



Fields of concern

Higher minimum support prices often do not translate into better returns for farmers

Within months of announcing generous hikes in the minimum support price (MSP) for several crops in the kharif summer season, the NDA government on Wednesday approved an increase in the MSP offered for rabi crops. These increases mark a sharp change from the cautious approach adopted by the Narendra Modi government in raising MSPs during the first half of its tenure. The latest hikes are generous, even if they are moderate compared to those fixed for the kharif crop. By way of comparison, the highest increase over the previous kharif season's MSP was 52.5% for the cereal ragi. Now the highest season-on-season hike for the rabi crops is 20.6% for safflower. The MSP for wheat has been raised 6.1%, or ₹105 a quintal. For mustard, gram and masur dal, the increases are between 5% and 5.3%. The government says that with these prices, it has delivered on its promise that farmers will get a price at least 150% above their cost of production, and that their incomes will be doubled over time. The rabi crop will be planted in November, by which time Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan (large producers of wheat and mustard, respectively) will be firmly in campaign mode. The BJP, which has to deal with anti-incumbency in both these States, has faced some flak over the Madhya Pradesh government's handling of farmer agitations. Clearly, it is now riding on the hope that the new MSPs will bolster its farmer-friendly credentials and further its prospects at the hustings.

It is no coincidence that the hikes were announced a day after thousands of angry farmers descended on New Delhi, stopped only by the use of water cannons and teargas. This is the latest in a long string of instances that signals the existence of underlying agrarian distress. But it is not merely the lack of adequate prices for farm output that has led to restiveness – the rise in costs of inputs such as fertilizers and diesel is also a reason for this. India's farm sector has multiple stress points, and ground-level procurement often does not take place at stipulated support prices. Barring paddy and, to a lesser extent, wheat, the MSP formula doesn't work for most crops in the absence of substantial direct procurement by the government. Market prices for cotton are currently close to the MSP, but this is largely because of traders betting that export demand will rise due to the U.S.-China trade war. A robust mechanism that actually helps farmers get the declared MSP for a crop is being pursued through a price deficiency payment scheme and a private procurement plan. But this is still in a nascent stage and is not adequate. There needs to be a holistic reboot of the agriculture sector, particularly to address the restrictive trading policies and excessive government interventions that deter productivity enhancements.

Short-term window

The BSP shuts the door on the Congress for now, but gives itself some wiggle room

Even as she shut the door on the Congress, the Bahujan Samaj Party chief Mayawati left a window open. While calling off talks on an alliance with the Congress for the Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan Assembly elections, Ms. Mayawati kept alive the possibility of an understanding for the Lok Sabha election. While she was unsparing in her criticism of the Congress interlocutors, former Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Digvijaya Singh in particular, for the failure to reach an electoral understanding, she declared that national-level leaders Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi had honest intentions. Coming from Ms. Mayawati, this is high praise indeed. For the BSP, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh are nowhere near as important as Uttar Pradesh, where it is fighting to regain lost ground. What matters most for Ms. Mayawati is an alliance with the Samajwadi Party in U.P. and not a tie-up with the Congress in these three States going to the polls later this year. Winning or losing a few seats in the three States does not matter as much as spreading the reach of her organisation by contesting in many constituencies. Although, unlike in Chhattisgarh where it allied with the breakaway Congress group of Ajit Jogi, the BSP does not have any viable electoral partners in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, the party sees itself in a growth phase in these States and the risk seems worthwhile given the low stakes.

What should worry leaders of both the Congress and the BSP is the war of words that could follow from the closure of the alliance option. Congress functionaries have indicated that Ms. Mayawati could be under pressure from the Bharatiya Janata Party to go it alone and that she might have given in just in order to fend off the Central investigative agencies. The BSP chief, never one to take kindly to personal attacks, responded by saying that Mr. Singh was afraid of the Enforcement Directorate and the Central Bureau of Investigation. The fact remains that in Madhya Pradesh the Congress needs the BSP more than the BSP needs the Congress. For the Congress what is at stake is a shot at power in three crucial States where it is fighting the BJP directly. In at least two, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, the BSP's vote share could be more than the gap between the victor and the loser. Quite conceivably, the results could cast a long shadow on the Lok Sabha election. If the Congress is unwilling to consider apportioning more seats to the BSP, it is in no small measure due to its fear of the longer-term impact of conceding space to another political animal in what is at present a two-horse race. But, sometimes, as the Congress may realise, there is no way of protecting long-term interests without securing the short-term.

A manifesto of dissent

Dissent is the custodian of difference, giving voice to minorities and people on the margins



SHIV VISWANATHAN

Dissent today is one of the most critical acts of democracy. There is an element of critical risk, and yet it is presented like a slice of drawing room behaviour. One almost senses that the next coffee table book shall be on dissent and its sheer affability. There is something textbookish about dissent, as if it comes from a handbook or a collection of recipes. Dissent is often thought to be divisive when, in fact, it is a search to return a whole, a desperate battle to keep the parts together. Dissent as a concept and an activity has to be differentiated from radicalism and from the inflated idea of the public intellectual. Radicalism is totalitarian while dissent is pluralistic. It acknowledges epistemically that it is one way among many ways of stating the truth.

Radicals, dissenters

Marxism was a form of radicalism. It created dualism and binaries but what redeemed Marxism from being a mechanical party ideology was the variety of dissenting imaginations that surrounded it. Rosa Luxemburg and Leon Trotsky, Marxist revolutionaries, add not just to the romance of Marxism, but redeem it from the monolithic ideology of Stalinism. The danger of Stalinism lay in the fact that it ate up the future of these dissenting imaginations. Dissenting Marxism has been life-giving and creative especially for the margins. Liberation theology during the fishing struggle in Kerala gave the battle for equality a new dimension when political parties and churches found it difficult to transcend hierarchy or abandon power. A party or cadre-style Marxism

had no place for the dissenting imaginations.

The idea of the public intellectual often degenerates to a drawing room concept of a creature we watch on TV. He is the successor to the salon intellectual who presents himself more as a performative rather than a substantive mind. One expects the public intellectual to get his hands dirty, ensure that while he is a media creation, he does not become a creature of the media. One senses all too often that his critique is cosmetic and rhetorical. There are exceptions. Kannada writer U.R. Ananthamurthy was a brilliant example of an intellectual who loved the café, the vibrancy of storytelling, and meditated on the fate and ironies of socialism. His last book, *Hindutva or Hind Swaraj*, is a good example of the creativity of dissent. Ananthamurthy would talk to the right and the left, engage with any group and yet create a separate presence. His critique of Narendra Modi as Gujarat Chief Minister and Prime Ministerial candidate in 2014 was about his suppression of storytelling, the State government's distortion of dissent, its labelling of environmentalists as anti-national. Ananthamurthy's bilingualism allowed him a greater diversity of thinking. It expanded the poetics of differences and made democracy a panchayat of ideas. The government gave him his finest accolade when it decreed through BJP leader Giriraj Kishore that he should be put on the train to Pakistan.

Dreams of an alternative

The very confused state of dissent and dissenting imaginations today demands that we re-conceptualise dissent into a tentative manifesto. I remember what the scientist C.V. Seshadri once told me. Radicalism lives in the world of hyperboles but dissent unravels itself through ordinary language. Yet it is out of this everydayness of language that



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it invents the dreams of alternatives. Dissent seeks to articulate difference, celebrate plurality and attain a sense of diversity. The dissenter, unlike the ideologist or the radical, claims the whole truth. He is a custodian, a trustee of truths which are being lost in mainstream or majority debates. A dissenter is thus a representative of differences of marginal truths and in articulating this role becomes a custodian for the imagination of democracies. A dissenter thus protects or argues for ideas which belong to the margins, the minority, to what might be condemned as heretic or merely eccentric. He is a custodian of abandoned memories and an advocate of defeated ideas which are still life-giving.

A dissenter has to survive not just the ideologist but the very definition of expertise. Expertise is today virtually defined as a monopoly or an oligopoly of knowledge which assumes it knows a domain best. An expert always operates within enclosures but is rarely exclusive within it. In expert controversies, the dissenter is regarded as noise in a system. A dissenter sounds discordant because the music of his ideas is not appreciated. When a lay person challenges expertise using ordinary language, he becomes a lesser order of knowledge. A dissenter has to challenge the ontology of both statuses – an invidious notion of citizenship and a non-inclusive notion of knowledge. One sees this during debates on nuclear energy where expert language seems measured and certain while dis-

Next steps at Gir

A geographically separate population of Asiatic lions needs to be created



NEHA SINHA

The magnificent Asiatic lion is under threat. Twenty-three lions have died in as many days in the eastern part of Gujarat's Gir sanctuary. While mass mortalities in wildlife are always a cause for concern, this case is even more worrisome as the big cat population in Gujarat is the last of the Asiatic lions in the wild.

In 2013, the Supreme Court had issued an order that lions from Gujarat be relocated to the Kuno sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh as a check against the threat of epidemic. But even wild animals are subject to State politics. Gujarat has been unwilling to part with its lions, calling them "its pride" in an affidavit.

Following the series of deaths, preliminary reports said that the cats have been killed by disease, most likely to be infectious. Some others have died due to poisoning and infighting. On October 3, the Supreme Court, noting that the

death of so many lions was a serious matter, asked the Central government to look into it.

New-age conservation

In its 2013 order, the Supreme Court had said: "Asiatic lion, it has been noticed, has been restricted to only one single habitat, i.e. the Gir National Forest and its surrounding areas and an outbreak of possible epidemic or natural calamity might wipe off the entire species. A smaller population with limited genetic strength are more vulnerable to diseases and other catastrophes in comparison to large and widespread population." The court also noted how 30% of the lion population in Tanzania's Serengeti was killed due to an outbreak of canine distemper, a viral disease that affects animals. Gujarat's response to this was that lions are now spread over the Greater Gir region and this reduces the threat. It has also had an intense, managerial response to the disease – when ill, lions are routinely picked up, medically treated, and then released.

Wildlife conservation concerns itself with maintaining ecological processes and reducing threats to endangered species. It does not entail treating wild animals for dis-



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ease (in the way domestic animals are) as this can go against the processes of natural selection. Treating wild animals appears to be a caring thing to do. But it is not conducive to the 'natural' process of life and death, and ultimately compromises immunity. Another celebrity example of this kind of management was Machli, the tigress from Ranthambhore in Rajasthan. Known as the world's most photographed tigress, she lived for 20 years before her death in 2016. This is because she was treated medically, and often fed artificially.

To be fair to Gujarat, the lines of what comprises wildlife conservation are getting blurred. When wild animals go extinct locally, they are reintroduced – as in the case of tigers in Sariska, Rajasthan. When hungry, they are fed arti-

sent sounds almost irrational and subjective. Here dissent not only has to broker between expertise and what is dubbed as ignorance, it has to challenge the very epistemology of knowledge which defines a layperson's knowledge as a lesser form of existence. Dissent in this instance challenges not just the dominance of expertise but the dominant constructions of knowledge itself. Dissent within a plural frame has to renew the very definitions of mainstream knowledge.

A dissenter in that sense is a custodian of difference, of defeated and dominated ideas. He has to challenge hegemonic ideas without demanding such exclusivity for his own ideas or knowledge system. He operates on the cusp of the republic of tentativeness as a trickster, a shaman, bringing a different life force to ideas. A satyagrahi in that sense epitomises dissent and the life of dissent. He lives out an idea and his protest is always dialogic, non-violent. His lifestyle embodies his idea such that his autobiography becomes a life world for the idea. Gandhi's "experiments with truth" represented a dissenting idea, where the dissenter also empathised with the hegemon and sought to rescue him. The Indian national movement was an attempt to rescue the British from their modernity. The dissenter rather than being factional or divisive was concerned with the health of the whole. He sought to be an exemplar of his own idea by living it. The satyagrahi in that sense embodied his idea linking life, lifeworld, livelihood, life style and life cycle. He experimented on himself and the body became a test tube for his experiments with self and truth, whether non-violence, diet, self-control. In that sense, satyagraha was a way of thought as a way of living and ashrams became experiments in thought, attempts to create an alternative world view. Gandhi ad-

ded to an usually political and intellectualist idea of dissent, an experimental and ethical mentality. But in a truly satyagraha style, the experiment rather than being inspectional began on oneself – creating a connectivity with the world which was both ethical and political.

Dissent as an idea and an activity has to be placed within both a theory of democracy and a theory of knowledge. One begins with the critical role of diversity and a critique of hegemonic knowledge. One of the great exponents of such an idea was Alfred Wallace, co-discoverer of evolution with Charles Darwin. In *The Wonderful Century*, Wallace argued that a science at its moment of dominance becomes a threat to itself, to the creative dream of alternatives. He argued that science must invent alternative imaginations to sustain its dynamisms. His book was an exploration of such alternative ideas from spiritualism to critiques of vaccination to argue for the availability of both eccentricity and creativity.

An outsider, an outlier

Finally, a dissenter's relation to power is liminal. I remember the political scientist, Rajni Kothari, once discussing a change in regimes. He smiled and said wryly, "Regardless of who comes to power, our place seems to be in the opposition." At the level of power, we remain outsiders and outliers to the hegemony of any idea. Dissent in that sense is critical at a time when one's citizenship in a world of knowledge is always in question. It becomes a ritual of trusteeship for the world of minorities, marginals, eccentrics, those dreaming of alternative ideas to sustain a vibrant democracy.

Shiv Viswanathan is an academic associated with the Compost Heap, a group in pursuit of alternative ideas and imagination

cially, and even provided salts as supplements, an example being the Hangul (Red deer) population in Dachigam, Jammu and Kashmir. In other parts of India, wild animals are funnelled through artificial trenches, barriers and fences. This is wildlife conservation in the age of man, where protected areas sometimes resemble zoos.

Yet even the most flexible of conservationists would agree that intensive artificial medical treatment of wild animals does not augur well for long-term sustainability. The role of wildlife managers should be to reduce unnatural threats, not unnaturally prolong life. While Gujarat has done a good job of conserving its lions, it should also turn its attention to reducing the drivers of disease, which includes controlling feral dog populations.

On metapopulations

Gujarat submitted before the Supreme Court that one of the reasons it did not want to part with the lions was because there are metapopulations in the State. Metapopulations may be geographically separate but have interactions and an exchange of individuals. Gujarat had said to the Supreme Court, "Current Asiatic

lion population is not a single population confined to one place." It consists of "metapopulation spread over several locations within the Greater Gir Region", adding that "good conservation practices and intensive wildlife healthcare, has lead to epidemic free regime". Crucially though, these areas are connected to each other and this does not address the main concern of creating geographically distant populations.

Undoubtedly, after the lion deaths, Gujarat should work towards colonising new habitats outside the Gir landscape within the State. However, there are spatial limitations in this industrialised State. An option is the Barda wildlife sanctuary. But Barda is close to Gir, and this cannot be confused with creating isolated populations. It would simply mean increasing suitable lion range from its present, much smaller area.

Finally, there is no getting around the fact that a geographically separate population of Asiatic lions needs to be created. A good track record for lion conservation does not in any way preclude a good long-term strategy.

Neha Sinha is a wildlife conservationist. 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.

PM's message

It was elating to read an article by the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi (OpEd, "In harmony with Mother Nature", October 4). He has beautifully reminded us of our culturally rich heritage, ethos and values. The government cannot bring about a change unless citizens are proactive towards the cause of the environment. With Mr. Modi's delineation of the bright present, and also the possibility of a brighter and promising future, we must draw inspiration from this and do our bit for the country.

AASTHA SINGH,
Patna, Bihar

■ It is heartening that the Prime Minister says that the Champions of the Earth Award he received from the United Nations is a recognition of Indian culture and values. However, some of his points in the article

take us back to the mythical past which dilutes scientific aspects. Data show that one manual scavenger dies every five days. Perhaps the clean India programme needs to be directed by someone from the marginalised community as he or she would be able to appreciate the aspect of human dignity. And why focus on Gandhiji being the patron of this project? Gandhiji mainly concentrated on the quest for inner purity.

ILANKO XAVIER M.,
Dindigul, Tamil Nadu

Sanitation as movement

The Swachh Bharat Mission is an earnest effort towards sanitation. A major change in the mindset of people is visible in rural and urban India. It is too early to evaluate the quantitative aspect of such efforts. However, one has to appreciate the involvement of people in mass cleaning efforts. Once the mantle is handed over to the people, it

will work on its own. It is impossible for government machinery alone to work and achieve the set objective in a time-bound manner. Clean surroundings not only change our outlook towards society but also empower us (Editorial, "No sweeping change", October 4).

SURESH RANGARAJAN,
Thiruvananthapuram

Creamy layer

One wonders on what premise, the writer (Editorial page, "The creamy layer of social justice", October 4) concludes that only the creamy layer of SC/ ST employees helps in fulfilling the second part of Article 335, which is "maintaining efficiency of administration". This assumption implicitly implies that the poorer sections of SCs/STs are inefficient. In another paragraph, he acknowledges the unevenness of educational opportunities. He accepts that public servants need to

be smart and educated, pointing out at the same time that this should not be treated as an affront to the less privileged. The writer appears to be simply resonating the elitist mentality to substantiate his views – by implying that rural and poor people are less smart and less educated than urban/rich people. I welcome his efforts to justify the continuation of social justice in the present form, but am displeased with his justifications based on long-held social prejudices. It should be acknowledged that there may be some kind of a skill gap between the rural poor and the urban rich. However, there is no gap between equally educated rural poor and the urban rich in terms of knowledge and efficiency. Skills can be acquired at any point of time in life. Being smart and efficient is not the privilege of rich urban people.

MANI SANKAR GANDHI,
Karur, Tamil Nadu

Island plan

The idea of building island lagoon villas and a film city to boost tourism and "relieve some of the pressure on Mumbai as a filming hub" may lead to the complete destruction of the beautiful Lakshadweep islands (Page 1, "Lagoon villas for Lakshadweep", October 4). There are many reports of large-scale degradation of the natural ecosystems of Lakshadweep and the Andaman and Nicobar islands due to an increase in the population and initiatives to develop tourism. In this case, drawing a comparison with Mauritius and the Maldives, which are island

nations largely dependent on tourism, is illogical. The statement by an adviser to NITI Aayog, "that it would be ensured there is no damage to the ecosystem," is amusing. India is a large country with a number of places of tourist interest which can be developed to attract international tourists. India needs to protect its natural ecosystems still thriving in only a few pockets. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep are prime examples.

KOSARAJU CHANDRAMOULI,
Hyderabad

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

A Business page story titled "L&T bags Bengaluru airport T2 project" (Oct. 4, 2018, some editions) erroneously said that the *Kempegowda airport* is India's first greenfield airport to be built as a public-private partnership. Actually, it is *Cochin International Airport* that holds the distinction.

It is the policy of The Hindu to correct significant errors as soon as possible. Please specify the edition (place of publication), date and page. The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300 (11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday); Fax: +91-44-28552963; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in; Mail: Readers' Editor, The Hindu, Kasturi Buildings, 859 & 860 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002, India. All communication must carry the full postal address and telephone number. No personal visits. The Terms of Reference for the Readers' Editor are on www.thehindu.com