t what point

will we start

caring about

the quality of our air?

I used to imagine that

almost the only lever

left with which to

drive Indian govern-

ment policy in any

positive direction was

the threat of national

humiliation in the

eyes of the world. But

the national capital,

and large swathes of

the country, are now

Caring about air



MIHIR SHARMA

widely known as having poisoned air and it looks increasingly likely to become a comic stereotype for India — as if we didn't already have enough of those — and yet it does not seem, that we are moving swiftly enough to deal with the problem.

I take almost for granted the notion that a massive public health crisis will not in and of itself cause the Indian state to make necessary changes. But the very fact that India is failing to deal with air that significantly harms people, especially children, and that causes people to think twice about visiting the nation's capital, suggests that as a democracy ours is broken in some fundamental way. I do not approve of comparisons to the People's Republic of China in general, but in this case the difference is truly troubling. When the air in Beijing and some other Chinese cities was a fraction as bad as in India's it became the focus of citizen anger and even the authoritarian government was forced to respond. Yes, because of the nature of the Chinese state its response was naturally more effective. But it nevertheless demonstrated greater responsiveness and co-ordination between different power centres. That has been notably missing in the Indian case.

There is a larger question here about health and politics that we must engage with. Why is it that public health in general is rarely high on the list of what Indian voters care about? We know that it matters greatly in their personal lives. The cost of healthcare is the number one reason for people falling back into poverty if they have managed to somehow scrape their way above the poverty line. You only have to take one trip to a publicly-run hospital in one of India's poorer states in order to realise first, that the conditions are awful, and second, that people are far from satisfied about it. Frequently, hapless healthcare professionals have to face mob anger and even violence from a dissatisfied public. But that does not translate into healthcare being an issue at election time.

Yes, the Aam Aadmi Party is hoping that things will be different in the coming Delhi elections. It is worth considering for a moment how much the party has transformed itself from an anti-corruption insurgent into a regional party that has sought to create a new template for the provision of public goods - not unlike other regional parties in other parts of the country. Because this is Delhi, however, which has the advantages of relative affluence and manageability over many other states, the public goods it has been able to carve out an identity around are education and health. The question is whether its performance has been distinctive enough and its narrative around the subject emphatic enough to convince voters that have not traditionally voted around issues such as healthcare and education.

Overall, however, it is dismayingly clear that issues such as healthcare will only become publicly identified as government responsibilities with electoral salience if politicians themselves take responsibility for them first. The template here, I feel, is sanitation. There too — since at least the Mother India controversy that so irked Mahatma Gandhi — India has had a globally poor reputation. There too, the negative effects on public health were high. But till central governments took responsibility for the problem. first through the Nirmal Bharat programme of the United Progressive Alliance and then, with far greater political resonance, through the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan of Narendra Modi, it seemed to be something that voters did not care to hold politicians accountable for.

We therefore must hope for a similar template to take hold in healthcare. If the AAP goes to the people talking about healthcare, and the Bharatiya Janata Party is forced to respond by claiming that AAP's d livery has ficiently effective and that it will do a better job, then that at least might set up a virtuous cycle for politics going forward. What one must hope for now is that this is replicated somehow at the national level. We need to start talking about the successes and failures of the new universal healthcare programme, and whether it is being genuinely effective. If "Modicare" becomes a talisman for the prime minister's second term, then perhaps a similar virtuous cycle could take hold at the national level. But, even if hospitalisation costs are perhaps on the verge of getting on the national agenda, it is also clear that very few want to take responsibility for air pollution. Naturally the Delhi Chief Minister has to talk about it, but that's not enough. Until public anger across states is stark and unmistakable, it is difficult to see how the problem will be seriously tackled. And the fact is that, in spite of red eyes and sore throats across north India, we're not there yet.

Why India must bother about BRI& RCEP

Its refusal to participate in the two says that this country of 1.2 billion people and a \$3 trillion economy shies away from playing a major part in shaping Asia's future



SUNANDA K DATTA-RAY

ee Kuan Yew would not have minded Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, whom he got to know as India's high commissioner to Singapore, saying that "the centrality of ASEAN to Asia is not what it is (sic) used to be". But India's retreat from the Asian stage under Jaishankar's watch as external affairs minister would have confirmed his worst apprehensions about Narendra Modi's prime ministership.

ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, was not Lee's brainchild. He stressed when I was writing *Looking East to Look West:* Lee Kuan Yew's Mission India that Thailand

played the key role in its creation. His own political objectives were twofold. First, to build up tiny Singapore's economy so that it was not swept under by the tides of great power politics. And second, to ensure that a prosperous India was the lead player in taking over Britain's Asian role and balancing China's rising might. As Jagat Mehta, India's foreign secretary from 1976 to 1979, put it, Lee "understood India's potential before we did". Sadly, he might feel that the potential is now being squandered after being carefully husbanded by PV Narasimha Rao (whom he hailed as India's Deng Xiaoping) and Manmohan Singh, whom he came to value as a respected friend.

So far as his own city-state is concerned, Lee was spectacularly successful. He boasted that Singapore had Asia's highest per capita income after Japan and the most dissatisfied people. For the discerning Jagat Mehta, Singapore was "the only former colony to make a success of independence". The survival of that independence called for a certain regional architecture that remains incomplete if India leaves the field open to China. Chagrin is understandable at having to follow China's initiatives but only the sluggards in Delhi, loud with bombastic verbiage but slow to act, are responsible for not coming up with sparkling new ideas.

Whatever the reason, India's earlier refusal to participate in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and now in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) tells the world that this country of 1.2 billion people and a \$3 trillion economy shies away from playing a major part in shaping Asia's future.

It is coincidence that soon after the RCEP's rejection, Sri Lankans elected as president Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the defence secretary identified with the Hambantota port which greatly increased indebtedness to China and added to India's concerns regarding China's Indian Ocean ambitions. The development highlighted the need not only for constant vigilance but also intelligent responses that don't alienate India's neighbours. The 10 ASEAN members, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand joined the RCEP expecting India to do so too. They have friendly economic and political relations with both Asian giants and know that a continental concert becomes impossible if one stands aloof. The RCEP and BRI supplement each other in Beijing's strategy to ensure the smooth flow of exports and imports. Geography demands India's inclusion.

The objection to the BRI is politically and emotionally understandable but not logically sustainable. If it's because Pakistan illegally ceded Indian territory to China, then Pakistan, not China, is the main offender. If the charge is of forcible occupation of Indian territory, then China should be penalised for Aksai Chin. Consistency of principle isn't static thinking. As for the RCEP, it's defeatist to fear being swamped with cheap Chinese products. A vigorous self-confident economy should be able to undertake reforms and regulatory measures instead of seeking refuge in protection. The longer India holds back, the more difficult it will to adjust to globalisation and boost production to create jobs for millions of new entrants every year into the labour market.

Ideally, India's labour-intensive and low-cost manufacturing should enjoy financial and logistic support from China to the benefit of both countries. Even if the time for such cooperation has not yet come, institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (India is the second largest shareholder after China), the Shanghai-based New Development Bank (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa are equal partners) and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Forum, which met in Kolkata in late April, indicate divisive politics can be put aside in the interests of growth.

Lee would have said it's like returning to the cooperative climate in which India and China shaped Southeast Asia, giving Indo-China the culture and traditions of both civilisations. With Asia resurgent, he looked forward to a repetition of that evolutionary process. "If India is not here, I think there will be a lack of balance," he said, adding confidently, "but I think India will come".

Amen to that.

LUNCH WITH BS ▶ SHAHEEN MISTRI | FOUNDER, THE AKANKSHA FOUNDATION & FOUNDER-CEO, TEACH FOR INDIA

The path less trodden

Mistri tells Anjuli Bhargava how her experiences and influences as a teenager and young adult shaped the unconventional path she decided to take later on

→ tarting from the age of 12 and through her School for hearing and speech impaired children, at the Happy Home and School for the blind, again in Mumbai, at an orphanage for special needs children in Indonesia, worked with autistic youth in New York while interacting with and observing closely children with multiple disabilities because her mother worked in the field.

Lebanon, a British and then an international school in Greece, an elementary school in Indonesia and completed her junior high and high school in the US, finishing her education from a very high income, elite school in Greenwich, Connecticut, a rich suburb outside New York.

As a result, Shaheen Mistri, now 48, the force behind Teach for India, couldn't help but question the dichotomy between her own life of privilege and the lives of children she came in contact with during her formative years. "What had I done to deserve all that I had" was a question that occupied her mind, unaware that this was an unusual thought for a teenager. Her "powerful" volunteering experiences and such thoughts shaped the direction her life would later take

restaurant in the Fort area. Mistri orders a sweet corn soup and a prawn and chive dumpling. I opt for a lemon coriander soup and still vegetables in black bean sauce and fried rice that I suggest we share. It was at the age of 18 and after a year at the Tufts University, USA, that, to her parent's surprise and dismay, she decided to drop out of and come back to live with her grandmother in Mumbai, feeling a tug she could not quite explain and one that has lasted 30 years. She enrolled in Xavier's Mumbai to earn a degree, the only condition her parents, who had encouraged her to think independently, placed on her. Soon she found herself spending all her free time to discover Mumbai in a new light, one that she had not been exposed to in her yearly summer vacation visits. Mistri started going to a slum in Cuffe Parade every day where she made her first friend — a girl who was the same age and who lived a life radically different from her own. With the assumptions that grow naturally from a life of privilege, Mistri expected she would be able to teach her friend and the community a lot but soon found it was the other way round.

She also didn't expect to see so many positives in a community that faced so many challenges. The courage, acceptance and yet the resilience and positivity blew her away. "I came in with this idea that I had so much and I was the one who was going to give not realising that I will be the bigger receiver here," she adds. The unassuming Mistri did however bring her own set of skills to the table and soon started teaching a bunch of kids from the slum every afternoon at Sandhya's house, which had become her base in the slum. That is where the seeds of what would later become The Akanksha Foundation were sown.

There were other traumatic experiences that she feels shaped her world view. At the slum, a 15 year old mentally challenged girl who lived with her working mother succumbed to her burns after her clothes caught fire while cooking. Mistri spent 15 days in the hospital at the girl's bedside as the mother had no time to spare. The mother was almost relieved her child was no more as she felt the odds were stacked against her in more ways than one. "To see a mother actually thinking her only child was better off dead was heartbreaking," Mistri explains. She was also appal d at th kind of superstitions the community held onto even at times to their disadvantage. Education, she felt, was the only way to lift them out of their situation.

two and spark people's willingness to help. These "pockets of resources" were brought together and Akanksha grew from that single Colaba centre to 60 across Mumbai. Over 4,000 students over the last 15 years were offered every type of support - adult guidance above all so that they could overcome the challenges they were born with and find their place in society. The centres soon evolved into 20 full-

fledged schools run in partnership with government schools.

Mistri says that through this journey she enjoyed the privilege of being let into people's lives. "The grace, generosity, lack of resentment we saw in our kids taught us a lot including the fact that no problem is insurmountable," she adds.

She wanted to reach more children and as a consequence Teach For India was born in 2009. She was convinced that you could only change the system if you changed the calibre of people who engage with it. In India, the bottom 10 per cent of the graduates get into the education sector with the stars opting for more lucrative professions like investment banking, law or consultancy.

In 2009, the Teach for India programme was formally launched in India, with the caveat that only the best would be recruited as fellows. Over 2,500 applications came in and 87 fellows were chosen in the first year. "The counter-intuitive approach worked. You take something that people usually don't want to do and make it impossible to get in and lo and behold, people want in!", she points out.

The fellowship teaches youngsters "leadership like nothing else can" by giving them charge of a bunch of young kids in a government school setting, with challenges they may have never faced themselves or knew existed.

Now in its tenth year. 3.000 fellows have completed their tenures and 1,000 fellows are engaged in the two-vear felowshin in seven cities cur rently. A pipeline of leaders has been created for the sector in the process as 70 per cent of the fellows have stayed on in the education sector and launched initiatives of their own. I interrupt to ask what else — education is evidently her biggest passion - keeps her going. Mistri is deeply knowledgeable about art (she's recently started taking classes) and theatre, she plays the piano and absolutely loves animals. In fact, the only real conflict she ever faced was whether she should work with children or with animals. She's now glad she picked the former.

teens, she volunteered at Mumbai's EAR She studied at a French pre-school in

We are meeting at Mumbai's Royal China

A second massive influence that led her on the unconventional path her life took was her maternal grandmother she lived with a rebel who lived life entirely on her own terms. She'd had a love marriage back when no one understood the concept, helped her children explore things generally forbidden and became a painter at the ripe age of 75.

Our food has arrived and I am the only one focusing on it. My soup is delicious, so are the stir-fried vegetables. She has her soup, dumplings and a tiny amount of stir-fry, eating absent-mindedly.

After she'd been teaching kids in the slum for a while, Mistri felt she needed a space outside the slum so that she could take her students out of their circumstances and teach in a different environment. She approached 20 schools in south Mumbai, all of which refused to offer her their premises even for two hours after regular school hours were over. Their intransigence in fact strengthened her resolve.

Finally, one of the priests at the Holy Name High School in Colaba agreed to give her space and the first Akanksha centre was born as an after-school school. Every time she went to Xavier's, she met dozens of students who were willing to volunteer their time. She also saw children with an insatiable hunger to learn. All she needed to do was act as a bridge between the

As we wind up our conversation, she drives the conversation back to her Akanksha children (she has two girls of her own). As I can see, the lady might have covered a fair distance but is far from done.

How Purvideen Kheragot its road The urban-rural culture clash



PEOPLE LIKE THEM **GEETANJALI KRISHNA**

here was a time when families of eligible girls rejected wedding proposals from families belonging to Purvideen Khera, a huge denotified urban settlement in Lucknow. There was something that this slum lacked, which many of Lucknow's other 700plus slums had -- a road. Ambulances, school vans and trucks carrying vital goods would have to stop outside the slum that sprawls over a kilometer on both sides of the Haider canal. The single alley inside the slum was so narrow that if someone even parked a two-wheeler there, another couldn't pass. It seemed difficult to imagine this as I, with community activist Rampati Devi, walked down the road that dissects the community today. Here's what she told me.

Over the years, many people in Purvideen Khera had demanded a road. No official addressed the issue as the slum wasn't recognised by the municipality. More importantly, space for a road would have to be created by breaking parts of houses on either side of it. It seemed like an impossible task.

"We realised that only we as a community can get this done," said Rampati. "We'd all have to sacrifice parts of our houses for collective good," she added saying that many of her neighbours were no strangers to collective action. These women were already organised into a collective, Shahri Garib Sangharsh Morcha through Lucknow-based Vigvan Foundation to demand their tenurial rights. However, when the same group placed their proposal to the community, many ridiculed the idea. "No one was willing to relinquish even an inch of space," she said. Help came in the form of Phoolmati Devi.

Phoolmati and her husband had one of the few pucca houses in the slum and operated a general store out of a room in front of their house. "We became the first in our lane to demolish a room and our shop to make way for the road," she recalled. This had a cascading effect. If

the couple could demolish part of their expensive pucca house, couldn't their next-door neighbour give up a mud wall? "Before our eyes, the space for our road was getting created because one by one, everyone was feeling compelled to demolish the fronts of their houses," she narrated. In this manner, the morcha activists were able to clear an astounding one and a half kilometers of area.

Next, the intrepid women had to convince the community to contribute for the actual levelling of the road. Initially, they collected ₹2,000 from every household. With this money they hired a JCB at ₹800 an hour to level the road. Funds quickly ran out. They had to collect more. The road was finally levelled after 22 days of work spread over four months at the cost of ₹4.5 lakh

Who'd have imagined that a bunch of poor, illiterate women in a slum would be able to achieve this? As Rampati strode down the road she helped build, I mused that perhaps when a disempowered and disadvantaged community is organised into a cohesive group, the consequences are far-reaching. And that it shouldn't come as a surprise that the women of Purvideen Khera who originally came together only to demand their tenurial rights, also ended up building a one-anda-half kilometer road along the way.



PEOPLE LIKE US KISHORE SINGH

ow that we are farmers — sort of my wife and I have begun to keep bucolic timings as far as our mornings are concerned. Which means, dear reader, while you are snuggling in your quilts, still hours away from your wake-up calls, chota hazris, or walks, we're pottering around amidst our vegetable patch, picking chillies (fiery), uprooting carrots (not yet tender), marvelling at the cauliflowers (perfect), fretting over the broccoli which refuses to flower (imported seeds), monitoring the papaya (which is resisting growth). Thanks to a barter system our caretaker has perfected, we get the pick of neigh-

bouring fields - lemons, brinjals, pomello, cucumbers — for the loan of a lawn mower, or a pipe connection from our bore well. Having fussed around a bit, we drive back to our city home to find the rest of the family still in bed. Only we farmers — sort of — have it tough.

The hard life is accentuated by our urban duality, when we must go to work later in the day despite an early start. Urban lives are the opposite of rural ones, especially when it comes to evenings out. Farmers sleep early, sometimes at times when we're still in office, and parties start even later. It takes a toll, this pre-dawn rising and late socialising, but the reality is that we can't afford to be farmers without a city job.

Our maali's family is generous with sharing produce, charring yam and skinning it for us to relish. My wife has been at pains to tell them they must wash their hands (to their bemusement) before dicing, peeling or otherwise serving anything, and invite some scorn for insisting it be served plated, with fork, spoons and knives, in a tray. So, the radish must be washed and sliced, the fruit peeled, the salad drizzled with dressing. Last weekend, the maali wanted to know whether he could pluck me some sugarcane stalks. "You peel the cane back with your teeth and then chew

it for juice," he explained. I told him I'd like some, yes, but sliced and diced, much to his amusement.

If our ways are alien to them, our children — and friends — who come visiting us over weekends prefer not our farm produce because their idea of countryside dining - or a picnic on the lawns seems to consist of pizzas and pastas with freshly crushed herbs for a "rural" flavour. I'm game for something more rustic — a khichdi, perhaps, or hot corn rotis made with our own flour, served with saag of mustard greens plucked fresh off the field. The maali gets me lassi sometimes, making the kids turn up their noses - they've only ever had it in tetrapacks. They'd prefer a beer. I join them on occasion, even though farmers oughtn't to be drinking during the day.

For most part, we dress in tracks similar — if a little less soiled — than that of the farm hands, hoping to merge in. Alas, we speak differently, and our familv and friends dress in clothes more suited to urban environments. The cultural clash is most evident around the swimming pool — which we are now trying to screen from prying eyes. We'd put it in for exercise, or leisure. Our caretaker, escorting his father around the property, explained to his father however: "This is where they have their baths."

OPINION 9

Weekend Business Standard

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MUMBAI | 23 NOVEMBER 2019 China is out of economic ammo NOAH SMITH

he Chinese government has issued vague but stern-sounding warnings that it will retaliate for a bill passed by Congress that would require the White House to protect human rights and ensure the territory's autonomy. But China's options for economic retaliation are limited. And most of these options have already been exercised amid President Donald Trump's trade war.

China's most obvious method of retaliation would be to stop buying American goods. But China has already imposed tariffs on \$135 billion worth of products. Sales to China from all over the US have plunged.

The agricultural industry has been hit especially hard. Farm bankruptcies are up 24 per cent this year. Farm bankruptcies are up 24 per cent this year, and a report by the American Farm Bureau Federation finds that almost 40 per cent of farmers' income this year will come either from insurance payouts or government bailouts. This is an economic catastrophe for farmers and a headache for exporters. Few expect exports to China to recover even if the trade war ends tomorrow because China has found other suppliers. Even those US exporters who are still selling their goods in China must realise their situation is shaky; if they're wise, they're already looking for alternative markets. So China has little left to threaten on the trade front. The other big weapon in the Chinese arsenal is investment. The Chinese government is traditionally a major buyer of US government debt, and it holds the second-biggest stash of Treasuries (after Japan). Over the years, many have fretted that a spat between the US and China would lead the latter to sell off that mountain of debt, creating a world of hurt for the US financial system and economy. But this danger is vastly exaggerated. As recent experience demonstrates, the US simply doesn't need Chinese government cash. In 2015 and 2016 China experienced one of the biggest capital flights in history, with about \$1 trillion pouring out of the country. This resulted in a huge drawdown of China's foreign-exchange reserves, most of which are US bonds. If the US were heavily dependent on Chinese government financing, interest rates on US debt - and by extension, throughout the US economy - should have risen. Instead, they fell.

If China can dump a quarter of its US bond holdings and not cause a noticeable movement in American borrowing costs, then the threat represented by the remaining three-quarters probably is small. The US, like the rest of the developed world, is simply awash in financial capital. Unloading its reserve stockpile in retaliation for US actions toward Hong Kong would put China in greater danger than the US Without the cushion of reserves, a repeat of 2015-16 could lead to a classic emerging-market crisis in China, with capital outflows forcing a sudden currency depreciation, devastating the financial system and bringing the economy to a sudden stop. One final thing China could do is restrict its exports of rare earths, a crucial input for many technology products. China now dominates production of these commodities. But as my colleague David Fickling has noted, this threat also is minimal; when China cut off rare-earth exports to Japan in 2010 as part of a geopolitical dispute, Japan simply teamed up with an Australian company to find new supplies, quickly breaking China's monopoly. The US could easily replicate this feat. So China has few economic weapons left with which to threaten the US over Hong Kong. It will likewise be powerless to retaliate over other geopolitical and humanitarian disputes, such as US condemnation of the mass internment of Muslims in China's Xinjiang province or territorial spats in the South China Sea. For that matter, China's continued ability to escalate the trade war seems limited. But China does have other weapons at its disposal. The kind that explode. In pushing China over everything from trade to human rights to Hong Kong's autonomy, the US should remember its own history. It was relentless US economic and diplomatic pressure over Japan's invasion of China that pushed that country into launching a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. With its economic arsenal depleted, China could at some point decide that a harder form of retaliation is in order. ©Bloomberg

Weekend Ruminations will resume next week

Do Indian Muslims matter?

Indian Muslims have been denied their rightful place in the power structure as punishment for their voting choices. This is self-defeating

he perennial regret of the BJP had always been

that Muslims punch way above their deserved political weight in India. It was stated most pithily, in the conversations by Balbir Punj, BJP leader, key intellectual voice, and my former colleague in the Express Group: "Muslims," he said, "have a veto on who will rule India and who won't."

The conversation happened just after Atal Bihari Vajpayee's second NDA government had been defeated in the Lok Sabha by a solitary vote in 1999 as all "secular" parties came together against it. Not long earlier (1996). Vaipavee's first NDA government was defeated in all of 13 days.

The second NDA lasted just over a year and Mr Punj made an arguable case that anyone who had any interest in seeking the Muslim vote, or fear of losing it, was happy to bury his hatchet to deny the BJP power. The Muslim vote was much too valuable for them to lose, and their commitment to secular values, in that view stated by Mr Punj, was merely a cynical cover. I bet this view would have been further strengthened after UPA-1 came up, with even the Left supporting the Congress-led government, all to keep the BJP out. The difference in seats between the Congress and BJP was marginal then, 145 to 138.

The BJP had, at various points of time, tried to reach out to the Muslims. Vajpayee himself was the party's friendliest and most inclusive face for minorities, L K Advani cultivated many prominent Muslim intellectuals, even the Muslim Left. From participating in Muslim festivals to praise for Jinnah, to the choice of

APJ Abdul Kalam for Rashtrapati Bhavan, the Vajpayee-Advani BJP tried to breach the fortress of Muslim voters. But the party lacked conviction, and failed.

The BJP translated this as the Muslim veto on who will rule India. The UPA decade, when the BJP's power declined across the country, strengthened that view. Then, Narendra Modi and Amit Shah rose in 2014, and turned the equation upside down, or inside out — take your pick. They won a full majority SHEKHAR GUPTA without much - if any - help from India's Muslim voters.

A new template had been set in Indian politics. Many BJP leaders were upfront with it: "We have now accepted we have to fight in a field with only 80 per cent voters, leaving Muslims and most Christians out." Once they accepted that reality, the challenge was simple: "Get about 50 per cent of that Hindu vote, we could rule India with a comfortable majority." They proved this again in 2019.

A most unexpected transformation in Indian politics had come about: The large Muslim population, now nearly 200 million, had been rendered electoral-



ly irrelevant. Don't buy into any folklore about Muslim women being grateful for the triple talaq ban, or aspirational younger Muslims having voted for the BJP. Demographic analysis by every reliable exit poll underlines this for us. It stunned the BJP's "secular" rivals. It also left the Muslims searching for answers.

Now, put yourself in the shoes of one of our 200 million Muslims and the picture may look something like this: My vote has lost its power, alright. But, should I be deprived even my rightful place in the power structure?

The Modi cabinet, in its sixth year now, has only one Muslim: Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, in charge of minority affairs. It is also one of those unfamiliar junctures in our history - and it's a long one when none of the key constitutional positions, president, vice-president, speaker of Lok Sabha, heads of armed forces, security and intelligence agencies, the Election Commission, or the judiciary features any Muslim.

There isn't one state with a Muslim chief minister and the one that might have needed to have one. Jammu and Kashmir, isn't even a state any more. None of the secre-

taries in the key ministries is a Muslim, nor any important regulator. We can search deeper, but in my quick recollection. Nasim Zaidi as chief election commissioner (2015-17) was the last Muslim to hold a constitutional position of consequence, besides Hamid Ansari, of course. Among India's 37 states and union territories, there are just two Muslim governors: Najma Heptullah and Arif Mohammed Khan. Where does it leave me in today's India?

We know the arguments from the BJP: Sabka saath, sabka vikas, to begin with. The absence of major communal riots is the next. Then, we can go on. As stories By special arrangement with ThePrint

by ThePrint's reporters Sanya Dhingra and Fatima Khan have recently shown, under the Modi government the success rate of Muslim candidates in the IAS, etc., has, if anything, risen marginally and more minority scholarships are going to the community's students than under the UPA.

But certainly, a 15 per cent population in a truly equal state would believe it also deserves a place in the sun, a slice of the power and governance pie. We will give you the post-2014 BJP's answer to this: "You can't first insist on voting against us en bloc, as if we are enemies, and then also demand a share in power. Much chutzpah?"

The question we are raising - by choosing a headline like "Do Indian Muslims matter?" - draws precisely from this and seeks to argue against this deeply diluted and qualified notion of constitutional equality. You have your vote, scholarships, jobs, and opportunity. For a share of power, maybe you should rethink your voting choices.

Or, too bad that 15 per cent of you are so scattered as to count for no more than 27 Muslim MPs in this Lok Sabha. You've seen this model elsewhere. The large Muslim minority in Israel is the only Arabic population anywhere to have a free and equal vote, safety, economic, and social opportunity. But the political office they can rise to, a place in the governance structure, is limited. It's a republic, but a Zionist republic. The new deal for Muslims in India also seems to be a similar one. Except, India was never imagined or designed to be a Hindu republic. That is where this argument fails.

The Indian Muslims are not a monolith, nor are the subcontinent's. Think about this. Forty per cent of all of the world's Muslims live in the subcontinent. And vet, the number of the region's Muslims in ISIS has never crossed a few low hundreds. Of these, Indians have never reached even three figures. Why is it so?

It is essentially because the subcontinent's Muslims have a strong nationalism of their own in India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh. They have a flag, an anthem, a cricket team to support, and politicians to adore or detest. The fantasy of a Caliphate as a mythical new and pristinely Islamic nation-state has no lure for them. In different parts of the subcontinent, Muslims also lean on diverse denominators or identities: Language, ethnicity, culture, political ideology, and not just religion. Bangladesh came into being as cultural and linguistic identity took precedence over the religion-driven two-nation theory.

This is a great strength of the region, and no liabil ity. It applies most of all for India. The continued isolation and sullenness of the Muslim minority at their post-2014 irrelevance is not what India needs. Don't confuse silence for acquiescence. Indian Muslims have also grown a new middle-class. An educated and professional elite has emerged. They no longer follow the old dvnastic Left-Urdu aristocracies or the Ulema (clergy) as their leaders. As young Delhi University scholar Asim Ali wrote in an article last week, they are now asking them tough questions. Punishing them for their voting preferences may bring some vengeful, servesyou-right joy. But it will be self-defeating. No country or society ever prospered or remained secure by marginalising more than one-sixth of its own.

Solutions to pollution need political will



VIEWPOINT **DEVANGSHU DATTA** have boomed. The morning an obvious problem becomes edge of starvation. walk or indeed, any walk outdoors, has become an act of reckless courage.

take before political consensus Things haven't gotten any better through all this time despite the fact that this affects the health of every resident of North India's plains. That detail. should make dealing with it a political imperative since it cuts across all ideologies and

Looking back, Gandhi started **before an obvious** income classes. Indeed, any the party that offered credible solutions to pollution should stand in the early

an issue that politicians of every Indira Gandhi may just have been paying lip service to hue are prepared to grapple with? Also, how long does it poverty alleviation and tackling years. hunger when she started translates into effective action? mouthing those slogans. But it These are interesting questions did lead to political consensus. has come to

power since Indira How long does it take 1977 has subscribed to that *Garibi* problem becomes an issue consensus. Hatao campaign that politicians of every Along the way, hue are prepared to hunger

mation that has held power at state or Centre in the last 20 Successes are qualified. There have been multiple

NATIONAL INTEREST

financial defaults and unfinand worth pondering in some Every political formation that ished road projects; the power sector is a financial horror-show due to loss-making state electricity boards; water resource management is abysmal. But that is due to the generic incompetence of India's policy-makers, not the lack of political will

through by every political for-

Building the elephant

EYE CULTURE ATANU BISWAS

he blind men of the parable went on debating whether the elephant was like a winnowing basket (ear), or a plowshare (tusk), or a plow (trunk), or a pillar (foot), by touching only one part of the body. However, instead of fighting for their own beliefs, they could possibly try to build an image of the animal by combining all their data. That's data-linking, of course. People have become smarter, and gather information from weights exceeding some pre-specified different sources by creating a new and matching are declared to be matches. richer dataset, which is of tremendous

dling missing data may affect the performance and reliability of the linkage approach. These are issues which must be treated with utmost care.

Typically, while linking two datasets, record linkage algorithm first fixes a set of linking variables, called identifiers (such as name, address), common in both datasets, and a numerical weight is calculated for each compared pair, which reflects the degree of confidence of the paired records, representing the same person or entity. Then, the pairs with

Several techniques are available for

Spot — an unending storm that rages across the giant planet. India has its Great Brown Spot – a massive also lack of political will. smudge of pollution that vitiates the quality of life for months every winter.

The Great Brown Spot showed up on satellite pictures about five years ago. Since then, it's become a permanent state points fingers at the othfeature of the Northern winter. Words like Vogmask and acronyms like AOI have entered the Hinglish lexicon. Schemes like odd-even have been implemented. Schools are now braced for regular shutdowns ing solutions. every winter. Air purifier sales

upiter has its Great Red to gain substantially in vote share across several states.

which rocks.

rejected by the voter.

can spring nasty surprises.

to give the UPA a cleaner image,

ordered many inquiries and

ordered - and will order -

economy. Time will tell if these

help or not.

Why hasn't this happened? The scale is large but there is Ideally, the administrations of four states and the Centre mid should be setting up a joint task Povertv force and inducting experts to hunger tackle the problem. Instead we been integral to see a blame game where each ers. Obviously, the solutions would be complicated, and equally obviously, there can be

the subcontilocalised famines in the 1960s no solution until there's a political consensus that there's something to be gained by seek-

1970s and folgrapple with? Also, how lowed through long does it take before with the more **political consensus** translates into effective pointed trifecta of Roti, Kapda, action? These are interesting questions Makaan in the and worth pondering in 1970s. and some detail have

nental civilisational experience 40 years has made attempts at for millennia. There were poverty reduction.

The next major consensus, before the Green Revolution, at least in terms of political slo-Indeed, the US' diplomatic gans, was Bijli, Sadak, Paani. leverage over India then was The focus on basic infrastruclargely due to the PL-480 ture gained consensus during Program, which donated wheat the Atal Bihari Vajpayee regime How long does it take before to a nation that lived on the and again, it has been followed

hasn't

every govern-

ment in the last

It is also undeniable that. been largely alleviated. despite defaults and abandoned projects, India has a better road Poverty reduction is a more network now. The power grid controversial has a larger footprint and it's subject -- policy more reliable, though that's not in this regard saying much, given how poor been electric supply used to be. optimal but

The key factor here is that these are now matters of consensus: Citizens will demand that any government provides basic infrastructure regardless of its ideological stances. Pollution alleviation probably has to hit the same levels of consensus before the Great Brown Spot reduces in size. That might take a couple of decades going by the experiences cited above.

whether to bail the water out or

plug the holes or trim the sails

So what should the govern-

but openly instead of by the

Indeed, the problem with

or open them out.

help in policy making.

Linkages among medical databases, such as electronic health records (EHRs), EHRs across multiple healthcare settings, health insurance claims, and patient-generated data are becoming increasingly important in delivering high-quality health care in different countries. Linking databases of Aadhaar, permanent account number, Voter ID, bank accounts and mobile numbers, for example, has been dominating our lives in the recent past. There has been a paradigm shift in the census methodology over the last two decades or so — especially in Europe. where the traditional questionnairebased censuses have been replaced by register-based ones. In fact, data from population registers, municipalities, jobs files, social security administration, pensions and life insurance benefits, schools, different types of tax records, health and hospital are now assembled to prepare censuses in many places. In India, the home minister recently asked officials to frame a plan to combine the databases such as Aadhaar and voter card into the upcoming 2021 census database.

Linking big datasets from various sources/registers is a daunting task. However, large-scale data-linking is not new; it has been successfully performed elsewhere. For example, in 2010, Luxembourg-based Eurostat launched a micro data-linking project in European business statistics with 10 participating countries. The aim was to link data from the International sourcing survey with structural business and international trade in goods statistics.

The objective of data-integration is to identify and combine information from corresponding records on different source datasets. Standard software packages such as R RecordLinkage package. Merge ToolBox, Link Plus, and Stanford Entity Resolution Framework (SERF) are available for data linking. However, it's certainly not easy to combine different registers concerning 1.35 billion people, for example. Even the name of a person might have been recorded differently in different registers. Are Debdulal Banerjee, Deb Dulal Benerjee, Deb Dulal Bannerjee, Debu Bandyopadhyay, and D Bandyopadhyay, having the same date of birth, the same person? There might have been typographical errors in some registers, but they might also be different individuals. There might be various The writer is a professor of Statistics at the kinds of missingness in data, and han- Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata

such purposes. For example, a "deterministic" algorithm checks whether records agree or disagree on a given set of identifiers in "all-or-nothing" fashion either in a single step or in multiple steps. An "exact deterministic" linkage requires an exact match on all identifiers, while an 'approximate or iterative deterministic linkage requires an exact match on one of several rounds of matching, but not on all possible identifiers. For example, a procedure may rely on matching two or more of the following identifiers: Year of birth, day of birth, middle initial, and gender.

However, it is likely that certain identifiers (like date of birth) have more discriminatory power than others. More complicated "probabilistic" strategies assess the discriminatory power of each identifier, and also the likelihood that two records are of the same person based on whether they agree or disagree on different identifiers. Matching probabilities may be obtained exogenously, reflecting past experience or expert opinion (e.g Fellegi-Sunter approach), or calculated endogenously (for example, expectationmaximisation algorithm). More sophisticated methods include a "deterministic" component into the "probabilistic" strategy, and such a combined strategy may be characterised as "hybrid probabilistic-deterministic" method.

In any case, the procedure to be applied should be "iterative" in nature. Moreover, a proper verification of the performance of the data-linking procedure should be done by taking a random sample of linked data. Certainly, matching errors may occur. The errors concerning clubbing a pair from two registers might be of two types - false positive and false negative. The associated data scientists need to devise effective algorithm, depending on the nature of registers to be linked to ensure that the data-linking becomes smooth, sufficiently accurate and, of course, hassle-free for the common people. There should be a convenient guideline to deal with the 'errors" subsequently.

Certainly, it's a mammoth task to build up the "elephant" by correctly assembling different types of "registers". However, once the complete elephant is formed, it might create waves of opportunities for more complex and expanded policies and research no doubt about that.

UPA, NDA and perfect storms



LINE AND LENGTH

T C A SRINIVASA-RAGHAVAN

hink about it. The NDA 2 is finding itself in exactly the same kind of trouble that the UPA 2 had done after being re-elected in 2009. Not a week goes by without some bad news

The difference is that in the case of the Manmohan Singh government, it was widespread corruption that caused the trouble. In the case of the Modi government, it is the economy. The bad news has been unrelenting.

Dr Singh appeared helpless then, and floundered. Mr Modi also looks helpless now and is floundering. He was not perhis colleagues let him down.

It's exactly the same with grandchildren.

Mr Modi. After almost six years The NDA partners are havin power, we don't know what worms are hiding under BJP. Unity is giving way to diversity. Political need, it is evi-By 2013, the last full year of dent, waits for no one.

the Singh government, eco-It's worth recalling that in 2010 the BJP was in complete nomic bad news had also begun to surface. The man who made disarray and the Congress the most of it electorally was Mr appeared firmly in the driver's seat. By 2014, it had been con-Modi. No promise of his was signed to the dustbin.

It will be interesting if cor-What cooked its goose was ruption becomes to the NDA in the perception of incompetence 2022 what inflation had become and crookedness. Perceptions to the UPA by 2012. It's unlikeare like that only. They don't ly, but ministerial colleagues regard facts as sacrosanct.

It is this problem that Mr Dr Singh, in a desperate bid Modi's government is currently encountering. The general belief is that it hasn't a clue as to punitive actions. None of them how to tackle the sudden and helped. Mr Modi has also massive deceleration in the rate of growth of industrial output of the Indian economy. It accounts for 15 per cent of GDP. similar desperate actions for the

Even when it does the right By late 2012, the nonthings, the government is being Congress members of the UPA criticised. Indeed, the truth is had given up. Many of them that it's done exactly what econtold me they were looking foromists and other busybodies ward to putting their feet have been recommending on sonally corrupt. Far from it. But up and, in a manner of macro, micro, taxation, and speaking, playing with their administrative matters.

The speed may be disappointing but the direction is ing similar problems with the not. But the mood has turned unforgiving. Once a perception takes hold, the constraints that governments operate under are seen as mere excuses.

> which I have written previously, is the complete disjunction between the government's political policies and economic will because there's no money policies. In politics, it gets the big things — and the associated perceptions — absolutely right. That helps it win elections.

UPA, which got its economics generally right, at least until Pranab Mukherjee became finance minister. To date no one knows why he did all that he did.

The perfect storm

Singh one, has thus run into what is called a perfect storm, where everything that can go wrong does so at the same time. It's like a boat that springs a simultaneous hundred leaks and also starts running into a you reduce speed, not bash gale. The crew doesn't know on regardless.

The current deficiency in demand for industrial goods is like that. The government is trying to boost both consumer and investment spending but it's like a crew with too few plugs and towels, as well as a faulty jib.

The biggest puzzle, about ment do? It has only one economically sensible option: Reduce expenditure — which it Chidambaram method of postponing and hiding it.

This is the opposite of the depressed consumer and investment sentiment is largely because the government is spending too much, and des-

perately demanding tax revenue. It needs to go easy. In Keynesian terms, it's the G in the national income identity that is holding C and I The Modi government, like the down, instead of raising them.

This is the precise opposite of what Keynes had thought would happen.

When things stop working as they should, you get the perfect storm. And when that happens