



## Indo-French harmony

PM Modi and President Macron deepen ties to work around global uncertainties

Much like the pioneering India-France strategic partnership of 1998, the agreements signed during President Emmanuel Macron's visit are set to strengthen bilateral cooperation at a time of global flux. The Joint Vision Statement on the Indian Ocean Region is clearly aimed at countering China's growing presence in the region. And the International Solar Alliance, recommitment to starting the Jaitapur nuclear power plant, and joint ventures on climate change cooperation are reactions to the U.S. abdication of its role by announcing its pullout from the Paris accord. The "reciprocal logistics support" agreement, which Prime Minister Narendra Modi called a "golden step" in defence cooperation, is a signal to Russia and to the U.S. that both New Delhi and Paris feel the need to diversify strategic postures beyond their current choices. Finally, by bringing 61 countries into the ISA, India and France are proposing an alternative leadership model for the less developed world, challenging the geopolitical power structure configured around fossil-fuel energy resources. Notably, Mr. Modi and Mr. Macron declared they would ensure cheaper solar energy and increase avenues for financing, something that has created heat at the WTO. The daunting task ahead is made clear by Mr. Macron's assertion that \$1 trillion is needed to reach the ISA goals by 2030: India and France have so far committed \$1.4 billion and \$1.3 billion, respectively.

There are other contradictions that New Delhi and Paris must contend with. For example, India's solar power tariffs stand at about ₹2.40 a unit and there is little scope to make the domestic industry profitable, as Mr. Modi wants, unless the cost of solar panels and other components are brought down drastically. At the same time, more thermal power, for which tariffs are higher but which is less fickle than solar or wind power, is being produced than the demand. France's nuclear power story is a success, but negotiations between EDF and NPCIL for the Jaitapur plant, billed as the world's biggest, have made very slow progress. While the two countries have committed to start construction by end-2018, they have missed deadlines multiple times. Bilateral cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region too is more symbolic than substantive today, and much will depend on how closely the Indian and French navies and intelligence work together in the future. The presumed joint message to Beijing may also be blurred by Mr. Macron's parallel commitment to help "lead" the Belt and Road Initiative with China. As two pluralistic democracies with a firm belief in a multipolar world order and in the future of Eurasia, India and France have numerous strategic convergences. But common ambitions to cooperate on the world stage, as projected by Mr. Macron and Mr. Modi, must be grounded in some hard realities as well.

## Not by fear alone

With the GST e-way billing set for April 1, firm timelines and simplification will be key

The GST (goods and services tax) Council chaired by Finance Minister Arun Jaitley has decided to stick to the prescriptions of the group of ministers on the rollout of the e-way bills system. So, starting April 1, all inter-State movement of goods above the value of ₹50,000 will require the generation of an e-way bill to help track their movement. The original rollout plan for February 1 had to be aborted as the IT system couldn't handle the lakhs of e-way bills being generated by consignors and transporters. As proposed by the ministerial group, the e-way bill system for tracking intra-State movement will be launched in a phased manner, with all States to be on board by June 1. From April 1 onwards, every week a few States will start the system for internal trade. While such an approach may give the government an opportunity to fix the chinks in the system, this is a compliance nightmare in the making for taxpayers with operations in multiple locations. The government is keen to use the system to foil tax evasion or non-filing of returns. The Central Board of Excise and Customs, together with the GST Network, has begun deploying data analytics on the vast repository of information collected from taxpayers since July. Action is likely to begin soon on taxpayers, based on variances and data gaps that have been found in returns.

While industry remains edgy about the capacity of the IT system to cope with e-way bills from April 1, new rules and forms for the generation of these transit challans have been issued. Tax experts have voiced concern about some of these rules, including one that empowers commissioners to notify those officers who can intercept any mode of conveyance to carry out physical verification of e-way bills while goods are in transit, akin to the old physical checkpost system. What is most disappointing for business, however, is the failure of the GST Council to finalise a simplified tax form for assessees. Infosys co-founder Nandan Nilekani has also made a pitch to help formulate a simpler return that involves just one monthly filing. Mr. Jaitley has said that there is scope for further simplification in the options available with the Council without rendering such a form "evasion-prone". For now, taxpayers will have to stick to the current compliance system till June 2018. Similarly, the plan to pay GST under the reverse charge mechanism has been deferred till the end of June, to avoid "inconvenience" to trade and industry. The e-way bill scheme proposed for exporters whose cash flows have been affected by delays in refunds on GST paid on domestic inputs has been deferred till October 1. For GST to become truly simple for taxpayers, certainty of timelines is as critical as the fear of the taxman.



M.K. NARAYANAN

Results of Assembly elections in Tripura, Meghalaya and Nagaland, coming after the results in the 2016 Assam elections, and alongside the ascendance of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in as many as 17 other States gives rise to a vision of a monochromatic India. Many may well deplore this state of affairs, since democracy is generally seen as a platform to encourage the 'blossoming of a hundred flowers' of varying colours and shapes. What is more important in the extant situation, however, is to understand how this phenomenon has come about, and try to assess what it signifies.

### Message from Tripura

Perhaps the most significant of the recent victories achieved by the BJP and its allies was in Tripura. The electoral alliance of the BJP and the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura (IPFT) produced a spectacular result, winning 43 of the 59 seats up for elections. The incumbent party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPI(M), could win only 16 seats. In terms of vote percentage, the BJP-IPFT combine secured a little over 50%, compared to the 42.7% for the CPI(M). The Congress and the rest of the Opposition were completely eclipsed.

In Nagaland and Meghalaya, the results were less one-sided, though the BJP and its allies were able to stitch together a winning combination, and push other parties including the Congress to the sidelines.

Elections to smaller northeastern States do not normally attract nationwide attention. With the BJP having repeated its earlier success achieved in Assam, in the process

overturning some long-held beliefs, it is perhaps time to take serious notice of what are the underlying factors dictating the overall election scene today. It would be highly myopic to treat election results in any one part of the country, as for instance in the North-east, as due solely to local or regional factors. It would be an equally serious mistake to treat the results, or the reasons for them, as of lesser national significance than elections in Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra or Madhya Pradesh.

### The usual excuses

Reams have been written on the reasons why parties such as the CPI(M) and the Congress have fared poorly in Tripura. The usual hackneyed reasons are being trotted out. For instance, the Congress debacle is attributed to poor election management. In the case of the CPI(M), apart from anti-incumbency, the loss is being ascribed to not having provided adequate jobs for aspiring youth in the State. There may be some merit in these arguments, but the reality is that none of them adequately answers the velocity and success of the BJP-led electoral offensive.

The basic causes for the results, especially the extent of victory, have hence to be found elsewhere. Apart from traditional aggressive electioneering, today's electoral dynamics include a mixture of many and different attributes. What is seldom mentioned is that of all the parties in India (with the possible exception of the Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamool Congress), it is the BJP today that is a votary of the assertive leadership approach, often seeking out younger leaders who can impart innate dynamism to even mundane issues. In most cases, the Opposition tends to wilt under their sustained offensive.

Tripura's former Chief Minister, Manik Sarkar (undoubtedly one of the most respected Chief Ministers till now in the country), is a case in point. He was portrayed by the BJP-led Opposition as a 'status qu-



PTI

oist' leader of a party in decline, viz. the CPI(M), which itself was out of touch with current realities. The CPI(M)'s defeat in Tripura, hence, had little to do with the handling of affairs in the State, or the traditional rivalry between the CPI(M) and tribal groups. To use the idiom of modern politics, it was the portrayal of Manik Sarkar as no longer being a 'conviction politician' that tilted the scale.

### The new ecosystem

The BJP does appear to have successfully created a new political 'ecosystem' that contrasts with the earlier ethos of participatory politics. Mega rallies with the Prime Minister himself addressing electoral audiences on a scale seldom seen previously, backed by technological advances, seem to produce a mesmerizing effect on those listening. The more strident the attack against opposing political parties, the greater seems to have been the impact. Issues may remain much the same; it could be livelihood or jobs. The solutions also may not be different. Yet, the alchemy seems to alter due to the impact of these newer techniques.

One is not certain whether parties such as the BJP are adopting the new science of psychometrics. Across the world, psychometrics is beginning to be employed by political parties to achieve their predetermined objectives. The success

# The cost of education

There is a lack of jurisprudential clarity on the fees charged by private schools



AKRITI GAUR

Regulating school fees is one of the most significant legal and political challenges policymakers in India face. The issue of fee regulation finds itself at the intersection of constitutionally protected freedoms enjoyed by private schools and the need for making quality education affordable and accessible. Over the years, the issue of skyrocketing tuition fees has confronted parents. Adding to their burden is the annual and steep hike in tuition fees along with additional costs such as fees for transport, extra-curricular activities and sports. Every academic year sees the media reporting instances of unhappy parents expressing their anger against what they perceive to be unjust hikes. The managements of such schools claim that these hikes are reasonable and justified as the costs of maintaining a fully functional private school with quality teaching

and world-class infrastructure are quite steep. In this context, balancing the autonomy of private schools and their public welfare function becomes a contentious issue.

So can private schools arbitrarily hike fees? In *T.M.A. Pai Foundation v. State of Karnataka* (2002), the Supreme Court held that regulatory measures imposed on unaided private educational institutions must, in general, ensure the maintenance of proper academic standards, atmosphere and infrastructure and the prevention of maladministration by the school management. Subsequently, in *Islamic Academy of Education and Anr. v. State of Karnataka and Ors* (2003), a Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court held that these institutions have the autonomy to generate "surplus" which must be used for their betterment and growth. While private schools are 'entitled to a reasonable surplus for development of education and expansion of the institution, there has to be a balance between autonomy of such institutions and the measures taken to prevent commercialisation of education'. However, there is not much clarity on what the terms "surplus", "rea-



sonable surplus" or "commercialisation of education" entail.

### Weak laws

In order to prevent private schools from charging unreasonably high fees and to prevent misuse of funds, several State governments have either enacted fee regulation laws or are in the process of framing them. States such as Tamil Nadu follow the fee fixation model whereby a government committee is empowered to verify and approve fee structures proposed by private schools. Karnataka is for a formula that caps fees for schools by way of framing rules under its school education legislation. Mah-

arashtra has a weakly enforced legislation to regulate fees and has multiple government bodies to approve school fees. Recently, the Maharashtra government's decision to cap proposed fee hikes at 15% was widely criticised by schools. A recent order of the Gujarat High Court upholding the validity of the Gujarat Self Financed Schools (Regulation of Fees) Act, 2017 is now being reconsidered by the Supreme Court. The court has directed the government to not take any coercive steps against schools in the interim period.

As of now, these models are affected by the challenges of weak implementation, a lack of capacity and constant legal challenges posed by private school associations. There is a larger irritant which is entrenched in the way private schools operate. In 2010, the Comptroller and Auditor General slammed 25 well-known private schools in Delhi for arbitrary fee hikes. According to the report, money was being collected from parents under false heads, while at the same time, teachers were being underpaid, and accounts misrepresented. Existing legislative efforts have made an incomplete assessment of the deeper pro-

blems with financial management and accounting practices adopted by private schools.

Another victory. Still, his failure to read the writing on the wall, or rather the signature tune of a new political era, proved to be the CPI(M)'s downfall. This has possibly been in the making for some time. The defeat of the CPI(M) – followed by its eclipse – in West Bengal should have alerted the party to the winds of change blowing. Yet, and despite a transition from the pragmatic Harkishan Singh Surjeet to party apparatchik, Prakash Karat, little fresh thinking has been induced into the party's thinking. This is well demonstrated in the nature of the current tussle between Prakash Karat and Sitaram Yechury (a Surjeet acolyte) regarding the line that the CPI(M) should follow.

As in the rest of the world, the moderate left and social democratic parties in India are currently facing an onslaught from the right wing and similar groups. In many cases they are being eclipsed. Unless the left and social democratic parties make certain fundamental alterations in their thinking and methodology, they are bound to wither away and become political relics. With the CPI(M) having been decimated in both Tripura and West Bengal, it has become easier for the right to delegitimise the left leadership.

The message is loud and clear. Political parties cannot hope to survive today's economic onslaughts by adhering to past attitudes, beliefs and techniques. They have to constantly evolve and consider new ways to communicate with the people and, above all, come up with fresh ideas. They need to jettison past shibboleths and let fresh ideas course through their minds. This is vitally important to check the increasing lurch to the right that is evident across the world, and to ensure that the far right does not trample upon what we treasure as democracy.

M.K. Narayanan is a former National Security Adviser and a former Governor of West Bengal

### Accounting standards

The new wave of fee regulation laws being debated and enforced in States has the potential to address the problems Indian parents face. However, there is still a lack of jurisprudential clarity on what private schools can or cannot do, how much "surplus" they can make, or what "commercialisation" actually means. In order to make these laws more effective, the solution would be to address the disease of financial mismanagement and misreporting, and not the symptoms. In *Modern School v. Union of India* (2004), the Supreme Court recommended accounting standards for private schools. Further, measures such as regular government supervised audits, generating capacity in State-level Departments of Education, regular inspections, and stricter sanctions for fraudulent reporting could be considered. Legislative and executive efforts must weigh in on all of the above.

Akriti Gaur is a Research Fellow with the Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy, New Delhi

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

### Powered by the sun

Solar energy has been a long talked about but less implemented energy option for being less cost effective ("India commits \$1.4 billion for solar energy worldwide", March 12 & Editorial - "Rooftop energy", March 8). It is clear that the policies of the Central and State governments are inconsistent. Why the business and corporate sector does not embrace solar technology is hard for me to understand. As I am based in Tirupati, I find it strange that even an institution such as the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam is lukewarm towards going solar. Talking about the issue of space being available, there are several alternatives such as barren wasteland and lakes that have fallen in disuse which are ideal locations

for solar installations. It is obvious that there is a lack of drive on that part of the government. The right hand doesn't know what the left hand's doing.

RAMAMURTHI RALLAPALLI,  
Tirupati

### At the high table

It is heartening that North Korea has come forward to hold talks with the U.S. on denuclearising the Korean peninsula. One hopes that U.S. President Donald Trump is able to make a significant breakthrough in his meeting with the North Korean leader. The world well knows the devastating consequences of the two World Wars. With the big powers having acquired nuclear capability and smaller nations trying not to be outdone in the nuclear race, this is the ideal opportunity for the U.S. to bring lasting peace

to the world. Why should the world be reduced to a pile of dust at the press of a nuclear button? The other big powers in the nuclear club should guide the U.S. in dealing with North Korea ("A breakthrough and a gamble", March 12).

A. MICHAEL DHANARAJ,  
Coimbatore

### Tragedy on the trail

That a trek turned tragic for a group of young people as a result of a forest fire is unfortunate ("Five trekkers killed as fires engulf forests in T.N.", March 12). Reports that the programme was undertaken without due permissions from officials should serve as an eye-opener. While trekking in the wilderness can be refreshing and a good break from mundane routine, helping one understand and appreciate nature, it

should be undertaken with due care, diligence and precautionary measures.

M. JEYARAM,  
Sholavandan, Tamil Nadu

■ The expedition could have been avoided as summer has set in. Though trekking in the forest is an exhilarating experience for youngsters, none other than the forest department can know what is best. The cause of the fire needs to be examined too. People out of negligence sometimes leave campfires unextinguished and do not put out cigarette butts. Even when permission is granted, the dos and don'ts should be strictly and invariably followed by trekkers. Self-discipline and control can help prevent disasters.

R. SAMPATH,  
Chennai

■ For those who live in Cumbum, Theni,

Bodinayakanur and surrounding areas, forest fires are nothing new as they occur every year in summer. It should have occurred to the organisers of the trek to seek permission from the forest officials, as alleged. How the founders of the club could have failed to adhere to this simple procedure is surprising. That guides who

are familiar with the Bodi High Range area were not engaged to accompany the group is shocking. The incident should be an eye-opener to other organisations and clubs organising trekking events.

SHEFA RAFI,  
Coimbatore

MORE LETTERS ONLINE:  
www.hindu.com/opinion/letters/

### CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

A clarification: There were queries from readers about the vote share figures mentioned in the OPED page interview with the former Chief Election Commissioner, "It is time to have a debate on proportional representation" (March 7, 2018). The reference was to the 20 per cent vote share and no seats to Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh. It actually secured 19.62% in UP and hence, it was rounded off to 20%. The BSP also emerged as third largest party nationally in terms of vote share securing 4.15% of the votes polled, without winning any seats.

A sentence in the fourth paragraph of a report, "India, France join hands for Indian Ocean security" (March 11, 2018) said: "This is the second major maritime agreement India has signed in the last six months following the Quadrilateral agreement with Australia, Japan and the US in October 2017." It should have read: "This is the second major maritime arrangement that India has taken up in the last six months following the Quadrilateral discussion with Australia, Japan and the US in October 2017."

The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300; E-mail:readerseditor@thehindu.co.in