



Eye on the monsoon

States must set up new recharging wells and improve existing ones on a war footing

As India awaits the arrival of the annual summer monsoon, hopes are particularly high for normal rainfall that is so vital for agriculture, the health of forests, rivers and wetlands. The India Meteorological Department has forecast normal rainfall of 96% of the long period average of 89 cm rain, with an onset date in the first week of June in Kerala. It has also signalled a significant possibility of a deficit. The monsoon bounty is crucial for the 60% of gross cropped area in farming that is rain-fed, and represents, in the assessment of the National Commission on Farmers, 45% of agricultural output. Given the erratic patterns of rainfall witnessed over the past few decades and their possible connection to atmospheric changes caused by a variety of pollutants, the distribution of monsoon 2019 will add to the insights. The southwest monsoon is a determinant of India's overall prosperity, and sustained efforts to make the best use of rainfall are absolutely important for farms, cities and industry. Considering that there has been a 52% decline in groundwater levels based on tests conducted last year over the previous decadal average, State governments should have pursued the setting up of new recharging wells and made improvements to existing ones on a war footing. They also have lagged in building structures to harvest surface water and helping farmers raise the efficiency of irrigation. The approach to the farming sector, however, has been influenced more by the imperatives of an election year, and the Centre's biggest intervention was to announce a cash handout to specified categories of small farmers.

A normal summer monsoon over the subcontinent brings widespread prosperity, but does not guarantee a uniform spread. This, as scientists point out, may be due to the effect of particulates released through various industrial and agricultural processes. Some of these aerosols suppress the rainfall and disperse it across the land, causing long breaks in precipitation, while others absorb heat and lead to a convection phenomenon that increases rainfall in some places. Such evidence points to the need for India to clean up its act on rising industrial emissions, and burning of fossil fuels and biomass in order to improve the stability of the monsoon. An equally key area of concern is freshwater availability for households, which, NITI Aayog says, account for 4% of available supplies, besides 12% used by industry. Urbanisation trends and the severe water stress that residents experience underscore the need for mandatory rainwater harvesting policies and augmented efforts by States to preserve surface water by building new reservoirs. Yet, governments are adopting a commodity approach to the vital resource, displaying deplorable indifference to the pollution and loss of rivers, wetlands and lakes that hold precious waters. This is no way to treat a life-giving resource.

Yemen's woes

The Saudi airstrikes on Sanaa risk tipping the country back to pre-ceasefire days

The withdrawal of Houthi rebels from three of Yemen's ports as part of the December 2018 ceasefire agreement should have been the basis for further talks to expand the truce to other parts of the country. But while the withdrawal was under way last week, Houthis, who are reportedly getting support from Iran, carried out a drone attack on a Saudi pipeline, and in retaliation Riyadh launched airstrikes on Sanaa, the capital city controlled by the rebels, killing at least six civilians, including children. Yemen now risks falling back to the pre-ceasefire days of conflict with fighting having broken out in parts of the government-controlled south. What makes the resumption of hostilities more dangerous is the regional angle. Tensions are on the rise in West Asia over the U.S.-Iran standoff. The U.S. had earlier warned against possible attacks by either Iran or Iran-backed militias against American interests or its allies in the region, and has deployed an aircraft carrier and a bomber squad to the Gulf. Immediately after the pipeline was attacked, the Saudis blamed Iran for ordering it, an allegation which both Tehran and the Houthis have refuted. Whether Iran was actually behind the attack or not, the incident and the subsequent Saudi airstrikes show how the Yemeni conflict is entangled with the regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia started its Yemen military campaign in March 2015 with the goal of driving Houthis out of territories they captured. Four years of war have devastated the country. According to the UN, at least 7,000 civilians have been killed. Thousands of others have died due to disease, poor health care and malnutrition. The blockade Saudi Arabia imposed on Yemen steadily worsened the country's hunger problem and health-care crisis. The country is on the brink of a famine. It's a shame that even when the ceasefire was holding, the Saudis did not halt bombing Yemen. Saudi Arabia appears to be frustrated that it is not able to defeat the Houthis even after years of heavy bombing. The Houthis, on their part, continue to provoke the Saudis through cross-border rocket and drone attacks. The Yemenis are stuck in between. The way forward is the Hodeida model. The December ceasefire took effect in the Red Sea port city and both the rebels and government forces stuck to it till the rebels pulled out last week. They should continue talks under international mediation and replicate the Hodeida model elsewhere in Yemen. For this to be achieved, the Houthis should decouple themselves from the regional politics, and stay focused on resolving differences with the government and rebuilding the war-torn country, while Saudi Arabia should get out of Yemen.

Why the BJP is not invincible in Uttar Pradesh

The SP-BSP's social arithmetic signposts Hindutva's failure to subsume identity politics



ZOYA HASAN

There is little doubt that the final outcome of the 2019 general election will be determined in great part by the vote in Uttar Pradesh. The battleground State is home to 80 of 543 Lok Sabha constituencies, enough to make or break governments. The jury is still out on the final outcome. What is clear is that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is having a hard time replicating its 2014 performance in U.P. in 2019. Anti-incumbency caused by a combination of economic factors and the Opposition on the ground propelled by the mahagathbandhan – alliance of the Samajwadi Party (SP), Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) – has created an unexpected new political dynamic. This alliance has been formed with an explicit anti-BJP focus and is likely to have a significant impact on the outcome of the 2019 election.

Two issues will determine the result in the State. These are: Hindu voter consolidation and caste mobilisation. These issues can also serve as a lens to track the shifts in the State's politics more broadly.

Shaky narrative

The BJP's stunning victory in the 2014 Lok Sabha election relied heavily on U.P. Till a couple of months ago, the BJP had the political momentum in its favour but in the dying phases of the long campaign it was struggling to regain momentum. In 2014, the BJP was an outsider; in 2019, it is the incumbent at both the State and national levels, making an anti-esta-

blishment campaign untenable. Economic issues have played an important role in shifting the ground. The BJP doesn't have a great story to tell the voters of U.P.; hence, it has focussed on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's muscular leadership, national security and Hindu-Muslim divisions.

Travelling through the heart of eastern and central U.P. during the election campaign, it was hard to detect a Modi wave. But it was equally difficult to overlook his popularity among the upper castes, youth and non-Yadav backward castes who want him back as Prime Minister. Mr. Modi had promised much on the development front to U.P. but there is disappointment about how little he has delivered. Big cities such as Lucknow, Varanasi and Allahabad have experienced economic expansion even as the older parts of these cities and peripheries are stagnating. Driven by real estate development, economic expansion basically means widening of roads (it was aptly described as 'Sadak Chaap vikas', or superficial development, by someone in Allahabad), swanky shopping malls and dazzling showrooms signalling changing lifestyles in urban U.P. But nearly 78% of U.P.'s population lives in rural areas, and this sizeable rural majority has not fared well as the Central and State governments have failed to address their needs. The deepening distress in the agricultural sector has hardly been addressed. Nor has the problem of stray cattle, which is damaging crops in the rural areas, been addressed.

There is much talk about government schemes which have benefited some people. However, differential access to government schemes such as toilets, gas connections and loans to build homes was highlighted in several conversations in central U.P., and this has contributed to growing anger, par-



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ticularly among Dalits and Muslims, who feel that they've been left out. We asked a group of women in Faizabad if they supported Mr. Modi. They said they did, but not with a certainty that withstood further probing. Soon enough they admitted that they said so out of fear and would not vote for him because his government had not delivered on promises, especially employment opportunities essential for their material well-being.

The 2014 singularity

The 2014 election ushered in the era of BJP-dominance in U.P. The party had gained ground in the State after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the campaign to construct a Ram temple in Ayodhya. This helped in the long run to win political power and gave a boost to its majoritarian project. The year 2017 saw the BJP deepen its electoral dominance of U.P. by winning a three-fourths majority in the Assembly elections. Yogi Adityanath's appointment as Chief Minister was a turning point in State politics with disenfranchisement and polarisation being weaponised to strengthen the process of Hindu consolidation. He has played a key part in polarising the electorate by openly speaking about the 80-20 equation (20% being Muslims).

The BJP's rise has been marked by the strong resurgence in the representation of traditional elite groups by virtue of being over-re-

presented within the BJP. The upper castes harboured strong resentment over their displacement in the post-Mandal era. BJP rule has been the vehicle for their comeback, as upper castes have regained positions of authority and influence. Simultaneously, the BJP has expanded its outreach to lower castes by leveraging social services provided by the government and giving representation to non-Yadav castes, which has enhanced recognition of these castes owing to their proximity to power. Adding them to the core upper caste voters has helped the party in building a formidable coalition in the State.

The rising power of the BJP has also led to a significant change in the behaviour of non-BJP, non-Congress parties. There is a realisation that the canvas of politics has to be much larger and the scope much broader to stall further expansion of the BJP. The success in the Gorakhpur, Phulpur and Kairana by-elections showed the way to the SP and BSP, the two social justice parties, that they must do business together. Bitter rivals for decades, they decided to bury the hatchet and join ranks to form an alliance driven by the overwhelming objective of defeating the BJP. The coming together of these two forces is what makes 2019 different from 2014.

Mandal 2.0

The new coalition of Yadavs, Jatavs and Muslims poses a serious challenge to Mr. Modi as he seeks reelection. The defining feature of Mandal 2.0, the second avatar of identity politics, is political power and social arithmetic, and not social justice, leave alone combining social justice and secularism. Even so, the counter-polemic has shaken the foundations of the BJP's caste politics as it signposts Hindutva's failure to subsume identity politics. The party's caste dilem-

ma persists because its own electoral success is predicated on caste-based social engineering. The role of Muslims in Mandal 2.0 is critical. It is clear that they are determined to vote out the BJP and are likely to have voted strategically and largely in favour of the mahagathbandhan. The numerical heft of Muslims in the mahagathbandhan underlines their relevance in U.P. politics, but it also underlines the limits of the BJP strategy of keeping them out.

There's a stark gap between the BJP's rhetoric of caste inclusion and the reality. It has consistently over-represented upper castes in its highest ranks in U.P. In the State Assembly, the overall representation of upper castes increased from 32.7% in 2012 to 44.4% in 2017. This contradicts the claim that the BJP has become an inclusive social platform. In spite of the five-year rule of a party ostensibly committed to vikas (development) for everyone, U.P. remains unequal and poor. In fact, even talk of vikas is off the table as the BJP is pushing voters to look beyond their material well-being.

Original battleground

The U.P. model has been central to the Sangh's Hindutva agenda much before the Gujarat model gained prominence. U.P. is still the key to the BJP's electoral fortunes and to the future creation of a Hindu state. Whatever the 2019 verdict, we must place the BJP's recent advances within the longer history of U.P. politics, which has witnessed momentous changes in the last hundred years. In the shifting sands of U.P. politics, Hindu nationalism has certainly gained primacy in recent decades but this too will change.

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Moral ambiguity on the Rohingya

India must break its silence on the gross human rights violations by Myanmar



ANGSHUMAN CHOUDHURY

India's abstention from voting on a UN Human Rights Council draft resolution, in March this year, on the "situation of human rights in Myanmar" needs closer examination. Co-sponsored by the European Union (EU) and Bangladesh, the resolution "expresses grave concern at continuing reports of serious human rights violations and abuses in Myanmar", particularly in Rakhine, Kachin and Shan States, and calls for a full inquiry into these by the Council's own mechanism and the International Criminal Court (ICC).

In its follow-up explanatory statement, India's permanent representative to the UN in Geneva, Rajiv Kumar Chander, said that it would "only be counter-productive" to support "extensive recommendations regarding legislative and policy actions" and "threatening Myanmar with punitive action, including at the ICC, to which that state is not a signatory".

It is understandable that as a non-signatory of the Rome Statute, New Delhi would register its dissent against any punitive interventions by the ICC on another non-signatory country (Myanmar).

However, what is deeply unfortunate is India's continued diplomatic and moral passivity on the Rohingya crisis.

Despite the Myanmar Army facing charges of serious war crimes, including genocide – according to a UN Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) and several other international human rights organisations – India refuses to take a strong moral stand for the sake of maintaining cordial bilateral relations with Naypyidaw.

A deference

India continues to toe Myanmar's line on the issue, which harps on the "complexity" of the whole situation, lays emphasis on economic development rather than political rights for the Rohingya, lays stress on internal inquiries instead of international mechanisms, and even refuses to call the Rohingya community by its name.

In fact, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has not even publicly condemned the horrible atrocities that the Rohingya have faced at the hands of Myanmar's security forces. On his last visit to Myanmar in September 2017, he simply expressed concern at the "loss of lives of security forces and innocent people due to the extremist violence in Rakhine State". There was no reference to the excessive and arbitrary force used by security forces on Rohingya civilians in response to the "extremist violence".

Radhika Coomaraswamy, who



was a part of the three-member UN FFM, during a recent briefing, said, "Acknowledging that human rights violations have been committed, holding people accountable and reforming the Tatmadaw is the only way forward." India, for its part, continues to maintain ties with the Myanmar armed forces (Tatmadaw), supplying them with combat hardware and imparting UN peacekeeping training. An edition of the India-Myanmar bilateral army exercise, IMBEX 2018-19, took place this January at Chandimandir.

Arms and business ties

According to the arms transfer database of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SI-PR), India is one of Myanmar's top arms suppliers, and weapons sales includes military aircraft, artillery, naval vessels and reconnaissance equipment, armoured vehicles, anti-submarine torpedoes and missiles.

One analysis by the Dutch advocacy group, Stop Wapenhandel

(Stop Arms Trade), claims that India transferred combat equipment in violation of international embargoes.

India's core logic here is to "modernise" the Tatmadaw with the intent of securing its 1,640-km plus border with Myanmar and forge a sustainable strategic partnership at China's doorstep. But, in this inflexible realpolitik approach, there is little space for end-user accountability and human rights. Whether Myanmar is using some of its India-supplied weapons to maim non-combatant civilians in Rakhine State and other ethnic regions is a question that New Delhi has not asked so far. Further, Indian companies continue to invest in Myanmar, with several having direct links with Tatmadaw-owned businesses.

Through Dhaka's lens

India has so far refused to exert any pressure on Myanmar, instead choosing to balance ties with Dhaka and Naypyidaw by sending humanitarian aid to both. But India's soft, backfoot approach is being increasingly seen by Bangladesh, which is hosting nearly a million Rohingya refugees, to be tilted in Myanmar's favour.

Bangladeshi journalist Humayun Kabir Bhuiyan argues that "Indian policy regarding the Rohingya crisis has always favoured Myanmar." He also flagged India's recent abstention as another sign of New Delhi's no-support for Dhaka on the Rohingya issue. It is clear

that if India continues to tacitly favour Myanmar at international forums, its much-valued bilateral ties with Bangladesh may suffer greatly.

Instead of just pushing one-time economic aid into Bangladesh and Myanmar, India could have forged a regional 'compact', much like the Jordan Compact on Syria, to ensure sustained humanitarian assistance in addressing the short- and long-term needs of the displaced Rohingya population. This would have ensured uniform donor interest and better monitoring of where aid is going to. Instead, India has deported (or refouled) more than a dozen Rohingya refugees from its own territory back to Myanmar, in violation of international and domestic legal norms.

Using the geo-economic leverage that it enjoys with Myanmar, India could compel Myanmar to bring the alleged perpetrators of war crimes to book or at least get a guarantee that such conduct would not be repeated in the future. But New Delhi does not want to corner Aung San Suu Kyi, whose own relations with the Generals remain dicey.

For now, India is happy to be in a stable, but morally tenuous, friends-with-benefit relationship with Myanmar. The victims continue to be the stateless Rohingya.

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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.

Wave or retreat?

The telecast and analysis of various exit polls at the conclusion of the seven-phase general election seem to have had much of India glued to the TV as if they were the actual results (Page 1, "Exit polls predict second term for Modi", May 20). The difference in numbers predicted by the various psephological groups is unconvincing. In one instance the difference is 94 seats as far as the NDA's grand total is concerned. The track record of exit polls in general is hardly glowing. The most common argument to justify their failure is the sample size and the kind of people interviewed. While the sample size can always be

enhanced, the behaviour of people is always difficult to judge. Predicting an election in the world's largest democracy has to take into account several factors ranging from caste, religion, region, money power to voting percentage. There needs to be fresh methodology and techniques as the results of every election redefine the rules of psephology.

N. SADHASIVA REDDY, Bengaluru

■ If the predictions are true, they show that Mr. Modi's election campaigns have been successful only because of his personal popularity rather than his government's performance. The Opposition may have tried to pin him down but,

surprisingly, the issues they raised may not have struck a chord. Does this mean the BJP employed an election strategy that was more clever and tactful than the Opposition's? The partisan attitude of the Election Commission of India and the prolonged election process seem to have helped the ruling party. In the end, I hope the new Prime Minister will take the country to newer heights, according importance to secularism.

D. SETHURAMAN, Chennai

What mattered in 2019

Some of the findings of the post-poll survey even with reference to the pre-poll survey are astonishing ("The issues that mattered in an issue-less election", *The*

Hindu-CSDS Lokniti post-poll survey 2019). Scant concern for corruption is surprising as it was the focal point in 2014. What is equally disturbing is the lack of interest in farming related issues.

N. VIJAI, Coimbatore

After May 23

One is happy that the election is over and the final result will be known shortly (Editorial, May 20). In the end, it is disappointing that institutions which should have been the guardrails of democracy have not lived up to their mandate. We need strong, solid institutions, people committed to putting the interests of their fellow citizens above party and personal interests and also

respect for the rules and laws of the land. We need to set dignified standards of civility and decorum in public life.

H.N. RAMAKRISHNA, Bengaluru

Promoting coffee

A report ('Business' page, "India to launch coffee consumption drive", April 14) said the India Coffee Trust in collaboration with the International Coffee Organisation is planning to launch a 'catch them young' campaign to promote the coffee drinking habit among

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS

The graphic titled "NDA redux?" that accompanied the front-page story on exit polls (May 20, 2019) had the figures corresponding to the exit polls conducted by ABP Nielsen wrong. It had said: NDA - 267; UPA - 127; and Others - 148. It should have been NDA - 277; UPA - 130; and Others - 135.

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