

## **Revisit AFSPA**

Its revocation in some areas is welcome, but should it be on the statute books at all?

The Centre's decision to revoke the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act in Meghalaya and reduce its ambit in Arunachal Pradesh is welcome insofar as it signifies a willingness to reconsider the use of the special law as and when the ground situation improves. The extent of 'disturbed areas' in Meghalaya was earlier limited to within 20 km of its border with Assam. The whole of Nagaland, most of Assam, and Manipur excluding the areas falling under seven Assembly constituencies in Imphal, continue to be under the law, which provides protection to the point of total immunity from prosecution for the security forces operating in the notified areas. In Arunachal, the areas under AFSPA have been reduced to the limits of eight police stations, instead of the previous 16, in three districts bordering Assam. It was only last month that the Act was extended for six months in Assam, even though the Union Home Ministry has said the situation has improved considerably. AFSPA was extended in Nagaland by six months from January. There is no sign that the vigour of the law will be diluted, but the area of its use may be progressively curtailed over time. It was withdrawn in Tripura in 2015. Assam has been empowered to decide on how long it needs the cover of AFSPA. Even though there is ample evidence that the law has created a sense of impunity among the security forces wherever it has been invoked, the Centre is still far from abrogating the Act, mainly because the Army favours its continuance.

Manipur had borne the brunt of Army excesses over the years. In a rare intervention in a matter concerning internal security, in 2016 the Supreme Court had ruled that the armed forces cannot escape investigation for excesses committed in the discharge of their duties even in 'disturbed areas'. It ordered a probe into specific cases. In other words, accountability for human rights violations is sacrosanct and the legal protection offered by AFSPA cannot be absolute. During the Budget session, Union Minister of State for Home Hansraj Gangaram Ahir informed the Lok Sabha in a written reply that the government was considering a proposal to make AFSPA more "operationally effective and humane". In 2005, a committee headed by former Supreme Court judge B.P. Jeevan Reddy was tasked by the then United Progressive Alliance government with suggesting amendments to AFSPA. The committee recommended that the law be repealed altogether, and that the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act be amended in a manner that would enable insurgency and conflict to be tackled legally. Now that there is some degree of official recognition that special laws for protecting armed forces personnel from the legal consequences of their operations and excesses need not continue indefinitely, it is time for the Centre to revisit the Jeevan Reddy committee report and find ways of humanising AFSPA, if not revoking it altogether.

## After the Castros

Cuba's President must seize the opportunity to refresh economic and foreign policies

s Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez assumes charge as Cuba's first 'non-Castro' leader in decades, ▲ Havana-watchers will look for cues of change or continuity in a country that once symbolised global anti-imperialist revolution. With Latin America's socialist upsurge of the last decade in retreat and Cuba's economy in anything but robust health, the answers should be evident. Mr. Díaz-Canel is a veteran Communist Party apparatchik, who served as Vice President during Raúl Castro's second five-year term since 2013. It will be no easy task for the former education minister, handpicked by Mr. Castro, to stamp his authority over a rigid bureaucratic and party apparatus. But Mr. Díaz-Canel can count on Mr. Castro's political backing as the latter is expected to continue as head of the party and the armed forces for some more years. Sustaining Cuba's education and health-care services will be a formidable challenge for the President. In the absence of the handsome bailouts of the Venezuelan oil boom time or the Soviet-era subsidies, the government should prioritise attention to these basic services. Another challenge is to reform the economy to attract more investment to major industry sectors and to boost growth and jobs.

Mr. Díaz-Canel is the country's first high-ranking politician to be elevated from among those outside the young guerrillas who fought in the Cuban revolution. It may therefore be reasonable to expect a more pragmatic stance on Havana's part towards its ideological opponents, notwithstanding the pre-eminence of the Communist Party – even if the détente between the U.S. and Cuba that began during Barack Obama's presidency has been in something of a limbo under Donald Trump. The spotlight in recent days has inevitably shone on the transition after the long Castro legacy in Latin America. In this process, an important aspect about the beginning of a new chapter should not be overlooked. Mr. Díaz-Canel's ascent bucks the regional trend where leaders routinely seek recourse to constitutional meddling to secure extensions of presidential tenures. The succession plan was more or less scripted by Mr. Castro at the commencement of his second term in 2013, when he spoke of age and term limits for high office. It would be cynical to dismiss the development as no more than a cosmetic change within the larger framework of Cuba's one-party rule. But then, there are countries across the world where many populists and strongmen have tinkered with the constitution to extend their terms in office, reducing competitive party politics to a charade. Mr. Díaz-Canel's is a leadership change that Cuba should make the most of, in order to refresh its domestic and foreign policies.

# The changing structure of riots

They are challenging the very essence of government and politics in Indian democracy



SHIV VISVANATHAN

The recent riots in West Bengal and Bihar have got stuck in the gullet of Indian democracy. These riots are disturbing not only as new rituals of violence but as part of the more cynical narratives of electoral democracy. In fact, as acts of violence, they are depressing thrice over as events. First, as premeditated acts of brutality followed by a sterile weakness of governmental response. What is even more sinister is the narrative of legitimacy built in the aftermath of a riot to normalise them. Let's try to understand the changing morphology of riots with West Bengal and Bihar as illustrations.

#### Ram Navami violence

Between communal riots and the lynch mob, India has added a new dimension to its repertoire of violence. But unlike the lynch mob, which feeds on a hunt for an individual, the riot has a complexity we have not fully grasped. Partly this is because riots have changed structurally over time. Conventionally, a riot had a short sequence followed by an almost surprising return to normalcy, where rioter and victim played neighbours again. The new riots have raised a different spectre of violence. Typical of this new style is what one can dub Ram Navami

Associated with the festival of the birth of Lord Ram, these are no longer small mohalla or nukkad affairs. Their change in scale is awesome, with some Ram Navami processions attracting over

25,000 people, such as the one in Bihar Sharif. The festival is used as a pretext for large pre-mediated riots involving murder, arson and destruction of property. The forces of law and order seem lukewarm or ill-equipped to fight such violence. Ironically, policemen who are supposed to control riots have been occasionally seen leading them using the most aggressive of words. The Bihar Home Secretary admitted this to the media but also sought to explain it by saying policeman are a part of society, and may get carried away by the prejudices of society. The question is when the law is seen to shield criminals, who does the victim as citizen turn to?

Another interesting point to note is that there is almost no admission of guilt. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), in fact, continues to play the political game by accusing the police of being one-sided in support of minorities. Worse, it often pretends to be proactive and lead an inquiry team to Opposition-ruled States where riots have taken place and where the government lacks the guts to challenge them. They brazenly attacked the Mamata Banerjee government in West Bengal even when it was clear that their cohorts in the Bajrang Dal were responsible. This creates a politics of gimmickry and misinformation leading to delays in investigation and a climate of hypocrisy.

### The election trigger

To a large extent this new form of rioting stems from the trigger of elections. Riots become a way of dividing society along standard fault lines and intensifying solidarity and suspicion as a way of consolidating vote-banks. The number of riots seems to double or triple before election year. Mass mobilisation for Ram Navami is a new phenomenon including the

entry of new self-styled religious samitis and a tendency to expand beyond the locality.

Banally, each riot begins with an act of obtaining permission. The administration is usually reluctant to deny permission, sensitive as they are to the claims of religious groups and also the political furore that follows a denial for any religious performance. The narrative then moves from the police station to the digital space. The Internet is a great carrier of instant rumours. In Nawada, riots were triggered when an idol of Hanuman was found vandalised. In fact, one of the government's first moves during the recent riots in West Bengal was the suspension of

Internet services. Then, there is the politics of the route. The control of routes almost becomes the ground for riots. All parties usually become unyielding insisting on pushing through a Muslim mohalla. It inevitably becomes a tussle between Bajrang Dal egos and Muslim intransigence and vulnerability. Another aspect, which is distressing to say the least, is that the leaders of riots are not mohalla boys and goondas but leading politicians, including in a recent case a son of a Minister, who abscond happily after the riots. What one senses here is a preening of Bajrang Dal machislogistics of riots is well-organised. One sees it particularly in the heavy presence of trishuls and

By this time there is little scope for conversation or negotiation and the police realise their cautionary caveats have been thrown to the dogs. The stage is now set for murder and arson and the script becomes almost predictably Pavlovian between an aggressive Bajrang Dal/RSS and vulnerable Muslims, wanting retaliation. It is almost as if riots are the price we pay to keep electoral democracy going. They provide the grease for animosity and keep political suspicion and hate alive.

#### 'Disastrous' handling

When riots have almost become an extension of the discourse on electoral politics, the inevitable litany of mechanical questions follow. The police become the standard target. They seem neither capable of prevention or control, even if they have an acute sense of the possible violence. It is almost as if they have become a passive ineffectual backdrop to the inevitability of riot scenarios. Yet the pressure on them from local politicians must be intense and their efforts to control the route of a riot seem often ineffective. But it is at the political level of leadership that one sees different patterns of disastrous handling. The Chief Ministers of Bengal and Bihar, Mamata Banerjee and Nitish Kumar, had slightly different responses, with Ms. Banerjee banking on threats and then vacillation, and Mr. Kumar greeting it with a strange indifference, conveying a tacit message that his political continuity and stability were more important than the consequences of a riot.

In fact, Ms. Banerjee and Mr. Kumar constitute two separate melodramas of political irrespon-

sibility. Both realised that these were organised riots, but while Mr. Kumar stayed indifferent, Ms. Banerjee was indecisive. Her bluster seems to have had little impact on the BJP as they intruded with their own four-man investigative committee into Asansol. Ms. Banerjee seems caught in a populist quagmire, while Mr. Kumar seems concerned with himself. His handling of the riots has vitiated what little reputation he built as a good administrator. One is not even clear whether his indifference will save him, as a wave of dissatisfaction spreads around him.

Mr. Kumar's alleged vulnerability in power has created the larger vulnerability of citizens, especially minorities in Bihar. The man who was early on firm on these guestions waffles when he encounters them. His hypocrisy is more appalling than Ms. Banerjee's empty threats and hysteria. Mr. Kumar's contempt for the electorate demands a deeper analysis. Political irresponsibility tied to weak governance becomes an added incentive for politicians prone to use riots as an act of electoral consolidation.

Riots have become premeditated acts of violence serving as a prelude and a catalyst for India's electoral machine. In that sense, riots are challenging the very essence of government and politics in Indian democracy. Sadly, most critiques become Cassandra cries in a world which sees violence as an integral part of the electoral ritual. One might suggest that along with majoritarianism of the Modi regime, the cynical structure of riots might make electoral democracy one of the most tragic oxymorons of the time.

associated with the Compost Heap, a group in pursuit of alternative ideas and

# Cautionary notes for Wuhan

Ahead of the Modi-Xi meeting, a look at the mixed record of grand summitry



SUHASINI HAIDAR

s a vantage point in Nepal, Mount Everest is an impor-Lant symbol for India and China. What is not well known is the mountain's contribution to the term "summit" to describe meetings between world leaders seeking to resolve monumental issues between them.

It was in the 1950s that former U.K. Prime Minister Winston Churchill used the term, calling for a "summit of nations" to deal with the Cold War, even as an attempt to scale Mount Everest, which had captured the headlines, was under way. Churchill's coinage of the term as well as his recommendation became a part of history when U.S. President John F. Kennedy met Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev for direct talks.

History shows, the success of such grand summitry is mixed. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi prepares for his "informal summit" with Chinese President Xi Jinping at Wuhan in China later this week, it would be instructive to look at the reasons why not all summits, including the Kennedy-Khrushchev Vienna summit of 1961, have borne fruit.

### Nehru and Zhou Enlai

According to historian David Reynolds, summit-level diplomacy, or the need for issues to be resolved through personal talks between leaders, came into its own in the 20th century because of three reashort notice; weapons of mass destruction that raised the stakes and urgency of summits; and instant mass media, which make such summits a spectacle. In terms of India-China ties, it is worth remembering that when the first Nehru-Zhou Enlai summit was held in Delhi in 1954, China did not even have an aircraft to fly in its Premier. An Air India flight was sent to bring him to Delhi. The summit in 1960, held after the Dalai Lama fled to India, turned bitter after talks on the boundary issue proved inconclusive and Zhou decided to hold a press conference at Rashtrapati Bhavan. The press conference turned acrimonious, and this time he and his entourage left on an Ilyushin aircraft, newly acquired by China. The India-China war followed in two years.

Mr. Modi could look to his own record in the last few years to glean a few lessons. The first is that



sons: the advent of air travel which holding summits such as the one allowed meetings to be planned at in Wuhan are necessitated when engagement at other levels has failed to resolve outstanding issues, and, therefore, must not be tied down by too much pageantry and expectations.

Despite meetings at every level in the past, it is clear that ties have slipped, beginning with the military stand-off in Chumar, Ladakh taking centrestage right from the moment Mr. Xi landed in Gujarat, in September 2014. Extensive talks alongside the Sabarmati, accompanied by cultural performances, failed to lighten the atmosphere and ties went south after Mr. Xi left. Mr. Modi then reached out to the U.S. to announce a "joint vision" for the Indo-Pacific, while Mr. Xi went to Islamabad and launched the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). This time around in Wuhan, Mr. Modi and Mr. Xi should avoid unnecessary photo opportunities and public displays full of expectations and instead focus on the talks.

Equally important at a summit is to resist the urge to grandstand. Pakistan's Pervez Musharraf brought down the Agra summit (2001) with his press conference for editors even as talks with Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who was then Prime Minister, were on. Mr. Modi's visit to Nepal in 2014 was a success bilaterally, but his reaching out to the public as well as his unsuccessful proposal to address a public rally in Janakpur were met with deep misgivings by Kathman-

### **Keeping it bilateral**

It is also important to keep the conversation more broad based, while allowing more concrete outcomes to be left to ministerial, official and working visits. This would not only stop the inevitable 'sizing up' by the media on 'who got more and who got less' but also set the course for positive engagements in

Summits are more likely to break ground on bilateral issues than on issues that involve a third country or a multilateral forum. As a result, a common understanding on boundary negotiations and rectifying the trade imbalance talks at Wuhan (and the next scheduled meeting in Oingdao in June on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Summit summit) would be of

greater help before launching into bold agreements such as those on the Belt and Road Initiative, the CPEC, Nuclear Suppliers Group membership or UN terror designa-

Finally, it is necessary to firewall processes launched by the leaders from bilateral and domestic minefields. In the India-Pakistan context, the Composite Dialogue Process launched by I.K. Gujral in the 1990s created a default template to return to - used by the Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh governments until 2008.

The Rajiv Gandhi-Li Peng summit of 1988 paved the way for the 1993 Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control, which holds even today. It was this immunity, channelled by Mr. Modi and Mr. Xi, that ensured that Doklam didn't escalate into something more difficult to reverse.

As Mr. Modi and Mr. Xi try to seek a better future for India-China relations, they should keep in mind Kennedy's famous words, after the Khrushchev visit to the U.S.: "It is far better that we meet at the summit than at the brink-.But let us remember that assurances of future talks are not assurances of future success or agreement."

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### PM on pharmaceuticals

The comment by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in London, that doctors prefer to prescribe branded medicines as a result of their nexus with pharmaceutical companies highlights a persistent issue in the Indian health-care system ("PM's comment on generic drugs a bitter pill for doctors", April 23). But the basis of his comment is misplaced. While health activist Abhijit More, cited in the article, says prescribing generics is difficult for Indian doctors because of a lack of availability, the actual reason Indian generics are under-prescribed is because of an absence of a reputable drug evaluation and certification agency in India equivalent to the U.S.'s FDA. This leads physicians to

prescribe not just

out of expectation of

traditional branded drugs

higher, internationally regulated quality, but also Indian branded generics. This is a situation unique to India whereby generic drug manufacturers add their brand name to the generic, helping physicians trust in the reputation of the generic drug manufacturer for drug quality over another, potentially lower quality generic drug. If the Prime Minister intends to call out Indian physicians over their preference for branded pharmaceuticals, he must address the absence of appropriately strict prescription drug regulation. VISHAL DASARI.

While stating that the Karnataka polls would be the BJP's gateway to the south, BJP president Amit

forgotten the fact that the

Shah seems to have

BJP was in power in the State earlier but botched it up because of a corrupt administration (OpEd page, 'The Wednesday Interview', April 25). The party's continued dependence on B.S. Yeddyurappa and the urban voter. The after-effects of adversaries. The **Assessing BJP's chances** 

Reddy brothers may not go down well with a discerning demonetisation and the GST cannot be wished away. Mr. Shah's assertion of not having an alliance with the ID(S) after the elections can only be taken with a pinch of salt given the way the BJP has come to power in many States after "making adjustments" with interviewer has failed to solicit any response from Mr. Shah on the economic situation or the contentious Cauvery issue, which should matter more to the people of the State than

dwelling on the effect of

caste equations on the elections. V. SUBRAMANIAN,

■ Optimism is undoubtedly a virtue in politics but undue or misplaced optimism might hardly yield dividends. For the BJP, the gateway opened much earlier but its tenure in 2008 was marked by corruption. Infighting too ruined the party's prospects. Pre-poll surveys, for what they are worth, point to a hung Assembly, so the best possible scenario would be for the BJP to once again have a tie-up with the JD(S). Karnataka was the only State in the south that opened its doors to the BIP but where it squandered the mandate. The BJP's chances of making an impression on voters on its own in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu and Kerala are remote as it is not even a marginal player here. So Mr. Shah and his party

have a Herculean task ahead;

mere rhetoric is just rhetoric. C.V. ARAVIND, Bengaluru

### The Madras link

If one goes back in history, there is ample evidence of almost every aspect of the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams having a link to the then Madras State. From the making of gold and gemsets, silver articles, gold and silver vahanams (mounts), the *Ther* (car), and purchase of cereals and pulses, to even the printing and publishing of the TTD's journal (Sabdhagiri), there is a distinct Madras link. When the TTD cottage scheme was implemented, a number of them were donated by the Madras State. The old ghat road to Tirumala was made possible using men and machinery from the Madras State. The TTD Act was enacted in the Madras Legislative Assembly. Famous industrialists, educationalists, legal

Tamil Nadu have been TTD board members In the Sangam literature of Tamil, the boundary of Tamil Nadu was known as "Vadavengadam Thenkumari Ayidai Tamizhkoorum Nallulagam...", meaning the schedule of Tamil Nadu in the north is up to Thirumala and the south is up to Kanyakumari. Even M.S. Subbulakshmi's "Sri Venkateswara" suprapadham had a Tamil link; MS was born in Tamil Nadu. Keeping all this in mind, one hopes that the government of Andhra Pradesh, without hesitation. includes a nominee from Tamil Nadu in the TTD Board

MORE LETTERS ONLINE:

time", April 23).

E.P. PARTHASARATHY,

(Some editions, "No member

from State on TTD board this