



The next best

Mayawati is testing BSP's alliance options by supporting the SP in UP by-elections

If politics is the art of the next best, then Bahujan Samaj Party chief Mayawati is slowly becoming adept at it. She has been averse to pre-poll alliances, opting instead for post-poll tie-ups with either the Bharatiya Janata Party or the Samajwadi Party, depending on the nature of the electoral outcome. For her to now extend support to the SP in the by-elections to the Phulpur and Gorakhpur Lok Sabha constituencies in Uttar Pradesh is therefore a serious departure from practice. True, the support comes with riders. She made it clear this does not amount to a formal alliance and is no pointer to a tie-up for the 2019 Lok Sabha election. But implicit in her declaration of support is a recognition that the BJP is the party to beat, and that the BSP needs to back the strongest opposition party in elections where it is not a contender. If the Lok Sabha election in 2014 and the Assembly election in 2017 are any indication, the BSP has shrunk to its core, unable to win support outside the Dalit caste of Jatavs. Earlier, with the backing of an assorted group of Dalits, non-Yadav backward classes and minorities, the BSP was able to win a substantial number of seats in the first-past-the-post system. Ms. Mayawati's reasoning against entering into any pre-poll electoral pact with other parties is not hard to understand: It is not a desire to guard against ideological compromises or the arrogance of an undisputed leader of a dominant party, but a tactic to force a multi-pronged contest and make the most of a fragmented vote. This worked most spectacularly in the 2007 Assembly election, when her outreach to social groups outside the BSP's core support base, especially the upper castes, combined well in a multi-cornered contest. Since then, however, the BSP has been on the decline, failing to win even a single Lok Sabha constituency in 2014, a loss of 20 seats in Uttar Pradesh.

The BSP's shrinking vote-bank now leaves Ms. Mayawati with little option but to make new alliances, and consolidate the anti-BJP vote. The same pragmatism that made the most of a fragmented vote will likely suggest to her that she take the pre-poll alliance route in the changed situation today. The SP has always been open to poll pacts, positioning itself as the principal opponent of the BJP. If the BSP takes a step forward, the SP will surely take two towards it. The Congress, with a geographically limited area of influence in Uttar Pradesh, would gladly try and replicate the grand alliance of Bihar 2015. Ms. Mayawati might be testing the benefits of an alliance with the SP in Phulpur and Gorakhpur. If the SP does well, the end-result might be more than an additional two members in the 16th Lok Sabha. It could be the beginning of a political churn.

High noon

Governments must ensure local-level interventions to deal with heat stress

The India Meteorological Department's forecast of above-normal maximum and minimum temperatures across the country during the pre-monsoon March-May period is a timely alert for State authorities to review their preparedness. Even a marginal rise above the normal will lead to enormous heat stress for millions of Indians, given the deprived conditions in which they live. Moreover, there are distinct groups at particular risk for health-related problems during a heat wave, such as senior citizens and people with pre-existing disease, mental illness or disability, which prevents them from being able to care for themselves. It is the responsibility of governments to ensure that community-level interventions are taken up to help vulnerable groups. The advent of hot weather this year is marked by temperatures rising between 1.6° Celsius and 5° C above normal in States such as Rajasthan, Jammu and Kashmir, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh; other northern, central and eastern States also show a small increase from March 1. Of course, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry and parts of Rayalaseema have begun the season with a slight decrease in minimum temperatures, and will possibly have less oppressive temperatures in coming weeks. For most other States, though, the summer of 2018 may pose a public health challenge, for which they must prepare with the experience gained during the many previous heat waves. One scientific estimate of annual mortality attributable to heat waves between 2010 and 2015 ranges between 1,300 and 2,500.

A spike in summer temperatures in India is not new, but some scientists contend that a half-degree rise in average temperature in recent decades has resulted in a higher probability of extreme heat waves and caused a lot of deaths. A heat event thus has serious implications for public health: it can lead to fatal heat stroke in a small percentage of people, while many more could encounter exhaustion, cramps and fainting. It is vital for governments to ensure that all stakeholders, including the health-care system, are prepared to deal with the phenomenon. The World Health Organisation recommends that countries adopt heat-health warning systems, including daily alerts to ensure that people are in a position to deal with adverse weather, starting with reduction of exposure. Water stress is a common and often chronic feature in many States: arrangements should be made to meet scarcity. There is some hope that the southwest monsoon this year will benefit from an expected moderate La Niña condition in the equatorial Pacific, marked by cooler-than-average sea surface temperature. Taking the long-term view, India has to pursue mitigation of greenhouse gases vigorously, since there is a perceived link between increases in average temperature caused by climate change and the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events.

It's time to reimagine South Asia

India-China-Pakistan cooperation can transform the subcontinent — joining a renamed CPEC would be a good start



SUDHEENDRA KULKARNI

A few months ago, Anjum Altaf, former dean of the prestigious Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), wrote an article in the *Dawn* newspaper, making a strong case for mutually beneficial economic cooperation between Pakistan and India. He also gave a revealing example of how this has become impossible because of “blind nationalism” in Pakistan.

“At the time,” he wrote, “when tomatoes were selling for Rs300 a kilo in Lahore, they were available at Indian Rs40 a kilo in Amritsar a mere 30 miles away. But a visceral Indo-phobia, shared by many of our influentials, stood in the way of consumers benefiting from the lower priced supply.” Many Pakistani politicians want nothing to be imported from India, the enemy nation.

This kind of blind nationalism is by no means Pakistan's monopoly. Those who watch Indian TV channels debating India-Pakistan relations routinely hear similar Pak-phobia. Result: despite being neighbours, India and Pakistan are among the least integrated nations in the world. Because of their unending mutual hostility, South Asia too has become the least integrated region in the world. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is in a coma. Sadly, the most populous region in the world has also remained home to the largest number of poor people in the world.

So near, so far

A few striking examples will show how our two countries, which were part of a single seamless socio-economic and cultural entity before 1947, have now completely drifted apart. There are no direct flights between their capitals — New Delhi and Islamabad. The frequency of Delhi-Lahore and Mum-



bai-Karachi flights have become minimal. The Mumbai-Karachi ferry service (the two port cities, once part of a single province, are closer to each other than either Mumbai and Delhi or Karachi and Islamabad) was stopped after the 1965 war.

In this age of information revolution, the number of phone calls between Indian and Pakistani citizens (including calls between close relatives of divided families) is negligible, mostly out of fear of being questioned by their respective security agencies. At less than \$3 billion annually, trade with Pakistan accounts for a meagre 0.4% of India's growing global commerce.

Those who are happy with this status quo have set responses. On the Indian side, it will be said that terror and trade cannot go together. The Narendra Modi government has raised the bar higher — terror and talks cannot go together. On the Pakistani side, resolution of the Kashmir issue has become a precondition for any substantial bilateral cooperation.

But is the status quo benefiting either country? The answer is obvious, except to those arrogant ultra-nationalists who think India now has a seat on the global high table and hence need not care for Pakistan, and to those narrow-minded Pakistani patriots who think they need not care for India since they now have two protectors — China and the Muslim Ummah.

China, of course, has become a

new factor influencing India's negative attitude towards Pakistan, both among policy-makers and the common people. Our Army chief, General Bipin Rawat's egregious remark last year about India being ready for a simultaneous two-and-a-half front war with Pakistan and China (the “half front” being our own alienated people in Kashmir) has helped solidify an impression that our two large neighbours can never be friendly towards India. If India's foreign and defence policies proceed on this belief, South Asia is surely heading towards a future of intensified hostilities and conflicts. Arms manufacturers and distant destabilisers will profit by this at the cost of common Indians and Pakistanis, who need employment, education, health care and food-and-environmental security. These needs can be met only through regional cooperation, not regional rivalry.

China, part of the solution

In other words, can China become a part of the solution, rather than being perceived as a part of the India-Pakistan problem? A three-way India-China-Pakistan cooperation is not only necessary but indeed possible, and Chinese President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) provides a practical framework for such partnership. Unfortunately, Mr. Modi has allowed himself to be misled by his advisers on the BRI. The government's opposition to the BRI is based, among other things, on

the myopic argument that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project under the BRI, violates India's sovereignty since it passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK).

Not only does this argument hold no water but it also undermines India's long-term development and security interests. First, CPEC does not recognise PoK to be Pakistan's sovereign territory. Article VI in the 1963 China-Pakistan boundary agreement clearly states in that “after the settlement of the Kashmir dispute between Pakistan and India, the sovereign authority concerned will reopen negotiations with the Government of the People's Republic of China...” Second, there is little possibility of India ever getting PoK, or Pakistan ever getting the Indian side of Kashmir, through war or by any other means. Therefore, connectivity, cooperation and economic integration are the only realistic bases for any future India-Pakistan settlement of the Kashmir dispute.

Third, and most important, both China and Pakistan have stated that they are open to India joining CPEC. China has also expressed its readiness to rename CPEC suitably to both address India's concerns and to reflect the project's expanded regional scope. Already, Iran, Afghanistan and several Central Asian republics have agreed to join this ambitious regional connectivity project. Will it help or hurt India if it joins this renamed initiative as an equal partner? Will it not connect Lahore and Amritsar (also Delhi and the rest of India), the two sides of Kashmir (which all Kashmir-based political parties want), Sindh and southern Punjab with Gujarat and Rajasthan, and Karachi with Mumbai?

Interdependence vital

A no less seminal benefit for India is that by joining the renamed CPEC, it would gain land access, through Pakistan, to Afghanistan, Iran, Central Asia and western China. And if our leaders show vision, ambition and resolve, the CPEC-plus-India can be linked to the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar

Corridor, thus creating a grand garland of connectivity and integration for the whole of South Asia. If 1947 divided our subcontinent, here is an opportunity for India, Pakistan and all other countries in the region to come together and rise in shared progress and prosperity.

Regrettably, the same short-sighted advisers who have misled Mr. Modi on the BRI and CPEC are selling India the pipe dream of an alternative connectivity project by the “Quadrilateral” of the U.S., Japan, Australia and India. This is unlikely to take off. Even if it does, its developmental benefits to India will be limited since it will seek to keep China and Pakistan out. We are also told that India does not need the CPEC since it has already partnered with Iran in building the Chabahar port. India's gains due to Chabahar are modest, and nowhere comparable to those that would accrue by India having a direct land access to Afghanistan through Pakistan, courtesy a renamed CPEC. The latter is also indispensable for the success of two other mega projects that are critical for India's energy security and accelerated economic growth — the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) and Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipelines.

Here is another huge potential gain for South Asia. The proposed connectivity initiative, which would create strong new bonds of regional cooperation and interdependence, could also help resolve three long-standing geopolitical problems in the region, in which countless people have been killed — terrorism, Kashmir and Afghanistan.

To realise this vision of a resurgent South Asia, two obstacles will have to be removed blind nationalism and the unfriendly designs of extra-regional powers. As Karl Marx would have said: peoples of South Asia and China, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains; you have a bright new future to win.

Sudheendra Kulkarni served in the Prime Minister's Office during Atal Bihari Vajpayee's tenure

Opacity in the banking sector

A well-informed public can serve as a watchdog more effectively than existing banking regulatory bodies



SHARAT SABHARWAL

The Nirav Modi case, of bank fraud, has once again brought into focus the deficiencies in procedures and supervisory and regulatory controls in the banking sector. However, an equally important aspect that warrants a closer look is the opacity around the functioning of our banks that keeps the public in the dark about the extent and details of wrongdoing.

Under the RTI

In 2011-12, the Central Information Commission (CIC) considered appeals from applicants concerning bank regulatory functions after they had been denied information, under the Right to Information (RTI) Act, by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) about these functions. The information sought comprised copies of their inspection reports on banks, details of action taken against banks in

breach of the relevant laws and regulations, and advisory notes issued by the RBI to banks and non-performing asset accounts. The denial of information was on the ground that disclosure would prejudicially affect the economic interests of the state by causing loss of public faith in some banks, and that it had been received from the banks concerned in a fiduciary capacity and could not be disclosed to third parties. Overruling this, the CIC ordered the disclosure of a good deal of information. However, its decisions were stayed by High Courts.

These decisions by the CIC were considered and upheld by the Supreme Court on the basis of transfer petitions filed by the RBI and NABARD, in its landmark judgment in *Reserve Bank of India v. Jayantilal N. Mistry* and 10 other cases, which was delivered in December 2015. The court ruled that the regulatory bodies were not in a fiduciary relationship with the banks that had provided the information to them and that by attaching a “fiduciary” label to the statutory duty, they had “intentionally or unintentionally created an in terror effect”. The Supreme Court also rejected the ground of information disclosure hurting the economic interest of the country



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and observed, “RBI's argument that if people, who are sovereign, are made aware of the irregularities being committed by the banks then the country's economic security would be endangered, is not only absurd but is equally misconceived and baseless.”

Stop the opacity

The judgment has guided subsequent decisions of the CIC in such matters. The CIC has also directed disclosure of information (amount disbursed, grounds underlying the decision, rate of interest, collaterals obtained, the outstanding amount and steps taken for recovery, etc.) in respect of wilful defaulters and absconders, overriding the ground of the fiduciary relationship of banks with their customers, which is one of the grounds for denial of information

under the RTI Act. These decisions are based on Section 8(2) of the Act, which provides that notwithstanding the exemptions from disclosure provided in it, the information can be disclosed if public interest in disclosure outweighs the harm to the protected interest.

Once a fraud on a financial institution has been established or a borrower declared a wilful defaulter (one who fails to honour his repayment commitments despite having the capacity to do so), or absconds, complete transparency concerning the amount involved as well as the factors and persons responsible for the loss become a matter of larger public interest. Institutions that take the responsibility of managing public funds have to be answerable to the people. The argument that information concerning such matters is the exclusive preserve of those in the government and regulatory bodies, and that people do not have the ability to comprehend and appraise it smacks of elitism. It could not be anyone's case that the confidence of people in financial institutions should be sustained by hiding information concerning their wrongdoings. On the contrary, people ought to have all the information, good or bad, concerning such institutions so that they can

make informed decisions about dealing with them. Above all, well-informed people can discharge the role of a watchdog far more effectively than all the regulatory bodies put together. Opacity deprives them of that role.

Notwithstanding the gains mentioned, transparency in the banking sector is still work in progress. While submitting a list of defaulters who owe more than ₹500 crore each in the course of hearing in the Supreme Court in *Centre for Public Interest Litigation v. Housing and Urban Development Corporation Ltd.*, the RBI's counsel argued that it need not be made public for the present as it was likely to affect third parties and claimed certain amount of confidentiality about the information under the RBI Act.

The law on the issue would be clarified further as a result of future judicial pronouncements. However, the goal should be complete transparency in such matters. If there are indeed any legal provisions that prevent disclosure of full details of loans of wilful defaulters and absconders, they ought to be suitably modified.

Sharat Sabharwal is a former diplomat and a former Central Information Commissioner. The views expressed are personal

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.

Three down

The Congress has emerged as the single largest party in Meghalaya but it is unfortunate that it will not be a part of the state executive for perhaps the next five years (“Congress outsmarted in Meghalaya”, March 5). This is a clear case of a fractured mandate being engineered in favour of the most powerful party. However, this is not the first time that we are witness to such a “power grab”; the same thing happened in the Manipur Assembly elections. Can proportional representation solve this conundrum of coalition politics?

UTKARSH AGRAWAL,
Allahabad

■ The northeastern States have for eons had an ethos distinct from that of the plains in the rest of India, and national politics has remained distant (“The saffron breeze in the Northeast”, March 5). The Congress initially served as a core around which regional entities twined themselves, but over time the party has allowed its core to fray. The Left with its blinkers has been no better. With the BJP now a part of the active political mix of this region, fresh winds could blow. However, equanimity and pragmatism must take over now that its ambition has been sated. A steep climb lies ahead.

R. NARAYANAN,
Navi Mumbai

As a metaphor

I am surprised that the use of the word “cancer” as a metaphor by journalists and laymen should have caused disquiet in medical circles (From the Readers' Editor - “A requiem for certitude”, March 5). As a matter of fact, there are quite a few diseases which are used as metaphors to describe various undesirable practices and social evils. The relatively innocuous “headache” (which is not so uncommon) is often used pejoratively to describe something as rampant as bureaucratic delays (the red tape), but there is no public outcry against it, given that nearly every second person experiences it. And “migraine” too has gained

some currency to describe various undesirable practices and evils. And even “cold” is not uncommon as a phrase to describe certain unpleasant situations: “if the bureaucracy sneezes, the citizenry catches a cold”. And how about “plague”, used to describe corruption or some unpleasant socio-economic problems such as inflation or unemployment? Therefore, I find it a bit hard to empathise with those who have flagged the use of “cancer” as a metaphor to refer to the bank scam. I certainly find the legendary cancer specialist, Dr. V. Shanta's solicitude for her patients eminently admirable, but I am unable to share her resentment to

the use of the disease as a metaphor to denote various social ills and evils.

M. JAMEEL AHMED,
Mysuru

Four-minute mile

The splendid black and white photograph on the front page, “A legend passes on” (March 5), brought back a flood of memories, on the significance of Roger Bannister and his wonderful achievement. His timing of three minutes, 59.4 seconds, to run a mile, will be an indelible record in athletics history. Set in 1954 — though it lasted for just under 50 days — it was an achievement that mattered a great deal. I would even call it as significant an event as the

moon landing in 1969 when Neil Armstrong uttered the words, “that's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind”. Looking back at such events, an old-timer like me can only lament about how much the world has changed since then. The mechanical life of today glosses over simple yet remarkable and joyful milestones such as these. Does the generation today even care to think about such things? The blank look this morning on my grandson's face, a first year university student, when I mentioned the name Roger Bannister to him said it all.

L. KRISHNAN,
Bengaluru

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