



Course correction

The GST Council does well to simplify the tax regime; it must sustain this conciliatory stance

Nearly 100 days after India's tryst with the new Goods and Services Tax regime began, the GST Council empowered to oversee its implementation has approved several alterations. These relate to coverage and compliance norms with a view to easing the burden of paperwork and stretched cash flows imposed on smaller businesses and exporters. The Council lowered the rates on 27 items, including dried sliced mango, *khakhra*, unbranded *namkeen* and, more importantly, yarn and sewing threads to soothe the textile industry that has been in distress over GST norms and is a bulwark for job-creation. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said the Council's decisions at its 22nd meeting, taken at his behest to overcome the GST system's apparent shortcomings, are akin to an early Deepavali. That the meeting was advanced by almost 20 days, and that it has tried to deliver on the Prime Minister's promise to fix the problems faced by traders in the first quarter of GST is welcome. The decision to switch the requirement to file three monthly returns and an annual return to a quarterly frequency for firms with a turnover of ₹1.5 crore will ease the burden of compliances on small and medium enterprises, and reduce the workload on the tax regime's fledgling IT backbone.

Equally critical is the expansion and proposed simplification of the composition scheme, under which firms with an annual turnover of up to ₹1 crore pay a flat and low tax, and the six-month suspension of the reverse charge mechanism that required large firms to deduct tax on supplies from firms outside the GST net. This should spur fresh confidence among small firms and help expand the tax base. The promise of faster tax refunds, starting Tuesday, for exporters facing a working capital crunch too is re-assuring. Time will tell how smoothly these decisions pan out on the ground, but suspension for six months of the payment of integrated GST (IGST) on inputs used for exports will bring immediate relief. While putting off the e-way bill provisions dealing with movement of goods that were making businesses and transporters nervous, the Council is instead considering a staggered introduction. So the system would begin with one or more States from January 2018 and cover the entire country by April 2018. It is not clear how this will impact inter-State movement of goods in the interim three months, and industry has good reason to worry about fresh complications. Amidst this flurry of adjustments, suspense persists on the operationalisation of the GST law's anti-profiteering provisions, which cramp pricing decisions by businesses. The government needs to move swiftly to bring clarity on all such remaining grey areas. Lastly, though some of the latest rate revisions may be based on impeccable economic rationale, it is important to resist giving the impression that some tweaks, even if they are warranted, are based on the Assembly election schedules.

New Left in Nepal

Long-time adversaries form a leftist coalition altering the pre-election landscape

In a most unexpected development, the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified-Marxist Leninist), the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist-Centre) and the Naya Shakti Party (NSP) have agreed to form a Left coalition to contest provincial and federal elections later this year. They have also formed a coordination committee that will work towards their unification into a single leftist party after the elections. This marks a major shift in Nepal's polity because the status-quoist UML and the radical Maoists have been at loggerheads for decades and have differed on significant issues – in particular, state restructuring after the Constituent Assembly elections of 2008 and 2013. While these parties worked together along with other political forces in the run-up to abolishing the monarchy, there has been little love lost between them over the past decade. But the Maoists have also undergone a series of splits during this period. Hardline sections led by Mohan Baidya 'Kiran' and Netra Bikram Chand branched off to form their own parties, while Baburam Bhattarai, who preferred greater parliamentary engagement and was unflinching on the state restructuring demand, also left the parent party. So far the UML has been steadfast in opposing greater federalisation, basing its argument on the principle of national unity, while the Maoist-Centre has changed positions depending on the prevailing power equations to suit its chairman, and ex-Prime Minister, Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda'.

In the run-up to the elections, Mr. Dahal sees a possibility of winning more seats by being in a Left alliance, which is why he chose to talk to the UML even though he currently shares power with the Nepali Congress. The UML did well overall in the local body elections held recently, but fared relatively poorly in the second phase of the polls in which a greater number of the contests were in the Terai region. The Maoists surprised many with a decent haul in this phase. Electorally it makes sense for the two parties to come together in an alliance. The addition of the NSP gives the alliance what is perceived by some as intellectual heft – its leader, Mr. Bhattarai, had been the prime mover in the Maoists giving up their armed struggle and joining the democratic process. In aligning with the UML and the Maoists, Mr. Bhattarai may have to relent on his key demand of state restructuring – but perhaps this was already inevitable following the Madhesi parties' poor show in the recent elections. It remains to be seen how the contradictions over this issue will be resolved in the future, even if they hope that a call for national unity and social justice will calm the Madhesi. For the Nepali Congress, the new Left alliance will be a difficult adversary to overcome, and it would have to strive to bring other centrist forces under its own "democratic" alliance. The Madhesi parties, however, may well be left in the lurch.

The legacy that binds

Rahul Gandhi's first challenge is to show how he sees himself in relation to previous Congress presidents



SMITA GUPTA

In January 2013, within minutes of Rahul Gandhi's anointment as Congress vice president, fireworks lit up the winter evening in Jaipur. The occasion was the party's *chintan shivir*, or brainstorming session, and the announcement was seen to be a prelude to his becoming the next president. The air was decidedly celebratory.

Mr. Gandhi's deeply emotional "power is poison" speech struck a chord with the rank and file, and his takeover was planned for after the upcoming general election. But the Congress's worst ever electoral performance in 2014 saw that date being pushed farther so much into the future that no presidency in Congress history has been in the works for as long as his, nor so planned.

Today, however, there is a sense of resigned inevitability, even apprehension, about Mr. Gandhi's imminent ascension, not a sentiment on which a leader would like to coast to the highest office in his party. His honeymoon appears to be already over and, as his prolonged apprenticeship draws to a close, a comparison with his immediate predecessors is instructive.

The near past

Since the late 1970s, Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, P.V. Narasimha Rao and Sonia Gandhi assumed the presidency only after each had been acknowledged as the absolute leader of the party – or had rapidly acquired that aura. Three were Prime Ministers and party presidents simultaneously, while Sonia Gandhi steered the Congress to power after becoming president, choosing Manmohan Singh to



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run the government in her stead. Even during the Sitaram Kesri interlude (1996-98), when he was installed by Rao's detractors till they could replace him with Ms. Gandhi, he wielded power while in office.

In fact, even Kesri's rise didn't evoke the trepidation Mr. Gandhi's elevation as president is doing now, partly because, on earlier occasions, there had been almost no lag time between the decision and its implementation. Public scrutiny in a social media driven world, at least post-2013, has also not helped him. He remains his party's choice because the Congress feels he alone can hold the party together. The only alternative, Ms. Gandhi, has made it amply clear that after 19 years at the helm of affairs, she wants to step down.

The legacy

Indira Gandhi had become party president first in 1959, but was overshadowed by Jawaharlal Nehru, and it would be another 19 years before she became President again, in 1978, this time of a truncated post-Emergency Congress. She held that post even after her triumphant return as Prime Minister in 1980, till her assassination in 1984.

Earlier, after Lal Bahadur Shastri's death and a brief interregnum when Gulzarilal Nanda was acting Prime Minister, she –

already Information and Broadcasting Minister – defeated her formidable adversary Morarji Desai in the election for Congress Parliamentary Party leader and became Prime Minister in 1966. But the party president's post was held by a succession of other party leaders till 1978.

When Rajiv Gandhi was catapulted to the posts of party president and Prime Minister after his mother's assassination, he was an MP and party general secretary, having joined politics because of his brother Sanjay's death. He had been in active politics for just four years (unlike his son who has completed 13 years) during which he demonstrated his administrative skills by successfully managing the 1982 Asian Games in Delhi. The party backed Rajiv Gandhi, with perhaps the only exception of Pranab Mukherjee, who had been senior-most after Indira Gandhi. In less than two months, he led the Congress to a stunning and unprecedented three-fourths majority in the 1984 general elections.

His assassination in the midst of the general election in 1991 created a vacuum. Sonia Gandhi was approached first, but shaken by her husband's violent death, she was in no mood to join politics. N.D. Tiwari had lost his Lok Sabha seat in that election; Shankar Dayal Sharma, sounded out for the prime ministership by Ms Gandhi, re-

fused; Sharad Pawar who had thrown his pagdi in the ring was not universally acceptable; finally, Rao emerged as the leader, with Ms. Gandhi's support.

Rao inherited the absolute powers that went with holding the twin jobs of Prime Minister and Congress President. But the Babri Masjid was destroyed on his watch; the economic reforms he initiated had a host of powerful critics within the Congress; the last straw was the JMM bribery case. He lasted his five-year term but the party lost the next election, and Kesri was quickly installed as president. Some say he was backed by Rao's detractors – others that Rao installed him, but that the wily Bihar politician switched camps.

In 1998, Kesri was turfed out unceremoniously and Ms Gandhi, now willing to take on the responsibility, became president. Just as those who made Indira Gandhi Prime Minister in 1966 believed they could manipulate her, those who installed Sonia Gandhi to give the party stability believed she would need constant guidance.

Ms. Gandhi, of course, is no Indira Gandhi, but both women proved their mansplainers wrong. Indira Gandhi grew into one of the most powerful politicians in the world; Sonia Gandhi, on her part, blossomed into a consummate politician, widely respected not just in the Congress, but across the political spectrum. When she inherited the Congress, the BJP's hugely popular Atal Bihari Vajpayee was Prime Minister: yet, within six years, she led a Congress-led coalition to the first of two consecutive Lok Sabha victories.

A personal imprint

Each of his five predecessors put their personal imprint on the job: Indira Gandhi, who didn't believe in niceties, seized power and became larger than the party; the challenge of the job made her. Rajiv

Gandhi tried hard without success to rid the party of its power-brokers. Rao wanted to hold real organisational elections but failed. Kesri sought to give the party an OBC hue. Sonia Gandhi, conscious of being seen as an outsider, searched through the family legacy for answers. But the flip side of the sterling leadership she provided is that, thanks to being the longest serving president in the party's history, the Congress organisation today has been reduced to a coterie which wants to preserve its power. Indeed, to ensure that Rahul Gandhi is not questioned, all avenues for dissent have been closed.

Mr. Gandhi, from the day he became a party functionary, as general secretary in 2007, has been talking of pulling down the current edifice and rebuilding it brick by brick. Famously, after the Aam Aadmi Party won Delhi in 2013, Rahul Gandhi said the Congress had a great deal to learn from it: this went down very poorly with party seniors, with many saying that remark had damaged the party. If Mr. Gandhi's efforts to "democratise" the party by holding elections to the Youth Congress backfired, partly because he himself has not come through a democratic process, his attempt to bring a management style to the Congress and corporatise it, choosing recruits and functionaries through interviews, having paid staff rather than political advisers has not helped him thus far.

But once he becomes President, and secures the power that goes with it, he needs to seize the opportunity provided by the chinks that have begun to appear in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's apparently invincible armour. It's time also that instead of seeking to make his team the Congress, as the party cynics would have it, he makes the Congress his team.

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A revolutionary power to heal

Fifty years after Che's death, the ideas that keep his legend alive



VIJAY PRASHAD

On October 9, 1967, in southern Bolivia, near the barren and desolate village of La Higuera, the Bolivian Army, under instructions from the government of the U.S., trapped the isolated guerrilla column led by Ernesto 'Che' Guevara. Che, a hero of the Cuban Revolution of 1959, believed that Cuba, only 90 miles away from the mainland of the U.S., would remain vulnerable unless other revolutions succeeded in the world. His reaction to the violent U.S. bombardment of Vietnam had been similar, not enough to defend Vietnam, he had said, but it was necessary to create two, three, many Vietnams'. Failure to spark revolution in Congo led Che to Bolivia, where his army trapped him. He was eventually captured and brought to a schoolhouse. Mario Terán Salazar, a soldier, was tasked with the assassination. Che looked at this quivering man. "Calm down and take good aim," he told him. "You're going to kill a man." Che died on his feet.

From man, Ernesto Guevara (b.1928) became a myth. It is diffi-

cult not to be moved by the life of this Argentinian doctor who became a revolutionary.

Radicalised by reality

His tutelage in revolutionary thought came from his experiences among the leprosy patients of Venezuela and the tin miners of Bolivia, among the revolutionaries of Argentina and the 1954 coup in Guatemala. Reality radicalised him. Only later would he recount that he had been influenced by, as he put it, "the doctrine of San Carlos", his sly reference to Karl Marx.

In 1953, in Mexico, Guevara met Hilda Gadea, a revolutionary from the Peruvian APRA (American Popular Revolutionary Alliance). Gadea schooled Guevara in Marxist theory and in the radical currents then inflaming the region. They moved to Guatemala in September 1954, which was then in the midst of a major struggle against the U.S. government and U.S.-based corporations. A democratically elected government led by Jacobo Arbenz attempted to conduct basic land reforms, which ran afoul of the United Fruit Company. Guevara was marked by the role of this corporation in governing Guatemala.

To his aunt Beatriz, he wrote, "I have had an opportunity to go through the land owned by United Fruit, and this has once again convinced me of the vileness of these



capitalist octopuses. I have sworn before a portrait of old, tearful Comrade Stalin not to rest until these capitalist octopuses have become annihilated. I will better myself in Guatemala and become a true revolutionary."

When the U.S. initiated the coup against Arbenz's government, Guevara took to the streets. No good came of it. Guevara and Gadea fled to Mexico. It was there that they, thanks to Gadea, met Raul Castro and eventually his brother Fidel. Not long after, Guevara would board a rickety boat, the Granma, with the Castros and 79 others to launch the Cuban Revolution. When their boat arrived in Cuba, the military killed 70 of the revolutionaries. The survivors rushed inland, and with sheer grit proceeded to build the peasant army that eventually overcame the

U.S.-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista at the close of 1959.

The young revolutionaries inherited a bankrupt country. Batista had shifted \$424 million of Cuban reserves to U.S. banks. Loans were not forthcoming. In a late night meeting, Castro asked if there were an economist among them. Che raised his hand. He became the head of the economy. Later when Castro asked him about these credentials, Che answered that he thought Castro had asked, "Who is a communist?" Che took to his task with energy and determination. The U.S. had set an embargo against the island in 1962. It suffocated Cuba. The Uruguayan journalist Eduardo Galeano went to interview Che in 1964. "I don't want every Cuban to wish he were a Rockefeller," Guevara said. He wanted to build socialism, a system that "purified people, moved them beyond egoism, saved them from competition and greed". It was a daunting task, made difficult by the poverty of the treasury and of the population; although the Cuban people's spirit drove them to volunteer their labour to build their resources.

The Cuba years

"Cuba will never be a showcase of socialism," Guevara told Galeano, "but rather a living example." It was too poor to become paradise. It could however exude love for its

own people and for the world. For Guevara, love was everything, key to his idea of socialism. In a letter to his five children written en route to Bolivia, Guevara said, "Always be able to feel deep within you being all the injustices committed against anyone, anywhere in the world. This is the most beautiful quality a revolutionary can have."

As the afterword

So for the fate of those who killed Guevara 50 years ago, Bolivian dictator René Barrientos died a year later when his helicopter burst into flames. General Joaquín Zenteno Anaya, who led the operation against Che, was shot to death in the streets of Paris. Major Andrés Selich Chop, who led the Rangers to capture Che, was killed by the dictatorship of Hugo Banzer. Monika Ertl, a member of the National Liberation Army of Bolivia, killed Colonel Roberto Quintanilla Perez, who had announced Che's death to the world, in Hamburg.

Mario Terán Salazar, the soldier who shot Che, went into hiding. Many years later, in 2006, the Cuban government operated on Che's killer to remove a cataract from his eye without charge. Che's legacy was not revenge. It remains a doctor's love for humanity.

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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.

Offered to god

It is sad that in a country where the Mahatma fought for the empowerment and dignity of women universally, there are still numerous 'Mathammas' who live in despair and subject to exploitation and stigma ("Sunday Special" - Devadasi: An exploitative ritual that refuses to die", October 8). That scores of children are initiated into the Devadasi system is a painful comment. Instead of viewing this practice through the lens of religion, it should be seen as patriarchy unchecked. One does not expect political parties to involve themselves in the fight against this system as they will be only thinking of votes.

Religious leaders, child right groups, the NCW and other organisations have to come forward to help these hapless women and children from enslavement.

As Nelson Mandela said: "Freedom cannot be achieved unless the women have been emancipated from all forms of oppression."

R. SRIDHARAN,
Chennai

■ It leaves one flabbergasted that a despicable practice continues in the world's largest democracy. Glorifying prostitution/sexual exploitation under the garb of religion is abominable. The political class has been lax as it obviously has an eye on votebanks. The women themselves are bound to face hurdles on account of brainwashing and social stigma and it is here that the administration, civil society and non-governmental organisations ought to help out and sensitise ignorant, superstitious people. The rehabilitation and integration of these women should be in the form of self-help groups and skill

acquisition programmes. Older Devadasis should have access to pension and welfare schemes.

SHREYASHI PANJA,
New Delhi

■ What is most unfortunate is when young girls are betrayed by their loved ones, who instead of protecting them, lead them towards an inhuman system which subjects them to life-long exploitation. Now that the authorities concerned have been sensitised, there should be action.

B. INFANCY REENA,
Bengaluru

Diversification

The Kerala government's firm stand in the Supreme Court on the subject of alleged 'conversion, marriage and radicalisation' and that it does not warrant investigation by the National Investigation Agency is heartening ("No rash of conversions in Kerala, State

govt. tells SC", October 8). Evidently interest in investigating such matters is intended to divert attention from the real livelihood issues. The undue thrust being given to investigate illusory fears over 'love jihad' is nothing but an attempt to give the right wing a foothold in a progressive State.

J. ANANTHA PADMANABHAN,
Tiruchi

The 'Bullet' way

A technology explosion in urban transportation, urban decongestion and the likely transformation thereafter are the benefits being touted in support of the bullet train which, prima facie, are very attractive.

But when we eulogise the massive investment, the state of ageing railway infrastructure, the safety of the existing rail network and the long pending demands of various States should not be ignored. The enormous cost of the project involves the internal generation of

resources. With resource mobilisation in a struggling economy being difficult, fund diversion from ongoing development projects and downsizing of regular expenditures are the obvious alternative. Another likely fallout would be continued cold treatment of projects pending for years at the threshold for approval and allocation of funds. There are indications in the Budget (2017-18) about such a possibility. Allocations to metropolitan transport projects, new lines (construction), gauge conversions and rolling stock have dipped. One hopes that the Japanese bounty of liberal finance doesn't become an irremovable drag on the economy.

HARIDASAN RAJAN,
Kozhikode

■ In the articles under "Left, Right, Centre", "Does India need a bullet train?" (October 6), the writer

("Left") had said: "Estimates in the project report by the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad show that at least 1 lakh passengers at fares of ₹4,000-₹5,000 would be required daily for the project to break even. The tariff is too high – air fares between the two cities are around ₹2,500. Subsidies appear inevitable. Subsidies for agriculture, education and healthcare are taboo, but subsidies for the rich seem unproblematic." The IIMA report assumed that the average distance a passenger would be travelling by bullet train would be 300 km, and at ₹5 per km, the fare would be ₹1,500. For the project to break even, the project would require 1 lakh passengers, who on average travel 300 km in the HSR corridor.

RAMAKRISHNAN T.S.,
Ahmedabad

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