

The politics of cool



TICKER

MIHIR S SHARMA

protests are. Instagram's winter of discontent has well and truly begun.

On one level, it is easy to mock and deride this phenomenon. Seasoned political types will ask themselves what value to any political movement is added by people who last month were posting about Christmas in Europe and next week will no doubt be back to snaps of their skiing holidays. But I think it is worth unpacking, nevertheless, what has changed for some in urban India since the introduction of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA).

First, the Act itself seems like the sort of straightforward assault on Indian nationhood that the government has so far been relatively careful to avoid. You could claim that the Babri judgment and the National Register of Citizens were due to the Supreme Court. The revocation of Article 370 and the triple talaq ban could be made to fit into a liberal, right-based framework of equality if you tried. But the CAA is another beast altogether. However much the government and its outreach community might insist it is merely an enabling act, it is hard to see it as anything but the first step towards a constitutionally Hindu nation.

Second, the nature of the early protests in the cities were clear — and attractive. Muslim women sitting on *dharna* at Shaheen Bagh, crowds waving the tricolour — there was nothing there for traditional middle-class prejudices to hang on to. It was clear that the only danger caused by the protests was from police overreaction.

Third, the attacks on universities were repugnant even to people who have not much time for student protests in general.

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sors did. But to attack protestors, whether using the police or political thugs disguised as students, is a bridge too far for most.

Deepika Padukone's courageous decision to go and stand with protestors at Jawaharlal Nehru University is thus more revealing and influential than some might think. It reveals that even those in Bollywood who might have previously been sympathetic but aloof, think that it will either do them no harm to turn out for a cause they believe in, or that things have got bad enough that they are willing to take a risk. But perhaps even more revealing was a short clip that was trending on social media of the film magnate Bhushan Kumar. Kumar had been invited to a meeting meant to "clear up doubts" among the film community about the CAA. He had even been photographed driving into the meeting at a Mumbai hotel. But when asked by a reporter about the meeting in the presence of film stars such as Anil Kapoor, Kumar said that merely being in the hotel didn't mean he attended the meeting. (Kapoor's face was a picture of amusement.) When people as exposed, influential — and government-sympathetic — as Kumar feel the need to distance themselves from the CAA in public, you know something has gone very wrong.

Narendra Modi's rise to power in 2013-14 felt as unlikely before it happened as it feels inevitable now. Part of what underlay that extraordinary ascent was the careful cultivation of influential voices. Somehow the candidacy chief minister with a chequered record was transformed into a cool cause. Nobody knows how the politics of cool works. Sometimes it comes together, sometimes it doesn't. Barack Obama's campaign managed it; Hillary Clinton's campaign did not. But what we are seeing at this moment is a reversal in our own politics of cool. For seven years, Modi has been the cool brand. Now, somehow, he is less so.

Perhaps it is something to do with that period — seven years? Seven years after the UPA rose to power it became embroiled in anti-corruption scandals. And, indeed, there is much that is worth revisiting in UPA-II's sordid descent into paralysis and unpopularity. The UPA was India's most inept government when it comes to communication. It came across as either arrogant, or inarticulate, or aloof. Modi's government is India's best when it comes to communication. There is little doubt that it will do a better job of recovering the situation than the UPA did. But one thing that even the NDA spin-masters will struggle with is the politics of cool. If you don't know how it works, you can't manipulate it.

The rise of the fringe

They are organised and the opposition to them is leaderless. Who will win the war that is bound to break out?



PLAIN POLITICS

ADITI PHADNIS

If there is one part of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that is confused by what happened at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in the twilight of 2019 and dawn of 2020, it is the party's student wing, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP). Torn between deep contentment at seeing the pinkos being roundly thrashed (many must have wished they'd been the ones to do it) and self-righteous indignation at supposed Left-instigated vandalism, the ABVP, at least in JNU, needs to ask itself if it is time to move over and make space for the "real" Hindus — like the Hindu Raksha Dal, a fringe group that has claimed credit for carrying out the JNU attacks.

Why only JNU? The "real" Hindus are now all over the place. Ranging from the gang that

killed Gauri Lankesh; to the Hindu Yuva Vahini, dormant but by no means decommissioned; to the Sri Rama Sene, fringe Hindu groups are popping up all over the country. They are splitting but they are not dying. They're the unicorns of Indian politics.

Anti-BJP activist and editor Gauri Lankesh was assassinated, the Special Investigations Team (SIT) probing her murder has found, by a hired hand, Parashuram Waghmare, who was recruited by one Amol Kale. At least 12 people have been named in the conspiracy that was hatched not just to kill Lankesh but also Govind Pansare, a Left-leaning thinker, and Narendra Dabholkar, the rationalist who questioned many Hindu beliefs and superstitions. The 9,000-page chargesheet says all the co-conspirators had links at one or other time with the Hindu Janajagruti Samiti (HJS), the Sanatan Sanstha and the Sri Rama Sene. The HJS says it was formed in response to the demands of the situation as "due to a "secular" democracy today, the state of the society, nation and dharma is on the decline. A system of governance based on Dharma, that is, establishment of the Hindu nation, is the need of the hour as a solution to the problems of Hindus."

Pramod Muthalik floated the Sri Rama Sene — the very same that would barge into pubs and drag out women having a drink there. He

has since been acquitted of the charge. But despite that, Muthalik's entry into many states ruled by the BJP is banned — including Goa. The Sene challenged the late Pejwar Swami Vishwesh Theertha (who died last month) to a *shastraarth* (a scriptural duel) when the latter hosted an *iftaar* at the premises of the Krishna temple in Udipi some years ago.

The Hindu Yuva Vahini was formed on Rama Navami day in 2002 in Uttar Pradesh by Yogi Adityanath. Initially envisaged as a body of young activists, the word "Hindu" was added on the advice of Mahant Avaidyanath of Gorakhpur, then alive. Sunil Singh, a co-founder of the HYV, recalled, despite the BJP's Kalyan Singh being in power in UP and Atal Bihari Vajpayee at the helm in Delhi, the pitiful sight of Yogi Adityanath having to beg that one of his supporters be given a seat in the

Assembly elections prompted the formation of the HYV — visualised as a fringe group designed to exert pressure over the BJP and raise Adityanath's profile in eastern UP. When Adityanath became chief minister but would not heed the HYV's demand for a share of the power pie, Sunil Singh walked out forming his own HYV Bharat. He was imprisoned almost immediately under the National Security Act

and released many months later.

In response, Adityanath formed the HYV (UP). So in Eastern UP now, there are at least two groups competing for the same fringe. Another organisation, the Yogi Sena, has been launched in Western UP with the same objective: Rousing and organising Hindu youth. While HYV says it will do nothing to embarrass the chief minister and involves itself in such blameless pursuits as delivering flood relief, what it is actually doing, no one knows. HYV acknowledges that its supporters are chafing at the bit at the anodyne activity they're being asked to carry out and it is hard to keep them reined in.

In America, as in India, fringe group activity has seen a spurt in the last few years. "Antifa" short for anti-fascist, turns up regularly to counter-protest far-right rallies and speaking events. The group's mission is to fight fascism at any cost, and defend America's most disenfranchised groups. Most are either anarchists or have far left-leaning political beliefs. "Proud Boys" says it is a "a pro-Western fraternal organisation". It has an initiation rite that includes "getting into a major fight for the cause".

In India, it is hard to judge where it will all end. The fringe is organised. The opposition to it is leaderless, inarticulate but determined to contest and fight back. The collateral damage is the ABVP, seen as being quick to strike but afraid to wound. Somebody has to win the war that is bound to break out sooner than later. And it won't be via the ballot box.

LUNCH WITH BS ▶ STEVE WINTER | CONSERVATION PHOTOGRAPHER

Frame by frame

Winter talks to Ruchika Chitravanshi about how he composes shots in his mind before actually shooting them and why he took up an Indian cooking course

It was the twenty-fourth day of sitting atop this elephant in Madhya Pradesh's Bandhavgarh tiger reserve for Steve Winter, one of the world's most celebrated wildlife photographers and a big cat specialist. Balancing his camera with its 600-mm lens and a tripod on a shifty elephant which was getting uneasy under the summer sun, Winter was worried yet calm, when suddenly he saw what he had been waiting for all these days. The tiger cubs had just emerged from the trees with their mother to play. Radio silence. Winter had already composed the prized shot in his mind and managed to capture seven frames, hoping at least one of them would be sharp.

Sitting comfortably in the plush Indian Accent restaurant in New Delhi's Lodhi Road, we admire the final photograph taken around five years ago that made it to the cover of the recently launched National Geographic's coffee table book, *Tigers Forever*. Winter asks for a shot of double espresso to kick start our lunch while narrating his many adventures. Even as a nine-year-old Indiana boy, all Winter wanted was to get out of his hometown and travel the world. Although photography came naturally to him — Winter's father was an amateur photographer — he joined university to study urban renewal... to "become something". Soon he realised this was not his calling. "I quit and decided to travel the world and came to India... I first came here in 1979..."

Having backpacked from Kolkata and Annapurna in Nepal, all the way down to southern India and then to Lucknow, that too on a third class railway ticket and buses back in his "hippie days", Winter is no stranger to India or Indian food.

Soon, we are served two baby *naans* stuffed with Danish blue cheese and topped with some champagne honey; the waiter cautions us to wait for it to cool down, almost sensing our excitement to try the dainty mouthfuls.

Winter is narrating his early adventures in the forest of Sierra de las Minas in Guatemala where he had built a shack to shoot the vibrant blue-green bird Quetzal while digging into the sumptuous bites of our first course that takes us through the streets of India with bite-size portions of Maharashtra's *dabeli*, *puri aloo* and Winter's favourite chilli crab.

Out in the wild, animals mark their territories, the photo journalist says. "So did I... mainly to protect my space from wild boars."

One night, when he was reading a book, Winter heard a creeping noise on the stairs and a brushing sound on the floor. "And then, I heard scratching under the door... I was so scared. I whacked my machete on the side of the bed and whistled and I heard the thing running down away."

Next morning, the locals told him it might have been the black panther. That was Winter's first encounter with a big cat.

Our next item on the menu, pulled pork *phulka* tacos and the jackfruit version of the same, is served just in time. Each preparation takes time and the food arrives slowly, but Winter is a patient man.

I would have thought 24 days in Bandhavgarh was a long wait, but then he tells me how he waited 15 months for one of his most well-known and iconic shots — a mountain tiger strolling in Griffith Park at the edge of Sunset Boulevard with the Hollywood Sign in the background. This was again a shot he had already framed in his mind. "I knew I needed incredible picture to illustrate urban wildlife."

When he shared the idea with a scientist friend who monitored the wildlife in the area, he looked at him like he was crazy, Winter said. However, as soon as the big cat was spotted, Winter had to figure out ways to install remote cameras he learned to use while shooting the snow leopards in Ladakh.

As a result of the picture, the largest wildlife overpass is being built in the area funded by American actor Leonardo DiCaprio and his foundation. We pore over some more of his work on his latest iPhone. "It has a great camera," he says.

The *anar* and *churan kulfi* is before us, to cleanse the palate for what is coming up next; roast chicken and smoked *papad* curry. It comes with wine pairing recommendations of Allegrini Valpolicella Classic or Rondonella among others. The idea is tempting but Winter gives it a pass — he has a talk scheduled later for budding photographers and journalists.

Winter loves Indian food. "My first *masala dosa* and *sambhar* with *chutney* in the south on a banana leaf just blew my mind. You know I'm the kid from Indiana. It was amaz-

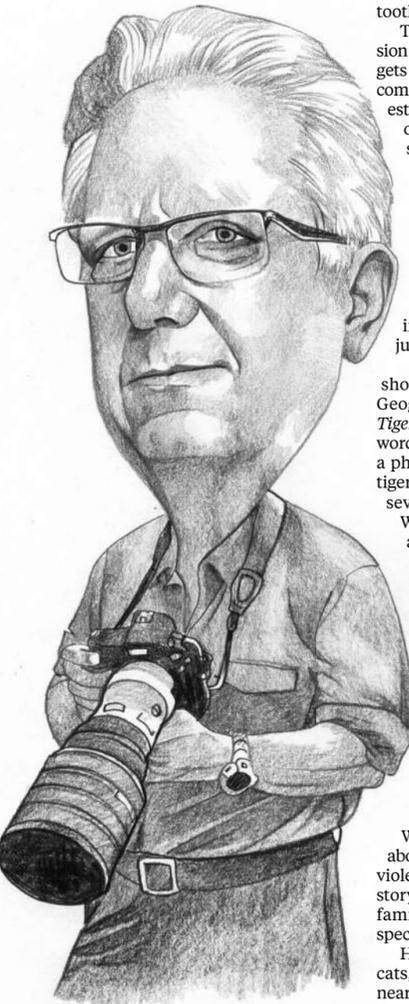


ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

ing." He even took up an Indian cooking course afterwards.

I am curious if Winter has ever had a close shave with a big cat since I had read how he was attacked by a rhinoceros once. "Twenty-eight years and I have never been attacked and I am super close to them," the 63-year-old lensman says.

"Predators have no desire to hurt us because we have not been a part of their image search for millennia!" He clarifies: "There is no way that these cats want to eat us. We stink. We use deodorant, shampoo, toothpaste, perfumes."

The question leads to a pertinent discussion on ecology and dangers it faces as wildlife gets displaced. "Every other breath you take comes from forests, and big cats live in the forest. If we can save big cats, we can help save ourselves because we need these areas," said Winter.

At this point, almost like an interlude our next course arrives — a delicious serving of grilled sea bass with sweet potato and goan mango curry. This is accompanied by a smoked eggplant *raita*, chilli hoisin duck *kulcha* and a pearl millet *roti* with a topping of fresh churned butter. The portion size, in keeping with the concept of tasting menu, is just right.

As we get back to our discussion, Winter shows me the latest edition of National Geographic magazine which features *The Tigers Next Door*, a 30-page story of over 5,200 words he did together with his wife, also a photographer and a writer. It is a story of tigers in roadside zoos, many of them pets, several abused, in South Carolina. Witnessing the wild beasts tamed in such a way looked wrong in the pictures. Winter calls them the worst tiger breeders in the world.

In India, Winter has also engaged with the ministry of environment during Jairam Ramesh's tenure to request a change in the laws for the way tigers are counted here. "Tigers in India only existed legally if they were in a tiger reserve, which was a bureaucratic mindset... because tigers exist wherever they want to exist."

His next stop is the Gir forests in Gujarat.

Wherever the tiger trail took him, Winter managed to create some awareness about big cats and prove that tigers are not as violent as they are made out to be. "Why do a story? Why spend months away from your family? If you're just going to watch this species disappear?"

His love for tigers, the biggest of the big cats, is more than evident by now. We are nearing the end of this sumptuous meal with desserts ready to be served — a chilli peanut ice cream cornet, *Jalebi* with Haji Ali inspired cream apple cream and coconut *burfi* with dark chocolate mousse. Reluctantly, Winter has to leave all the sweet delights behind, as the time for his talk for photographers is too close and his ride has already arrived.

As I walk him out, Winter gives me his visiting card. It has the famous Hollywood shot of the mountain tiger on the back. Why am I not surprised?

When survival trumped bias



PEOPLE LIKE THEM

GEETANJALI KRISHNA

In rural Uttar Pradesh, especially in the heart of Bundelkhand, the annual summer drought regularly wreaks economic and emotional havoc in the lives of villagers. Some months ago, I visited the Mahuee village in Banda district to document the interventions of WaterAid, an international NGO that works on issues relating to water, sanitation and hygiene across the country. I discovered that the drought actually had an unintended positive fallout in this underdeveloped village. Here's what I saw.

Mahuee is ranked high among the villages worst affected by groundwater depletion in Banda district. Locals attest that in the last decade, water shortage in the vil-

lage has worsened every summer, even though the region receives a reasonable amount of rain during monsoon. Not only wells and tube wells, but even village ponds dry up as the temperature shoots up to nearly 50 degrees Celsius. Deep fissures develop in the fields and the villagers have little water for themselves, let alone for their livestock. WaterAid has successfully set up rooftop rainwater harvesting systems to recharge wells and tube wells in the area. When they approached Mahuee's gram *pradhan* Malkhe Srivas to build a similar project in the village in 2017, he was excited to help. He even offered to set the harvesting system on his rooftop as he lived next to one of the wells in the village. But there was a hitch.

In the heartlands of Uttar Pradesh, caste fissures tend to run deep and Srivas is a Dalit. "To avoid even accidentally touching lower-caste people like me," he told me, "some of my upper caste neighbours wouldn't even draw water from the well at the same time as I did." He wondered what they would say when they heard that water from a Dalit's rooftop was going to recharge a common well. Even if the harvested rainwater from his rooftop managed to do the job, there was a strong possibility his higher caste neighbours would not even use that water. After much discussion, they decided

to go ahead with the plan anyway.

Not unexpectedly, the higher caste villagers were horrified at the idea. How could water recharged by rainwater from a Dalit's rooftop be "clean", they asked.

As it turned out, the recharge system successfully prevented the well from drying out the following summer while other water sources dried up. "People were amazed to see that this well continued to have abundant water throughout the summer," Srivas recounted. Eventually, his upper caste neighbours were compelled to set aside their caste prejudices and draw water from the well. "Today, the very people who'd earlier criticised me are clamouring for similar recharging systems to be put up on their roofs as well," he said. "We've now built two more recharge pits independently, and as the *pradhan*, I plan to construct such pits near all water sources in the village in the year ahead."

And so the drought proved to be a social lever in Mahuee. What years of education, social messaging and reservations couldn't accomplish, water scarcity did in one summer. The caste taboo, once broken, has somewhat reduced in importance now. "Now everyone drinks water from the well recharged by the rainwater from my rooftop," Srivas told me. "I'd not believed this would happen in my lifetime."

Thanks, but no thanks



PEOPLE LIKE US

KISHORE SINGH

When it comes to breakfast, nothing can beat Indian hotel buffets, so I wonder why I'm feeling blue. The hotel where I am writing this has as lavish a spread as any — but too much food can be off-putting too, which is why I prefer to order a la carte. Usually, a glass of orange juice and eggs is just fine, though I do extend myself over weekends. At the time of writing this, I've skimmed past the spreads of baked beans, sausages, scrambled eggs, bacon; the north Indian *puris* and *bhajis*; the south Indian (always tempting) *vadas*, *idlis* and fresh *dosas* off a live counter; pan-cakes and waffles if you're up to it;

there's south-east Asian congee which I've never been partial too; fruits, flavoured yogurts, doughnuts and all kinds of temptations from the bakery I find easy to resist, and cheeses that I sometimes succumb to. Cold meats left out for hours — ugh! How can anyone even think of it?

This morning, it isn't crowded in the spillover restaurant where those who didn't find a seat in the coffee shop have been adjusted, so I decide to be a little adventurous. Having spooned some sprouts and *dahi*, I ask the chef at the eggs counter for a *masala* omelette, lavish with chillies, served over a *paratha* "With toast?" he asks. "No, with a *paratha*," I say. "A stuffed *paratha* with *aloo*?" he asks. "A plain *paratha*," I coax him, "served with the egg on top of it." When all is confirmed, I retire to the corner table assigned to me. I have work to do.

Fifteen minutes later, I am served a *paratha*, plain, no trimmings, no accompaniments. "Your *paratha*, Sir," says the waiter solicitously. "I asked for an omelette with it," I remind him, "placed over the *paratha*." The *paratha* is removed and replaced, a few minutes later, by an omelette. No accompaniments; no *paratha*. "I'd like a *paratha* with it," I explain. "A stuffed *paratha*,

Sir?" "No, a plain one, served instead of toast." A few minutes later, all is sorted out. The *paratha* and the omelette finally make it together to my table. Only, by now, they're stone cold. I tell myself the sprouts will hold me till lunchtime.

But I do like coffee at breakfast. Happily, the waiter had taken the order for my preferred choice of cappuccino. "Yes, Sir, a cappuccino." "A strong cappuccino," I suggest, "even a very strong cappuccino." I am assured of its arrival. Only it doesn't. "My coffee," I remind a passing waiter — not mine — and we go through the same sequence again. I wait. No coffee. "Would you like anything else, Sir?" my waiter is back to clear my uneaten plate. "I'm waiting for my cappuccino," I say. "Very well, Sir," he says.

Over the shenanigans of the *paratha* and omelette, I'm drawing a little notice to myself, but the cup of coffee remains elusive. I decide to walk across to the hostess to ask for her help. "Coffee, Sir," she says, "I'll send somebody across." Finally, perhaps a half hour and a half-dozen reminders later, I have what I asked for — a strong cappuccino. I'm tempted to ask for a second round, but dare I risk it? I take the coward's way out. Tomorrow is another breakfast day.

Beyond taxes

Some Budget time and it is surprising how much of the discussion is on tax rates and revenues — though these account for only 60 per cent of the Union Budget, up from about 52 per cent of the Manmohan Singh government's last Budget. Non-tax revenues, including borrowings to fund the deficit, account for the remaining 40 per cent, or close to ₹11 trillion, but there is little focus on how to boost non-tax revenues or reduce the level of borrowings by saving on expenditure. This is surprising, given how it is non-tax revenues that have fallen short even as tax revenues have grown faster than gross domestic product (GDP).

If tax revenues have done well, thank the oil windfall of 2014-16. Arun Jaitley used the opportunity afforded by the sharp drop in oil prices to soak up tax revenue, though some of it has had to be given back to the consumer. There is also work to be done on individual taxation as well as on goods and services tax (GST). But while the airwaves are full of noise on these issues, not nearly enough attention gets paid to non-tax revenues — where there are repeated shortfalls in disinvestment receipts and mismanagement of revenues from sectors like telecom. A government hungry for revenue has simply fallen back on the companies it owns, asking them to up their dividend payments or borrow on its behalf. This year North Block's long arm also reached Mumbai to extract surpluses from the Reserve Bank of India.

The flip side of this is the story of where the money goes. Trillions of rupees have been used to shore up the balance sheets of government banks, while more trillions invested in highways and railways have not yielded the returns they should have. More highways could have been monetised through maintenance and operations contracts that yield the government net revenue. The railways in turn is into the final phase of building high-speed, high-capacity freight corridors, but it is not yet certain what kind of traffic such lines will attract, given that the existing rail traffic is only partially containerised and new growth centres along the corridors are not yet up and running.

Meanwhile, another ₹20,000 crore is being used this year to keep the postal department going, mostly because the pay and pension bill is much bigger than the revenue. This spares the blushes of perennial loss-makers like Air India and Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd, though their losses too run into thousands of crores. Talk of converting the postal network into a bank has remained just that: Talk. If the government were to demand performance from the companies and ministries concerned, the non-tax component of the Budget would get a booster shot, and there would be less infructuous outlay to support non-performing companies.

The irony is that the government thinks it has all the money in the world to give these companies, when the truth is that it is more strapped for cash now than at any other time in the last decade. Can the management of food stocks be made more efficient? Can shortfalls in payment to electricity generators get a prior claim on states' share of Central taxes? Can private shipyards be given business to see if they can deliver within cost and stipulated timelines, because today the public shipyards don't do either? Can politics be taken out of pricing decisions so that the subsidy bill gets curtailed?

In short, there are many ways to make the government's money go further — if the government were to bring to the task the same determination it has shown in persisting with the amended citizenship law? The key question is how much political capital the government is willing to spend on economic reform measures that will be unpopular with one or other section of the population. If Air India is not sold, will it be shut down? After all, private airlines have been shut, so why not Air India? To take such decisions, the economy has to become the government's No. 1 priority, which it self-evidently is not at the moment.

Stooping to lose

Six months after returning to power with a huge mandate, Modi government is stuck fighting students — its most ardent voters who are now pessimistic, hopeless and even angry

Competitive sport follows the system of leagues — upper, middle, lower, senior and junior and so on. A contestant's stature determines the league in which she plays. One who stoops down to play at a much lower level, or fight with the "bachchas" (juniors), diminishes her/his own stature.

We are applying this test to our politics, specifically to the way the BJP government is handling student protests.

A simpler way of understanding this is how our great old wrestler-actor Dara Singh handled any new challenger. He asked him to fight his brother Randhawa first, beat him, and earn the right to fight the champ. I asked him why, and he said every "Lallu Panju" (Tom, Dick and Harry) wants to be able to boast he wrestled with Dara Singh. Why should I lower my own standing to please them?

Back to the game of hard politics. For a month now, that is precisely what this almighty BJP government is doing: Senior, powerful men and women fighting with children. They've seen fires lit in campuses across the country in response to their policies. Their response — especially where the BJP has been in power — has been consistent. Bring down the full force of state power, internet and telecom restrictions, and, at least in one case, Uttar Pradesh, collective fines.

If a government elected with such an enormous popular vote finds it worth its while to fight its students rather than reason or listen to them, three things follow:

First, a tyrant versus the underdog story builds up.

Second, it generates pictures that gravely damage Brand India globally. And you can't stop any of this from "getting out".

Third, and the most significant, it inevitably creates a "children versus uncle/aunt mood" among the youth. Let me elaborate.

Every exit and opinion poll in 2014 and 2019 showed us that the young of India, all of the millennials but especially the first-time voters backed Narendra Modi with passion. I have in my archives a string of short conversations with young people while travelling through the 2019 campaign across the country that name only one leader: Modi.

I wrote and spoke out at a Centre for Policy Research debate in New Delhi on the factors I found were propelling Mr Modi towards a big

victory. Especially on how the young were walking out of the identity trenches — of caste, language, ethnicity, in many cases even religion — to embrace Mr Modi.

The sentiment you saw in their eyes was optimism, joy, an anticipation of a better life, the storied "achche din". They were not breaking their families' old political loyalties because they hated someone, or were afraid of them. If 2014 was an election of hope of a better life, 2019 was the renewal of that promise in the expectation that it will take that long to redeem it fully.

Within six months, however, they find they are being delivered something entirely different. The economy is in a free fall. And it's been declining for so long, so consistently, that the promise of growth and better days now looks a fantasy.

A mid-1970s kind of pessimism, even hopelessness, is growing among the young. New jobs aren't available. And while all jobs are important and dignified, let's face it: Not every young person studying in a college is looking forward to delivering for Swiggy or Zomato or driving an Ola or Uber.

That isn't what Mr Modi had promised them. Their aspirations and needs are clear and present, and not being fulfilled. And certainly they won't be compensated for the let-down either by "firmness", with which you control and "integrate" Kashmir, or how you teach Pakistan a lesson a day. Nor will their needs be met by how much you can persuade them to fear the Muslim or hate the migrant Muslim "termite".

None of these would get them a job, a living, a better life. Unless, of course, they are your ideological followers. The disillusionment of the college-going youth with Modi-2 has been rapid and deep.

Nobody should also remain under the misconception that it is just a virus specific to the few, liberal, Left, public universities infested by "Urban Naxals". The anger has now spread to expensive private campuses as well, which allow no politics and unions, and cost many students' parents a lot of their savings and inherited assets. I have been speaking at several in different parts of the country, and found anger similar to what you might see at JNU, Jamia, or BHU.

The sentiment is a bemused — and increas-



NATIONAL INTEREST

SHEKHAR GUPTA

Lighting the campus tinderbox



AL FRESCO

SUNIL SETHI

The ill wind of rampant violence against students and faculty of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) by masked hoodlums on January 5 took place in some of the most miserable weather the capital has known, with temperatures plummeting to the coldest in decades.

If that was a barometer of national politics, then a bitter winter of discontent augurs a dangerous spring for the Narendra Modi-Amit Shah ruling establishment and their Hindutva-fuelled followers.

From the blur of images of Bloody Sunday — students' union President Aishe Ghosh's bandaged head from wounds inflicted, Deepika Padukone's flying visit,

hundreds of protesting students gathered at the gates — some stark facts stand out. They suggest the complicity of forces on high behind the orchestrated attacks. A large police force turned a blind eye to several hours of mayhem in the students' hostels, the street lights conveniently went off, and the vice-chancellor — a government appointee — fiddled, like Nero, as his realm burned. To this day he has not been held accountable for his failure to restore order. Moreover, the assailants have not been tracked. And, bizarrely, FIRs were filed against Ms Ghosh as the agent provocateur rather than the sinister traceable attackers. As a Centrally-funded institution, JNU has been very much in the government's line of fire for some time, from February 2016 in fact, when Kanhaiya Kumar, its former students' president, was arrested for sedition and criminal conspiracy for allegedly voicing anti-national slogans, a charge he denied. Like his successor, Ms Ghosh, Mr Kumar belongs to the Leftist union and has long been denounced by the prime minister, home minister and the BJP's students' union as the "Tukde Tukde Gang" — by now a rather jaded phrase that started out to describe

a bunch of "anti-national" students hell-bent on shredding the country but is now applied to anyone politically opposing government policy or ruling party ideology.

Like that other shop-soiled appellation "Khan Market Gang", the label can be embarrassingly ironic. Two pillars of the Modi government, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and Foreign Minister S Jaishankar, are former JNU students, and have had to issue cringe-worthy assurances that in their student days there was no "Tukde Tukde Gang" and they were engaged in blameless intellectual capacity-building rather than involvement in the university's established Left-liberal leanings. (The two are not necessarily mutually exclusive, indeed they often go together in places of higher learning.)

Judging by the spillover of students' protests nationwide in expressions of solidarity for the JNU violence, infiltrating campuses and tampering with the aspirations of a restive youth population desperate for degrees and hungry for jobs can have unforeseen consequences. It is not the same kind of control enforced by military might in the lockdown in Kashmir or the passing of the Citizenship Amendment Act

through parliamentary legislation. Opposition to both has been swift and peremptorily dealt with.

Mr Modi's authoritarian streak is sometimes compared to Indira Gandhi's rise to absolute power. If so, the triggering of a students' agitation carries a fateful echo from the non-so-distant past.

In 1971, fresh from victory in the Bangladesh war and a triumphant election, Mrs Gandhi was at the very zenith of her power. Her international prestige was high and her command of the party and state governments untrammelled. Yet it was precisely her tightening grip on controlling levers that made things go wrong — the lightning rod being the students' unrest in Bihar and Gujarat.

In her incisive political biography Indira Gandhi: *Trust with Power* (Penguin; ₹399), the writer Nayantara Sahgal gives a detailed account. It is small things (such as JNU students recently protesting a hike in hostel fees) that set off the conflagration. In January 1974 a student revolt against food prices in engineering college hostels in Ahmedabad and Morvi erupted into a citizens' movement against scarcity and misrule. That same year students of Patna colleges held protests

demanding educational reform. In both cities there were police beatings at barricades, arrests, and bloodletting. Thence forward the story of Jayaprakash Narayan's emergence as a galvanising force, Emergency rule and Mrs Gandhi's fall in 1975 is well-known. "In her grasp of the nuts and bolts of the machinery of power," observes Ms Sahgal, "Indira Gandhi installed a strategy of command that depended entirely on personal loyalty".

The student uprisings of 1974 were not abetted by WhatsApp wars, Twittermania, or a body of outspoken supporters from the film world. The smashings and thrashings at JNU are right in our face; they force the most passive observer to take sides. As a pan-Indian (to use that overused but indefinable phrase) community, university students everywhere are the same. Everyone either knows a college-goer, or was one, or, in the basic human desire for self-improvement, hopes to become one. An ill-educated driver I once had, a runaway from rural Bihar, used to regretfully intone: "Sir, *vidya se badi koi sampatti nahin hai*" (Sir, there is no greater wealth than education).

New Delhi's rulers should be alert to lighting a dangerous tinderbox. Besides, the city-state will elect a new government on February 11. The voters will factor in JNU's Bloody Sunday.

Remember Safdar

EYE CULTURE

UTTARAN DAS GUPTA

Deepika Padukone has been at the receiving end of praises and brickbats for turning up at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) earlier this week to express solidarity with students assaulted by armed miscreants, who breached security to enter the campus last Sunday evening. Some have accused her of using the incident to promote her new film *Chhapaak* — in which she plays the protagonist, an acid attack survivor. Others have said that her gesture was "bare minimum" from a celebrity at a time when the entire nation has been roiled by protests against the contentious Citizenship Amendment Act. Yet, some other — mostly supporters of the government — have called for a boycott of her new film for extending support to "anti-national" JNU.

At the same time, a thirty-year-old video has been circulating on social media, in which Shabana Azmi uses her time on stage at 12th International Film Festival of India in January 1989

to read out a note of protest for the murder of theatre activist Safdar Hashmi. In the video, Kabir Bedi asks about her opinion of the new wave theatre director. "My views on my directors can be reserved for a later date," she replies to a surprised Bedi, while Victor Banerjee looks on. "I choose this occasion to read out our protest," she adds. According to some sources, senior Congress leaders — miscreants associated with the party accused of killing Hashmi — were apparently present in the audience.

Hashmi, a member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and founder of the theatre troupe Jana Natya Manch (Janam), was beaten up on January 1, 1989 — allegedly by a Congress mob, led by party leader Mukesh Sharma — as he and his troupe were performing their play *Halla Bol!* at Jhandapur Colony in Sahibabad, the industrial town of Ghaziabad on the outskirts of Delhi. The performance was a gesture of solidarity for Ramanand Jha, a communist leader who was fighting the municipal elections in the area. Hashmi succumbed to his injuries a day later in the hospital.

Senior journalist V Kumara Swamy, in an article for *The Telegraph* last year, wrote: "People talk of Safdar Hashmi as if he was a man who died at a ripe old age. ... In his thick glasses, coat-muffer and wide smile, Hashmi looks much older than he actually was at the time the photograph was taken." When he was murdered, he was only 34 years old. But he "had already made a name for himself as a fiery street theatre actor and director."

Hashmi's fame really grew to mythic proportions after his murder. His wife, Moloyashree Hashmi, who now runs

Janam, was a part of the cast that was performing *Halla Bol!* on the day Safdar Hashmi was murdered. She led the troupe back a couple of days later to complete the interrupted performance; the group has been revisiting Jhandapur every year since then on the day of Hashmi's martyrdom.

Hashmi's vision of street theatre was utopian and internationalist. In an essay outlining the vision of Janam, he noted: "Street theatre, as we know it today, is not more than fifty or fifty-five years old. It began with a short play by Mayakovsky — *Mystery-Bouffe* — during the 1917 revolution in Russia. During the Second World War, the same play was performed more than a thousand times in front of the troops of the Red Army. Street theatre in the Soviet Union has been closely related to the growth of people's movements. In China, North Korea, Cuba and Vietnam, street theatre has been nurtured in the cradle of the Communist party. In Africa, street theatre has been the mouthpiece of nationalist movements. In the US, underclass African Americans have used street theatre to propagate their aspirations. In India too, street theatre has been closely related to the struggle for Independence. But even after Independence, our society is deeply afflicted with class hierarchy, social injustice and improper distribution of wealth." The aim of his theatre was to attack these injustices.

In another article for *The Telegraph*, Vidyarthi Chatterjee writes: "Hashmi was too astute a student of history and too perceptive an observer of the social and economic realities of his time to not realise that given the existing character of the Indian 'system', violent confrontation with the propertied and the privileged would amount to a battle lost before it had even begun. That, in spite of his sagacious understanding of conditions on the ground, violence visited him the way it did carries a lesson immersed in sadness and irony. In a sense, Hashmi's was a death foretold, both moving and enlightening."

Other writers, artists and activists have been murdered since Hashmi's death in India by political parties of all persuasion, from the far Right to the far Left. One is almost immediately reminded of the murders of Govind Pansare, Narendra Dabholkar, M M Kalburgi and Gauri Lankesh in 2013-14 by a shadowy right-wing organisation. In recent times, it has also become very fashionable to call people "anti-national" if they are critical of the Bharatiya Janata Party-led central government or its policies. But, if Hashmi's death has taught us anything, it is that no amount of bullying, even murder can silence artists or their ideas. One can perhaps take hope from it in our dark times.

Every week, Eye Culture features writers with an entertaining critical take on art, music, dance, film and sport

How our lexicon got enriched in the past decade



YES, BUT...

SANDEEP GOYAL

As a student of linguistics one was taught that language changes due to assimilation and dissimilation, mergers and splits, syncope and apocope, prothesis and epenthesis ... new words are borrowed or invented, the meaning of old words drifts or is redefined, and morphology of the lexicon develops or decays every couple of generations. In the past decade all of the above has happened to our language, and our vocabulary. New words, new meanings, new interpretations, new implications and new understandings have created a new lexicon prompted by new technologies, new social realities, and a new way of living life. And it has happened in a fraction of a generation.

The most interesting additions to our active vocabulary in the last 10 years have come from portmanteau words ... blended words ...

Brexit, bromance, shero, metrosexual, netizen, screenger, frenemy, freemium, emoticon, unfriend, staycation, podcast, athleisure, buzzworthy, upcycle, solopreneur, sexting, adulting, dadbod, dadance, clickbait, hatewatch, side-eye, humblebrag, meetcute, photobomb ... it is not that the likes of motel or smog or brunch did not exist previously in our conversational language, but in the 2010-20 decade, marrying parts of multiple words or their phonemes and combining them into a new word became almost a fashion in popular culture. Take "dadbod" mentioned earlier. To the uninitiated, it is slang for a body shape of middle-aged men, usually dads, with a slightly protruding tummy out of an otherwise muscular body which is actually being celebrated these days as sexy! Not just that, some new introductions like MeTime are actually profound expressions of how an entire generation wants not just leisure or solitude, but a cocooned personal downtime with zero intrusions. Similarly, bingewatch has

become the newest definition of content consumption yes, but also defines the volume and velocity of the viewing.

There is no dearth of blended words in use today ... affluenza, bodacious, celebutant, chillax, crunk, liger, mansplaining ... in domains that are more sociological ... and the likes of animatronic, bionic, cyborg, mockumentary, docusoap, telethon, and many more that are derived from technology and entertainment. Even choco-holic, fregan and hangry which are related to food. So, anything goes.

The other major trend of the decade just gone by has been the heightened embracing of acronyms ... wildly popular ones like BFF, FOMO, FYI, ICYMI, GTG, BRB, IMO, TTYL, TBTF to the more esoteric GOAT (Greatest Of All Times), EGOT (an Emmy-Grammy-Oscar-Tony winner), OOTD (Outfit Of The Day) or the more grounded TLDR (Too Long Didn't Read) or 2C2E (Too Complicated To Explain!).

Our recent vocabulary has also been vastly enriched by words like "woke" which made an appearance on the conversation horizon barely a couple of years ago. Now, who or what is "woke"? Well, it is someone

who is hyper-aware of current social issues, and news, and is generally politically engaged. More and more brands today, in fact, are seeking a "woke" positioning.

Similarly, another buzz-word of recent times is "swag" ... the new-gen word for "cool" ... a certain bold self-assurance in style, expression and manner which in the old days was nothing but "swagger"!

To think that just 10 years ago, we did not know, or use, words like selfie, ping, poke, tweet, meme, emoji, troll ... or did not even know what a hashtag was all about. Talking of hashtags, #MeToo entered the global consciousness when on October 15, 2017, Alyssa Milano wrote: "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet." And world began to talk about its experiences, sparking one of the most acrimonious outpourings and shaming in recent history. And #MeToo became the hashtag that showed us how a few words can galvanize and unite people for a cause. The likes of #Egypt and #ArabSpring, #UmbrellaRevolution and #BlackLivesMatter all became words that were pregnant with

meaning, and the pennants of revolution. So also, #MAGA (the acronym for Make America Great Again) which became easily the most emblematic political hashtag of the decade, catapulting Donald Trump to the American presidency.

Language and lexicon, in conclusion, fulfils a number of roles and functions in a changing society. It interprets the whole of our experience, reducing the infinitely varied phenomena of the world around us, as well as the worlds inside us, to a manageable number of classes of occurrences, types of processes, events and actions, classes of objects, people and institutions. In a way it becomes the "social construction of reality" around us. The rapid change that the world has witnessed in the past decade is truly reflected in the massive enhancement of our day-to-day lexicon, and how new actions, new mannerisms, new attitudes, new thinking, new products, and new ideas have all found names, and expressions, that define them and evoke a common understanding of their meanings amongst us all.

The writer is an advertising and media veteran

Opinion

SATURDAY, JANUARY 11, 2020

Tech-ing a brand new turn

Virtual humans to foldable screens, galloping AI/machine learning innovation is unlocking big gains for mankind

IN 2014, ARTIFICIAL intelligence (AI) first passed the Turing test—designed by English mathematician and computer science pioneer Alan Turing in 1950, to check if a machine is capable of thinking like a human. Ever since, many pieces of AI tech have successfully passed the test. With current technology evolving much faster than before, technological innovations are breaching new frontiers every day. The recent Consumer Electronic Show (CES) seemed almost like the future dragged into the present. For instance, Samsung's NEON is a virtual human—actually, an AI chatbot with a human-like avatar that will converse with and learn from users until its 'emotion' and 'intelligence' are indistinguishable from a human's. The world has had digital personal assistants for a long time now, but NEON, Samsung says, won't be one; it will be a virtual human being. What need they serve is an important question. Loneliness, especially among the young, is on the rise in most of the developed world, and technology can play a role in addressing it—OECD data shows that the share of 15-year-olds that feel lonely at school rose sharply between 2003 and 2015, and in the US and UK, nearly a quarter of the adult population have reported feeling lonely or lacking companionship. Chatbots are increasingly being seen as a tool to combat depression, and the NEON avatar may do this better by acting as a friend.

Virtual humans, though, aren't the only talking point in consumer tech. While smartphone makers unveiled foldable phones last year, Dell and Lenovo have showcased laptops that can do the same. Acer last year had launched a dual-screen laptop, but new devices at CES have unity displays where the computer can turn into one giant tablet. Still a proof of concept—and likely expensive—folding screens are going to be the next significant innovation. It also means that as technology advances, tablets are going to lose out. Like point-and-shoot cameras have become redundant with the coming of smartphones—Xiaomi last year launched a phone with 108MP camera—tablets are headed for a similar trajectory if foldable phones can host an 8-9 inch screen. The latest from Samsung's stable has a 7.3-inch display. Although larger screens do translate into higher battery consumption, larger battery capacity would make phones clunkier. Companies, thus, will have to look for more efficient batteries as devices come equipped with more RAM and space. The highest specification in a smartphone, at 12GB RAM and 512 GB space, is already better than low-end laptops.

While smartphones are already increasingly replacing laptops, the pace is going to accelerate further. In the first quarter of 2010, 85 million PCs were sold worldwide, compared with 55 million smartphones. While analysts had predicted smartphone shipments to outstrip PC sales in 2012, this happened much earlier than expected. By the first quarter of 2011, PC shipments had fallen to 82 million whereas smartphone shipments crossed the 100-million mark. By 2018, laptop shipments at 161 million for the whole of the year were less than a tenth of total smartphone shipments. As smartphones look to consolidate the market—Samsung has been pushing DeX, which can turn it into a Windows-like OS—both laptops and tablets are going to lose out. The convergence of devices is finally coming. In the coming decade, there will be fewer screens, but reliance on technology and AI will increase. After all, if your friend and personal assistant can both reside in your phone, why look anywhere else?

Getting Railways on track

Railway Board reforms good, but little on huge subsidies

BIBEK DEBROY, WHO heads the prime minister's economic advisory council, has a fascinating piece (bit.ly/36GDH6Gs) on how, the Railways was so compartmentalised in its functioning, while the platforms/toilets/waiting-rooms in a railway station were looked after by the civil engineering department, the lights/lifts/fans/water-coolers are the responsibility of the electrical department; he even talks of the wrangling between various wings on whether hot-cases were a better idea to heat food than microwaves. To that extent, railway minister Piyush Goyal has done well to try to put an end to this departmentalism—and silo-thinking—in the Railways by restructuring the Railway Board. The proof of the pudding, of course, is in the eating, so we will know the plan works when decision-making gets faster.

But Goyal needs to keep in mind that, even if the Railway Board revamp delivers over time, he cannot afford to go slow on slashing the huge passenger subsidies. Indeed, when he was power minister, Goyal didn't emphasise as much on raising power tariffs as he did on cutting ATC losses, and that is the reason why the power reforms didn't quite work as planned; indeed, even if ATC losses had come down, the huge subsidies on household electricity usage are cross-subsidised by commercial/industrial users and that makes them uncompetitive.

The recent hike in passenger fares, it is important to keep in mind, were after a gap of five years; given how large the subsidies were, fares should be hiked by a pre-specified amount—say 5% per year—instead of the hikes being episodic. Over the years, the subsidy burden has been increasing, and little has been done to address this and, as a result, operational expenses have increased at a faster rate than revenues; the operating ratio has deteriorated from 90.46% in 2008-09 to 98.44% in 2017-18. While Railways spent ₹97.3 to earn ₹100 in 2018-19—an improvement from 2017-18—this was only due to advance payments of ₹13,000 crore from Concor and NTPC. A CAG report last year pointed out that, had it not been for exceptional assistance like the one from NTPC, the operating ratio would have been 102.66% in 2017-18. While the current hike may help add another few hundred crore to the Railways kitty, this is far from enough.

More important, the current hike excludes the suburban sector, which accounts for a tenth of total subsidy, and has less than half the average revenue per user per km than the non-suburban travel. Debroy had, in 2015, estimated that losses on passenger traffic rose from ₹25,314 crore in FY12 to ₹35,298 crore in FY15, the CAG estimates this rose to ₹39,956 crore in FY17, and all of this was made up by hiking freight rates so much that it is cheaper to move lots of goods via road; that is why the Railways share of freight falls every year. The fact that the dedicated freight corridors will, though, help increase freight earnings, since the Railways can move it faster and also have double-decker containers. On the passenger side, while Goyal has to keep cutting passenger subsidies, the introduction of new trains—including private ones—where higher tariffs can be charged because of their superior amenities will also help.

Sailing SHAME

Sulphur waste from ships will remain a problem if open-loop scrubbers are preferred over closed-loop ones

SULPHUR FROM SHIPS' exhaust is a significant contributor to ozone depletion. Thus, when the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) adopted the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (Marpol) Annex VI in 2008—this prohibits deliberate emission of ozone-depleting substances such as sulphur oxides and nitrous oxides by ships—it was hoped that more ships will get fitted with closed-loop scrubbers. Exhaust scrubbers bring down sulphur pollutants in ships' exhaust, and closed loop ones retain the emissions for disposal at the port while open loop ones release the pollutants into the sea after turning them into sulphuric acid.

But, it seems the preference for open-loop scrubbers dwarves that for closed-loop ones—recent data shows that of 3,756 vessels with scrubbers, just 65 have closed-loop. While the IMO approves of open-loop scrubbers, it has strict guidelines of discharge of wash water from exhaust cleaning systems. GlobalData, a data analytics company that put out the numbers, reports. The fact is that it is still uncertain if open loop scrubbers will prove to be sustainable in the long run. While IMO's Sulphur 2020 vision estimates that the capping standards for sulphur content in ships' fuel that came into force from January 1 will lead to a 77% drop in overall sulphur oxide emissions from ships—an annual reduction of 8.5 million tonnes of SO_x—if discharge of wash-water remains an unaddressed area, the problem isn't really resolved.

● OIL ON THE BOIL

STABLE OIL PRICES WERE ONE OF THE ASSUMPTIONS OF MONETARY POLICY WHICH FOCUSED MORE ON CORE INFLATION. THIS WILL CHANGE AS THE PRICE MOVEMENT BECOMES PERMANENT

What the oil price spike could mean for India

IT IS ALMOST a stylised fact that a crude oil price shock is an annual feature; and this time, it has struck at the beginning of the year. The shock is always singular as it is caused more by geo-political tensions with Iran being the fulcrum of the controversy for some years now. There was a time when OPEC could move prices given the oligopolistic power wielded by them, but this is passé. With American shale-based oil entering the market and the US becoming one of the largest suppliers, the power of OPEC has gone down to an extent.

The recent imbroglio in Iran has led to the price of crude moving towards \$70/barrel and stock markets getting into a tizzy with panic striking across the forex markets. Investors are searching for new havens, and the non-dollar currencies like euro and yen seem to have been preferred to begin with. In such situations, the logical thing to do is to wait and watch, and see if the disturbance is temporary or permanent. If it is the former, then time would be the healer. But, if it is the latter, there could be some implications for us as there is a lot of dependence on imports.

Just how important is oil in Indian economics? The first thing that comes to mind is inflation, as higher oil prices means higher fuel prices, which, with the exception of LPG and kerosene, would be transmitted directly to the consumer. The price of petrol and diesel have moved up immediately as there is no subsidy element and the pricing system is on a daily basis. Curiously, at the macro level, the WPI gets impacted more given the weight of these products. In case of the WPI, the weight of all crude related products is around 10.4%, which means that 10% increase in crude price can potentially lead to 1% increase in WPI inflation. And, given that it is presently moving in the negative terrain, the potential increase can make it positive. In case of CPI, the direct weight is lower at 2.4%, and hence, the inflation impact is mod-

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erate even though this would be affecting households directly. This also means that RBI would be less concerned when looking at the monetary policy as the CPI effect would be less bothersome and the WPI effect not really relevant from the point of view of monetary policy.

Oil is also important for the government on both the revenue and expenditure side. On the expenditure side, the subsidy level gets impacted and with the present targeted amount of ₹37,000 crore, there would be an upside risk in case crude oil price remains high for a prolonged period of time. Therefore, the FY21 budget would be watchful of this phenomenon as it would be drawn on the basis of an assumption of crude oil price, which if higher than \$65/barrel will enter the budgetary numbers. A higher provision has to be made in case the government is keen to not let market prices increase for these products.

On the other side, the higher crude price is good for the government as there is a lot of revenue to be earned. The effective duty/taxes levied on petrol works out to almost 100% while that on diesel is between 65-70%. These duties are outside the ambit of the GST, and consciously so, as there is a lot of revenue to be earned by the government. In FY19, the central government earned around ₹3 lakh crore and the state government around ₹2.3 lakh crore. Clearly, such revenue would end in case these products came under the GST, as the highest slab is 28%, which is much below what is being levied today.

In fact, even if the rate is fixed at say 67% for both the products, this would

not work well with the government as the *ad valorem* rate would mean lower collections in case crude oil prices declined. Therefore, there is an incentive to keep these products out of the purview of GST. It has always been defended on grounds that these products are essential to the consumption basket of the common man, though diesel does enter the transportation costs of goods that are finally passed on.

The other direct impact is on the trade deficit. Crude oil has progressively become less important in the Indian trade basket with this share now being less than 30%. This is so because of various factors. There has been a movement towards alternative fuels which, though marginal today, would expand. CNG has already caught on for vehicles in some metro cities. Second, the slowdown in the economy has meant that there is less demand for fuels, which is getting reflected in the declining share in the import basket. Third, the lower demand for autos has meant that even in future there would not be exponential growth in consumption of oil products. Therefore, crude oil is not as potent a factor in distorting the trade balance, and hence, current account, and eventually the balance of payments position. The oil intensity of growth across the globe has been coming down, which in a way, is a threat to

Crude oil is not as potent a factor in distorting the trade balance, and hence, current account, and eventually the balance of payments position

the future of countries that are fully dependent on oil.

With the impact on trade deficit unlikely to be very stark, the rupee should continue to move based on fundamentals which remain strong, mainly due to the strong capital flows witnessed so far this year. Therefore, the impact on the rupee should be muted to this extent. However, of late it has been observed that currencies move more due to sentiment and extraneous conditions, of which, the dollar as the pivot currency holds the clue. As long as the strife signals play out, the rupee would tend to get volatile, though a fair value of 71.5-72 to the dollar looks more likely once normalcy returns. However, of late, the dollar and its strength drives currencies, and as the US exercises power, there would be a tendency for the dollar to strengthen globally which results in currencies weakening across the globe. This can be expected in the coming days too.

The oil crisis comes at a time when the Indian economy is weathering a series of challenges. Stable oil prices were one of

the assumptions of monetary policy, which focused more on core inflation. This will change as the price movement becomes more permanent in nature. Fiscal policy also has assumed stable prices within a range and would require some tweaking to factor in this new reality. Hence, this episode of crude oil prices will be watched quite closely by policy makers as the implications go beyond the political overtones that are currently pervading the headlines. The crux will be as to how long does this imbroglio last, and whether it would spread to other neighbouring nations too? Prima facie it looks like being more transient in nature, though one can never tell in such cases.

India's direct tax reforms agenda

Simplicity and certainty in taxation is valued by taxpayers even above the tax rates. In this context, multiplicity of capital gains tax rates is an area that deserves attention

SHALINI MATHUR

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FOR THE TAX world, 2019 has been a happening year as India responded to a multiplicity of challenges and dynamics at the domestic and global levels. Three significant drivers have shaped the tax policy in the past few months—the need to rev-up business sentiments and spur investments amidst concerns of a sub-5% economic growth for the first half of 2019-20, the OECD's BEPS agenda altering the tax structures and legislations across jurisdictions and, most importantly, technology that is bringing in new business models, different supply chains and immense digital data, thus, impacting both tax policy and administration.

Unquestionably, the most defining development of 2019 was the slashing of corporate tax rates to 22% for all companies, and 15% for new manufacturing companies, in a trade-off for zero incentives and deductions. The new rates have catapulted India to a very competitive position against many of the OECD and BRICS countries, and neighbours like China, Indonesia and Philippines. Over time, the lower rates will reduce the cost of capital and catalyse investments.

As a supplementary measure, to truly bring down the effective tax burden on companies, the system of taxing dividends in the hands of the shareholders as per the applicable tax rate should be reintroduced. This system has the advantages of simplicity, transparency and equity. It also eliminates the problem of no-credit for foreign investors, thereby, making India a more competitive destination for investments. With the current dividend distribution tax, even after the rate cuts, a company bears a tax burden of 38% to 56%, depending on whether it is a non-subsidiary, and whether it pays the additional tax on dividends more than ₹10 lakh.

Simplicity and certainty in taxation

is valued by taxpayers even above the tax rates. In this context, multiplicity of capital gains tax rates is an area that deserves attention. The current law is highly complex due to inconsistent tax treatment of income, based on varied parameters such as holding period that ranges from 1-3 years, tax rates that range from 10% to 30% and allowing indexation only in respect of certain assets.

A major recent development is the OECD proposal on taxation of digital transactions. New profit allocation rules, nexus rules and implementation of new market jurisdiction taxing rights could lead to significant changes to the tax environment for MNEs. As a welcome step, the Indian authorities are holding consultations with businesses to evaluate the potential impact of these changes. More developments are expected in 2020 with the MLI/treaty amendments taking shape. India will need to guard against any unilateral measures that increase the risk of double taxation and multi-jurisdictional disputes.

Given the above, the role of robust dispute avoidance measures cannot be over-emphasised. Most jurisdictions have mechanisms such as private ruling and settlement mechanism to avoid litigation. India, too, may consider new mechanisms to prevent disputes. For instance, a mediation mechanism may be brought in, right at the assessment level, for high pitched assessments. A mediation panel may be constituted comprising experts like past ITAT members, retired IRS members, and direct tax professionals with relevant experience in mediation and special knowledge of direct taxes. The mechanisms of Authority for

Advance Rulings (AAR) and Advance Pricing Agreements (APAs) are the long hanging fruits for improving dispute avoidance. With more than 400 cases pending resolution, AAR has had limited success in reducing litigation due to structural and administrative reasons. Though APAs have been successful as a means of minimising litigation, with already 300 APAs signed despite it being a complex exercise, lack of capacity has slowed down the APA decisions. Capacity building for both AARs and APAs, supplemented by a new mechanism for private ruling will help taxpayers immensely.

In the recent years, the ministry of finance has taken a leap towards digitised tax administration. A pathbreaking initiative has been the implementation of anonymised, faceless assessments that deploy machine learning and artificial intelligence technologies to undertake risk-based audits. E-assessment will bring substantial ease to the taxpayer and minimise undesirable practises. Small businesses/individual taxpayers may not need the help of consultants to represent routine enquiries, which will help bring down their costs. Going forward, the taxpayers will need to equip themselves to provide crisper and focussed information that is easy to understand and not subject to misinterpretation. The tax department too will need to ensure a robust IT infrastructure to enable faceless assessments.

India has been ranked as one of the top-20 improvers in Doing Business 2020 by the World Bank. Here's hoping that the new year brings in significant improvement in India's current ranking of 151 out of 190 for ease of paying taxes.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SC's verdict on Kashmir lockdown

The Supreme Court's (SC) verdict on the prolonged Internet and communication blackout, and the indefinite restrictions on movement imposed under Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure came as a whiff of fresh air. It marked a welcome deviation from the pattern of a slew of judgments delivered in recent days. It was proof that left to itself the apex court is capable of pronouncing fair, impeccable and stellar judgments. Implicit in the present verdict are the paramountcy of civil liberties and the precedence they should get over political exigencies. The verdict represents a setback to the Modi government in that it has held its curbs on communication and movement violative of the constitutionally guaranteed rights. The enforcement of curfew has circumscribed people to their homes and forced them to go without the much-needed social intercourse. Had the SC endorsed its politically expedient moves, the government would have flaunted it as a thumbs up for it and as a thumbs down for the human rights defenders. Post-this verdict, the government cannot invoke or cite 'national security' to justify whatever it does. In any case, the verdict will bring some reprieve to the residents of Kashmir whose day-to-day life became hell. The untold suffering of the people of Kashmir for the last 161 days could have been avoided if the Modi government had not abrogated Article: 370 and stripped their autonomy required, and then not denied them the political space to react to its unilateral decision. It cannot be denied that there exists among the Kashmiris the feeling of being occupied and subjugated. The alienation of the Muslim majority valley still remains to be addressed; it can be addressed only by giving them their rights. — G David Milton, Maruthacode

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UP RERA

A nice Upturn for home buyers

Uttar Pradesh has been at the forefront of RERA redressals. The state decided a whopping 15,485 complaints, while other states lagged far behind. Maharashtra decided only 6,834, Madhya Pradesh 2,839, Karnataka 1,908, and Haryana 3,161

Development Act, 2016, widely acknowledged as one of the three most important reforms undertaken by the present government, was enacted on March 25, 2016.

July 26, 2017, is an epochal day for the home-buyers and the real estate sector of Uttar Pradesh. On this day chief minister Yogi Adityanath launched the website of UP RERA, and, thus, Uttar Pradesh became the first state in the country to start online management of the real estate projects as well as public complaints. UP RERA has many firsts to its credit and is assiduously working to bring about a desired change in the sector.

Nobody will deny that the sector has been under tremendous stress for a variety of reasons leading to inordinate delay in completion of the projects, abandonment of some projects and increase in the financial liabilities of the promoters-developers. There have also been issues like piling up of the dues of the development authorities, especially NOIDA, GNOIDA and YEIDA; withholding of the approvals and CC/OC by the authorities, non-delivery of lakhs of houses, dismy among the home-buyers leading to complex litigation and non-payment of instalments and fraudulent trade practices by some promoters. So, RERA could not have come at a later date.

The government had designated the Additional Chief Secretary Housing and the Urban Planning Department as the interim regulator. However, the permanent authority was established at a later date and assumed office on August 9, 2018. The administration took a quick and complete overview of the matters requiring attention and embarked on a resolution plan. About 50% of the real estate projects, 70% of the real estate complaints and 75% of the stressed projects are from the NCR. While there have been 22,309 registered complaints, 16,575 have been registered in NCR and 5,734 outside NCR.

Similarly, total complaints that have been decided are 15,485. Of these 12,084 are from NCR and 3,401 from outside NCR. The full recovery certificates that have been issued stand at 1,261. Out of these 1,022 are from NCR, and 239 from outside NCR. Again 2,762



ILLUSTRATIONS: ROHNIT PHORE

are total registered projects. Of these 1,368 are from NCR, and 1,394 from outside NCR.

These are just a few instances. The government, on the request of RERA, established the regional Office of RERA in GNOIDA in Gautam Buddha Nagar in September 2018, and the NCR office-bench started working w.e.f. September 4, 2018, with the chairman, members and senior officers working from both the offices as per the roster decided by the authority. The authority also took a conscious decision to work six days a week, keeping in view the considerable volume of the grievances of the consumers and the responsibilities cast upon it. Some of the instances of how the authority has successfully met these demands and how it is ameliorating the rashes of the sector paving the

way for a vibrant and responsive real estate sector are:

■ Under the close monitoring of the authority, 570 registered projects have been completed, 157 projects granted short duration extension, 200 projects audited, show-cause notices issued for de-registration of 27 projects, 67 projects de-registered and steps initiated to complete such projects under section 8 of RERA as per the draft policy submitted to the government. This move will help to discipline the errant promoters and to ensure the completion of the projects.

■ The authority has established a project management division in its NCR office for close supervision of the projects and positive intervention in case of stressed projects. It has prepared panels of auditors, third party construction consultants, undertaken the audit and

verification of the accounts of 321 projects through the CA firms on the panel of the CAG. The development of a framework for the grading of the projects and promoters is underway and will soon be rolled out. Once the grading framework becomes operational, it will help the consumers in making informed choices and usher a healthy competition in the sector.

■ Efforts are being made vigorously to make all the projects RERA compliant. Recently, the authority imposed penalties against the promoters of 1,088 projects for not updating quarterly progress reports on the website. The promoters have started realising the advantages of the RERA compliances. This will finally lead to financial discipline, accountability and transparency in the sector. A study by Magicbricks found 60% want to buy

a house in a RERA-registered project. UP RERA has been successful in instilling confidence among the home-buyers.

■ Uttar Pradesh does not have the largest real estate sector in the country, but it has the highest volume of the complaints by the home-buyers. The regular authority was constituted at a much later date in the state. Still, it has decided more than two times the complaints resolved by any other state. While Uttar Pradesh decided a whopping 15,485 complaints, other states lagged far behind. Maharashtra decided only 6,834, Madhya Pradesh 2,839, Karnataka 1,908, Haryana 3,161. The lowest number of complaints were decided in Gujarat (1,455).

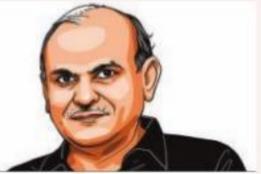
Uttar Pradesh was the first state to start the execution of its orders through recovery certificates. The authority has issued 1,261 recovery certificates having demand of ₹391.36 crore. During the short period of just over one year, an amount of ₹53.42 crore has been realised against 275 recovery certificates. The pace of recovery is picking up. The authority is continuously following up the recovery cases with the concerned collectors. It has established an online facility for filing the request for execution of RERA orders and also an online module for tracking compliance on possessions and refunds. Most promoters now comply with the orders of RERA. As per the compliance status gathered from different tracking mediums, there has been compliance in half of the cases. Owing to RERA, promoters are trying to settle issues with home-buyers.

■ The authority has also institutionalised the amicable settlement of the disputes between the home-buyers and the promoters through two conciliation fora established at its Lucknow and NCR offices. So far over two thousand home-buyers have sought relief through this forum.

Uttar Pradesh Real Estate Regulatory Authority earned the honour of organising the First National RERA Conclave in Lucknow on November 4, 2019. The conclave had broad participation from all stakeholders including the central government, state governments, RERAs and Appellate Tribunals of states, top management of the banks and other financial institutions, industry associations, home-buyers and their associations, promoters, professionals and competent authorities. The chief minister of Uttar Pradesh inaugurated the conference in the presence of the minister of state (independent charge), Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, Government of India. The conclave was immensely successful and the achievements of UP RERA were acknowledged by all.

With RERA, and UP RERA, the scenario is changing and changing for the better.

RAJIVE KUMAR



Chairman, UP Real Estate Regulatory Authority

THE REAL ESTATE sector had come under tremendous pressure during 2015 and 2016. A large number of real estate projects had come to a halt; the home-buyers, who had invested their lifetime savings, had limited recourse to a rapid resolution of problems; the developers were non-responsive, and the development authorities faced serious constraints in regulating them. The need of the hour was for transparency, discipline, and timely delivery of projects, which was too important to be neglected any further.

Therefore, the central government resolved to establish a regulatory authority in all the states and union territories across the country to help the consumers, bring about financial discipline and transparency, and to develop and transform the real estate sector.

The Real Estate Regulation and

able to meet its investment targets. If we were to presume the government's projections—it is expecting nominal growth to average 12% over the next five years—this would mean an investment growth of 6.5%. One needs to keep in mind that the investment ratio in the period between FY13-17, when growth averaged 10% was just 5.7%.

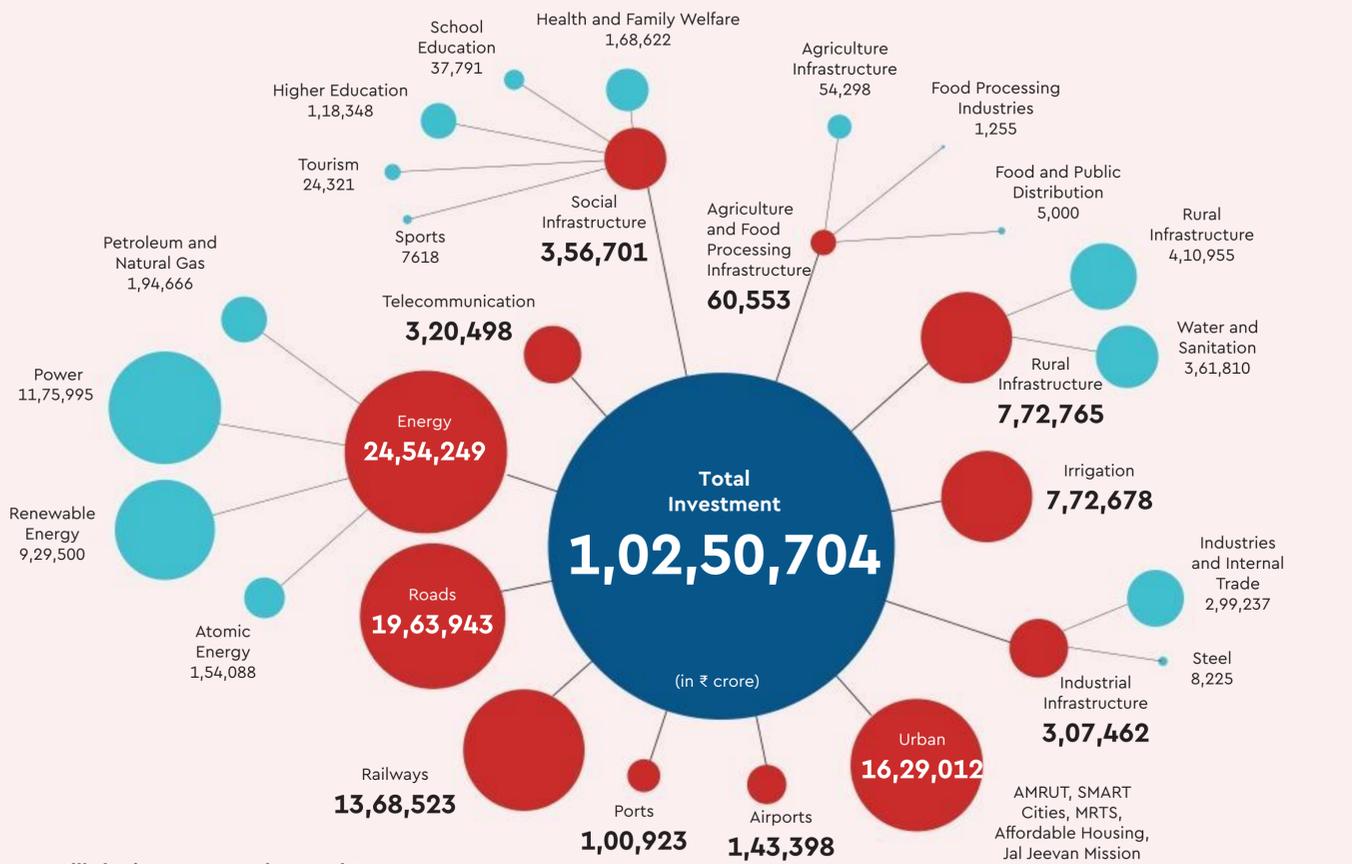
Further, if we are to consider a more realistic growth projection of 8%, the average investment ratio would jump to 7% of the GDP. More important, for FY21, investment will have to be nearly 10%, an impossible task given that even in its best years investment ratio has been just a notch above 6%. The government will, thus, have to explore other avenues if it needs to consider propping up the economy. While government has allocated 25% of the funds to power sector and 20% to roads, till issues like discom losses aren't fixed, the question is who will be ready to invest?

DATA DRIVE

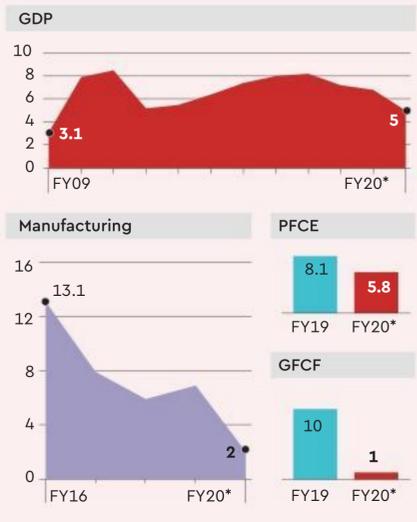
Building a way out of the slump

INTERNATIONAL AGENCIES AND analysts have been revising their forecasts of Indian GDP, but the government has held that the economy is not in crisis. The release of first annual estimates for the economy show that growth has come down to 5%. While growth was growing by 7% until last year—the fastest-growing major economy in the world then—low investment, coupled with slow down in private consumption has brought down growth. Even the rising government expenditure has not been able to arrest the fall in growth numbers. While the next two quarters are expected to be better given the base effect, Indian economy still has a lot to deal with as most economists who were earlier, terming the growth as cyclical, are highlighting structural issues.

The government has responded with a major infrastructure push, targeting investments worth ₹102 lakh crore within the next five years, but the plan seems too ambitious. For one, even when the economy was performing well, India was not



Falling headlong



FY20 growth forecast



Will the investment plan work?



If GDP growth is 8%

