in the past. Provision of land for such institutions by state governments and public institutions at affordable (not market) rates would be



necessary. This would also be a lot easier, as the land is not going to private developers.

A large housing programme for middle and lower income groups would not need any budgetary support. Institutional finance should be able to support the programme, where the normal practice has been for customers to make payments in instalments linked to progress in execution. It would, however, need considerable administrative effort to provide land at below market rates for projects in cities across the country.

If there are good projects in the infrastructure space, bidding some of them out for construction and maintenance on an annuity basis would spur economic activity

In the infrastructure space, if there are good projects, having land and clearances, bidding some of them out for construction and maintenance on an annuity basis would also boost economic activity. The payment liability for these projects would start after they are completed. A significant part of railway modernisation could be undertaken through annuity projects. The road sector was able to regain momentum after it took up the hybrid annuity model of execution.

The energy sector also offers possibilities. The speed of the switchover to electric mobility would depend on the rapidity with which the public charging infrastructure for electric vehicles, from two-

wheelers to three-wheelers, cars and buses, is rolled out. The lower GST rates now introduced would make a real difference only after the charging infrastructure is in place. The oil companies are cash-rich and can be directed to create the infrastructure. Electricity distribution companies can also be directed to do so, with the investment being accepted for tariff determination by the regulatory commissions. Bringing in the distribution companies is required for creating charging stations for personal cars and two-wheelers in parking places in residential areas.

The economics is now clearly in favour of electric vehicles and they will take over market share rapidly from conventional vehicles once charging facilities are provided. Government directives about phasing out conventional vehicles will not be needed. Energy Efficiency Services Limited could also attempt to replicate its success story with LEDs and try to replace all the energy-inefficient pumps presently in use with efficient ones through bulk procurement for urban water supply undertakings, industrial clusters and farmers in partnership with distribution companies. Bulk procurement would result in lower prices. Some concessional financing could also be provided.

A stimulus to generate demand for domestic goods and services is imperative to reverse the slowdown. This can be done without compromising on fiscal rectitude.

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Road map for wider city gas distribution

SURESH P MANGLANI

India witnessed a paradigm shift in the city gas distribution (CGD) sector in 2018-19. Proactive efforts by the Petroleum and Natural Gas Regulatory Board (PNGRB) over the ninth and tenth bidding rounds are expected to take nationwide CGD coverage to a new high. The development presents an opportunity to give more than seven out of 10 Indians living in 400 districts across 27 states and Union Territories seamless access to cleaner fuel.

Under these rounds, 21 entities committed to invest in the new CGD network. With this, India will now see fast track development of compressed natural gas (CNG) and piped natural gas (PNG) infrastructure.

Currently, PNG connections reach 5.1 million homes, and there are 1760 CNG stations across more than 100 districts. We are now looking at a 10-fold rise, with 50 million new PNG connections and 10,000 new CNG stations. The opportunity also opens the door to users of public transport, restaurants, hotels, small eateries, temples, crematoriums and micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs).

The next eight years will see a massive jump in PNG and CNG infrastructure, with the laying of over 20,000 km of steel pipelines and 100,000 km of polyethylene pipelines, attracting investments of \$15-20 billion.

Enhanced mobility of CNG vehicles has been a major impediment to its adoption by owners of private vehicles. The expanded CNG network will offer customers the option of choosing a CNG station convenient to them, on the lines of other retail products and services.

The scale of the above numbers will make India a key destination for all major global suppliers of compressors, dispensers, meters, fittings and technology solutions. Domestic suppliers and construction contractors have started adding new capacities to reap the full benefit of the huge upside in infrastructure development.

India will reap substantial social and economic benefits through development of green fuel corridors, generation of millions of jobs and a major thrust to MSMEs, not to mention the enormous impact on the environment by cutting air pollution.

It also promises to give a significant push to start-ups and homegrown government initiatives such as Skill India and Make in India. This will also be an integral component of India's plan to increase the share of natural gas to 15 per cent of its energy mix.

The key issue is whether we are prepared to deliver these big numbers. While the answer is yes, we need to critically review the cumbersome and time-consuming processes and policies in place since the pre-PNGRB era, and be open to bring in reforms.

The scale of the PNG and CNG network will make India a key destination for all major global suppliers of compressors, dispensers, meters and technology solutions

It is essential that the government's philosophy of improving ease of doing business percolates down to the implementation of key projects such as CGD network expansion. Ease of doing business must be reflected in approval processes. Conventional systems involving multiple authorities should make way for a fast-track, milestone-based professional certification process.

While PNGRB has granted authorisation, infrastructure development has to take place under the authority of state governments and various central governmental authorities. Besides, the PNGRB and the petroleum ministry, state governments, gas transportation companies, oil marketing companies (OMCs) supporting co-location of CNG stations in petrol pumps, pollution control boards, Petroleum and Explosives Safety Organisation (PESO), National Highways Authority of India (NHAI), Indian Railways (IR) and public works departments (PWDs) are key stakeholders playing important roles in the development of CGD networks. Currently, CGD entities have to approach each of the stakeholders and clear their permission processes.

One way to resolve such impediments is to bring all key stakeholders on a single platform by constituting a CGD Development Council (CDC). The CDC may include representatives of the ministry of petroleum and natural gas, ministry of finance, state governments, NHAI, IR, the PNGRB, PESO, OMCs and other stakeholders.

The key plan of action for the CDC should be to formulate a single uniform policy for the whole country. The overarching goal is to fast-track CGD development through single-window clearance, formulation of policies to incentivise natural gas adoption (by developing freight corridors), rationalisation of various government charges, a grievance redress mechanism, and inter-stakeholder issues.

The council would be a standing forum for at least the next three years, meeting every quarter. It will be an empowered body and should be in a position to take binding decisions. It will have the authority to call any agency, CGD company or gas transmission company, or seek the help of professional agencies.

Coherence and strong government will drive the initiative. The central government can urge the state governments to see the larger benefits of developing PNG and CNG infrastructure in states.

CDC will be a forum where all stakeholders can deliberate and take informed decisions. CGD companies will have to put their full resources solely into achieving committed PNG and CNG numbers. This will also increase the share of natural gas in the energy basket, as committed by India at international forums.

The writer is CEO, Adani Gas Ltd

OTHER VIEWS

Congress disarray in face of govt move on J&K worrying

It is bad news for a democracy that prides itself on its checks and balances

Even though scrapping the special status of Kashmir has long been an important feature of the BJP's core ideological agenda, the Narendra Modi government took everyone by surprise with its move to render Article 370 ineffective and bifurcate J&K into two Union Territories. But none more so than the Opposition, especially the Congress. And then it has spoken in different voices, with many of its prominent younger leaders like Jyotiraditya Scindia, Deepender Hooda and Milind Deora publicly backing the government, saying that the revocation of Article 370 is the national interest, even as seniors like Ghulam Nabi Azad accuse those who support it of being ignorant of history.

Rahul Gandhi had stepped down as president after the party's embarrassing showing in the Lok Sabha elections, and the aftermath of his decision has exposed a reality hidden in plain sight: Remove the Gandhi at the helm, and you have a party that has forsaken all structures and processes, one that has no mechanisms of survival and movement left. With the Congress floundering visibly, therefore, the smaller regional parties are evidently making their own calculations about the viability of opposing the BJP, and many are joining the band-



wagon. The inability of the Opposition to hold its ground is bad news for a democracy that prides itself for its argumentative spirit, and its checks and balances, especially at a time when they will be needed to handle the fallout of the Centre's move in Kashmir.

The Indian Express, August 9

Back to square one

Ties with India: Pak must reconsider

Pakistan's decision to expel India's High Commissioner, snap trade relations and observe August 15 as a black day in supposed solidarity with the people of Jammu & Kashmir is a serious setback for diplomatic relations. Sections of Indian civil society have legitimate concerns about the actions of the BJP Government in emptying out Article 370 and the continuing lockdown of the Valley, but this does not license Pakistan to interfere in what the MEA correctly described on Thursday as India's internal matter.

In the days to come, India can expect Pakistan to raise the Kashmir issue at the United Nations, mobilise the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and send envoys

to friendly capitals. India's economic clout has grown enormously in the last couple of decades, and given doubts in the Western world about Pakistan's overt and covert support to Islamist terror, New Delhi has the space to deal with Islamabad's efforts to "internationalise" the Kashmir issue. Downgrading diplomatic relations between troubled neighbours is never a good idea. Diplomacy is a mechanism to ensure that channels of communication remain open. While India and Pakistan have used back channels in recent years, the presence of seasoned diplomats in Delhi and Islamabad has always benefited the two countries.

The Hindu, August 9

Countering radicalisation

A humane approach may be effective

Radical measures need not be the only way of cleansing a radicalised mind. Patience, engagement, dialogue and — this cannot be emphasised enough — empathy often hold the key to the success of deradicalisation programmes operated by the keepers of the law. One such module run by the anti-terrorism squad in Maharashtra — reportedly the only such initiative in the country that is run by a state police force — seems to have met with considerable success. Perhaps that is because of the adoption of a humane, rather than draconian, approach. Data suggest that in three years, the programme has succeeded in reintegrating almost 114 men and six women who had been seduced by extremist ideolo-

gies. The suspect was subjected to patient counselling and hours of conversation. It is not uncommon for the Maharashtra police to seek the help of private counsellors to tackle the problem.

There is thus a strong case to argue that reforms in the policing system entail training and sensitisation of its personnel, especially in the lower rungs, to deal with the threat of radicalisation effectively. Maharashtra police's sensibility seems to have enthused several other states to follow in its footsteps. But there is only so much that the police can do in this respect. The spectre of radicalism cannot be excoriated as long as politics and society remain toxic.

The Telegraph, August 9