



Dangerous spiral

New Delhi and Islamabad must address the tit-for-tat harassment of each other's envoys

Regardless of the provocation or the sequence of events, there is an urgent need for India and Pakistan to address allegations of harassment of each other's diplomats and interference in High Commission work. While surveillance of diplomats by intelligence agencies in New Delhi and Islamabad is not new, matters have escalated in the past month, and the treatment of diplomatic officials by both sides has dropped to new lows. The spark for this round of 'tit-for-tat' actions appears to be an incident in February, when alleged ISI agents roughed up Pakistani construction workers headed for the Indian mission's new building site in Islamabad. While Pakistan's foreign office claimed they did not have security clearance to enter the diplomatic zone, India saw it as an attempt to stop the work, adding that power and water connections were tampered with. Then, the Pakistan High Commission in Delhi claimed that Indian security personnel warned repairmen and electricians against entering its premises. Both missions said personnel were being targeted on the road, with cars stopped and drivers intimidated. Other instances on both sides include obscene phone calls, stoppage of milk and newspaper delivery to diplomats, and even 3 a.m. doorbell rings.

The timing is clearly more than just coincidence, and the incidents mark a deliberate policy by India and Pakistan to give their intelligence agencies a *carte blanche* to target the other side. It is unfortunate that things have come to such a pass, weeks after the two countries agreed to humanitarian measures for prisoners, with Pakistan Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif accepting External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj's proposals on the issue. The allegations of harassment are more serious than just shadow-boxing, and must be checked in order to avoid a further slippage in ties. They constitute technical violations of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961) and the subsequent Vienna Convention on Consular Relations (1963), which clearly state that a diplomatic agent's person, premises and property are inviolable and must be respected and protected by the "receiving state". The fear is that as a next step in this spiral, India and Pakistan may even take stronger measures, including sending back diplomats or scaling down their missions. India had declared Islamabad a non-family post in the wake of the terror attack on an army school in Peshawar; Pakistan may now follow suit by withdrawing its families from Delhi. At a time when bilateral dialogue has been stalled for years, and ceasefire violations are becoming the norm on the Line of Control, any escalation will impact the few lines of communication that remain. Cooler counsel must prevail.

In a plastics world

The presence of plastics in drinking water must compel drastic action

Plastics are now widely present in the environment, as visible waste along coastlines, in lakes and rivers, and even in the soil. The recent finding that microplastic particles are found even in 'safe' bottled water indicates the magnitude of the crisis. There is little doubt that the global production of plastics, at over 300 million tonnes a year according to the UN Environment Programme, has overwhelmed the capacity of governments to handle what is thrown away as waste. Microplastics are particles of less than 5 mm that enter the environment either as primary industrial products, such as those used in scrubbers and cosmetics, or via urban waste water and broken-down elements of articles discarded by consumers. Washing of clothes releases synthetic microfibrils into water bodies and the sea. The health impact of the presence of polypropylene, polyethylene terephthalate and other chemicals in drinking water, food and even inhaled air may not yet be clear, but indisputably these are contaminants. Research evidence from complementary fields indicates that accumulation of these chemicals can induce or aggravate immune responses in the body. More studies, as a globally coordinated effort, are necessary to assess the impact on health. It is heartening that the WHO has come forward to commission a review of the health impact of plastics in water.

Last December in Nairobi, UN member-countries resolved to produce a binding agreement in 18 months to deal with the release of plastics into the marine environment. The problem is staggering: eight million tonnes of waste, including bottles and packaging, make their way into the sea each year. There is now even the Great Pacific Garbage Patch of plastic debris. India has a major problem dealing with plastics, particularly single-use shopping bags that reach dumping sites, rivers and wetlands along with other waste. The most efficient way to deal with the pollution is to control the production and distribution of plastics. Banning single-use bags and making consumers pay a significant amount for the more durable ones is a feasible solution. Enforcing the Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016, which require segregation of waste from April 8 this year, will retrieve materials and greatly reduce the burden on the environment. Waste separation can be achieved in partnership with the community, and presents a major employment opportunity. The goal, however, has to be long term. As the European Union's vision 2030 document on creating a circular plastic economy explains, the answer lies in changing the very nature of plastics, from cheap and disposable to durable, reusable and fully recyclable. There is consensus that this is the way forward. Now that the presence of plastics in drinking water, including the bottled variety, has been documented, governments should realise it cannot be business as usual.

A stoppable juggernaut

Voters have sent a loud message in the U.P. by-elections – the Congress has to read it right

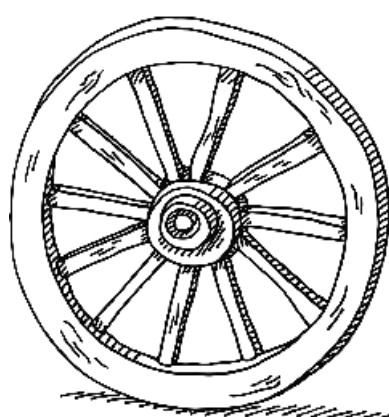


PULPAPRE BALAKRISHNAN

The results of the recent by-elections in eastern Uttar Pradesh have made it clear that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Narendra Modi is not invincible. The electors of Gorakhpur and Phulpur have shown their party the door, signalling that they are neither enamoured by what it has to offer by way of politics nor overawed of its grand success in the State Assembly elections of barely a year ago. They have bearded the proverbial lion in his den. It is now no longer inconceivable that the BJP may face the same fate elsewhere in the country in the parliamentary elections in 2019.

Secularism question

However, for this to happen, the advisers of the main Opposition party, the Congress, must read this verdict. They must realise that it would hardly do to merely "promote secularism without giving the BJP the opportunity to label [it] anti-Hindu," as a writer put it in this newspaper soon after the elections to the Gujarat Assembly. Nor would it help for the party president to become a serial temple-goer as he did temporarily in Gujarat in poll season, a practice that has been hailed as "smart secularism" by pundits dismayed by the supposed innocence of "Nehruvian liberals". Only a puffed-up intellect could imagine that India's electorate are so naive as to not sniff fake religiosity from a distance. That Akhilesh Yadav did not go on a temple crawl in the Hindu-majority constituencies of Gorakhpur and Phulpur did not prevent



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the electors from switching their allegiance to the Samajwadi Party (SP). We know from the vote count that while Opposition unity helped with the victories, there has actually been a swing away from the BJP, even though slight. As for promoting 'secularism without appearing to be anti-Hindu', this is odd advice indeed.

First, how can a political party promote secularism when the State, the reins to which it aspires, is constitutionally bound by it? Second, why should any religious group feel threatened by a genuinely secular State for it remains the best bet for the religiously inclined, whatever their faith. Finally, what the electors of U.P. have shown is that the people of India need no lessons in secularism. They have rejected Hindutva politics without any help from the Congress Party. How can we be certain that it is Hindutva that they have rejected? Well we can't, for it could also be anti-incumbency as the elections were to the Lok Sabha. But if it is anti-incumbency that led to the defeat of the BJP, it is all the more reason for the Opposition parties to focus on the things that voters really care about. Hospitals are very likely among these. Last year Gorakhpur saw over 1,000 child deaths due to a deadly district public hospital in Chief Mi-

nister Yogi Adityanath's pocket borough.

Vertical presence

Why is it necessary to even consider the Congress when the possibilities for 2019 are being considered? Because even at a miserable 40-plus seats in the Lok Sabha, it is still the largest single Opposition party. And its importance stems from more than numbers. In terms of mindset, it is the only party that straddles the country vertically. With the ending of Chandrababu Naidu's dalliance with the BJP, the entire south of the country is ruled by non-BJP parties. Assuming that this will continue till May 2019, the historical reach of the Congress party makes it better suited than any other to respond to the aspirations of the people of southern India. The architects of the BJP's recent defeat in U.P. cannot hope to fill this role. Both the SP and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) are by choice parochial entities. Neither Lalu Prasad nor Mulayam Singh Yadav has attempted outreach south of the Vindhya. In fact, they seem to revel in the role of regional politicians apart from the unapologetic pitch to their own caste, which practice does not go down as well here.

On the other hand, whatever

After the drift, the split

Varying perceptions of political interests in Andhra Pradesh hastened the TDP-BJP break-up



K. VENKATESHWARLU

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu is quite vocal in making it clear that he is among the senior-most politicians in the country, having just completed four decades in public life. As a shrewd politician he has kept his party, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), afloat and politically relevant through changing times. Yet after he decided to pull out of the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance government and move a no-confidence motion against the Narendra Modi government over the Centre's refusal to grant special category status (SCS) to Andhra Pradesh, he is being ridiculed as one who has waded into competitive politics with his younger political rival and YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) leader, Y.S. Jaganmohan Reddy, whom he considers a greenhorn.

That seasoned leaders such as

Mr. Naidu are forced to follow this course once again demonstrates that local political and electoral compulsions and regional versus national interests matter, however politically savvy they may be.

To a casual observer, it may appear puzzling why Mr. Naidu has taken this stand when the Centre has announced an alternative special assistance measure (SAM) for Andhra Pradesh.

But a closer look shows that it has only been a trickle and there is bewilderment locally at the Central government's argument that "it is not sentiment, but the constitutional award of the Finance Commission which decides the quantum of funds that States get". Perceived as being insensitive, this became a key factor that ruptured relations between the TDP and the BJP.

The perception

The people of the State believe that they are bearing the brunt of an irrational and hasty bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh (under the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance) that has now left them without a capital city, a huge revenue deficit and no big industry. The BJP's stand is being perceived



as a second betrayal by the second national party.

Many questions are flying in the political wind. If the SCS is based on features of a State such as 'hilly and difficult terrain, low population density or a sizeable tribal population, strategic location, economic backwardness and non-viable nature of State finances', why did the then Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, in a debate in the Rajya Sabha on the A.P. Reorganisation Act, say that the SCS would be "extended to the successor State of Andhra Pradesh... for a period of five years"? And why has the BJP now ruled out the possibility of the SCS after pushing its extension for 10 years?

When almost every political entity is in agreement that Andhra Pradesh has been left in a distinctly disadvantaged position requiring "special" care, why the argu-

ment that other States will start making similar demands? Is there no scope for political intervention to help such States in a cooperative federalism? If the SCS is such an impractical scheme, why are the people not being taken into confidence and educated about its shortcomings?

The SCS has become a stick to beat political rivals with. For the YSRCP, it has come in handy to embarrass the TDP. Mr. Naidu did try to convince people in the State to accept the special assistance measure but dropped it midway after the Centre's stance. A concerted campaign by the Opposition, social organisations and the media in favour of the SCS also ensured that it became an emotive issue that was projected as being tied to 'Telugu self-respect'.

Other grievances

In the end, Mr. Naidu appeared to have been left with no alternative but to back the SCS narrative. There were also a host of other contentious issues such as bridging the revenue deficit, fulfilment of provisions of the A.P. Reorganisation Act, funds for the Polavaram irrigation project, the capital city, and other infrastructure pro-

jects. The BJP's stance on "alliance dharma", by encouraging Mr. Naidu's political rivals in terms of either granting them an audience or launching verbal attacks against him, was also a sore point, an example being Jana Sena Party leader, Pawan Kalyan's attack on Mr. Naidu and his son, Information Technology Minister Nara Lokesh. Others attribute the political break-up to problems in the Naidu-Modi chemistry, which go back to 2002 and the backdrop of the Gujarat riots.

Amid the political jostling, it is clear that there is a trust deficit. After BJP spokesperson G.V.L. Narasimha Rao said that "far from being a threat, the TDP's exit is an opportunity for the BJP to grow in A.P.", Mr. Naidu levelled a fresh charge that the BJP was desperately trying to replicate Tamil Nadu-type politics by pitting one party against the other in order to create political space for itself.

In this context, it is important to note that senior TDP leaders have backed Mr. Naidu on this especially as the State accounts for 25 Lok Sabha seats, and will be a crucial factor in the 2019 election.

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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.

Opposition's prospects

Seizing the opportunity provided by the BJP's disappointing performance in the recent by-elections, the Opposition appears to be getting its act together. Or is it? The call by former Congress president Sonia Gandhi at the party's plenary session that all parties opposed to the BJP must come together under a single umbrella to unseat the BJP on the one hand and Rahul Gandhi's statement that the Congress is the only party that could unite the country on the other are not only boastful but also appear premature in the absence of clarity and tall leaders. A year is still a long time given the fluid political environment. With responses that can at best be considered half-hearted and a failure on many an occasion to defeat communal forces, one is sceptical about the Opposition, especially the Congress under Rahul Gandhi, being able to achieve its goal ("Modi's

promises are theatrics", says Sonia, March 18).

K.R. SRINIVASAN,
Secunderabad

■ The Congress's hints about political tie-ups is acknowledgement of the fact that the grand old party is struggling to remain politically relevant ("Congress hints at readiness for tie-ups to beat BJP in 2019", March 18). A decade of UPA rule is evidence that it only wants power by stitching together alliances with regional parties of varied ideologies. It was an era where holding power by all means was given priority over ethics and efficient governance which eventually led to a series of big-ticket scams.

NISHANT CHOUDHARY,
Nasirabad, Ajmer, Rajasthan

Stephen Hawking

Except for an article on the Op-Ed page, an editorial and just one letter, the passing away of Stephen Hawking appears to have elicited scant attention in the print media,

and *The Hindu*. This is mainly because of the growing and general apathy of Indians towards science. Hawking held the most prestigious Lucasian Chair, at the University of Cambridge, once held by Sir Isaac Newton. More interesting is his meeting with the Pope during a gathering for those who had distinguished themselves in science. When it came to Hawking's turn to greet the Pope, the pontiff walked up to Hawking, a gesture that created a stir as he was a scientist who had questioned the very existence of god. It is strange that the genius was not awarded the Nobel for his work.

K.P. PRABHAKARAN NAIR,
Kozhikode, Kerala

At the science meet

The comments by the Union Science Minister at the 105th edition of the Indian Science Congress in Imphal are troubling in more ways than one ("Hawking said Vedic theory is superior", March 17). First, making an

unverified claim about an iconic theoretical physicist who passed away recently is sheer disrespect. Second, the attitude of condescension in telling the media to "do some work" to find the source for his claim points to an anti-intellectual sentiment. Also, in resorting to an appeal to authority, he has adopted the very technique that one needs to avoid if one is to do science – relying on evidence and objectivity, rather than subjective interpretations of any one person or group. In order to "spread science", as the Prime Minister wants, people in government themselves must adopt scientific temper first, and also endeavour to provide a greater share of public funding to modern science. This means that there has to be research and development rather than focus on the "glorious days" of ancient Indian science.

S. DUTTA,
Kolkata

■ It has become a habit for those in authority to twist

history and facts. As a Union Minister, one would have expected Harsh Vardhan to make statements supported by proof. That subsequent governments have not cared to correct such wrongs shows the kind of respect those in power have toward 'developing scientific temper' and a 'spirit of inquiry' as demanded by the Constitution.

K. NATARAJAN,
Madurai

Mining hub

As a resident of Ballari, I find that the article, "Red earth and fine dust" (Ground Zero" page, March 17) appears to

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:
The last paragraph of a report, "The slowdown on the audit regulator" ("Who-What-Why-When-Where" page, March 18, 2018) said: "According to Section 132 of the Companies Act, 2013, the NFR will have powers to impose a fine of less than ₹1 lakh..." It should have been *not less than ₹1 lakh*.

In the report headlined "TDP's decision to quit inevitable, says BJP" (March 17, 2018), it was erroneously stated that the Vajpayee government fell in 1996 by one vote. Actually the year was 1999.

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, Kasturba Buildings, 855 & 860 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002, India. All communications 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