

Naidu's change of tone

Political antennae have gone up after former Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu told reporters in Chittoor he felt Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ambitious plan to make India a \$5 trillion economy by 2024 should be supported and was do-able. "This is possible and very much (sic) achievable. I am sure the Prime Minister will have his goal of taking the country's GDP to \$5 trillion in the next five years. I am going to come up with a document explaining how this is achievable and can be achieved," said Naidu after a party meeting. Not so long ago, Naidu was part of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and it seems he is setting the stage to return there. In his state, he is being buffeted by hostility and is being hounded by the YSR Congress in power and is intent on extracting revenge from the previous regime. Of course, we don't know what the local unit of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) thinks. It is possible that sometime in the future, Naidu might seek a meeting with Modi to hand over his document to make the PM's dream come true.

Different instinct

Interesting, the race to be visible on Twitter, and even more, what you do with the media. On the day the Haryana and Maharashtra election results came out, it was Priyanka Gandhi who came out with the first reaction from the Congress, not Rahul Gandhi. On the day of the Ayodhya verdict, it was Priyanka again. Rahul's first tweet of the day was not to issue a political comment on the judgment but to thank his SPG (which was withdrawn around the same time). Interesting, the difference in instinct.



OPINION

S JAISHANKAR

Need for greater realism in policy

So what does the past teach us? Seven decades of foreign policy certainly offer a lot of lessons, especially if we contemplate a challenging road ahead. They span a broad spectrum, both in time and in outcomes. A dispassionate assessment of our performance would note that while we ourselves have done well in many respects, many competitors have done much better. Overcoming many challenges, India consolidated its national unity and integrity. That was not a given, noting that some other diverse societies like USSR and Yugoslavia did not make it in the same period. A modern economy with industrial capacities was developed over time, even as our reliance on nature was mitigated in agriculture. Defence preparedness was improved and one of the key accomplishments of diplomacy was to enable access to multiple sources of equipment and technology. However, the fact remains that even after seven decades of independence, many of our borders remain unsettled. In the economic sphere, we may look good when benchmarked against our own past. It seems a little different when compared to China or South East Asia. So what really matters is to develop a sharp awareness about our own performance. And the lessons of that exercise can be captured in five baskets of issues.

The first relates to the need for greater realism in policy. Swami Vivekananda perceptively described the world as a gymnasium where nations come to make themselves strong. Particularly in the phase of optimistic non-alignment, perhaps even later, our focus on diplomatic visibility sometimes led to overlooking the harsher realities of hard security. The early misreading of Pakistan's intentions can perhaps be explained away by lack of experience. But the reluctance to attach overriding priority to securing borders even a decade later is much more difficult to justify. It was not just that the challenges of 1962 were unanticipated. It was more that a diplomacy focused on world politics did not give it the primacy it deserved. Somewhere, there was an implicit but deeply entrenched belief that India's high standing in world affairs was protection enough against global turbulence and competitive politics. It was, therefore, at some cost that we discovered that outcomes can be decided as much on the field as at conferences. This is a relevant takeaway even now, despite having entered a more constrained world. Interestingly, it is not that India always shrank from the applications of force when required. But having so strongly built up an image of a reluctant power, we also ended up influenced by our own narrative.

Due to that, we rarely prepared for security situations with the sense of mission that many of our competitors displayed. Discomfort with hard power was reflected in lack of adequate consultation with the military, most notably during the 1962 conflict. The creation of the post of Chief of Defence Staff half-a-century later shows a very different mindset. Judgments of the past that overlooked security implications are also worth studying. An overemphasis on diplomacy also led to a lack of understanding of the behaviour of other polities. The Cold War was seen more as an argumentation, when the reality was a ruthless exercise of power. There was also little awareness in the 1950s that we were dealing with a battle-hardened neighbor to the North. Or indeed of the strategic significance of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. This approach to world affairs continued even thereafter. Thus, in 1972 at Simla, India chose to bet on an optimistic outlook on Pakistan. At the end of the day, it resulted in both a revanchist Pakistan and a continuing problem in Jammu & Kashmir. That it has taken us so long to link talks with Pakistan to cessation of terrorism speaks for itself.

The economic counterpart of these concerns constitute a second basket. If one considers all the major growth stories since 1945, a common feature was the extraordinary focus that they put on leveraging the global environment. China did that with great effect, initially with the USSR and then with the US and the West. The Asian 'tiger economies' practiced it as well, using Japan, the US and now China successively to build themselves. That is how India too approached its various relationships over the last seven decades, but not always with the same single-mindedness. Nevertheless, much of India's industrialization and capacities in other domains were direct achievements of collaborations enabled by diplomacy. Steel, nuclear industry, higher education and computing are some examples. This held true even more for the post-1991 reform period and the shift eastwards of India's economic centre of gravity. The interconnection between diplomacy, strategy and economic capabilities is, however, not self-evident. As in security, it is important to distinguish between cause and effect. The economy drives diplomacy; not the other way around. Few would argue that the reforms of the 1990s and greater openness have served us well. But as we then extrapolated it onto free trade agreements with South-East and East Asia, the proposition has become more challengeable. Blame it on structural rigidities, limited competitiveness, inadequate exploitation of opportunities or just plain unfair practices; the growing deficit numbers are a stark reality. More importantly, their negative impact on industry at home is impossible to deny. And China, of course, poses a special trade challenge even without an FTA.

In this background, the recent debate about the RCEP offers lessons in foreign policy as much as in the trade domain. On the one hand, we should not go back to the old dogmas of economic autarky and import substitution. But at the same time, embracing the new dogma of globalization without a cost-benefit analysis is equally dangerous. What we saw in Bangkok recently was a clear-eyed calculation of the gains and costs of entering a new arrangement. We negotiated till the very end, as indeed we should. Then, knowing what was on offer, we took a call. And that call was that no agreement at this time was better than a bad agreement. It is also important to recognize what the RCEP is not. It is not about stepping back from the Act East policy. Even in trade, India already has FTAs with 12 out of the 15 RCEP partners. Nor is there really a connection with our Indo-Pacific approach, as that goes well beyond the RCEP membership. There can be a legitimate debate on the merits of joining RCEP or any other FTA for that matter. Just don't confuse it for grand strategy.

Edited excerpt from the Ramnath Goenka memorial lecture by Minister of External Affairs, S. Jaishankar on November 14 at New Delhi

DID THEY REALLY SAY THAT?



"We want to have the chief minister's post for the next 25 years. The Shiv Sena will provide leadership to the state no matter who tries best to stop it."

Shiv Sena Spokesman Sanjay Raut on whether the Sena will share the CM's post on a rotational basis in the next dispensation, November 15



ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

Sanjay Singh, who is in charge of organising Assembly elections for the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), says the party will benefit because the Delhi government, led by Arvind Kejriwal, has delivered. Edited excerpts from the interview with Nitin Kumar:

'We will repeat our massive victory'

In the Delhi Assembly election in 2015, AAP won 67 of the 70 seats. You had then showcased 49 days of your government's work in its earlier stint in 2013-14. But this time you are contesting after five years of being in government. How much of a challenge is a repeat of the same victory?

The people gave us a massive mandate in 2015 because in just 49 days (before that) we had kept our promises about water, electricity, and corruption, which we had said in our manifesto. And, this time we are going to the people with our five-year report card — 200 units of electricity free, 20,000 litres of free water, and free medicine, checkups and treatment in hospitals.

Today, the Delhi government bears the health expenses of victims of road accidents. We have provided free bus rides for women in Delhi and installed 300,000 cameras for their security. Apart from that, the Delhi gov-

ernment is giving the highest compensation to farmers for their land — at ₹50,000 per hectare (one hectare = 110,000 square feet). For martyrs' families, we gave ₹1 crore. We have doubled the salaries of anganwadi workers and guest teachers. These are our achievements, on which the people will vote for us. We will surely repeat our massive victory in the coming election.

AAP says it has fulfilled all the promises it made in 2015, but free wi-fi across Delhi is still a dream.

We have done more than we promised in our manifesto. Our priority is education — 26 per cent of our Budget expenditure, the highest in the country, goes to education. The Delhi government is spending 13 per cent of the Budget on health. Our Budget is the only deficit-free one in the country.

Today, the country's GDP is going down

CHECKLIST THE JHARKHAND CHESSBOARD

■ In a state where the current government led by Bharatiya Janata Party leader Raghuraj Das is the first since the formation of the state in 2000 to complete a full term in office, floor crossings and defections have reached new heights.

■ After the 2014 Assembly polls, six JVM-P MLAs had defected and joined the BJP. This had helped Chief Minister Raghuraj Das to form a stable government.

■ Last month, four sitting MLAs quit their parties and joined the BJP ahead of the Assembly polls that began November 30.

■ Sukhdeo Bhagat and Manoj Yadav of the Congress crossed the floor first. While Bhagat, a former Jharkhand Pradesh Congress Committee president, represents the Lohardaga constituency, Yadav elected from the Darkatha seat, has represented the

constituency six times and has a huge following. Both leaders had managed to retain their seats in 2014, at the height of a BJP sweep following the Lok Sabha elections.

■ The BJP will have to explain to its candidates who were defeated by these two, why they are not being fielded again — because, obviously, being renominated by a different party is part of the deal for defectors crossing over.

■ Kunal Sarangi of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, also a sitting MLA, left his party and jumped ship. Sarangi had won from Baharagora constituency and his father Dinesh was a minister in the erstwhile BJP-led NDA governments of Babulal Marandi and Arjun Munda.

■ An independent, Bhanu Pratap Sahi, a two-term MLA from Bhawanathpur seat, has joined the BJP as well.

but Delhi's GDP is increasing. And we will complete the small works that are pending in the coming months.

AAP came to power riding on the corruption-free Delhi wave. What is the party's main agenda for the upcoming election?

This time our only agenda will be our report card, which will tell the people of our achievements. People will judge us on our promises and delivery. We will start our election campaign with a positive message. We have kept negative messaging for the BJP, which it is good at.

Just three months before the election the central government approved the norms to grant ownership in Delhi's 1,797 unauthorised colonies, with nearly 4 million residents. These colonies are considered an AAP vote bank. Do you think that this move will help the BJP to lure your voters?

What did the Central government do to approve these colonies? The Delhi government on November 12, 2015, sent an application to the central government to seek approval. For four years, we fought the battle to get them approved. AAP took the initiative, and this Bill will be passed in Parliament in the coming session.

AAP, not the BJP, will benefit from this move because we did the work to get these colonies approved. The Central government only delayed the approval. The Delhi government has spent ₹6,000 crore on development work in these colonies.

Pollution has taken centre stage this time. Will it be a political issue during the Assembly election? And what has the Delhi government done in the past five years to curb the pollution generated from the exhaust of diesel generators, garbage burning, the dust of construction sites, and illegal industrial activity?

The government, with the support of the people, has reduced pollution by 25 per cent. This data has been provided by agencies working on environmental matters.

We started a drive to plant trees in Delhi. It was our initiative to supply 24-hour electricity so that people could reduce the use of generators. With the ban on construction and excavation in Delhi, we were able to control pollution generated through the dust. With the successful experiment of odd-even, we were able to curb pollution in Delhi.

Because of our innovative idea of laser Diwali celebration, people were motivated not to use crackers and thousands of them participated in our initiative. But what did the BJP do? BJP workers were bursting crackers, and sharing photos of their garbage

burning. People in Delhi are watching all of this. They know that the BJP is against all the work done for Delhi's welfare.

When we started odd-even, it protested against that too. Today, anybody can make out the difference in air quality — after odd-even implementation, pollution has been curbed. This difference has not been seen in Lucknow, Varanasi, Kanpur, or any other place.

Funnily, the BJP wants odd-even in UP. What does this mean? It is against everything the Kejriwal government does.

AAP has accused the Central government of doing nothing to prevent pollution in Delhi. Any comment?

The Central government has not complied with any recommendation of the National Green Tribunal (NGT) and the Supreme Court to prevent stubble burning in Haryana, Punjab, and UP. All stakeholders need to work together to make a comprehensive plan to deal with this issue. But our Union environment minister, Prakash Javadekar, gave a statement that the Kejriwal government should give ₹1,500 crore to the Haryana and Punjab govern-

ments to prevent pollution in Delhi. They should have asked the state governments to supply a sufficient number of seeders and threshers, so that the farmers could stop stubble burning. Have they done that?

The environment minister has postponed three meetings with state environment ministers, which shows either he has no time for them or does not consider treating the national capital's poor air quality on priority.

But recently newspapers have given three different values of PM2.5 ratings and have charged AAP with giving false numbers...

We are not the ones to give those pollution reports. Several environmental agencies did their research and drew the conclusion that pollution in Delhi has reduced by 25 per cent. Questioning them on the basis of newspaper reports would be wrong.

Delhi has a water challenge for decades. And a Lok Sabha Secretariat report in 2018 stated Delhi's water quality is alarming. What did the Delhi government do about this?

The Kejriwal government is the only one that has supplied drinking water through pipelines to homes. The menace of the mafia, which I heard for the first time in Delhi, has been removed by our government.

And to improve the water level in Delhi, we have launched a project to create natural reservoirs to conserve rainwater in the Yamuna floodplains. This will end the water crisis in the capital.

The octogenarians who will not give up

From collecting money to build toilets for primary students in government schools to saving a lake from land sharks, Padmanabha and Rao are the dynamic duo of civic activism, writes Aditi Phadnis

Padmanabha Arkalgudand and S Venkata Subba Rao aged 83 years and 81 respectively, are the best of pals — they have been, for over 60 years since their days in law college. Padmanabha retired as a senior vice-president from ITC Ltd and Rao retired as general manager from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), Bengaluru more than 20 years ago. Since then, Rao has saved a lake from the clutches of the Debt Recovery Tribunal (DRT) and freely admits his contribution to the ₹8 lakh crore NPAs owed to public sector banks. The two friends have raised money and personally supervised the building of toilets in at least three government primary schools that together account for more than 1000 pupils — small boys and girls. They have many other projects on their mind. This is Padmanabha and Rao's story and all the usual clichés apply: They're neither tired nor retired; and ultimately, age is just a number.

The story of civic activism begins in the 1970s when Rao first built his house on the banks of the 14-odd acre Byresandra lake. "It was a full-fledged lake then, with boats and fishing. In 1985, the Laxmanrao committee appointed by the Karnataka government to revive lakes suggested ways in which the Byresandra lake could be protected and turned into a tourist spot," Rao said. But around 1992, the lake began drying up — it was probably drained of water deliberately. The lake bed was visible and residents in the area began noticing hundreds of lorries that

would thunder in late at night or early morning piled with construction debris. The central government-run National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS) campus was nearby and a lot of the land had been encroached by slums. "The plan probably was to shift the slums to the Byresandra lake bed," Rao said.

The residents led by Rao filed a suit in the Karnataka High Court and the case dragged on and on. In 2005, "I went for a walk and found a notice pasted on the watchman's cabin. It had been issued by the Debt Recovery Tribunal and said the lake was being sold by public auction, so anyone who was interested could buy it." Upon enquiring with the DRT, Rao found that the entire lake had been pledged as collateral with the Indian Overseas Bank (IOB) by a builder, who had then fallen on hard times, was unable to repay his loan and the collateral was in the process of being auctioned by the bank. The lake was valued at ₹5 crore and the builder owed the bank (with interest and penalties) around ₹6 crore. Rao rushed to the High Court to seek a stay. The then Chief Justice said: "Today a lake is being sold. Tomorrow it will be the Vidhana Soudha. No stay." Within days, the lake was sold at a cost of ₹760 crore, with the buyers paying 25 per cent immediately and getting a month to pay the rest.

Rao's advocate returned to the court to tell the Chief Justice that the lake had been sold. A stay was granted. The bank, anxious to recover its money, appealed in the Supreme



Court. "Being a bank officer, I knew there would be an appeal," Rao said and immediately filed a caveat. The bank's appeal was dismissed. By now, it was 2011 and Justice J S Khehar had been appointed Chief Justice of the Karnataka High Court. He not only ruled that the auction was void but also decreed that the lake be developed by the Bangalore Municipality. The lake is now a limpid pool of tranquillity in South Bangalore. No one knows what happened to the bad loan.

This had been a good fight and the two friends were ready for more. One day, out on their morning walk, they found a terrible stench and discovered it was from a public toilet in Byresandra. The toilet was opposite a primary school with 150 students which had no toilet of its own. It had no doors, and the inside was filthy.

The two decided to renovate the toilet and sent messages and emails to friends to raise funds. The contractors they approached

wanted between ₹3 and ₹4 lakh to renovate it. The friends decided to give out a labour contract and supervise the renovations themselves. They managed to do it for ₹1.60 lakh. They had, in the meantime, raised almost ₹3 lakh. They sought the advice of the donors who said they should continue to renovate school toilets. So they went from school to school. "In one school we found some kind donor had built a toilet for boys but there was none for the girls. So the girls were asked to use the boys' toilet and the boys were asked to use a designated spot in the open. We organised separate toilets for the girls and boys..." Rao chuckled. Their third school toilet project will become functional from this weekend.

The two friends have a lot of fun together. They are quite content filling the breach where the government can't reach until it is shamed into acting. And they are both neither tired nor retired.



THE OTHER INDIA

Banking with Google

Regulators need to be watchful about sensitive financial data

Reports that Google intends to enter the consumer banking space through a partnership with Citibank did not cause any surprise, because many tech firms are looking at the consumer finance market. However, there are genuine concerns about the implications for data security and data sovereignty if this happens. The search engine giant would gain access to vast, new, highly sensitive datasets if it became a banking service provider. It is unclear what it intends to do with that data. Recent revelations that Google had discreetly gained access to the health data of at least 50 million Americans have added to the apprehensions.

Consumer finance is a new focus area for tech majors. Apple has launched credit cards in partnership with Goldman Sachs. Facebook is trying to create a cryptocurrency with its Libra initiative. Facebook's subsidiaries, WhatsApp and Instagram, are setting up payment systems within the respective apps. Amazon is said to be seeking a partnership to provide banking services. Google Pay is already a very successful payment app. It has around 67 million users in India, and it is said to be generating over 50 per cent of all Unified Payments Interface (UPI) transactions and also doing well elsewhere around the world.

The Citibank-Google partnership would

provide checking accounts tied to Google Pay accounts, with backup support from a credit-rating agency. This initiative could be launched in 2020. Citi's checking accounts are typically fee-based, with charges payable for overdrafts, and for withdrawals from non-Citi ATMs. Google may opt that model. On Citi's part, gaining access to Google's massive user-base makes the partnership an attractive proposition.

However, even if the bank accounts are fee-based, Google is unlikely to be interested in just generating some revenue from consumers. This would be small change for the company, which had over \$136 billion in global revenues in 2018. The real area of interest would be the new data generated in a banking operation. When consumers are paid, how much they spend on discretionary purchases, where they spend it, and so on - these are the sorts of information Google would become privy to as a banking service

provider. It could potentially tie the new information fields to data it already possesses about the search practices of users, their video-watching habits, reading and musical tastes, e-mail usage, video-calling patterns, and the ads they watch.

This would enable the creation of a formidably complete profile of users, which could enable the company to micro-target consumers in multiple ways. Would Google share that data with other companies? Would it use that data to drive some new initiatives of its own? Obviously, these things are unclear. But consumers and the regulatory authorities could justifiably be apprehensive about one private company gaining access to so much information about so many individuals. Questions may also arise about the storage and security of any such data, and the privacy laws that would be applicable. This is over and above regulators wanting compliance with local

KYC and regulations.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI), for instance, wants financial service providers to store data pertaining to Indian citizens on servers located within the country. The EU has also started thinking about data localisation. Google Pay has agreed in principle to comply with the RBI's data localisation rules but it has not done so yet, even though the rules were announced about a year ago. All this means that there is a trust deficit where many consumers are concerned. There are over 5.5 billion searches on Google every day, and 1.4 billion Gmail accounts in operation. Indeed, there are over 100 million users of Google Pay across the world. But many of those users may not be comfortable with Google having access to sensitive financial data as well. And regulators certainly need to review Google's plans carefully, given the chance that something could go very wrong.

India and its Brics dilemmas

The five-country group faces challenges arising from bilateral differences and diverse political systems



Prime Minister Narendra Modi (second from right) with, from left to right, Chinese President Xi Jinping, Russian President Vladimir Putin, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and South African President Cyril Ramaphosa at the 11th BRICS emerging economies summit in Brasilia, Brazil

HARSH V PANT & RAJ KUMAR SHARMA

The 11th BRICS summit concluded in Brazil Friday with customary calls for strengthening multilateralism and reforming global institutions such as the UN Security Council (UNSC), World Trade Organisation, World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF). Initially, BRICS mainly had an economic agenda but gradually, the scope has widened to include security, health, science and technology, culture and civil society. Under the chairmanship of Brazil, more than a hundred meetings relating to BRICS were held in 2019.

From an Indian perspective, two major developments happened at the summit. One, the grouping decided to open a regional office of the New Development Bank (NDB) in India. This hopefully will give impetus to financing of projects in India's priority areas. Second, terrorism was one of the priority areas for BRICS 2019, set by Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro. The BRICS joint working group on counter-terrorism decided to constitute five sub working groups — one each focusing on terrorist financing, use of the internet for terrorist purposes, countering radicalisation, the issue of foreign terrorist fighters, and capacity-building.

In 2012, India, as the chair of BRICS, introduced security on the agenda, as the theme of the New Delhi summit was "BRICS Partnership for Global Stability, Security and Prosperity". Terrorism is now a key concern of all member states, and India made good use of this opportunity as Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlighted the fact that the world loses \$1 trillion due to terrorism each year. India has been facing state-sponsored cross-border terrorism from Pakistan for decades now but in BRICS, China has been shielding Pakistan and has been uneasy discussing the issue of terrorism on this platform. India hopes to continue to work with other BRICS countries to reach an understanding with China on the issue of cross-border terrorism.

Overall, while the BRICS grouping may have completed a decade, it continues to face the challenges of the lack of a binding ideology, bilateral differences, diversity in terms of socio-cultural and political systems, and China's overwhelming

presence, which reduces the space for other countries in the grouping. Given these challenges, New Delhi's continuing engagement with BRICS has generated mixed responses.

As China rises and positions itself as the sole challenger to American hegemony, there is a growing discussion about the possible Kindleberger Trap, a situation where China may fail to provide global public goods like a clean environment and financial stability, despite being a superpower. Small countries have little incentive to contribute to global public goods and it is generally the responsibility of great powers to provide global governance. The idea of the Kindleberger Trap is also applicable to rising powers like India, which have global ambitions.

A close examination of India's record in BRICS reveals that New Delhi has used its membership to make a substantial contribution to the international financial architecture, while also making efforts to address glaring gaps in areas such as counter-terrorism, the fight against climate change and UNSC reform. India is not a free-rider in a system of global governance dominated by the West, and continues to provide a vision of global governance.

India was the main BRICS country behind the establishment of the NDB and proposed the idea at the fourth BRICS summit in New Delhi. The NDB was established in 2014 with all five BRICS members contributing equal amounts of economic capital and having equal voting rights, with no provision of veto power. The NDB also intends to provide non-conditional financing, unlike the WB and IMF. This reflects true equality in a global financial institution, and the NDB attempts to rectify the North-South divide that exists in the governance of the WB and IMF to make it more inclusive.

While it might be tempting to position the NDB as a challenge to the West, New Delhi seeks reforms in global governance through BRICS and does not have an anti-West agenda. As External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar recently suggested, India could be viewed

as a south-western power, a blend of the West and the developing world. Through BRICS, India seems to be mediating between the two identities.

India's efforts to seek changes in international financial governance through BRICS have been successful, as China also shares this objective with India. The story has been one of missed opportunity in areas like UNSC reform, counter-terrorism and the fight against climate change. BRICS may have raised the issue of UNSC reform but this is more declaratory in nature than a serious attempt to overhaul the UNSC. This reflects that BRICS is interested in selective reform of the system, as its members have developed vested interests in the existing system. That is why the grouping seeks to reform global financial governance but is divided over UNSC reform. On the issue of terrorism, India has tried to project its unique approach, in which New Delhi is not selective and does not differentiate between good terrorists and bad terrorists, since they all pose a threat to humanity.

Climate governance too has been highlighted as an area where BRICS members have a lot of potential to contribute, but so far, that has not happened. Russia has been ambivalent towards climate change and has recently joined the Paris Agreement. India has taken initiatives outside the grouping to project itself as a leader in the fight against climate change, such as the launch of the International Solar Alliance in 2015 with France. Apart from the global agenda, BRICS allows New Delhi to send out messages about its foreign policy priorities, underscoring its desire to be part of issue-based coalitions.

At a different level, BRICS membership elevates India's global profile. China may still not be interested in de-hyphenating India and Pakistan, but India's BRICS membership automatically de-hyphenates India and Pakistan, while it casts India and China as equals. So, even as challenges abound in the BRICS trajectory, the grouping will continue to be of some instrumental value to India in the years ahead.

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How secure are social media messaging apps?

ATANU BISWAS

Did we think that our social media messaging devices are so safe that they cannot be hacked or snooped? If so, then we were silly. We now know that a bug in WhatsApp's audio call feature allowed hackers to install a commercial spyware of Israeli company NSO Group on Android and iOS phones just by calling the target.

No doubt, most messaging apps are not easy to crack. In an opinion piece in *The Daily Telegraph* in July 2017, the then UK Home Secretary Amber Rudd opined that "real people" are not really interested in security features that stop the government and criminals from reading their messages. Her claim has been called "dangerous and misleading" by many critics. However, the idea somehow persists.

This October, US Attorney General William Barr, acting US Homeland Security Secretary Kevin McAleenan, UK Home Secretary Priti Patel and Australia's minister for home affairs, Peter Dutton, co-signed an open letter to Facebook, urging it to halt its plan to roll out end-to-end encryption across its suite of messaging products. Such demands, however, completely ignore the choices of billions of "real people" who are present and future users of such messaging apps. And, the recent outrage following the episode involving the spyware Pegasus shows that real people do care about their security.

In April 2016, the Facebook-owned messaging service, WhatsApp, rolled out end-to-end encryption across all devices supporting the platform: "WhatsApp's end-to-end encryption ensures only you and the person you're communicating with can read what is sent, and nobody in between, not even WhatsApp." This is because all messages are secured with a lock, and only the recipient and sender have the special key needed to unlock and read them. But, that security is certainly not absolute. And Pegasus has also exposed WhatsApp's limitations around its end-to-end encryption. If the spyware is installed, it can access the targeted users' private data, including passwords, contact lists, calendar events, text messages, and live voice calls from popular mobile messaging apps.

Interestingly, "end-to-end" encryption has become a buzzword which is now widely used to emphasise the security of any such product, mostly to make it more attractive to users — so much so that common people tend to believe that the encryption between the two "ends" is simply unbreakable. Is end-to-end encryption a magic bullet for security?

Certainly, some messaging apps encrypt messages between the user and them. However, aren't most encryptions end-to-end? Still, they are always vulnerable at the two ends, as is clear from the Pegasus episode. In addition, who says that they're 100 per cent secured in-between? We know the encrypted message is scrambled. But, is it impossible for an interceptor to decode it? Do we think that cryptography systems are based on mathe-

matical problems so complex that they cannot be solved without a key? Certainly not. A classic example was British mathematician Alan Turing's cracking, during the Second World War, of Enigma, an enciphering machine used by the German armed forces to send messages securely, by changing the cipher system daily.

The security of the encrypted message no doubt depends on the strength of the encryption, and the computing power and efficiency of the interceptor. With more and more powerful computers, and quantum computers around the corner, encrypted messages using standard encryption methods are bound to become increasingly vulnerable. Also, one must keep in mind that the proof of security of the encryption algorithms is often based on several "assumptions", whose validity is never tested. Overall, an end-to-end encryption may be sufficiently secured, but its not a panacea. All digital messages in social media can be hacked, even if they are deleted. Almost everything connected to the internet is at risk of cyberattacks.

There are other vulnerabilities; for example, WhatsApp offers the option to back up chats to Google Drive or iCloud, but those back-up copies are not protected by end-to-end encryption.

WhatsApp, with over 1.5 billion users worldwide, including 400 million in India, might be most vulnerable due to its large user base. What about other messaging apps such as Signal, iMessage, GroupMe, Viber, LINE and Telegram? Most of them are also encrypted end-to-end, but complete security is possibly a hypothetical and non-existent state in cryptology. LINE is incredibly popular in East Asia. This writer has seen a 2018 article by two Japanese researchers on breaking the message integrity of an end-to-end encryption scheme of LINE.

Telegram has been widely used by the Hong Kong protestors to organise protests while hiding their identities. A few months ago, a group of Hong Kong engineers observed that a feature in Telegram's design might have allowed mainland Chinese or Hong Kong authorities to learn the real identities of users. Telegram tried to fix this bug to allow users to disable identity matching by phone number.

Cyber-security is often a game of cat and mouse. In fact, two major directions of research in cryptology are breaking the available security, and devising more efficient security. If "non-breakable" security can at all be devised, that will be the end of cryptology, indeed!

However, security is just a belief. It is better to understand this, and act accordingly. One of my cryptologist friends believes that an app or an encryption is safe as long as it is not hacked or snooped. I disagree. I think that safety is ensured until we know that it has been hacked or snooped.

The quest for devising more secure encryption and stronger security, however, continues.

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OTHER VIEWS

RBI must address slowdown, even as inflation rises

It should frontload rate cuts in its December monetary policy review

The Monetary Policy Committee of the Reserve Bank of India is scheduled to meet in the first week of December. With various economic indicators indicating that growth has slowed down considerably over the past few months, the consensus so far has been that the MPC will cut the benchmark repo rate for the sixth straight time in December, bringing it below 5 per cent. But the sharper than expected spike in headline retail inflation in October has complicated the policy choices before the MPC. Data from the National Statistics Office shows that headline retail inflation edged up to 4.62 per cent in October, up from 3.99 per cent in September, largely on the back of higher food inflation. Core inflation, which is essentially inflation excluding food and fuel, has moderated further, however, signalling continued weakness in demand.

In its last policy review, the RBI had lowered its estimate for growth this year to 6.1 per cent, down from its earlier assessment of 6.9 per cent. But there is little possibility of the RBI's projections materialising, as various high frequency indicators suggest that growth is likely to fall below 5 per cent in the second quarter. So, while the MPC should carefully assess the trajectory of food inflation, its primary concern should be to



arrest the slowdown. It should frontload the rate cuts in its December policy, though the magnitude of the cut will depend on the extent to which growth deviates from the RBI's own projection.

The Indian Express, November 15

SC ruling on RTI is welcome

Paves way for greater transparency

The welcome ruling by a five-member Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court that the office of the Chief Justice of India is a "public authority" under the RTI Act, as much as the apex court itself, now enables the disclosure of information such as the judges' personal assets. The judgment's majority opinion, written by Justice Sanjiv Khanna, emphasised the need for transparency and accountability and that "disclosure is a facet of public interest". The Bench unanimously argued that the right to know under the RTI Act was not absolute and this had to be balanced with the right of privacy of judges.

The RTI Act is a strong weapon that enhances accountability, citizen

activism and, consequently, participative democracy, even if its implementation has come under strain in recent years due mainly to the Central government's apathy and disregard for the nuts and bolts of the Act. Yet, despite this, the Supreme Court judgment paves the way for greater transparency and could now impinge upon issues such as disclosure, under the RTI Act, by other institutions such as registered political parties. This is vital as political party financing is a murky area today, marked by opacity and exacerbated by the issue of electoral bonds, precluding citizens from being fully informed on sources of party incomes.

The Hindu, November 15

Media has right to criticise

Criticism and defamation are different

Freedom of the press — the Tebbit test of a democracy — had not been specifically mentioned in Section 19(1) of the Constitution but that may only be because BR Ambedkar, one of the architects of the Constitution, believed that the media's right to air their opinion is concomitant with the right of the citizens to express themselves freely and fearlessly. The minders of New India have let Ambedkar down in this respect as well. Andhra Pradesh, which has elected YS Jaganmohan Reddy's YSR Congress to power, has given its nod to an earlier provision that empowers secretaries of government departments to file complaints against the media for publishing defamatory news. Ambiguities exist in the interpretation of

defamation: Thin-skinned governments are ever willing to blur the line between legitimate criticism and defamation in a bid to stifle dissent. The media's right to be critical of a government or a specific department should be absolute in a democratic system of governance. Moreover, statutes exist to restrain the press from indulging in vendetta.

The media as an institution has also been complicit in its own undoing. One of the reasons being attributed to Mr Reddy's excess is that the media in Andhra Pradesh has, for long, been divided on the basis of political allegiances. Fairness must be integral to the media's conduct.

The Telegraph, November 15