

## India's two poles



TICKER

MIHIR SHARMA

The BJP dominates the political sphere in much of India the way the Congress once did. It is also self evidently true that in many states where the Congress provided the principal opposition to a regional party, such as Bengal or Odisha, that role has now been taken over by the BJP. While six or seven years ago it was essentially a regional party of the north and west, it is now a truly national party.

But this springs from, and has implications for, the in-built structure of Indian politics. The simple fact is that this is a federal union, and its national politics is hard-wired to reflect that fact. In a country as organised as ours is, there are always two natural political forces in any state's politics: the centralising one and the federalising one. These have two different approaches to many policy questions, and to the broader questions of narrative that also have a role to play in politics.

For decades, the centralising pole in our politics was the Congress and its ideology — or, as the BJP would derisively say, its "idea of India". This was essentially a con-social, compromising central state, with hard edges at the margins but generally soft. Debates would be settled by a central authority in the party rather than through formal institutional structures. Within many states, the party would run through a coalition of two groups. First, elites who claimed to have a national consciousness — whether because they were products of British India, or because they were national-level capitalists, or occupied certain spots on the local caste system. And second, those who looked to the central power to protect them from rapacious ground level dominant castes. The classical form of this would be, of course, the Brahmin-Dalit-Muslim-ST coalition that the Congress is constantly trying to rebuild in parts of the north.

The opposition to this centralising tendency would be provided by the parties of those ground-level dominant castes, often small landowners, supported by local (as opposed to national and global) capital. These might variously be the Telugu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh, the Lohia-ite "socialists" in north India, or the BJP in Gujarat and some other states.

So what does it mean that the BJP today occupies the space of the Congress? It means that now, its own ideology of the nation has replaced the Congress' as the primary centralising pole in many states, and the BJP itself therefore is the national pole in most state politics. It has extended its politics by roping in those of the "backward classes" who were excluded from the gains won by dominant caste leaders — OBCs who resented Yadavs in UP and Bihar, for example. This allows it to form winning political coalitions that replicate those the Congress used to have, but without Muslims.

Logically, therefore, this means that in many states the opposition will continue to be provided by localising forces of one sort or another, backed as earlier by local capital. This can provide a counterweight to the strong support of national capital for the centralising pole, reminiscent of how big business used to swing into line behind the Congress.

This is visible in these elections, if you look for it. The Congress managed to put up a fight in Haryana when it began to behave like a local party, and allowed the Hoodas to create the local coalitions that they needed to reverse the BJP's gains (but not win). It is also why, in Maharashtra, the Congress is now very much the junior partner to Sharad Pawar's Nationalist Congress Party. And it is also why the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance is growing ever more uneasy. For a sons-of-the-soil party like the Sena to be allied to a centralising force is extremely difficult for their politics. When Aaditya Thackeray promises to defend Aarey, it is not just an amusing revelation of Sena powerlessness or a statement of its hypocrisy. It is an attempt to navigate the basic contradiction of their alliance: in regionalist politics, an infrastructure project backed by national ambitions should not ride rough-shod over local objections.

The implications going forward are evident. First, the BJP will try wherever possible to institutionalise the power of the centre, since it now represents the centralising pole. Thus Narendra Modi will argue for simultaneous elections and the Finance Commission will be told to de-prioritise states. Second, the Congress will only survive if it can transform into something more like the BJP used to be: a coalition of strong state leaders held together by shared ideology or personal loyalty. The Gandhis can continue to reign, but they certainly cannot rule any more. And, finally, if state leaders do not understand that they have to unite at the central level to win concessions, they will continue to be institutionally diminished in New India.

## Abhijit's Nobel and the challenges ahead

The fruition of Nobel's hope lies in the response of a caring government that can rise above politics and propaganda



WHERE MONEY TALKS

SUNANDA K DATTARAJ

The surge of pride at Abhijit Vinayak Banerjee's achievement is instinctive. But going beyond parochial loyalty, ignoring political carping, and without at all diminishing what the nine India-connected laureates, including six from Bengal, have accomplished, only two seem to me to have served the Nobel ideal of recognising and rewarding "those who conferred the greatest benefit on humankind". They are Ronald Ross, who established how malaria spreads, and Kailash Satyarthi, who tried to stop child exploitation.

But let me first repeat an anecdote about

another Nobel laureate even though the story hasn't made me any friends. Some 40 years ago, Doordarshan asked me to interview Mother (as she still was) Teresa to celebrate some now forgotten distinction. Never having met the good lady, I made an appointment and trotted down to her office the day before the scheduled interview. Mother Teresa advised me to see her work centres first, which I promised to do that afternoon. I then asked how she differed from other social welfare workers. She was aghast. "I am not a social welfare worker!" she exclaimed. "I serve the poor because our Lord said that is the only way to attain salvation." It was my turn to be astonished. "You mean the effects of your work don't matter and you do it only for your own salvation?" Mother Teresa repeated firmly, "Our Lord said to serve the poor is the only way to attain salvation."

I spent the afternoon at the Missionaries of Charity's centres. When I got back, there was a message from Doordarshan. The interview was off. Mother Teresa had telephoned the director to say she refused to be interviewed by me. She had chosen my colleague Desmond Doig who was then working on a book eulogising her work for a London publisher. Doordarshan acquiesced.

Perhaps all Nobel prize winners have their own highly individual perspectives to which lay outsiders can't easily relate. CV Raman's discovery that light changes wavelength and amplitude when it traverses a transparent material must be of momentous significance in physics. That would also apply to the "studies of the structure and function of the ribosome" for which the Indian-origin Venkatraman Ramakrishnan was honoured. Or Har Gobind Khorana's "interpretation of the genetic code and its function in protein synthesis". I could mention others whose undoubtedly path-breaking discoveries seem rather remote from the daily concerns of ordinary men and women.

Banerjee's work may be significantly different. He, his wife Esther Duflo and their colleague Michael Kremer share the prize for an "experimental approach to alleviating global poverty" by suggesting a way of evaluating economic programmes on which billions of dollars are spent annually. As with Amartya Sen's contributions to welfare economics, this might indicate a means of helping the poor. But not more. The help itself must come from governments. That also applies to Satyarthi's role in the "struggle against the suppression of children and young people and for the right of all children

to education". Pioneering research can benefit mankind only if followed up by well-planned, adequately financed and honestly implemented practical programmes.

Some Nobel prizes acknowledge service to humanity. Some pay tribute to individual excellence, as with Rabindranath Tagore or V S Naipaul. Some laureates show the way of helping people. They all merit applause but naturally awards that focus attention on problems that affect the human condition by singling out someone who has made a signal contribution to the solution are valued most. That's why I murmur a prayer of thanks every time I pass the marble plaque in Ross's honour on what is now Kolkata's Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose Road.

Sadly, the claim that malaria had been eradicated in India proved to be premature. The scourge returned with a vengeance and is now reportedly rising in our cities. Malaria will never disappear so long as we have high illiteracy, reservoirs of stagnant water, poor garbage collection and disposal, and insanitary habitations. But the awareness now exists and the challenge is taken seriously at a global level. Similarly, child exploitation cannot be divorced from poverty or the need for every family member to earn something. If there are no orphans in India because everyone is a child of Mother India, to quote Jawaharlal Nehru's lyrical prose, there is no denying she can be a cruel mother.

The fruition of Nobel's hope lies in the response of a caring government that can rise above politics and propaganda, not in the frenetic raptures of a public that worships fame for fame's sake.

LUNCH WITH BS ► GEETA DHARMARAJAN | EDUCATIONIST & EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, KATHA

## The sheer joy of teaching

Dharmarajan tells Geetanjali Krishna why she dislikes exams, how Katha was born, and what the primary task of educators really is

She's an educationist who dislikes exams. She's a translator who eschews literal translations. Ever the iconoclast, ever the dreamer, everything that Geeta Dharmarajan has accomplished in her prolific career has had but one simple goal — to bring joy into the classroom. The 71-year-old founder of Katha, the NGO that creates, in its own words, "Reader Leaders" radiates positive energy as she walks into Rooh, the modern Indian restaurant in Mehrauli, Delhi, dressed in her trademark handloom sari and a big black bindi. She has recently relocated to Chennai after 32 years in Delhi, which is why she has been hard to pin down. "I'm enjoying the change," she says as she settles down into a chair that faces the iconic Qutub Minar. "But it's nice to be back!" And just like that, we get into a free-wheeling discussion on literary translations, education and books — and how they can save the world.

"When I came to Delhi 1987, a sheltered young woman from a typical Tamil Brahmin family, I was shocked to find that kids in Delhi barely read any books, let alone those by Indian authors," she says. "On the flip side, there were hardly any books by Indian authors being published anyway." Around that time, a chance visit to UNICEF made her aware that at that time, 30 children died every day of diarrhoea. She immediately offered her services to UNICEF and *Tamasha*, a children's magazine that promoted health awareness through short stories and games, was born. "The magazine was a big success and the idea that books could affect positive behavioural change caught the attention of the government," she narrates. "They offered me five rooms in a Delhi slum to run a school and Katha was born."

Meanwhile, we have been presented with a drinks menu that resembles a puzzle better suited to a Katha school — with a series of concentric circles representing flavour groups and ingredients. Eventually, crisp mocktails arrive at the table as Dharmarajan talks about her vision of education. "There are very good schools available to the few who can afford the fees," she says. "My concern has always

been to ensure that quality education is accessible to even the children in my slum school who had so very little." Early on, she realised the importance of regarding every child as an individual with a story and a unique set of circumstances that enable or hinder her education — rather than as one of the many faceless students. For example, she says, when she discovered that at the time that students often dropped out to augment household incomes, Katha developed successful livelihood programmes for their mothers.

Today, Katha has 1,157 school partnerships across 17 states of India. "Our experience shows us that if we're able to make a child laugh or feel happy to come to school, more than half the battle is won," she says.

It's time to order the food. The appetisers at Rooh look so interesting that we decide to share a few and forgo the main course. The first, a crisp yoghurt *chaat* arrives on the table, shrouded in a nitrogen mist. Dharmarajan smiles in surprise when she tastes the icy concoction that manages to taste familiar and surprising at the same time.

Our conversation has moved on to the project for which she has perhaps received the most critical appreciation — Katha Prize Stories. Year after year, these volumes, sensitively translated from different Indian languages, gave readers what would turn out to often be their first taste of India's rich and varied regional literature. For Dharmarajan, translations allowed diverse Indian readers to access the country's rich multi-lingual literary tradition. "I'd grown up listening to Tamil stories, for example, but unless they were translated, they'd be lost to the rest of the country," she says. "So the idea driving Katha translations was to link India to India, rather than India to the rest of the world, through these beautiful regional stories."

An avocado *bhel* with a crispy quinoa puff cracker arrives next, accompanied in grand style by a raw mango sorbet.

Between mouthfuls, Dharmarajan talks about literary translation, and all that is lost when it becomes too literal. "A good translation should be able to convey the emotional and cultural nuances of the work," she says. It



ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

becomes an exercise in cultural understanding that allows readers rare glimpses into diverse ways of life and living. As we nibble at the tasty charcoal biscuits that have arrived with our *kappa shami* kebabs, she reminisces about the trouble she had translating a short story in which the author compares a woman's public area with a cashew nut. "I was up nights thinking about how cashew nuts actually looked and felt," she laughs.

Dharmarajan also recalls working closely

with Krishna Sobti over the translations of her short stories and novels. "It was the first time I realised that there were several distinct types of silences in her work which came through beautifully in Hindi but made me struggle to translate them into English."

Some years back, a bout of ill health forced her to downsize her work. "Diverticulitis left me with every editor's bane," she says, merry twinkle in her eyes, "a semi colon!" She laughs about it now, but doctors reckoned at that time she won't be able to survive more than 10 years after the surgery. "I now know they were wrong but at that time this prognosis compelled me to stop doing the Katha prize short stories," she says. In 2012, she was bestowed the Padma Shri for her contribution to the field of literature and education.

We order dessert (a balsamic and tamarind sorbet for her and a besan *barfi* opera for me) as the conversation goes back to schools and the problem she perceives with the present practice of evaluating learning outcomes ("they are too simplistic and ignore the child's learning journey"). She suggests schools should teach and foster empathy. "At Katha, we've initiated a programme called ECTC — Each Child Teach a Child under the 300M Challenge," she says. It is based on the premise that of the estimated 300 million children in the country today, barely half are able to read fluently. "The question we're asking is, why can't the 50 per cent fluent readers teach one child each to read as well as they do?" she says. To accomplish this, Katha has created the 300M Alliance of like-minded people and organisations. "We've also created India's first story-telling app to facilitate this," she says.

The desserts arrive, along with the young chef who has prepared them for us. The first thing she asks him is telling: "Did you have fun creating them?"

At the end of the day, from Dharmarajan's perspective, everything boils down to fun and joy. "I'm confident that if we as educators can provide a learning environment in which the children enjoy themselves, they will learn on their own and from each other," she states.

Does she have any regrets when she looks back on her prolific career, I ask. Her expressive dancer's eyes are momentarily lost in thought. "I wish I were not 71, but 17 all over again," she finally says. "I wish I had more time to impart to every Indian child not an education but the sheer joy of learning and reading..."

## The rise of the 'mini' consumer



PEOPLE LIKE THEM

GEETANJALI KRISHNA

The other day, our freshly white-washed home required some extra hours of elbow grease. Krishna attacked the mess with broom and mop and emerged triumphant hours later. "It's satisfying to see the place sparkling and dust-free," she said. "But you owe me a sachet!" I was stumped. "I can't afford expensive large bottles of shampoo," she explained. "But every now and then, I treat myself to a sachet of my favourite shampoo for ₹3." The bottle worked out cheaper than the sachet, I pointed out. She laughed. "Even without doing the maths, I can say that sachets work out better for people like me."

Suchitra who was overhearing our

conversation, piped in. "I buy everything in small sizes not just because they're cheap, but also because they control how much I use." For example, she told us that her five-year-old loves chocolate. "So as a treat once in a while, I buy her a single serving of Kellogg's Chocos or a small Kitkat bar for ₹10," she said. "If I bought larger packets, she'd probably eat them all in one go which would be neither good for her, nor for our pockets."

As someone who consciously shops for larger packs and refills to minimise costs and reduce my plastic waste, I hadn't even thought that in the world of fast moving consumer goods, small could be this desirable. So I asked the two of them what other products they bought in small sizes and was surprised by their answers. It turned out that they bought mini sizes of everything from instant noodles and butter to detergents and soap bars.

Suchitra said that television has raised her little daughter's aspiration levels considerably. "Thankfully, almost every new product in the market also comes out in tiny trial packs," she said. "Which is why we can afford to try them." Krishna's children, both working, have even higher aspirations and expectations. "My daughter uses the best brands of shampoo, hair oil and face washes in the market," she said. "For me the best

thing is that none of them cost more than ₹10." Both agreed that there was a certain joy in going to the local grocery store, buying everything from shampoo and toothpaste to breakfast cereal and ketchup — and running up a bill of just ₹150, sometimes even less.

Later, I did some quick digging online to realise that Krishna and Suchitra represent one of the fastest growing consumer segments for FMCG products. Over 30 years ago, when CavinKare launched 10-ml shampoo sachets under the Chik brand, the company probably didn't realise it would make history. From the 10 per cent of consumers who bought shampoo then, the percentage of shampoo users has grown to over 90 per cent now. And this growth has been driven by women like Krishna and Suchitra who prefer single-serve sachets and perceive them to be affordable.

"Come to think of it, earlier I never even thought of using a gentler detergent to wash my woollens," commented Krishna. "Ever since I used a ₹5 sachet of Ezee, I haven't used anything else." Suchitra sighed: "I've been addicted ever since I first bought a pouch of Nivea moisturiser for ₹15." As they left, making plans to meet for grocery shopping later, I realised that perhaps the best things in life did indeed come in small sizes.

## No more parties



PEOPLE LIKE US

KISHORE SINGH

Breakfast is substantial: two Tylenols, plus one more, and a Combiflam for added impact, along with some medicine for blood pressure. It's almost a filling meal, but the head still hurts. Hangovers are the devil's own business, and he seems to have been particularly busy. The cranium feels like a mushy watermelon, only heavier. Somewhere, I know I have feet, but they don't feel connected to the rest of the body. I think I ought to go back to sleep but there's a woodpecker knocking fiercely on my forehead. A shower hasn't helped. Nor has coffee. Or water. I'm never, ever going to drink

again. Of course, I'm lying.

I'm not going to any more parties either, especially when they're at the other end of the city. Yes, I know, I'm lying again. But the traffic is insane. Is everybody else going out too? It certainly seems that way from the top of a flyover when you spot cars gridlocked for what seems like miles. Two hours to reach somebody's home seems a bit much for food you could just as easily order at home. Without having to talk to strangers. Or pretend to be having a good time. Or dreading a hangover. Why do hosts insist on your having a third drink, and a fourth, and fifth?

Other perils include dressing up — and, yes, it applies to men too. Do you have a fresh Diwali wardrobe? Repeating outfits is an offence punishable by excommunication from cards parties. Not to be seen or heard at these shindigs is akin to social hara-kiri. Being dropped from party lists is a disgrace few can survive. More friends suffer Diwali blues not so much because what they spend, or the bonuses they hand out to staff, as much as feeling left out because they weren't invited to three parties every evening, of which attendance at two is mandatory.

Every night for a month, then a lull before it's time for Christmas and New Year parties, poses another problem:

Who gets the booze and who the recycled wine? Should one scratch out the expiry date from eatables, or spa products — because, as everyone knows, they aren't meant to be used as much as reprocessed till the packaging wears off and the products can finally be shared with the domestic staff. If, sometimes, the packaging, or gift, looks familiar — it might be because it's passed through your hands earlier. Take care to not circulate repackaged gifts among the closest circle of friends because, chances are, you might be returning something to the very friends it originated from. Who might then hand it back to you on the next occasion.

And who plans the party menus? Because the food is always identical. You can predict to a certainty that is surprising only for its accuracy. Shammis, yes; seekh, a-ha; cheese balls, tick; mince sliders, sure; the same dips, lavash, hummus and nachos, the same pizza slices, potato wedges and tiny cups of risotto. It seems like a single person has written out the list of what ought to be served, and is being followed diligently by everyone without interference. It's enough to make you want to drink. A lot. But eat not so much. Resulting in that beastly thing that's happening to your head. A Tylenol may help. Or two, or three.

## The choice beyond RCEP

Shimon Peres, the late Israeli leader who signed the Oslo accords, once said that as soon as you begin negotiating with the enemy, you realise that you first have to negotiate with your own people. Trade negotiations are not with any enemy, for trade is supposed to be win-win. Still, as the tortuous talks over the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) have dragged on, it has become increasingly clear that the real negotiations that the government has to conduct are with Indian business, which, with almost no exceptions, is wary of yet another free trade agreement.

Signing up for the RCEP, or refusing to do so, will be one of the most important decisions that the government will take in the coming months. Staying out of the grouping, which will include every economy in East Asia and Australasia, will come at a cost. The region has become the world's leading economic powerhouse (accounting for 40 per cent of global GDP), with the largest share of trade and the highest economic growth rates. Staying out will mean that Indian exporters to this crucial market will have to cope with tariff walls and non-tariff barriers. Joining later is a risky bet, because China will almost certainly try to prevent a subsequent Indian entry.

Wouldn't staying out come with a smaller price tag than having domestic producers destroyed by a flood of unrestricted imports from China and other regional players? The government response to that tricky question is to try and have its cake and eat it too. It wants to sign up, but with safeguards to prevent a flood of imports knocking out domestic producers. Whether it will get such safeguards remains to be seen. The acid test will be if it is asked to sign up without such safeguards.

In truth, though, the real issue goes beyond the binary choice that is usually postulated: Sign up or stay out. Rather, it is how to ensure that the country benefits even as it signs up for RCEP membership. In other words, the domestic economy has to be made ready for increased imported competition — through greater efficiencies (in transport, for instance); rational pricing of electricity (don't tax industrial consumers to subsidise farmers); step up productivity (if domestic dairying can't face up to competition from New Zealand, then raise milk output per head of cattle); improve standards and certification so as to get past non-tariff trade barriers; and lower the cost of finance, which remains unconscionably high. Finally, get rid of a currency policy that over-prices the rupee and thereby taxes all exports while making imports cheaper.

As should be obvious, these involve systemic changes and can't be done overnight. Indeed, work on these should have started seven years ago, when RCEP negotiations first began. After all, if every other economy in the region — whether Vietnam or Cambodia, the Philippines or Myanmar — can live with an open regional trading environment, the problem is not the RCEP, or any of the other free-trade agreements that the country has already signed, but the infirmities of the domestic economy. So India has to change — and the most important safeguard to negotiate just now is the time needed to make the necessary domestic changes. This is what China did when it was negotiating to join the World Trade Organization at the turn of the century — with spectacular successes to show in the subsequent years. India should take a leaf out of China's book.

The really worrying aspect of the negotiations, therefore, is that one hears nothing at all about getting the economy ready for a more open trading environment. No reform of electricity pricing so as to end pernicious cross-subsidies has been proposed; amid the business of cow protection, no one is talking of more efficient dairying; too many influential people in government seem unaware of the costs imposed by an over-priced rupee; and the Reserve Bank's interest rate cuts remain ineffective. If all this does not change, it matters little whether India signs up for the RCEP or not. Either way the economy will continue to under-perform.

## Early winds of change

Modi hasn't lost popularity. But more voters are returning to the basics as they're hurting too deep and want the return of economic optimism

It has been an extended monsoon this year. Finally, the wind patterns are now reversing. In the capital, they now become dry, come from the west, over Punjab — and Haryana — bringing along the burning stubble smoke. Autumn is here.

Not quite as clearly as this, but political winds have also shifted. For a couple of years now, as the economy has stalled, the BJP has unleashed the winds of hyper-nationalism with religion (Hinduism) liberally stirred in. This peaked in the months leading up to the general elections, especially with Balakot and Abhinandan.

Once a voter was convinced India had faced an existential threat from Pakistan for seven decades, nobody had done anything about it, and Narendra Modi was nailing the problem, with a finality. And that while he would do it mostly by "decisive, deterrent and fearless" military punishment, he was also raising India's global stature to "isolate" Pakistan. Once enough voters buy into these, they will forget their other, traditional political loyalties and binaries.

The rest then followed. Pakistan is Muslim, it spreads terrorism in the name of jihad, bloodthirsty jihadis are a pestilence for the entire world. Again, the insinuation was that the threat was pan-Islamic, Indian Muslims were not immune, and Hindus needed to consolidate. Of course, all this would not have worked so well but for the spectacularly efficient distribution of almost ₹12 trillion in visible welfare to the poor: Cooking gas, toilets, homes, and MUDRA loans. I have written and spoken about these often in the campaign weeks.

In electoral terms, this was a devastating mix: Nationalism, religion, welfare. The opposition's Rafale talk only invited derision and the issue of the day, even the post-demonetisation growth decline and rising joblessness, was overlooked.

The two assembly elections this week have given our first indication that those winds are shifting. It is definitely not as if Narendra Modi has lost any popularity. If he had, the BJP would've at least lost Haryana.

It was still his pull that kept sufficient numbers of voters still with the BJP. They've depleted substantially from five months ago: By 21.5 percentage points in Haryana, from 58 per cent to 36.5 per cent, for example. But enough still to enable Modi to hail a double-victory on the evening of the counting day.

The early highlights of the India Today-Axis exit poll, the most trusted of all lately, gives us some indications. In Haryana, it shows that while the BJP still has a healthy overall lead (almost 9 percentage points) over the Congress, in many categories — rural youth, unemployed, farmers, farm labour — it



has fallen behind. It must be that in a largely rural state, the middle class, upper castes, and the sizeable Punjabi population have stayed committed and saved it greater embarrassment.

Similarly, in Maharashtra, where the party had run a pretty good government under a clean and well-liked chief minister, it suffered sizeable reverses rather than improve, as was widely expected. Further, the opposition's ranks were depleted, with key leaders from both the Congress and NCP defecting to the BJP, or facing the wrath of the "agencies".

If this relatively indifferent victory came despite these overwhelming advantages, it is important to see who and what broke the party's blitzkrieg. If it was Sharad Pawar's National Congress Party (NCP) rather than the much bigger Congress that stood in the BJP's way, especially in mostly rural western Maharashtra, it is evident that many farmers and the unemployed have now switched sides.

And remember, all of this happened within 11 weeks of the scrapping of Article 370 in Kashmir, five weeks of "Howdy, Modi!", the talks with Donald Trump and the speech at the UN General Assembly. Add to these the TV spectacle of Mamallapuram with Xi Jinping, P Chidambaram, and D K Shivakumar's arrest and key NCP leader Praful Patel's inquisition for an alleged "terror-financing link with Iqbal Mirchi" — and moreover, while the hearings on Ayodhya were going on a day-to-day basis in the Supreme Court, bringing the issue back into the national consciousness.

If so many voters shifted in spite of all these factors, within five months of May, it is sufficient indication that the bountiful winds of nationalism, anti-Pakistanism, and religious fervour that overwhelmed with emotion the relatively "mundane" concerns of economics and jobs, are now retreating. More voters are now returning to the basics.

Travelling in the general election campaign we would often run into poor, jobless people who'd



NATIONAL INTEREST

SHEKHAR GUPTA

## Making computers intelligent



### VIEWPOINT

DEVANGSHU DATTA

Net surfers who wander around the darker recesses of the Web often have to prove they are not robots. Various websites use different types of tests to try and ensure they are not being surfed, or scraped, by automated programs.

These can consist of CAPTCHAs — Completely Automated Public Turing Tests to tell Computers and Humans Apart. That is usually an alphanumeric sequence where the letters and numbers have been distorted to make it hard for a machine to read.

A more time-intensive and

supposedly more fool proof version, involves presenting a panel of images to the surfer and asking them to tick off images that contain something specific. It could be a traffic light, or a parking meter, or a dog, for instance. This is something that a robot will find hard to do, unless it has been taught to specifically identify those images, by category.

Computers need to be trained to recognise images. Indeed, this is one of the biggest stumbling blocks to machine learning applications, and many artificial intelligence (AI)-dependent applications, such as the use of self-driving cars, or facial recognition programs.

This is less of a problem in a completely controlled environment, such as a factory floor, but it is a huge barrier to using AI in natural environments. Any human driver, for example, is used to seeing literally thousands of things on the road. Apart from other vehicles of various types, one may see something like a child tying her shoelaces at a school zebra crossing, or an ele-

phant relieving itself if you happen to be driving through a wildlife reserve. We automatically identify these images, classify them in terms of risk, and take what we consider to be an appropriate action.

A computer has to be trained to recognise such images. What's more, a computer has to be trained to recognise composites of those images, and sometimes to recognise partial images seen from peculiar angles in uncertain light.

Heading down a highway in Corbett National Park, a driver who sees a raised grey trunk emerging from the foliage, usually has the sense to realise that it is attached to a 4,000 kg animal. Another driver seeing the crunched rear-end of a child tying shoelaces identifies the same as a small human kneeling, in a bent posture.

Computers don't do this sort of thing easily at all. One of the nastiest accidents involving self-driving cars occurred when a car tried to go under an advertising billboard. It had correctly identi-

fied the billboard, and it calculated that there was enough clearance under the board for the car to pass. Where it failed was in not realising that the billboard was attached to the side of a truck.

This difficulty has led to the creation of supervised learning. AI is trained to recognise images by throwing databases of millions of related images at them. By the time it has processed several million related images, taken from different angles with different levels of fidelity, it is hoped that the program would have learnt enough to recognise those objects if they pop up while it's working.

The problem is that all those images need to be labelled. While this is easy work for humans, it is also mind-numbingly boring. And it needs to be done on scales that are mind-boggling, for a

multitude of categories, depending on what the programs are designed to handle.

This is becoming the AI-generation equivalent of the call centre in terms of scut work. AI has, to a large extent, taken over the role of the call centre worker and the personal assistant (PA). Google, Siri, Cortana, Alexa, etc., meet most of our PA requirements, and AI works reasonably at limited tasks, such as providing information about insurance policies and airline schedules.

But putting together databases and labelling them — "dog", "human", "human face with dilated nostrils", "cat washing itself", "car with advertising slogans", "Politician yelling his head off", etc. is a job that only humans seem to be able to do. The IT anti-farms of the next decade will be focussed on image labelling. It would be an odd way to make a living as a PA to an AI which may well provide PA services to humans once it has been trained.

Computers need to be trained to recognise images. Indeed, this is one of the biggest stumbling blocks to machine learning applications, and many artificial intelligence — dependent applications, such as the use of self-driving cars, or facial recognition programs

will always be under needless pressure and end up, as it has done since 2014, deflating the economy more than is necessary. It has done this by pursuing unnecessarily low fiscal and fashionably low inflation targets.

Furthermore, the political parts of total expenditure should be financed from tax revenues and the economic parts by deficit financing. Next, the political part should have the equivalent of the British PSBR (public sector borrowing requirement) limit, which is not negotiable for five years.

The central government shouldn't spend more than what it is doing currently on subsidies, salaries, and pensions. It's only higher interest payments that it should pay when it borrows to build new things. It should not borrow for anything else.

All incremental expenditure on political heads should, from next year, come from the states — after allowing them to levy a tax on individual incomes. There is no reason why income tax should be a central monopoly.

Mullahs of macroeconomics The distinguishing feature of a good priest is utter and unquestioning conformity and sticking, regardless of context, to the

## The ignoble strife

### EYE CULTURE

SUHIT K SEN

While the award of the Nobel Prize for economics to someone from Kolkata, among others, elicited an outpouring of emotion throughout the country, especially in his hometown, the award of the Nobel Prize for literature, a week or so earlier, only managed to provoke bitter worldwide controversy.

To begin with, the world was witness this year to the literally unprecedented spectacle of two awards being made in the same category. This not entirely desirable precedent was occasioned by the failure of the Swedish Academy to make the award for literature last year. It was thus that the Nobel Prize for literature for 2018 and 2019 was awarded simultaneously this year.

It wasn't benign providence that had prevented the Academy from awarding the Nobel Prize for literature last year. It had been prevented by a scandal involving sexual misconduct and financial irregularities that had engulfed the Academy last year. Not only had the Nobel for literature been suspended, but the credibility of the Academy and the prize itself had been so badly undermined that it was felt that the prize should be awarded a year later to allow the Academy to recover from the scandal.

Of the two awards made this year, the 2018 Nobel for literature went to Olga Tokarczuk, a Polish writer based in a small town in her native country. The Nobel citation mentioned "a narrative imagination that with encyclopedic passion represents the crossing of boundaries as a form of life". The award was uncontroversial.

Not so the almost simultaneously awarded literature Nobel for this year, which went to Peter Handke, an Austrian novelist. This award sparked outrage throughout the world because of Handke's controversial views on the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s and his proximity to Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic, who had been charged with war crimes. Handke was himself accused of being a genocide denier.

Statements by Kosovo leaders and the influential international literary body PEN excoriated both Handke and the Academy. The Swedish Academy's somewhat disingenuous response, given its track record, was that it made choices based on aesthetic and literary considerations and it wasn't its job to take positions on political views.

The firestorm broke out after the award was announced. As the controversy snowballed, with many writers and others joining issue with the choice, the Academy issued a statement last week saying it had "obviously not intended to reward a war criminal and denier of war crimes or genocide. But

complain they were hurting, that the promised boom hadn't come. Yet they said they will vote only for Mr Modi: "Desh ke liye" (for the nation). That sentiment has not receded. But see it like that voter: I have already overlooked all my personal challenges to vote for Mr Modi to protect my nation. The nation is safe. Now tell me what are you doing for what is really hurting me: Falling incomes, unemployment, and, for farmers, mostly static procurement prices.

My central proposition, therefore, is that the winds of nationalism laden with religion will now yield to those of concern over the stalled economy, unemployment, and a general malaise and unhappiness. Fresh noises and action on Pakistan, Kashmir, and terror will not be able to reverse these. Except, in the most unlikely event of a larger armed conflict.

Will a favourable Supreme Court decision on the temple make a difference? Maybe to some, in the Hindi heartland. But not enough. Too many people are hurting too deep now. They want the return of economic optimism.

We complain often about frequent elections in India. The BJP is in the forefront with the idea of one-country, one-election. Yet, it is the Modi government that didn't want elections in Jharkhand simultaneously with Haryana and Maharashtra. Maybe they had sensed trouble? More likely, they understand that they have only one vote-getter, so it is better to give Mr Modi sufficient time in all three states.

Whether it proves counter-productive now, we will know enough as the Jharkhand polls will be announced soon. Whether the early winds of change from distant Haryana in the north and Maharashtra in the west will reach there we can only guess. But definitely, the opposition will have its tail out of its legs at last. Cruel thing is, in an all-conquering personality cult, where all victories are credited to one leader, it is tough to immunise him from setbacks. Especially today, when it doesn't even take defeat, but a narrower "points" victory rather than a knock-out of the rivals is seen as disappointing.

The best thing with India's never-ending cycle of elections is, politics never freezes. Not long after Jharkhand, elections will come to Delhi. The BJP will then need to take a big call: Whether or not to put Mr Modi in front again, risk its becoming Modi versus Kejriwal, and go for broke. Will it be worth the risk for a prize that is a small semi-state where the Centre already controls all municipal corporations, land, and police? All I can say is, Arvind Kejriwal looks way better prepared than the Congress was in Haryana next door.

Politics in India takes years, sometimes epochs, to change. But political seasons do. You can sense that in the dry autumn air now.

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## How to reform fiscal deficit



### LINE AND LENGTH

T C A SRINIVASA RAGHAVAN

We are now well into the Great Indian Slump. To reverse it, the main contours of the reforms that are required are clear.

Some of them will get done. Some won't. That's how it is.

But here I want to reiterate something I have been saying for several years: Should the most important part of macroeconomic reform not comprise the way we look at the fiscal deficit?

That is, if increased or lowered government expenditure is the main instrument of equilibrating the labour and product markets, should not such expenditure be broken into two parts?

Should not one part be the one which, if reduced, increases political risk for the government, and the other which, when increased, enhances economic benefits (as opposed to just commercial ones)? The revenue deficit, after all, is the one in which political risk is deeply embedded. Economic benefits, however, flow from investment expenditure.

The two, I suggest, need to be separated for financing purposes. In the old days, before the distinction was abolished, they called it plan and non-plan expenditure. We need to revert to that but with a further refinement.

Even non-plan expenditure should comprise two parts. One whose reduction entails political risk, e.g. subsidies, and salaries and pensions; the other is higher maintenance expenditure, whose enhancement improves overall productivity.

At present any increase in the former reduces the latter and this happens every year because there is an election or two every year. That's why public infrastructure is so awful. Delhi under Arvind

Kejriwal is just one example.

The only new thing I am saying is that expenditure on mitigating political risk should be explicitly separated from expenditure that entails economic risk. This is necessary to avoid perpetuating the important hypocrisy that is inherent in a competitive political system, namely, deliberately equating political risk to the ruling party with its concern for welfare of the poor.

### Towards transparency

It's only after this is done that a target for the fiscal deficit should be set. It can then indeed be 3 per cent.

In the absence of such transparency, we have had an acceleration in the window dressing of Budgets. It's always been there but the UPA, with the MGNREGA, took it to new heights from the Budget for 2005.

The practice has continued unabated since then. It's time for Nirmala Sitharaman to stop it. She should convince the prime minister to tackle this problem head on.

Otherwise, the government