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Why some states have Vidhan Parishads, why AP doesn't want one

SREENIVAS JANYALA & OM MARATHE
HYDERABAD, NEW DELHI, JANUARY 27

THE ANDHRA Pradesh Assembly on Monday evening passed a resolution to abolish the state's Legislative Council, where the opposition Telugu Desam Party (TDP) has a majority. The resolution was passed under Article 169(1) of the Constitution, which allows Parliament to either create or abolish a Council in a state "if the Legislative Assembly of the State passes a resolution to that effect by a majority of the total membership of the Assembly and by a majority of not less than two-thirds of the members of the Assembly present and voting".

The TDP, which has 23 members in the Assembly, boycotted the session to indicate that the resolution to abolish the Council was passed in the absence of the Opposition.

Casualty in political war

While the YSR Congress has an overwhelming majority of 151 in the 175-member Assembly, it has only 9 MLCs in the 58-strong Upper House. The government decided to abolish the Council after the TDP's MLCs last week blocked The Andhra Pradesh Decentralisation and Inclusive Development of All Regions Bill, 2020 and The Andhra Pradesh Capital Region Development Authority Repeal Bill, 2020 — the first steps towards the establishment of three capitals for the state at Amaravati, Visakhapatnam, and Kurnool.

Chairman of the Council Mohammed Ahmed Shariff, who belongs to the TDP, had used his discretionary powers to refer the two Bills to a Select Committee for review, tying the government's hands for at least the next three months. The position taken by the TDP in the Council had also led to two other important Bills — to establish separate commissions for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and to make the medium of instruction English in government schools — being stalled.

The YSRCP had last month threatened to do away with the Council after it became clear the TDP would block the latter two Bills. After the Bills to create the three capitals were blocked, Chief Minister YS Jaganmohan Reddy had said, "We need to seriously think whether we need to have such a House which appears to be functioning with only political motives."

After a Cabinet meeting on Monday morning that cleared the resolution to dissolve the Council, Finance and Legislative Affairs Minister B Rajendranath said: "People have given us a big mandate and power to take decisions in the interest of the state. But TDP is using its political clout in the Legislative Council to stall important Bills. They illegally blocked the three-capitals Bill. The TDP is not letting us carry on our work, so we have proposed to abolish the Council. We will send the resolution to the Centre for approval."

The Council's journey

The Vidhan Parishad of united Andhra Pradesh was created on July 1, 1958, and dissolved on May 31, 1985. It was resurrected after 22 years, on March 30, 2007. Ironically, it was abolished the last time by N T Rama Rao, the founder of the TDP, after the Congress blocked all the government's decisions in the Council. And it was restored by Dr Y S Rajashekara Reddy, the father of Chief Minister Jaganmohan Reddy.

Since the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh in 2014, the Council has had 58 members. The TDP's strength fell to 28 last week after the resignation of D Manikya Varaprasad. Two

CM Jaganmohan Reddy's 3-capitals plan has been thwarted in the Council. *Archive*

Ministers in the Jaganmohan Reddy government, Deputy Chief Minister Pilli Subhash Chandra Bose, and Marketing Minister Mopidevi Venkata Ramana are members of the Council. They will have to resign when the Council is ultimately abolished.

That, however, will happen only after Parliament approves the resolution passed by the Assembly. The Union Law Ministry will prepare a Bill to be tabled in Parliament. The process may take 3-6 months, during which time the Council will continue to function.

Councils in the Constitution

Under Article 168, states can have either one or two Houses of legislature. Article 169 leaves the choice of having a Vidhan Parishad to individual states.

The Constituent Assembly was divided on having a second chamber in the states. It was argued that a second House can help check hasty actions by the directly elected House, and also enable non-elected persons to contribute to the legislative process. However, it was also felt that some of the poorer states could ill afford the extravagance of two Houses.

It has been pointed out that the Councils can be used to delay important legislation, and to park leaders who have not been able to win an election.

Under Article 171, a Council cannot have more than a third of the number of MLAs in the state, and not less than 40 members. A third of the MLCs are elected by MLAs, another third by a special electorate comprising sitting members of local government bodies such as municipalities and district boards, 1/12th by an electorate of teachers, and another 1/12th by registered graduates. The remaining members are appointed by the Governor for distinguished services in various fields.

Councils in other states

Besides Andhra Pradesh, five other states have Vidhan Parishads — Bihar (58 members), Karnataka (75), Maharashtra (78), Telangana (40), UP (100). Jammu and Kashmir had a Council until the state was bifurcated into the Union Territories of J&K and Ladakh.

In 1986, the M G Ramachandran government in Tamil Nadu abolished the Council. The DMK government passed a law revive it, but the subsequent J Jayalalithaa-led government withdrew it after coming to power in 2010.

The Odisha Assembly has passed a resolution for a Legislative Council. Proposals to create Councils in Rajasthan and Assam are pending in Rajya Sabha.

The parliamentary panel that examined the Rajasthan Bill advocated a national policy for creation and abolition of Councils: "The status of Second Chamber cannot be of temporary in nature depending on the mood of the Government of the day nor can be abolished once created, only at the whims and fancy of a newly elected Government in the State."

TELLING NUMBERS

India slips in global corruption index, Denmark, NZ top list

India has slipped two spots to number 80 in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), with its score remaining the same at 41. The index is prepared annually by the Germany-based Transparency International, and offers a snapshot of the relative degrees of public sector corruption by ranking countries and territories from around the world. It gives each country a score from zero (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean).

Major protests across the world last year signal a growing lack of trust in government, and erodes public confidence in political leaders, elected officials and democracy, the report says.

The 2019 CPI, released on January 23, draws on 13 surveys and expert assessments to measure public sector corruption in 180 countries and territories. The average 2019 score is 43, with more than two-thirds of countries scoring below 50. "Corruption is more pervasive in countries where big money can flow freely into electoral campaigns...," Transparency International said on its website.

INDIA IN LAST 5 YEARS

Index Year	Rank	Score	Countries Surveyed
2012	94	36	174
2013	94	36	175
2014	85	38	174
2015	76	38	167
2016	79	40	176
2017	81	40	180
2018	78	41	180
2019	80	41	180

INDIA'S NEIGHBOURHOOD

COUNTRY	RANK	SCORE
India	80	41
China	80	41
Pakistan	120	32
Bangladesh	146	26
Sri Lanka	93	38
Nepal	113	34
Myanmar	130	29

WORLD

MOST CLEAN

COUNTRY	RANK	SCORE
Denmark	1	87
New Zealand	1	87
Finland	3	86
Singapore	4	85
Sweden	4	85
Switzerland	4	85
Norway	7	84
Netherlands	8	82

MOST CORRUPT

COUNTRY	RANK	SCORE
Afghanistan	173	16
Equatorial Guinea	173	16
Sudan	173	16
Venezuela	173	16
Yemen	177	15
Syria	178	13
South Sudan	179	12
Somalia	180	9

Source: Transparency International

SIMPLY PUT QUESTION & ANSWER

Departure announcement

The government has tweaked the terms of Air India's sale, and is now putting 100% of its equity in the airline on the block. Will there finally be a buyer? How will flyers and employees be impacted?

PRANAV MUKUL
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 27

The government has rolled out the red carpet for potential buyers. *AP*

THE FIRST formal attempt at privatising Air India and, at the time, Indian Airlines, in 2000 had elicited interest from the who's who of India Inc., including the Tata Group, Hinduja Group, L N Mittal, and Videocon Group.

But the airlines were not privatised after political opposition from within the then-NDA government.

Cut to 2018. The NDA government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, despite all the political will to disinvest its stake in the airline, could not attract a single bidder. The reasons: the Centre's unwillingness to part with 100% of its holding in the flag carrier, and lack of clarity over the debt being packaged with the airline, among others.

Less than two years later, the government has tweaked the terms of sale — with room for more changes — and is now putting 100% of its equity in the airline on the block. Like the last time, low-cost arm Air India Express and a 50% stake in ground handling joint-venture Air India-SATS are also up for sale. The government has also laid down a principle for calculating debt, which will be bundled with airline, and relaxed the minimum net worth criteria for potential bidders to Rs 3,500 crore from the Rs 5,000 crore in 2018.

Will the new terms attract investors?

After having conducted eight roadshows across the world seeking inputs on how the disinvestment package should be structured, the government is hopeful of attracting investors with the new sale criteria, coupled with the main benefits of the airline, which are prime slots in capacity-constrained airports across the world, wide-bodied aircraft, and a 50.64% market share in international traffic among Indian carriers.

The first time around, the manner in which debt and liabilities were bundled with the airline were called into question. This time, the airline will come with a frozen long-term liability of Rs 23,286.50 crore, and current liabilities that will be calculated on the date the transaction closes.

However, any potential investor is also expected to look at the size of the airline's operations with reference to what those operations generate. For example, both Air India and Singapore Airlines operate with a fleet of 121 aircraft, but in 2018-19 (April-March), Air India posted a net loss of Rs 8,556 crore, whereas Singapore Airlines (as a standalone airline) reported a net profit of Singapore $ 779.1 million (approximately Rs 4,100 crore).

Further, even though the debt calculation has been changed to instill a level of certainty in what will be packaged with the airline, the combined amount of debt and liabilities are at least Rs 32,058 crore. Therefore, in addition to valuing the airline and placing a bid for its equity, the new investor will need to invest in turning the airline around.

What will the new investor get?

The most attractive proposition in acquiring Air India is the slots and landing rights that it holds at airports such at Delhi, Mumbai, London, New York, Chicago, Paris, etc. These could be helpful both to airlines looking to expand into long-haul international operations, and to entities looking to set up global operations from scratch.

Air India currently operates to 56 Indian cities and 42 international destinations. Several of Air India's international and domestic routes are profit-generating, while a number of them are loss-making or witness low load factors. This is a legacy problem that the airline comes with for the new promoter.

Additionally, while the airline comes with 121 aircraft primed as domestic and international workhorses, 18 of them are grounded for lack of funds to make them airworthy.

The new investor also gets hold of the ground-handling firm AI-SATS, which offers end-to-end ground handling services such as passenger and baggage handling, ramp handling, aircraft interior cleaning, load control and flight operations, and cargo handling services for general, perishable, trans-shipment, express courier and special cargo at Bengaluru, Delhi, Hyderabad, Mangaluru and Thiruvananthapuram airports. This would provide the investor with an ancillary services firm with captive use.

How will consumers and employees be impacted?

CONSUMERS: If and when Air India is taken over by a private entity or consortium, experts believe the first move could be pruning of operations to ensure the airline inches closer to profitability. This could cause Air India to cease operations on certain loss-making domestic and international routes — leading to a rise in fares. It is believed that Air India's continuous loss-making operations have skewed the market, wherein private companies have to play ball even when fares are artificially low. Cutting certain routes could also impact consumers in terms of the unique offerings by Air India, such as higher baggage allowance, etc.

EMPLOYEES: Air India's bloated staff strength was flagged by potential investors in the last disinvestment attempt. The airline has 17,984 employees, of which 9,617 are permanent staff. According to the preliminary information memorandum, 36% of the permanent staff will retire in the next five years. However, Air India's Chairman and Managing Director Ashwani Lohani insisted on Monday that the airline did not have any "excess staff". Whether the employees will be retained by the new investor is unclear. The government is expected to provide more clarity on conditions for retaining staff in the request-for-proposal stage, which will come after expressions of interest are received.

So will the airline be finally sold?

Despite the strong political will to privatise the airline, the government has received opposition even from within. BJP leader Subramanian Swamy tweeted on Monday: "This deal is wholly anti-national and I will (be) forced to go to court. We cannot sell our family silver."

Employee unions have always opposed stake sale. However, the government has held extensive meetings with the unions, and tried to identify specific issues raised by them.

A lot also depends on the global politico-economic scenario that enables bidders, from India or abroad, to show interest in acquiring the loss-making airline. Given that there are specific parts of the airline that are considered attractive for different entities, experts are of the view that if this second attempt too fails, the government will have no choice but to take a piecemeal approach at divesting the national carrier.

FACT CHECK, GROUND REALITY

Why China has emerged as the epicentre of global outbreaks of disease

ABANTIKA GHOSH
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 27

SEVERAL DEADLY new viruses in recent years have emerged in China — Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), bird flu, and now the novel coronavirus (nCOV). The reason could lie in the busy food markets dotting cities across the country — where fruits, vegetables, hairy crabs and butchered meat are often sold next to bamboo rats, snakes, turtles, and palm civets. Closely packed stalls in busy marketplaces, the Chinese taste for exotic meats, and the high population density of cities create the conditions for the spread of zoonotic infections, experts say.

Zoonotic infections

The relationship between zoonotic pathogens — those of animal origin — and global pandemics is not new. The Justinian Plague (541-542 AD), the Black Death (which started in Europe in 1347), yellow fever in South America in the 16th century, the global influenza pandemic in 1918, and modern pandemics such as HIV/AIDS, SARS, and triple-reassortant A H1N1 influenza have one thing in common: the causal organisms came to humans from animals.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that globally, about a billion cases of illness and millions of deaths occur every year from zoonoses, i.e, diseases and infections naturally transmitted between people and vertebrate animals. Some 60% of emerging infectious diseases globally are zoonoses. Of the over 30 new human pathogens detected over the last three decades, 75% originated in animals.

Animal markets everywhere...

"Wherever there is close mixing of humans and animals, especially the unregulated handling of blood and other body products, as happens for example in China's animal markets, there are greater chances of transmission of a virus from animals to humans, and its mutation to adapt to the human body," a senior WHO functionary told *The Indian Express* from Geneva.

It isn't just China, the official said. "It has happened wherever in the world there is unregulated mixing of humans and animals, either wild or domesticated." The official referred to the Ebola outbreak in Africa: "There it was wild chimpanzees who had the disease. It came into humans after these were killed and consumed. Animal markets are breeding grounds because there is free interchange of pathogens between species and mutations."

...And especially in China

Dr K S Reddy, former professor of AIIMS and president of the Public Health Foundation of India (PHFI) noted that the majority of new outbreaks and pandemic threats over the past five decades had arisen from microbes transmitted from animals to humans, either directly or through another animal reservoir host.

"Proximity to animals grows from wild food markets and captive animal breeding, with deforestation creating a conveyor belt for viruses and vectors to move from wildlife to captive animals, and from them to humans. The wild food markets in China offer both a mix of many animals which harbour deadly viruses, and an opportunity to transmit with ease to crowds of humans whose taste for a diversity of wild as well as close-bred animals provides a conveyor belt for animal-to-human transmission. Once the virus gains entry into humans who travel and transport animals, the infection spreads," Dr Reddy said.

The more virulent strains emerge from mutation which occurs when a large human host community offers itself for easy transmission, Dr Reddy said. "Human folly opens the ecological window and microbial genetics seize the opportunity. Deadly viruses can then play Chinese Checkers leaping from species to species. This happens in other parts of the world too, but the Chinese taste for exotic animal foods and the population density makes it a prime playground for zoonotic infections," he said.

Ecology of infections, spread

With a population of nearly 1.4 billion and 50% of the world's livestock, China's ecology poses a risk for emerging, re-emerging, and novel diseases that could threaten China and the rest of the world, says the US federal agency Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

"Moreover, the world's growing network of air travel routes dramatically increases the risk for infections to rapidly spread, and for potential pandemics that can cause illness, death, and costly disruption to global trade," the CDC states.

The SARS epidemic began in November 2002 in the Guangdong province of southern China, and spread across the world. Bird flu of various provenances — the virus keeps mutating — have been repeatedly reported from China after the first H7N9 novel avian influenza outbreak of 2013. In 2018, a 68-year-old patient from Jiangsu province was infected with H7N4. Last year, there was an outbreak of H5N6 bird flu in Horgos in the far western Xinjiang region.

In the wake of the Wuhan coronavirus outbreak, Dr Takeshi Kasai, Regional Director for the Western Pacific, WHO (under which China falls), wrote: "This New Year's wake-up call reminds us to be vigilant against SARS, bird flu and the causes of more recent outbreaks in the region... In fact, two of the last four influenza pandemics began in the Western Pacific Region — home to 1.9 billion people and a hot spot for outbreaks of emerging infectious diseases and natural disasters. These were threats that put people's health and safety and economic development at risk... It is fair to ask: are we safer from health security threats than we were a decade ago, following the H1N1 influenza pandemic? Or than we were when SARS emerged 17 years ago?"

THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE

EVEN WHEN I'M OLD AND GREY, I WON'T BE ABLE TO PLAY IT, BUT I'LL STILL LOVE THE GAME.

— MICHAEL JORDAN

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

POISED FOR TAKEOFF

Government move to revive Air India sale is welcome. But it should devise a better strategy for disinvestment

THE NDA GOVERNMENT has kicked off the disinvestment process for Air India for the second time — its previous attempt in 2018 had failed to receive a single bid. It has issued a preliminary information memorandum for interest to sell its stake in Air India, Air India Express and Air India-SATS. Qualified bidders will be notified by March 31, implying that the stake sale will be closed only in the next fiscal year. But this time, the government seems to have taken care to address some of the contentious issues which had dampened investor interest in the past. This is a welcome move. As the airline has been incurring huge losses, there is simply no rationale for continuing to pump in money into a loss making entity operating in a hyper competitive sector where consumers are well-served by the private sector.

The government has sweetened the deal on several counts. First, unlike last time when it offered to offload only 76 per cent of its stake in the airline, the government will offload its entire stake. This is likely to encourage prospective bidders as it implies having full operational freedom to run the carrier. Second, the government has taken steps to address the airline's massive debt, which has been a major stumbling block for prospective buyers. This time around, the government has transferred part of the debt to a special purpose vehicle. As a result, the buyer will now have to take over only Rs 23,286 crore of debt. Third, the government has lowered the net worth criteria for potential bidders from Rs 5,000 crore to Rs 3,500 crore. Fourth, eligibility norms have been tweaked and consortiums have been given greater flexibility for bidding, making it a better structured deal. However, prospective buyers will still have to contend with the airline's huge workforce. Some have argued that investors may find it difficult to buy the entire airline. Thus, a more prudent approach would be to split its various businesses such as international and domestic operations, its ground services arm, and the airport services company, and sell them separately. With the demise of Jet Airways — Air India's competitor in both domestic and international markets — this revised structure should be attractive to investors.

The repeated delays in the government's stake sale in Air India, or BPCL for that matter, underline the need to have a better strategy for the disinvestment programme. So far, the approach has been to view it as a means for shoring up the Centre's revenue towards the end of each financial year. Instead, the Centre could draw up a list of companies for disinvestment and release an advance calendar. This would provide clarity and help potential investors.

WARNINGS FROM EUROPE

Resolutions on CAA, Kashmir in European parliament point to the limits of diplomacy when the ground situation is fraught

THERE IS NO getting around the reality that the six resolutions tabled in the European Parliament against the Citizenship Amendment Act and proposed NRC, as well as the detentions and restrictions on communications in Kashmir, show India in poor light. The resolutions, which will be taken up for discussion on January 29, varyingly denounce the CAA as having the potential to create the largest crisis of statelessness in the world, of having adverse consequences for India's internal stability, of being discriminatory on the grounds of religion, and of violating the principle of equality. In all, the resolutions involve 626 of the 751 members of the European parliament. Only one of the resolutions, by a centre-right bloc in the EP, was willing to give any quarter to India, coming close in its formulation to India's position that these are internal matters on which a sovereign power has the right to take its decisions.

The resolutions have come weeks before Prime Minister Narendra Modi is to go to Brussels for the EU-India summit in March, an important event in Delhi's diplomatic calendar. The two sides have been trying to tie up a Bilateral Trade and Investment Agreement, a pact that acquires more significance after India's withdrawal from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. The EU is India's largest trading partner and some parliamentarians had earlier said that any trade agreement with India should include a human rights clause. Delhi has not made an official statement yet, but has put out unofficially that the European Parliament has no business debating the authority and rights of a democratically elected government and its legislature. However, it has to be borne in mind that just three months ago, it was the Indian government that invited two dozen European lawmakers from India-friendly far-right groups and took them on a guided tour of Kashmir as part of its diplomatic outreach to explain the August 5 decisions, hoping their pro-India views would carry the day. As a seasoned international player, the Ministry of External Affairs should know that it cannot take the position that only favourable views on its internal affairs are kosher.

Today's globalised world is as concerned about the movement of people as it is about the movement of goods. Actions by any country with potential for causing ripples elsewhere worries the international community. India cannot turn its face away from such concerns though no European nation has criticised the government's moves. The resolutions should also give pause for Delhi to consider how much headway diplomacy can make when the ground situation inspires little confidence.

AHEAD OF THE BUZZER

Kobe Bryant aspired for greatness, leaves behind a tortured legacy

BASKETBALL LOST ITS synonym and the Los Angeles Lakers its biggest face when NBA legend Kobe Bryant, 41, died in a helicopter crash with eight others including his 13-year-old hoopster daughter, Gianna. A deeply polarising figure in NBA, Kobe brashly dared to become the next Michael Jordan, and some might say, succeeded almost with 18 All Stars and five championship rings headlining his career. The sheer command on the court put him in a three-way race with Jordan and LeBron for the greatest ever. His frequent feuding with teammates and his cold, reticent personality made him quite the hated figure amongst his peers and coaches in his early years. And a sexual assault complaint by a hotel employee in Colorado permanently blotted his legacy.

What will not be eclipsed was Kobe's years on the court where he finally found the balance between being called a ball-hog in a team and passing to his teammates, mentoring them in his later years to mirror him in the clutch situations. If the clock was running down and you needed someone to make a three-pointer to beat the buzzer, then Kobe was the man.

What will perhaps be Kobe's abiding association with basketball is his pure love for the game. Schooled in Italy where his father played, he grew up different from other American NBA players, and channelled his unapologetic pursuit of Jordan's greatness by making his life all about the sport. NBA is replete with stories of how hard he worked. First to practice, last to leave, immense workouts in the gym everyday, off-season training alone and the famous figure of just 18 days taken off in a year. He went with humility to Hakeem Olajuwon to better his game after he had won plenty. He retired in 2016 with $680 million in total earnings, highest for a team athlete, but none of the Nike-propelled cult that built Jordan. He died leaving conflicted and mourning fans, far too soon for the buzzer.

Lifting the pall of fear

Centre faces classic dilemma civil disobedience unfailingly poses: Whether or not it cracks down, protests will grow

ASHUTOSH VARSHNEY

"AS IT WERE, that pall of fear was lifted from the people's shoulders, not wholly, of course, but to an amazing degree." This is how Jawaharlal Nehru described what Gandhi, after 1918-19, did to India's psyche against the British rulers.

After three recent weeks in Delhi (including Shaheen Bagh), Mumbai, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Bhopal and Lucknow, it is clear to me that the pall of fear which accompanied BJP's victory in May has been lifted. The analogy is not perfect. Instead of Gandhi, it is women and students who have taken charge of protests. And the current rulers, like the British, are not alien, though to India's 200 million Muslims, they feel like one.

Continuing citizen protests illustrate a well-known feature of parliamentary democracy. If a parliamentary system is first-past-the-post (FPTP), and it does not have proportional representation (PR), election victories and defeats acquire an exaggerated form. The BJP had 37.4 per cent of the national vote in May 2019, which yielded 55.8 per cent of the Lok Sabha seats. In contrast, the Congress received 19.5 per cent of the vote, but only 9.6 per cent of seats. In a PR system that marks much of Western Europe, votes and seats are in proportion.

The vote-seat paradox of FPTP systems, prevalent in British-style democracies, generates an illusion. The winners often begin to believe that they have not only won a majority of seats, but also a majority of vote. They think that their parliamentary majority entitles them to making laws, which radically restructure a polity. But what often happens is that a brute assertion of executive or parliamentary power touches off citizen anxiety and protest, at least among those who did not vote for the party in power, which was nearly 63 per cent in the recent Indian elections.

The unrelenting march of protesters undoubtedly contains a substantial proportion of non-BJP voters. But I also met many Modi voters, certainly those not wedded to the ideology of Hindu nationalism, who have found the behaviour of the Modi government excessive. The ideologically-committed, on the whole, think that cracked skulls and maimed bodies are simply the price to pay for establishing their preferred political order. They are after a "higher truth", as it were, the "truth" of Hindu primacy and Muslim subsidiarity, which they think the "New India" must seek, even though the Constitution is decidedly against that. In contrast, the symbolic repertoire of the protesters shows an unmistakable embrace of constitutional values: The preamble of the Constitution, pictures of Gandhi and Ambedkar, songs, poems and artwork of defiance as well as pluralism, and a commitment to civil disobedience aptly depicted in a Shaheen Bagh poster, "Don't be Silent, Don't be Violent".

> The intensity and breadth of protests illustrate that the BJP is dominant, but not hegemonic. More significantly, after its enhanced majority in May 2019, the BJP government assumed that it was hegemonic. Only such an assumption can possibly explain why it went for what, in retrospect, was a legislative overkill: The triple *talaq*, the unlawful activities prevention, Kashmir, Ayodhya (a victory the court handed), and the citizenship amendment. It is as though the BJP rulers thought it was time to turn the Constitution upside down and realise their long-held ideological dream, the dream of Hindu supremacy and Muslim marginality.

It is hard to escape the well-known political hypothesis that India is witnessing a conflict between two different majorities: The majority of voters, who did not vote for the BJP, and the parliamentary majority, which was based only on a plurality, not a majority, of vote. The BJP might still win a parliamentary majority four and a half years from now, but meanwhile it has to deal, at least as a governance matter, with what could well be the wishes of a majority of citizens. The BJP used to be proud of its control of the streets. It has lost that dominance, and the narrative control that comes with it.

Another important analytic point is worth emphasising. Scholars have long drawn a distinction between hegemony and dominance. Hegemony implies a takeover of minds and an obliteration of virtually all opposition spaces. Dominance means the victor is far ahead of the competing alternatives, but pockets of resistance are substantial, not meagre.

The intensity and breadth of protests illustrate that the BJP is dominant, but not hegemonic. More significantly, after its enhanced majority in May 2019, the BJP government assumed that it was hegemonic. Only such an assumption can possibly explain why it went for what, in retrospect, was a legislative overkill: The triple *talaq*, the unlawful activities prevention, Kashmir, Ayodhya (a victory the court handed), and the citizenship amendment. It is as though the BJP rulers thought it was time to turn the Constitution upside down and realise their long-held ideological dream, the dream of Hindu supremacy and Muslim marginality.

Delhi's rulers have tried to wrest the narrative by arguing that the protests are an artefact of opposition political parties and the protesters are Muslim, who can be identified, as the PM put it, by their clothes. But it is abundantly clear that civil society organisations, not political parties, have led the protests, with the partial exception of West Bengal and Hyderabad. Individual party leaders might have spoken at the rallies, but political parties are not the vanguard. Moreover, though statistically valid surveys are still to be conducted, it is fair to hypothesise that every fourth protestor is a Hindu, or at least a non-Muslim. The protests are undoubtedly multi-religious.

Indeed, if a political party had led nationwide protests, if only Muslims had protested, if the protests had been predominantly violent, it would have been easy for Delhi to crush them. There was a violent streak in the beginning. But the dominant form since then is non-violent. It is Gandhian-style civil disobedience without a Gandhi at the helm.

The Modi government is caught in a classic dilemma that civil disobedience unfailingly poses: If it cracks down, as it did at Jamia, JNU or AMU, the protests will only grow, and if it does not, then too protests will continue. Two more factors contribute to the government's difficulties. There are so many civil society organisations involved, with none as a clear leader, that the Modi government really does not know who to target. Besides, women are holding the centrestage at Shaheen Bagh and if more Shaheen Baghs emerge in different cities, the government would find it extremely hard to use coercion. Use of state violence against women almost always boomerangs.

Normally, civil society has the feet to stand on, but rarely the legs to run with. So it is unclear how far the protests will go. But one thing is clear. If the Modi government violently cracks down, the protests will engulf more of India. The energy demonstrated in protests and the opposition of multiple state governments have placed the Centre in a quandary that civil disobedience always generates.

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THE FRINGE THAT ISN'T

Religio-cultural public spheres, ignored by most, are tapped well by Hindutva groups

BADRI NARAYAN

IN JANUARY, THE VHP — at its Prayagraj Magh mela convention — announced the organisation of a series of functions as part of Ram Mahotsav in villages across India before the Ram Janmabhoomi construction starts. These would be the same villages where Ramshila poojan happened during the Ram Janmabhoomi movement under the leadership of the RSS, VHP and Sant Samaj. This move may be observed as the VHP's effort to sustain Ram-based memories among Hindus, through various celebrations, in order to strengthen the Ram-based religious public sphere in India.

After the SC verdict on Babri Masjid was delivered, the VHP organised a Ram *baraat* from Ayodhya to Janakpur. In that procession, the VHP organised meetings involving religio-social organisations and Ramleela committees working in villages, qasbas and cities in north India. The Ram Janmabhoomi issue strengthened Hindutva politics in India and Hindutva politics, in turn, kept alive the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. Hindutva forces entered the religious public sphere through the Ram Janmabhoomi movement initially, but it evolved later as it entered and worked in religious public sphere.

The Ram Janmabhoomi movement connected with the grass roots using the cultural consciousness and memories of Ram, which was circulated and re-narrated in the religious public sphere of the country. The RSS, VHP and BJP forged a relationship with this vibrant religious public sphere. They facilitated the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, which in turn strengthened their political-organisational influence in the electoral landscape of the country.

> The Ram Janmabhoomi movement connected with the grass roots using the cultural consciousness and memories of Ram, which was circulated and re-narrated in the religious public sphere of the country. The RSS, VHP and BJP forged a relationship with this vibrant religious public sphere.

Most of the parties that claim to be secular stay aloof from the religious public sphere, which Hindutva politics gives due importance to, especially during their mobilisations. Religious-cultural actions have also contributed to the expansion of Hindutva ideology and politics. These spheres may evolve around a place, institutions, events and individuals: Sometimes, they evolve in fixed geographies like Ayodhya, Varanasi and Prayag which carry the attractions of the past and reflections of cultural heritage. A part of such public spheres may emerge around institutions like temples, mutts and akharas — which are woven with Hindu cultural-religious traditions. These spheres may also emerge while celebrating festivals like Dussehara, Diwali, Janmashtami etc. Finally, a section of such spheres can emerge around individuals like saints and kathavachaks (storytellers).

Religious-cultural public spheres also include Ram *katha mandals*, various kirtan *mandals* and Krishna bhajan *mandals* etc. — these create space where lakhs of people gather and engage in religious discourse, and also become a part of the discussion on a few issues of national-political importance. These events are organised in some states by regional-level trusts, associations and temple organisations in various parts of India.

These associations also help to develop *mandapas* — these, for example, are found in villages in Odisha, which evolve as village public spheres where religious stories are narrated. Many Ram katha pravachaks and Bhagwat katha storytellers attract lakhs of people in their gatherings. An interaction with these storytellers would reveal how most of them are impressed with Hindutva politics in one way or another. During their Ram kathas and Bhagwat katha pravachans, these storytellers also discuss issues like Ram Janmabhoomi and Article 370. In October 2019, Uttar Pradesh chief minister, Yogi Adityanath inaugurated a nine-day Ram katha utsav by famous storyteller Murari Bapu in Gorakhpur. That is also when he dropped hints about the possibility of a positive Ram temple verdict.

While such spheres are ignored by non-Hindutva political parties, they contribute towards the forming communities in the society. It enables the Hindutva groups to accumulate social capital that is later used for the expansion of their ideology. Hindutva politics, thus, is increasingly becoming influential due to its engagement with the non-political but socio-culturally and religiously powerful public spheres associated with the Hindu religion.

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JANUARY 28, 1980, FORTY YEARS AGO


INDIAN EXPRESS

INDO-FRANCE TALKS

AFTER THREE DAYS of talks between Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and the French president, Valery Giscard d'Estaing, India and France decided to take all necessary initiatives to defuse tensions threatening peace and stability in several sensitive regions. The decision to take initiatives is contained in a joint declaration the two leaders signed in New Delhi. The declaration, though, does not spell out the nature of initiatives: It merely says the two countries will remain in close consultation with each other. However, the joint declaration clearly shows that the Soviet armed intervention in Afghanistan as well as its after-effects on the international situation took most of the time of President Giscard and Mrs Gandhi during the talks.

NEW AFGHANISTAN

THE NEW REGIME is stripping Afghanistan of leftist slogans and pictures, apparently as part of its efforts to pacify Muslims who have rebelled against the country's Marxist revolution. Signs proclaiming worker solidarity are being painted over or removed, portraits of Afghan leaders past and present are disappearing from public display. A decision by the country's politburo published in *Kabul New Times* said signs that have a "leftist character and are not in conformity with the present stage of national and democratic revolution should be collected and disposed of".

ZIA AND KASHMIR

K S BAJPAI, India's ambassador in Islamabad, left the Islamic conference of foreign ministers and lodged a verbal protest with the Pakistan Foreign Office against a reference to Kashmir in the inaugural speech of Pakistan president, General Zia-ul- Haq. Zia did not mention Kashmir in the rest of the speech even though he referred to the people of Palestine twice. Nor did Agha Shahi, adviser on foreign affairs, who was elected the chairman of the conference, say anything about Kashmir although he spoke about Palestine at length.

THE IDEAS PAGE

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"What the coronovirus reveals is a global failure to take action to minimise the risk of zoonotic viruses jumping species from animals to humans."

— THE GUARDIAN

Money in consumers' hands

A heightened fiscal deficit in the Budget can help increase spending and rejuvenate markets, especially in sectors like real estate and renewables

KARAN BHAGAT

C R Sasikumar

IN THE LAST six years, the government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has taken many bold and positive decisions. There have been a slew of initiatives including demonetisation, the Goods and Services Tax (GST) and Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC). These measures had a revolutionary purpose: To kickstart India's journey from an informal, state driven, physical economy to a formal, one-nation market and a digital economy.

Over the medium to long-term, these ideas will play out for sure and get our GDP growth rate back to its historic highs. However, the immediate impact of these changes has disrupted the Indian economy. It has affected the supply of money to small and medium business enterprises. Challenged by the availability of resources, consumption has slowed down and this has had an inevitable impact on job creation. In addition, the IL&FS issue has added to the crisis of confidence. Most NBFCs are being forced to cut credit to consumers even as they grapple with their own asset liability mismatch. Banks, both PSUs and private, are reeling from their own NPA issues from 2013-14 and continue to be extremely conservative, sticking to only high-quality credit. This, in turn, has created a unique dichotomy in the capital markets with the top 30-40 stocks quoting at all-time highs and the rest of the market witnessing multi-year lows. Sectors with high capital needs like real estate, infrastructure and renewables are seeing interim stoppage of work amid a worsening demand environment.

Demand-side issues have consequently led to a fall in direct and indirect tax revenues. The government has rightly continued with its social agenda of empowering the poor with direct subsidy schemes and special compensation to farmers. A tepid capital market has prevented privatisation at a pace the government would have desired. With a shortage in revenues, and expenses being incurred as per plan, the fiscal deficit targets have started to look larger than ever before. Interest rates continue to be high as the RBI has been conservative with rate cuts, aiming to ensure that it stays the course on keeping inflation below the 4 per cent mark. Given this framework, revolutionary steps to cut rates have not been possible. Demand and supply problems are thus keeping GDP growth muted. The first positive step was taken in the form of reducing corporate tax rates, in my opinion, "a bold decision in the right direction". The finance minister now has a very tight rope to walk on. Here I suggest some measures, which could go a long way to "monetise the Indian consumer again".

One, simplify individual tax rates further, specially at the lower income slabs. Income up to Rs 5 lakh or even Rs 7.5 lakh should be exempt from taxes. This will put more money in the hands of the urban middle class, which will help get consumption back on track.

Two, post the Global Financial Crisis, America was saddled with a huge amount of home inventory. A provision introduced to get full interest set-off against salary for the purchase of the first house, proved to be a game changer. In India, the rental yield today is as low as 2-2.5 per cent; a tax exemption through HRA allowance makes cost of renting as low as 1.5 per cent to 2 per cent. On the other hand, for purchase of a house, home loan costs are still as high as 8.5 per cent — with a cap of Rs 2 lakh of interest exemption for tax purposes. This translates into at least an annual interest cost of 6.75 per cent to 7 per cent (assuming an average home cost of Rs 1 crore). This anomaly — between renting and purchasing a house — is discouraging new purchases, even for first-time buyers. An exemption of interest only for the purchase of first house will keep speculators away and ensure effective cost of borrowing dips to as low as 5 per cent to 5.5 per cent for genuine home buyers.

Three, startups could be the next big catalyst for the country. Currently, taxation of long-term gains on sale of shares of unlisted companies are effectively at the highest level; being taxed at 20 per cent plus surcharge (indexation benefits tend to be zero as the cost of acquisition is very low). Getting startups at par in terms of tax with listed companies will go a long way in unlocking the potential of the entrepreneurial engine of India. Startups ought to be subject to a long-term capital gain (LTCG) tax of 10 per cent, plus surcharge, plus the applicable securities transaction tax (STT).

Four, the government must free up its resources to fund infrastructure. This can be anti-inflationary as better infrastructure typically leads to downward price revisions of real estate and transportation costs as the distance between cities effectively comes down. To increase its spend on infrastructure, the government could look at the following options. Launch a Global Indian Sovereign Bond in foreign currency and push for its inclusion in at least two of the major indices. These will have great demand from sovereign funds and endowments globally. At 2.5 per cent to 3 per cent per annum in dollar terms, we should be able to generate enough demand. For NRIs, an extra 0.5 per cent can be offered to encourage them to contribute to nation building.

Replace the current Provident Fund (PF) scheme with the National Pension Scheme (NPS). For all PSU enterprises, the government has already initiated the same. All new flows (with the earlier PF being grandfathered) should be allowed into NPS only. Akin to the 401(k) in the US, this will take away the liability imposed on the government treasury to guarantee a rate of 8.5 per cent post tax — effectively a pre-tax of 12 per cent. With low cost ETFs now available both on the fixed income and equity side, this responsibility can easily be shared between NPS holders and investment managers directly.

> Foreign companies with profitable Indian subsidiaries should be required to necessarily list their Indian companies within a stipulated time-frame. Though India is a large consumer base for large new age companies, Indian investors have not been able to participate as equity holders in the upside of these companies. Free up the corporate debt market and open it up to Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) without most of the current restrictions as local bond markets are not adequately large and need long term sticky money.

Relaunch GOI tax free bonds. The tax saving can be shared equally between the government and citizens. For example, a 20-year G-sec bond quoting at 7.16 per cent can be launched as a tax-free bond at 6.25 per cent. This will allow the government to raise a large amount of money for infrastructure domestically.

Accelerate disinvestment and privatisation — examples like IRCTC prove it can be mutually beneficial to government and private enterprises; freeing up this capital allows the government to match its long-term capital requirements for infrastructure.

Simplify rules relating to land acquisition and compensation for building infrastructure like roads; projects like bullet trains must be fast-tracked.

For the Indian investor, few measures can go a long way to help invest more money into capital markets: STT was introduced to offset LTCG; now both co-exist. Ideally, we should have just one of these, as opposed to having both. Foreign companies with profitable Indian subsidiaries should be required to necessarily list their Indian companies within a stipulated time-frame. Though India is a large consumer base for large new age companies, Indian investors have not been able to participate as equity holders in the upside of these companies. Free up the corporate debt market and open it up to foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) without most of the current restrictions as local bond markets are not adequately large and need long-term sticky money.

The impact of all of these measures on the fiscal deficit or on the rupee or interest rates may not be predictable. A slight distortion in the same will be tolerable by the financial markets as long as the road map for the future is clear. A heightened fiscal deficit in the short term may inversely over the longer term, help rates and currency — with adequate pick up in consumption and infrastructure spend. While none of us can predict the future with 100 percent accuracy, I do feel that now is the time to continue on the path of taking bold decisions.

The author works as MD & CEO of IIFL Wealth & Asset Management. Views are personal

Here's looking at you

Policy makers on facial recognition tech in India must straddle national interests, new digital norms

RAJA MANDALA

BY C RAJA MOHAN

ON THE FACE of it, the Google CEO Sundar Pichai's recent support for a temporary ban on facial recognition technologies seems uncharacteristic. It is not often that companies developing a technology call for its ban. Their interest is in promoting the use of technology, not proscribing it. Not every one of the leading tech companies agree with Google on facial recognition.

Brad Smith, the president of Microsoft, has questioned the idea of a ban. Calling facial recognition a "young technology", Smith said "it will get better. But the only way to make it better is actually to continue developing it. And the only way to continue developing it actually is to have more people using it." Microsoft wants the scalpel rather than a meat cleaver in addressing the problems posed by the new technologies. IBM has taken a step forward in developing the "policy scalpel" by setting up a "lab" that will generate actionable ideas for policy makers to manage the emergence of new technologies like facial recognition that are shaping our digital future. The idea is to develop "precision regulation" rather than enforce "blunt" instruments like the ban.

The debate on finding the right balance between regulation and promotion of emerging technologies comes in the wake of leaked plans of the EU to issue a temporary ban on the use of facial recognition technologies by private and public entities. The ban could be up to five years. The proposed ban is not a comprehensive one, and will be applicable to the use of facial recognition in public spaces.

The new thinking on facial recognition is part of an EU white paper, likely to be issued next month, on guidelines to regulate the use of artificial intelligence and other digital technologies.

The intensifying global debate also coincides with India's own plans to roll out a massive project on deploying facial recognition technologies, essentially for law enforcement. The international discourse, hopefully, provides the context for developing a broad and effective Indian policy framework for the use of facial recognition.

Well before the EU had begun to discuss a temporary ban on facial recognition, there has been a "techlash" against the companies that have so dramatically altered our lives in the last few years. For nearly two decades, the idea that "digital is different" and does not need public oversight had triumphed in most capitals of the world. The main argument was that regulation constrains technological innovation and retards progress.

But the triumph of the digital companies, especially at the federal level in the US, has been muddied by state-level regulations across America. The urge to regulate has triggered widespread concerns about the dangers of digitalisation, especially the use of big data and AI by private companies as well as governments.

If companies were seen as monetising the data generated by the widespread use of digital platforms like Google and Facebook, China became the prime example of states using data and information to exercise ever more control over their citizens.

Civil society groups, which saw both "surveillance capitalism" and "surveillance state" as evils of the digital age that threaten individual rights, began to press for legislative action at the provincial and municipal levels.

These pressures from multiple directions have compelled the dominant technology companies to recognise that regulation is inevitable and that they should focus on shaping the outcomes. The technology companies also saw the need for some collective understanding at the international level for a set of universal rules for the conduct of digital business across the world. Microsoft's promotion of a global code of conduct for the digital domain is an example.

Tech companies fear that too many constraints in democratic societies will weaken them against competition from China, where the party-state is actively developing and deploying AI.

But no aspect of AI triggers greater anxiety than facial recognition technology, the use of which has become widespread. China's use of facial recognition to track and control its Muslim citizens in Xinjiang to using the technology to control the prolonged protests in Hong Kong are at one end of potential concerns.

At the other end are concerns that facial recognition is not entirely accurate and could lead to punitive actions against innocent people. There is also concern in the US that the algorithms behind facial recognition carry the baggage of racism and misogyny that are inherent in the political culture shaping the development of technology.

But few can deny some of the advantages of the use of facial recognition for governments in the control of crime, better border controls and countering terrorism. In India, a severely under-policed nation, facial recognition surely offers many benefits.

But it also remains a fact that the Indian state has always been tempted to empower itself against its citizens in the name of collective security. It has also tended to weaponise information against political opponents and dissidents.

Delhi's statist impulses have also tended to stifle the role of the private sector in the development of new technologies and their innovative use. In the immediate post-war years, Delhi punched way above its weight in debates on the global governance of new technologies like nuclear and space. Its voice has become increasingly marginal in the digital era where the private sector is driving technological development.

The foreign office must reclaim India's place in the international discourse on AI and facial recognition and develop a productive alignment between India's national interests and the development of new digital norms. At the same time, the government needs a more comprehensive domestic framework that promotes the use of new technologies for public good as well as imposes necessary constraints against their abuse by both state and capital.

The writer is director, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore and contributing editor on international affairs, The Indian Express

The stress in state finances

Lower tax devolution, delays in GST compensation are potential risks

JAYANTA ROY AND ADITI NAYAR

GENERAL GOVERNMENT SPENDING was one of the major drivers of economic growth in the first half of this fiscal year. And with state governments accounting for a majority of total general government spending, it is critical to analyse the trends in their finances. The unaudited fiscal data of 21 states, which account for around 90 per cent of India's GDP in 2017-18, for the first eight months (April-November) of the current financial year, reveals some sombre trends.

First, at the aggregate level, revenue receipts of these states have grown by a mere 4.6 per cent, sliding down from 15.3 per cent over the same period last year. Under the broad rubric of revenue receipts, the analysis shows that the states' share in Central tax devolution has slowed the most, contracting by 2.3 per cent during this period, after having grown by 12.1 per cent over the same period last year. This fall likely reflects an adjustment made for the higher-than-mandated devolution carried out in during the last fiscal year. This was a consequence of the optimistic forecast of the Centre's gross tax collections in its revised estimates for that year, relative to the subsequently available provisional actuals.

Moreover, the Centre's gross tax revenues are expected to fall short of the budgeted target by a considerable Rs 3- 3.5 trillion this fiscal year. Based on the shortfalls in the Centre's tax collections last year, and the estimated gap this year, the aggregate tax devolution to all states may be as much as Rs 1.7 - 2.2 trillion lower in the current fiscal year than what was budgeted. This is a key revenue risk staring at the state governments this year.

In addition, the states' own non-tax revenues have contracted by 1.5 per cent during the first eight months of this fiscal year, after an expansion of 15.3 per cent over the same period last year. Further, growth of states' own tax revenues, the largest source of their revenue receipts, eased to a tepid 2.2 per cent during this period, down from a healthy 16 per cent over the same period last year, dampened, in part by the modest rise in collections of the State Goods and Services Tax (SGST).

However, grants from the Centre to these states grew by 26.9 per cent during these eight months, up from 18.7 per cent last year, driven likely by a 72.7 per cent expansion in the GST compensation paid to all states. This amounted to Rs 647 billion in April-November 2019, up from Rs 374 billion in these months last year. Subsequently, another tranche of Rs 359 billion was released to states in December 2019, comparable in size to the release in the first eight months of last year. The primary factor boosting the GST compensation seems to be the low growth in states' GST revenues relative to the mandated 14 per cent annual growth for the five-year transition period.

Some state governments have voiced concerns over the delays in receipt of the compensation amount in recent months, which has complicated their fiscal position and cash flow management. The timing of receipt of the compensation is the second major revenue risk facing state governments. If compensation for one or more months of the current fiscal year gets delayed to the next fiscal year, we may well find some traditionally revenue surplus states staring at a revenue deficit as well as a sharp rise in their fiscal deficit this year. But it seems states will have to start gearing up for life without the GST compensation.

The brunt of subdued revenue expansion is clearly faced by capital expenditure, whose growth shrank to 1.4 per cent in the first eight months of this fiscal year, down from a healthy 19.8 per cent over the same period last year. The data indicates a multi-fold increase in the aggregate revenue deficit of these states to Rs 829 billion (April-November 2019), up from Rs 155 billion over the same period last year. Their fiscal deficit has also widened to Rs 2,643 billion over this period (53 per cent of the budgeted amount), up from Rs 2,199 billion last year (48.7 per cent of the budgeted amount).

It is thus not a surprise that market borrowings or State Development Loans (SDLs) have risen substantially this year. According to ICRA's estimates, net SDL issuance of all states and eligible union territories (UTs) rose by 15.5 per cent to Rs 2,806 billion in the first three quarters of this fiscal year, up from Rs 2,429 billion last year. This trend has been exacerbated by larger redemptions this year. Accordingly, the combined gross SDL issuance have expanded by a significant 34.9 per cent to Rs 3,874 billion this fiscal year (April-December), up from Rs 2,872 billion last year.

The calendar for state government market borrowings for the fourth quarter indicates tentative gross SDL issuances of Rs 2,086 billion in the quarter, implying a moderate 9.1 per cent growth. But, this conceals a large dip in redemptions. According to our estimates, there will be a dip in redemptions during the fourth quarter, implying that net SDL issuances will expand by a staggering 55.7 per cent to Rs 1,766 billion in Q4FY20, up from Rs 1,134 billion last year, underlining the stress in state government finances this year.

If market borrowings in the fourth quarter are in line with the amounts indicated, total gross borrowing this fiscal year would rise by 24.6 per cent to nearly Rs 6 trillion, up from Rs 4.8 trillion last year. Moreover, net borrowings by states would rise by an even sharper 28.3 per cent to Rs 4.6 trillion this year, becoming nearly as large as the Central government's net market borrowings of Rs 4.7 trillion that have been announced so far for this year.

Roy is Group Head Corporate Sector Rating and Nayar is Principal Economist, ICRA Ltd

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

CAA FAILS PEOPLE

THIS REFERS to the article 'CAA does not carry out Mahatma Gandhi's wishes, it brazenly defies them' (IE, January 27). The Citizenship Amendment Act appears to be a piece of legislation that has not been drafted well and is not inclusive. Many Muslims migrated to India from neighbouring countries because of persecution and it would be unfair to exclude them from the CAA. In a sense, protests against the CAA also highlight a vibrant democratic structure in the country: CAA passed the litmus test in Parliament but clearly failed to get acceptance from large sections of people in the country.

Devendra Khurana, *Bhopal*

TO LIVE AND LOVE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Two bicycles, a broken dream' (IE, January 27). Shalini Langer's poignant description of Sageer's brutal end and the story of Rahi Masoom Raza give us reason to be sane in these turbulent times. Sageer's death stands out as a metaphor for the death of our dreams. E M Forster had said that it was imperative that we "only connect prose and passion and both will be exalted and human love will be at its height". It is for all of us to remember that the greatest ideology, is that the milk of human kindness should never cease to flow.

Sangeeta Kampani, *New Delhi*

LETTER OF THE WEEK AWARD

To encourage quality reader intervention, The Indian Express offers the Letter of the Week award. The letter adjudged the best for the week is published every Saturday. Letters may be e-mailed to editpage@expressindia.com or sent to The Indian Express, B-1/B, Sector 10, Noida-UP 201301.

THE RIGHT DATA

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Restoring Trust' (IE, January 27). The Indian statistical system has taken a huge beating because of our government's lack of belief in its data: Evidently because it tells a reality which doesn't suit the regime's narrative. India is going through an economic slowdown and unemployment is a harsh reality. Pronab Sen and his team should be given a free hand. They should now be empowered enough to ensure zero compromise on integrity of these critical data.

Bal Govind, *Noida*