

Cart before the horse?



VIJAENDER TAKHAN

Whatever people may say about Prime Minister Modi, he has demonstrated strong will to act. Cooking gas penetration has improved the life of the home maker. Electricity is available in 80 per cent of the homes. Banking is available to all with world leading payment systems. Universal health insurance promises to leave the United States

in the dark, making President Trump curious. Toilets were installed in rural homes. Now there is focus on making water available. These initiatives together count towards the good governance the prime minister promised in the elections.

But India demands far better governance. A game changer is needed. Universal wired broadband access is the only slingshot the government has in its arsenal to put power in people's hands and propel the country to greatness.

India is a leader in mobile broadband. However, while all studies attest the critical importance of wired broadband to economic development, jobs and income growth, the jury is mixed on mobile broadband. The World Bank reports that mobile broadband can decrease productive economic activity and growth. Thus, Indians spend 16 hours a month watching video on the tiny screen compared to 15 minutes in 2015. Younger Indians likely watch more.

So do demonetisation and GST take too much of the blame? TRAI should report how mobile broadband is used. All carriers have the data.

Compared to government spending on other basic citizen utilities — food, housing, cooking gas, electricity, water, sanitation, roads, health, and education, Digital India is on a starvation diet. Consider the data. Only 3 per cent of the ₹42.5 trillion government spend on these utilities since 2014 went to critical telecommunications.

A lot was spent on BSNL, not exactly a paragon of good governance. And on BBNL whose charter to connect village panchayats was subcontracted to BSNL. The result is that India's wired broadband subscriber base is just 18 million and declining according to TRAI. It is growing in peer countries. Further, the government's option to offer rural broadband services on BSNL's fibre assets is stymied.

Wireless is a poor substitute for wired broadband in India. Brick housing bars easy penetration of 4G and 5G frequencies. Dense populations share scarce spectrum leading to slow service or outages. Wireless is expensive to use compared to wired. Family members pay individually to use wireless whereas wired broadband is shared.

Location-specific nature of wired assuage cyber and national security concerns. Surveillance cameras require wired broadband. In Kashmir, good wired broadband penetration would have limited citizen suffering without hindering anti-terrorism activities. Perceptions of health risks posed by wireless towers and phones remain. Above all, smart phones distract from productive work. The youth-user is conditioned to check the phone 150 times a day!

Great governance requires smartness-enabled productive farms and efficient markets, food distribution, water supply, timely sanitation, utilization of transportation infrastructure, health screening and monitoring, electricity usage, and access to the world's latest educational content by all. Just imagine the smart skills and millions of new jobs potentially created in the process.

The "smart" requires reliable, universal access to wired broadband infrastructure. Even 5G wireless requires pervasive wired broadband to work. Like WiFi, it enhances the utilisation of wired broadband infrastructure, not substitute. You can't put the cart before the horse.

Wired networks are more complex to operate than wireless. Network assets must reach every home. In wireless, towers are installed on fiber along main roads with offices nearby to sign-up subscribers. Now, additional wired competitive offerings to BSNL are coming up only in the major cities. Existing wired broadband subscribers may have another choice. What happens to the critical need for growth?

Prime Minister Modi knows the answer. Cable TV networks in use reach 50 per cent of Indian homes. They are easily upgraded to deliver world class wired broadband. Required capital expenditure of ₹50,000 crore spread over three years, is a little over 1 per cent of the ₹10.4 trillion current year budget for basic citizen utilities.

It will create a smart and secure central nervous system for India. The rural broadband problem is solved by extension. Delivery of other citizen utility services will become resource and time efficient. A vibrant \$100 billion-dollar new industry by value would be created.

India therefore has no alternative to cable broadband. The Prime Minister formed an inter-ministerial committee to develop cable broadband in 2015. The time is now ripe to implement the recommendations. All is needed is strong political will.

The author led foreign investments into India in the media and telecommunications industry

The Losers, 2019

The 2019 Maharashtra Assembly election tells us that while constancy and fealty pay and that timing is everything



PLAIN POLITICS

ADITI PHADNIS

There's a saying in Hindi: "*Chaube gaye Chhabbe banane, rah gaye Dube*". It describes a person who tries to overreach himself, and ends up worse off than he was before. There are many winners in the Maharashtra saga, some who have got much more than they could possibly have hoped for or deserve. But it is the losers who need to worry.

Narayan Rane was a Shiv Sainik whom Balasaheb himself anointed Chief Minister: he adored "Saheb" but could not reconcile to the rise and rise of Uddhav. Rane was responsible for creating and strengthening the Sena

in Konkan. When Uddhav was appointed executive president of Sena, he was deeply disappointed and quit the party in 2005. So bitter was the parting that although he longed to pay one last visit to see Balasaheb, then on his deathbed, he could not bring himself to do so, fearing the response of the rest of the family. He joined the Congress, spurning an offer from the Nationalist Congress Party, within six months of leaving Sena. He took the oath that he would strive "for the rest of my life to follow the Congress' ideals and uphold the dignity of the tricolour". The terms for his joining the party were, he would be made chief minister within six months. It never happened.

Ten years later, Rane dumped his oath and when approached by Devendra Fadnis, agreed to join the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), not realising the offer was no longer on the table — because the Shiv Sena warned Fadnis that it would withdraw support to the BJP-Sena government if Rane entered the BJP. Fadnis backed off hastily and spurned by his suitor, in 2017, Rane launched his own party, the Maharashtra Swabhiman Paksha. By now Fadnis was confident enough to stand up to Sena and renewed an invitation to Rane. Singed once, Rane agreed to be asso-

ciated with the BJP and accepted a Rajya Sabha seat from the party. If he had accepted Uddhav's leadership then, where would he have been today?

Ajit Pawar has been chafing at the bit for months and years against the imposition of his uncle Sharad's will on him. The last time, most recently, was ahead of the Maharashtra Assembly elections when Ajit wanted the authority to unfurl two flags at NCP's election rallies — the party's tricolour and along with that, a saffron flag with Chhatrapati Shivaji's image. Sharad Pawar publicly shot down the idea, calling it Ajit's personal opinion. Sharad Pawar assured Ajit he would secure the position of deputy chief minister for him under an Uddhav Thackeray-led government. But Ajit thought he could outdo his uncle in the deal-making department and went to the BJP with an offer they could not refuse, expecting to land the deputy chiefministership in that camp. (This camp or that. *Sannu kee?*) And look what happened!

So many left the NCP to join the BJP in search of greener pastures that BJP president Amit Shah chortled that barring Sharad Pawar and Prithviraj Chavan, everyone else was queuing up to join the saffron party. And where are they now?

LUNCH WITH BS ▶ RAHUL MUNJAL | CHAIRMAN & MD | HERO FUTURE ENERGIES

Making sustainable choices

Over sushi, Munjal tells Shreya Jai and Jyoti Mukul why it is important for India to start a discussion on sustainable technology immediately

We are at Megu at The Leela Palace hotel in New Delhi to meet Rahul Munjal, chairman and managing director, Hero Future Energies. A grandson of B.M. Munjal, patriarch of two-wheeler company Hero MotoCorp, the junior Munjal moved to London in 2018 with the dream of building a global green energy business. He's a regular at this Japanese restaurant in Delhi's diplomatic enclave.

As we take our seats, we notice a Buddha statue right next to our corner table. A lady saunters in and pours some rose water on it.

We ask Munjal if Delhi's unrelenting air pollution is one of the reasons he shifted base to London. He laughs out loud: "My ambition is to become a global player. The other reason is my son has been in a London boarding school for many years now," says the 43-year-old son of the late Ramakant Munjal.

So without much ado, we dive into our conversation. Why did he choose to explore renewables? "Climate change is a very big thing in my life." It is easy to see why he appreciates the efforts of Greta Thunberg, the 16-year-old Swedish girl who has taken the world by storm with her emotional pitch on climate change. "It made more impact on the world than many of us put together," says Munjal.

We can see digital is as close to his heart as is the issue of sustainability. As we start talking about the harmful effects of technology, he mentions the Netflix film *The Great Hack*, a 2019 documentary about the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal. "The world will never be same again. Every marketing man and industry is thinking of ways to influence the mind of the consumer. If you have some information points on somebody, you can very easily manipulate the way they think," he says.

We interrupt him and urge him to place the order for the lunch first. As we scan the menu, we infer Japanese cuisine is not very vegetarian friendly. Since Munjal is a Megu-

regular, we seek his advice on what to order. He suggests we try the set menu, which offers an assortment of typically Japanese dishes. He orders a helping of omakase, the chef's choice meal at sushi restaurants, for himself. We order a *ysai itame* (assorted vegetables) and a rock-corn tempura. He chooses a Diet Coke to wash down the food and we settle for some fresh lime and soda.

We get back to discussing the world of internet and social media. "Say, if I am undecided about what to drink — Coke or Pepsi — but someone in Coke knows I like sports, then they will make sure they club Coke and sports for me for every piece of communication directed at me," he continues.

Everybody has a large digital footprint and that becomes larger every time we use phones. "At some time, the world has to wake up to the reality that so much of ourselves is already out there."

So who must take the flak for data misuse? The marketing fraternity? "No. It is a reflection of the society, we live in. Where do you draw the line? As a society, we should debate it. Okay, so much of my information is out there but how should that data be used? That's the question that society as a whole needs to ask and answer."

The miso soup, a traditional Japanese soup and part of the set menu, arrives. Munjal helps himself to some. It is tangy but light.

We ask him if the debate on the subject is any different in India than it is in, say, Europe, where he spends a lot of his time. Munjal says there is not enough debate in India around data and privacy. "Only after we have a proper debate we will know what India needs. For all you know, India might just say we don't mind all that personal data getting out." But, he says, there is a difference in the way younger people and the older generation think about the issue. The lives of younger people are an open book, he explains. "It is the older people who say this



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

is my private life, *tumko kya* (how does it concern you). It is a generational thing and not an east or west thing. Younger people say I am what I am and my parents, the boss, my company, wife and girlfriend, all know who I am."

Former chief of the Mumbai unit of Congress, Sanjay Nirupam, himself originally from Shiv Sena, lobbied publicly and strongly against the Congress joining hands with the Sena. When Devendra Fadnis became chief minister, he could scarcely restrain himself from saying "I told you so". But the tables were turned very rapidly indeed. If Nirupam had held his peace then, he might have been something in the Maharashtra government today.

There are others like him. Radhakrishna Vikhe Patil was treasured by the Congress which made him the leader of the Opposition in the outgoing Assembly. But when his son joined the BJP, the father resigned as MLA and joined the BJP with him. As Congress leader of Opposition, he campaigned for the BJP. His exit left the field free for his Ahmadnagar rival in the Congress, Balasaheb Thorat, who MLAs say, has about as much charisma as a turtle. But it is Thorat who is having the last laugh now: He is likely to become a minister, if not the speaker (he is an eight-term MLA who has won seven times as a Congress candidate).

And the award for the smartest of them all should go to...

Priyanka Chaturvedi, for getting the timing absolutely right. She quit the Congress where she was spokesman and the face of the Congress and joined the Shiv Sena just before the Maharashtra elections. And she's now on the winning side!

There's no telling how long this government will last or how cordial the relations between the alliance partners will be in the future. But this election tells us that while constancy and fealty pay, timing is everything.

The family that shared its well



PEOPLE LIKE THEM

GEETANJALI KRISHNA

The season for giving is upon us, a good time to reflect on the transformative power of kindness. I met a family in Memdi, a village in Dewas district in Madhya Pradesh, whose act of generosity really moved me. At a time when water was scarcely available to 38-year-old Mamta Kailwa and her family, they chose to share their personal well with the entire neighbourhood. I had a chance to have tea with the family. Here's their story.

"This was an old *kaccha* well about 18-feet deep, in the farthest corner of our fields," said Kailwa, as we hiked up to the well through the sugarcane

fields. The family didn't use it much as the path was long, slushy and snake-infested. "It was too shallow to have much water anyway," she said. Eventually, as water became scarcer in Memdi, Kailwa and her mother, like all their neighbours, spent most their day fetching water, especially in the summers. The family decided to have the well cemented and deepened to 70-feet in 2017. "To our delight, its water level rose substantially," she said. The family decided to invest in a 3,000-foot pipe to pump the water to their doorstep.

"It was at this point that we all stopped to think how far we were about to come from the past, when we had often been turned away from privately-owned bore wells when there was no other water source nearby," said Kailwa. "My father, a devout Hindu and a firm believer in fate, began to wonder if the well had been rejuvenated because of the good fortune of a family member or that of a neighbor." They bore the expense of the pump and the laying of the long pipeline and brought it to their doorstep — but not inside their door.

"We felt that water, like air should be shared by all — who were to lay claim on it," she said. "We placed the

tap outside the house so that all our neighbours could share the water equally." Today, the Kailwa family turns on the pump twice a day and their old well services the water needs of dozens of families living around. The pipe opens into a large tank outside their house and within minutes, it is surrounded by neighbours filling their buckets. They bear all the maintenance expenses. "We still remember what it felt like to be turned away in our hour of need," said Kailwa. "That's why my parents and I now feel that even if our fields don't get sufficient water, every person in our neighbourhood should."

The transformation this simple act of generosity has effected has been immense. The women of the locality no longer have to battle over water. The time spent on fetching water can now be spent on daily labour and community work. Moreover, this family's goodwill has somehow made them all a little more helpful towards one another. "Perhaps this kind of generosity is contagious," commented a neighbour, there to fill her bucket. "This family has shown how communities can bond together when they share resources rather than claim them as their own."

A fight that's going to cost me



PEOPLE LIKE US

KISHORE SINGH

Being a passionate, full-blooded, quick-to-temper family, I am not ashamed to admit that our domestic scraps can be fierce, acerbic and intemperate. Peace is equally quick to reign, but during the midst of a skirmish simmering rages can erupt and explode with unexpected consequences. For most part we get by, but when it occurs, bystanders are just as likely to be scathed by their intensity and closeness. In the early years, I would maintain a stiff upper lip, but it was wasted on the natives who inhabit our home, who thought I was chickening out. I don't like being labelled a wuss any more than the

next person, and what's a war of words if you're silent instead of raging? No sir, of late, I've chosen to enter the fray, even if it means coming out of the domestic turf blooded and bruised.

The reason for these brawls is mostly inconsequential, as occurred when my daughter objected to my wife for something she'd posted — or not posted — on a WhatsApp group. My wife retaliated by saying the group consisted of a bunch of nincompoops — or words to that effect. My daughter said my wife was a "blip" (word deleted). My wife said our daughter was a well, let's just say, not very polite person. All of this would have been of little merit had we not been leaving to attend a wedding reception. My wife said she would not go — which was a bluff, since it is difficult to keep her away from parties of any kind. Our daughter said *she* would not go — which was a threat and what she had been spoiling for anyway since she dislikes going anywhere where her bunch of close friends is unlikely to be present.

Both were cajoled into coming and stuffed into a car and driven across town, but continued to sulk, at which I got upset and said things any head of family should not — since it inevitably comes back to bite him in the butt. The

long and short of it is that we messed up our hosts' calculation of the number of guests for dinner by storming back home, hungry, and feeling just a little bit ridiculous for having abandoned a reasonable dinner — all the more idiotic because there weren't even leftovers in the fridge.

By the following morning everyone wanted to sue for peace, but since nobody was willing to take the first step, we continued to pass snide remarks, or ignore each other, while secretly hoping for a round of family hugs. My son and his bride, peacemakers in the melee since they'd had no role to play in the acrimony, dismissed us as a bunch of cranks and shut themselves up in their room. From being an innocent bystander, I'd been pronounced curmudgeon-in-chief.

That evening, our daughter came bearing peace offerings, making her — rather than her parents — the better person. Since you can't be resentful and grateful at the same time, I reprised the stiff upper lip — expressing neither joy nor gratitude — which was a childish thing to do. Even though the battle wasn't mine to begin with, I'm now going to have to bribe my way back into family favour — a fight that's going to cost me for no reason at all.

Don't waste this crisis

The gross domestic product (GDP) growth numbers for the July-September quarter, the lowest in 26 quarters, are no surprise. Most analysts had — belatedly — forecast the bad news. It is now clear that if the government does not get its act together by Budget day, two months from now, a quick recovery from the current depths should not be expected. The economy is on a cusp from where it can swing either way. Nirmala Sitharaman is on test.

If we get past the schadenfreude with which many analysts greet the Modi government's mounting economic problems, for being self-inflicted, even critics will have to address the question: What should the government do? For starters, it should stop whistling in the dark. The global slowdown is not the primary cause of India's problems, or the gap with China's growth numbers (6 per cent for the same July-September quarter) would not have risen as it has. Nor would Bangladesh be growing at more than 7 per cent. Next, there is no point quibbling about whether this is just a slowdown or a full-blown recession. When growth drops precipitously from 7.0 per cent to 4.5 per cent in four quarters, it is for all practical purposes a recession.

Don't expect the quick turnaround that many analysts were forecasting until recently. The current quarter's numbers may be no better than the last one's if one goes by the story in the steady trickle of data, and the full year will see the slowest growth since Narendra Modi came to power on the promise of double-digit growth and *acche din* (good days). The government has so far been the fastest-growing part of the economy. But with the deficit target for the full year having been crossed in seven months, this cannot continue. The Index of Industrial Production continues to bear grim tidings, as do the output numbers on the core sector. Electricity consumption has slumped, diesel consumption is going nowhere, the trade numbers point to shrinkage, and manufacturing continues to stagnate or fall across key sectors. There is no good news on either the consumption or industrial front.

While every downturn has a cyclical element to it, and there is some evidence of the automobile slump bottoming out, the fact is that much of the growth in reported bank credit is not going to industry, even as the scale of loan write-offs accelerates. Non-banking financial companies are unable to pick up the slack, having seen a sharp shrinkage in their credit flow. Companies are still de-leveraging their balance sheets. Till that process reaches near-completion, don't expect fresh investment.

While we wait for some of these cyclical factors to play themselves out to a receding horizon that stretches now to three or four quarters into the future, deeper structural issues wait to be addressed. Agriculture has to deal with the fundamental issue of poor productivity and inadequate domestic demand (in part a result of stagnant rural wages). The government's tax revenue base is shot through with holes, and no one seems to know how to fix the good and simple tax's problems. The strength of services exports keeps the rupee pegged at a level at which manufacturing exporters find themselves unable to compete in export markets. Reform of the public sector is a coat that hangs yet again on the peg of what happens to the employees of unviable firms. Finally, as one business leader after another capitulates — from an Ambani to a Ruia, and from a Thapar to a Subhash Chandra — the capacity of India's famed entrepreneurs to lead a growth charge is increasingly in question.

The best advice one can give is that this is a crisis that should not be wasted. The Modi government has acted so far as though it can ignore the bad economic news and coast along on its political and social agendas. It would be a pity if it continued to do that. A crisis in when a government can expect people to make some sacrifices for the larger good. The danger of doing nothing is that growth of 6 per cent or less becomes the norm, not the unacceptable.

Saffron shrinks but Hindutva wins

BJP is ruling fewer large, important states now but its big Hindutva ideas have won and face little opposition across the country

Like the proverbial "half-full or half-empty" glass, you can look at the much-discussed India Today Group graphic showing the comparative swathes of saffron on the political map of India between 2017 and now. At first glance, the graphic tells you that the BJP's reign over Indian states has declined from 71 to 40 per cent in these two years — just when you thought the party had reached its peak of popularity and unassailable domination under Narendra Modi.

This, however, is the "half-empty" perspective. The half-full view is: Draw a similar map with the Lok Sabha results of last May. What it would show is the dominant political reality: That in all of the north, the Hindi heartland, most of the coastal west and large parts of the east/northeast, the BJP reigns unchallenged. A fresh general election may not have an outcome very different from May 2019. So, what are Mr Modi's critics celebrating?

Political reality, however, is complex and multi-layered, and comes in many shades of saffron. Let's try lifting these layers:

■ Mr Modi, though a colossus in his own right, is no Indira Gandhi. Or, the other way of seeing it: The Indian voter has matured from the Indira era. She makes a clear distinction between voting choices for the Lok Sabha and the Vidhan Sabha.

Just like Indira, therefore, Mr Modi can still swing a "lamp-post" election (where a leader can get people to vote for even a lamp-post on his ticket), but only for the Lok Sabha, when seeking votes for himself. Unlike Indira, he cannot repeat the same magic for assemblies. Maharashtra is a slightly complicated case and we will return to it. Think Haryana. Within five months of the Lok Sabha elections, the party's vote share fell by a neat 22 percentage points, to 36 per cent from 58, leaving it well short of a majority instead of the widely predicted near clean-sweep. This, in a state with a deep military and nationalist tradition, an insignificant minority vote, and 11 weeks after the action on Article 370.

Now, check the data backwards. Even after the sweep of 2014, Mr Modi wasn't often able to sweep a state except Uttar Pradesh in 2017 and smaller states such as Haryana, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, and Assam. But there also was the debacle of Delhi in 2015 first, and Punjab subsequently. Gujarat (2017), which he should have won en passant, became a near-thing and stretched him fully. In Karnataka, despite the

anti-incumbency factor against the Congress and the embarrassing compromises it made with the Bally brothers, the BJP finished well short. Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Chhattisgarh were lost later.

Now flip these numbers. In each one of the states (barring Punjab) that the BJP lost or failed to win decisively, it swept the Lok Sabha polls. Even in Delhi, Rajasthan, MP, and Chhattisgarh, where it had just lost to AAP and the Congress. Let's see what follows.

■ The most important takeaway is that, unlike in the Indira era, when one-party domination was accepted as a given, India has evolved into a much more federal nation. If the voter makes a clear distinction between choices made for the Lok Sabha and the Vidhan Sabha, it emboldens those who can hold their own, even if they aren't too hostile to the BJP, like Naveen Patnaik, K Chandrashekar Rao, Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy and, going ahead, probably the DMK.

It gives its adversaries, like Arvind Kejriwal and Mamata Banerjee, heart. Her three by-election victories this week, including two by landslide margins six months after she struggled in the Lok Sabha elections, underline the same voter discretion.

The third type of regional leader who'd smile is the BJP's own partner. On the top of this list is Nitish Kumar — remember, Bihar goes to the polls next year. But even Prafulla Kumar Mahanta in Assam might revive his opposition to the Citizenship Amendment Bill, and Dushyant Chautala can aspire to punch at a level above his "weight" category.

■ Here is why even the count of 17 states currently under the BJP, as the graphic shows, is a half-truth. Some of these, notably Bihar and Haryana, are in partnership with allies who might have a radically different ideological view and vested interests. Some, like Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Manipur, are essentially the political equivalent of leveraged buyouts. So, they aren't particularly BJP states. Sikkim, Mizoram are part of the NDA, but not the BJP's. The other, even less convenient unstated half of this truth is that today the BJP owns only three major states: Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, and Karnataka. The last one is fragile.

■ Since the rise of the Modi-Shah paradigm, the BJP has followed a simple formula. Sweep the Hindi heartland and the two big western states, and you can rule India with a majority by just adding some little bits on the platter from here and there.

If this cannot be replicated in the states, you are

stuck with federalism. It means having to negotiate with chief ministers, accept some give-and-take, and live with the reality that hostile states will control their own police and law and order, and may even (like Ms Banerjee), refuse to carry forward your grand plans, even good ones like Ayushman Bharat. They can no longer be ordered around. You have to treat them with respect and deference, sometimes as equals. This requires a radical change in method and style. Because, "cooperative federalism" that the prime minister often talks about is no longer a mere mantra, but an imperative.

■ Take a close look at Maharashtra. Why the Nationalist Congress Party and the Congress went with the Shiv Sena has a simpler explanation: They were fighting for survival and power, if undesired. But why did the Shiv Sena break away? It was because they saw in the relentless expansion of the BJP in their state a rapid erosion of their own ideological space. Their rebellion is a straightforward immune reaction to single-party domination, even if it is like-minded.

■ The Centre-state equation is more likely to return closer to the 25-year epoch of 1989-2014 now. The noises from Maharashtra are disconcerting: Opposition to bullet train, silly threats on the metro. Andhra has already delivered a nasty blow to India's FDI-friendly claims by peremptorily throwing out Amaravati and reputed foreign partners, from Singapore to the Gulf's LuLu Group. The prime minister will have to reach out and hug these chief ministers too, as he does his foreign counterparts.

■ And the biggest issue of them all: The National Register of Citizens, or NRC. Ms Banerjee might have been the first to reject it formally, but it is unlikely that most of the non-BJP governments would now fall in line with an idea so divisive, so dangerous, and loaded against them.

The smaller Northeastern states have to deal with their own public opinion, which is hostile to the Citizenship Amendment Bill. In terms of implementability, the NRC is therefore dead on arrival. It may (and likely will) continue as a communally polarising concept for electoral reasons, a bit like the Ram temple might have been in the past three decades. But it won't happen, definitely not as an NRC-CAB combo.

■ And finally, in case you think I am counting only the downsides for the BJP. See that graphic again, with shrinking swathes of saffron. That is a limited electoral reality. Check out the ideological/philosophical picture. In all of India, you do not find one chief minister who, forget opposing, doesn't instead welcome the blunting of Article 370 and the Supreme Court judgment on Ayodhya.

Over the past decades, these were the favourite BJP/RSS issues that polarised Indian politics. Now, a consensus similar to Kashmir and the Ram temple is building even on the Uniform Civil Code. Even the Left Front government in Kerala wouldn't dare implement the Supreme Court order on Sabarimala. Rahul Gandhi flaunts his *janeu*, temple visits, and high Brahmin gotra.

Whatever the political shades on the map of India, it is now dyed-in-saffron as far as the key RSS/BJP ideas are concerned. The RSS, if not the BJP, could easily declare victory now. Hedgewar, Golwalkar, and Savarkar will agree.

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NATIONAL INTEREST
SHEKHAR GUPTA

Political jugglery and other pollutants



AL FRESCO
SUNIL SETHI

Union Minister for Transport and Roadways Minister Nitin Gadkari is generally regarded as one of the more credible and performance-oriented members of the BJP-led government. But even he can't resist stooping to hyperbolic bombast at election time. In May he loudly promised that Delhi would be completely free of air and water pollution in three years, committing a largesse of ₹50,000 crore to decongest the capital. He sealed the deal, saying, "all my announcements are credible. I have built this credibility. No one can tell me that I have promised something and not delivered."

With the ruling Aap Aadmi Party flailing — and failing — with half-hearted, hand-wringing

measures like intermittently shutting down schools, odd-even car use, and altogether banning construction activity, there is not much respite from the toxic fog that envelops the city. In 19th century industrialising Britain the notorious yellow haze was known as a "pea-souper" and took a terrible toll on human life. Present-day statistics are not that far off: 10,000 people a year may die prematurely in Delhi as a result of air pollution; one study claims that citizens would live on average an extra nine years if Delhi met WHO air quality standards.

In 2015 reactions to an impassioned report by Gardiner Harris, the *New York Times* correspondent — including an account of his young son being hospitalised due to breathing difficulties — were mixed when he sought to go away. There was general dismay at the article but he was also reviled for giving the impression of Delhi as a hardship posting. The story was sharply brought home to me the other day when a young banker of my acquaintance had to put his 10-month-old son under a respirator — air purifiers weren't enough. At the pediatrician's suggestion, he sent his wife and child to relatives in Mumbai and was

making inquiries about renting a flat in Goa for the winter. If such are the last resorts of well-off middle class professionals, how do the large majority survive in congested habitats with poor sanitation and putrid air? Many shut their doors and windows, lock their children up indoors, and don masks on stepping out.

Year after year it is the same, a chronicle of political tall talk and broken promises. Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's ₹1,200-crore gift to combat criticism, prior to facing an election early next year, is free bus and Metro rides to women passengers, a move that E Sreedharan, the Delhi Metro's creator, says will push the network into "inefficiency, bankruptcy ... and a debt trap".

Against the nerve-racking, government-formation drama in Maharashtra, where the BJP's filibustering tactics failed, I have been in Mumbai, and Goa, where a similar strategy succeeded when the party "acquired" 10 MLAs from smaller parties to form a government after Manohar Parrikar's death in March. Together with Delhi, Mumbai and Goa count among the richest places in the country. Yet behind the swank lobbies and clubs of south Mumbai

where "women come and go ... talking of Michelangelo" and the seugad-induced languor of Goa eateries with names like "Sublime" and "Gunpowder" is a shifting, rootless mass of humanity that powers everyday services.

The majority are migrants from far-flung parts of the country, with a preponderance of Nepalis in Goa. In Mumbai nearly every taxi driver (those ever-dependable conversation companions in traffic jams) was from Uttar Pradesh. Shahid from district Faizabad and Devendra Kumar from Gorakhpur were among those who described their grim, ghettoised lives. Of the ₹40,000 they averaged monthly, one-third went to the *malik* (car owner), one-third spent on board and lodge, and the rest sent home. The arrival of a Shiv Sena-led government has only exacerbated their gnawing anxiety and insecurity of tenure.

A stirring account of these fragmented, down-and-out lives is portrayed in the award-winning filmmaker Ritesh Batra's (of *The Lunchbox* fame) latest feature *Photograph* (available on Netflix). Nawazuddin Siddiqui plays a photographer taking pop-up tourist shots outside the Gateway of India.

Poised on the jagged edge between hope and hopelessness, the protagonist's desire to forge a human connection is set against his blighted living conditions. It is a chronicle (despite the Shiv Sena's new-fangled promise of 10-rupee *thalis* for the hungry) of how shabbily waves of job-seekers are treated in search of livelihoods.

For escapees from the polluted north, Goa's sea air may be salubrious but it is a badly managed and expensive tourism destination in comparison to Southeast Asian resorts. Unseasonably long rain this year has wrecked the roads and ruined the rice crop. Jobs are scarce, power cuts frequent, and the taxi mafia's grip on inflated fares inexorable. Chief Minister Pramod Sawant's government is bust, relying on development handouts from his patrons in Delhi. Key flyovers, to the airport, for example, are incomplete. Nitin Gadkari's helping hand is akin to his promise of purifying Delhi.

At the Mad Hatter's Tea Party, Alice insists that saying what she means is the same as meaning what she says. "Not a bit!" retorts the Mad Hatter. Ditto for political leaders: What they say is not what they mean at all.

Fallacy of trusting ad truisms



YES, BUT...
SANDEEP GOYAL

One of the commonest assumptions marketers make is that young males are a "difficult-to-reach" audience because they spend the bulk of their leisure time either in indulging in sports or playing games. Hence, they tend to miss out most advertising messages beamed at them by brands. But this seems a fallacious premise. The latest Comscore research has found that the time spent by male 18-24-year-olds in playing sports or games is significantly less than the time spent by them on either social media or on various entertainment sites. This is surely an enlightening revelation.

Similar such assumptions that take on the garb of truisms most often end up hurting brands. For example, brands that consider media reach using age as a demographic have to factor in a very important perspective — that assumed differences between generations are more about stage of life than they are about substantial differences in attitude or usage. Search for information for automobiles, hence interest in automotive media tends to go up with age, because the older you get, the higher likelihood you have of having the necessary funds to buy a car. Similarly, those seeking career opportunities are most likely to be not just amongst 25-35-year-olds but, in today's age of longer life spans, could well extend to those in their forties and fifties, except that the type of jobs these demographics may be seeking would be more senior, also perhaps more well-paying.

Generational misunderstandings tend to proliferate through ill-informed media stories and consequent sharing of those between friends and family. The most common such story is that the rise

of ride-sharing will kill car ownership among younger consumers. However, research in both the US and the UK shows that 64 per cent of Millennials who used a ride-sharing app also visited traditional car-related sites and apps that provided news and views on new car purchases. In comparison to a 61 per cent usage rate of ride-sharing apps by Millennials, Generation Z was only a whisker ahead on car co-sharing. One would have presumed that the younger generation cohort would have significantly higher usage of the sharing but actual research shows it is not. Marketers, therefore, need to be very very careful in pre-supposing assumptions based on iterative logic, which otherwise appears both sequential and valid, but in real life repudiates the very basis on which such judgements are made.

Similar logic applies to an oft-used truism that high-income consumers in their fifties are always the best bet for luxury brands. Interestingly, research shows that it is not age but income that has a positive correlation with purchas-

ing luxury goods. So, it is not the consumers in their fifties but those in the age group of 30-34-year-olds that are the most potent customers for luxury brands. Provided of course, that they have the economic muscle and affordability. In fact, the propensity of this age segment to buy luxe stuff starts to decline from age 35 to age 55 before experiencing a kind of hockey stick demand curve. People in the age group 55-64 constitute the second-largest aggregated demand segment for luxury brands and top-of-the-line experiences including holidays, cruises, hotels, and even spas. So, a broad brush targeting of hi-end watches or whiskies to those in their fifties would actually mean missing the real consumers who are a good 15-20 years younger or may be 5-10 years older.

Interestingly, while the size of women fans as a segment may be smaller, media research shows that female viewers are far more engaged. In the FIFA World Cup 2018, female viewers watched 77 per cent more FIFA YouTube videos than males; in the Stanley Cup for ice hockey again female

viewers out-watched the males by 79 per cent! In the Super Bowl too, in the US, female fans watched 44 per cent more videos than men.

Becoming data-rich has not necessarily meant that brands and marketers have become data-savvy. Most often, the data is all there in front of us. Waiting to be analysed. Waiting to be massaged. Waiting for someone to sit down and understand how consumers are behaving both individually and in groups. Unfortunately, most times most brands take the easier way out by looking more at macro flows rather than actual data.

Data can be used not just to understand the numerical size of audiences; data can actually be used to transform the connect and engagement between brands and their customers. Data can be used to develop the right messaging in the right context and to place it on the right vehicle in the right time aperture. It is not as difficult or as complex as it sounds or seems. It just needs the right skill sets and the right mindset. If done right, many assumptions that seem like truisms may actually not stand the litmus test.

The writer is an advertising and media veteran