



## Questionable remedy

Key sections of the National Medical Commission Bill need a rethink

The decision of the Lok Sabha to send the National Medical Commission Bill to a standing committee for a relook is the right one. First proposed in 2016, the Bill aims to overhaul the corrupt and inefficient Medical Council of India, which regulates medical education and practice. But despite its plus points, the NMC isn't the game-changing legislation it could have been. One of its goals is to rein in corruption in the MCI through greater distribution of powers. This is sought to be accomplished through an independent Medical Advisory Council to oversee the National Medical Commission, the proposed successor of the MCI. But all members of the NMC are members of the Council, undermining the latter's independence. This, and other concerns, must be addressed. Perhaps the most controversial provision of all is for a bridge course allowing alternative-medicine practitioners to prescribe modern drugs. One motivation could be to plug the shortfall of rural doctors by creating a new cadre of practitioners. But if this was the rationale, better solutions exist.

The shortfall of MBBS doctors is partly due to the fact that many of them seek a post-graduate degree to improve career prospects. MCI regulations prevent even experienced MBBS doctors from carrying out procedures like caesarians and ultrasound tests, while nurses are barred from administering anaesthesia. Empowering doctors and nurses to do more is a reform many have called for, and that would have been easier to implement than a bridge course for AYUSH practitioners. Yet, the NMC Bill hasn't taken it up. Another way to bolster healthcare delivery is a three-year diploma for rural medical-care providers, along the lines of the Licentiate Medical Practitioners who practised in India before 1946. Chhattisgarh tried this experiment in 2001 to tackle the paucity of doctors it faced as it was formed. Graduates from such a three-year programme would only be allowed to provide basic care in underserved pockets. Massive protests by the Indian Medical Association and poor execution derailed the Chhattisgarh experiment, but the idea wasn't without merit. India has no choice but to innovate with health-care delivery models to tackle the challenges it faces. The trick is to base these innovations on evidence. There is plenty of evidence that MBBS doctors and nurses can do more than they are legally allowed to do. But integrating alternative-medicine practitioners into modern medicine requires a lot more thought. The government will do well to empower existing doctors before attempting more ambitious, and questionable, experiments.

## On the ledger

Expenditure data underline the government's challenge on fiscal consolidation

Eight months into the financial year, or until end November, the Union government's fiscal deficit – the amount by which its expenditure exceeds revenue – had already overshoot the year's budget target by a significant ₹65,573 crore. And as in everything with numbers, there are several interesting insights to be had, some fairly straightforward and self-explanatory and others less obvious and disconcerting. One of the biggest contributors to the wider fiscal slippage has clearly been the faster pace at which total expenditure has grown. While the government had in the Union Budget provided for overall spending to increase by a modest 6.6% over the revised estimates for the previous fiscal, data for April-November released by the Controller General of Accounts show a 14.9% jump year-on-year. A look at the individual ministries and how they have front-loaded their spending shows wide variability with several ministries still significantly underutilising their budget allocations over the first eight months. (One of the government's aims when it advanced the budget presentation by a month to February 1 was to ensure that government departments had adequate time to spend the funds apportioned to them in an optimal manner.) Similarly, revenue receipts for the eight-month period have shown an underwhelming 1.1% year-on-year increase while the budget projection was for 6.5% growth. Even if some of the sluggishness in revenue receipts can be explained by the fact that the current year has been a one-off, transitional period given that the GST regime was implemented from July 1, there are other pressure points that policymakers need to square up with. Non-tax revenue at 36.5% of budget estimates compares unfavourably with the 54.2% garnered in the corresponding period of the previous year.

There is also the issue of how the government is likely to account the additional capital it has announced as part of the recapitalisation effort to bolster the financial health of public sector banks. There is the additional ₹50,000 crore in market borrowing that the government has planned for the fourth quarter – a move it has said will not significantly impact the fiscal calculus since it simultaneously plans to scale back collections from treasury bills. The fiscal gap has widened in spite of a healthy jump in non-debt capital receipts, which include the ₹17,357 crore the government received from the public listing of state-run insurance companies, and steady improvements in corporate and personal income tax collections. That the figures revealing the fiscal slippage have come less than two months after Moody's upgraded India's sovereign credit rating serves as a reminder that there is little room for complacency. With monetary authorities at the RBI having reiterated the inflationary risks that a worsening fiscal gap would pose, and private investment still struggling to gain traction, policymakers would do well to try and regain their footing on the crucial path of fiscal consolidation.

# Looking for substance in style

Rajinikanth signals a shift away from a politics rooted in ideology to one that is solely personality-centric



K. VENKATARAMANAN

For those of us who remember the first flush of excitement that 'Rajini style' caused in Tamil society in the 1970s, style was the man. The idea that Rajinikanth, the superstar of Tamil cinema, is best known for his style has been with us for so long that not many associate his films with substance. That some of his early films and performances showed promise is nearly forgotten. He has come to be associated with superhuman achievements. His mythic appeal has been converted into innumerable jokes about impossible feats. The time has come when his fans and admirers have accepted his style as his work itself. This will be as true for his films as for his present foray into politics.

### Improbable hopes

"Style is art," Susan Sontag said, questioning the distinction often made between style and substance, between form and content. Mr. Rajinikanth's art, if the world can be associated with him, is his style. Sontag also warned against interpretation, calling it the "revenge of the intellect upon art". As the leading figure in the Tamil celluloid world takes the plunge into politics, it may be too early to interpret the actor's politics and political intentions. Looking for substance or a political vision can wait. It is, for now, as futile as looking for deeper meanings and hidden subtexts in his fast-moving films with improbable fight sequences.

Questions are being raised: whether his entry will worsen the



M. VEJHAN

cult of hero worship and charisma-driven politics in Tamil Nadu; whether he is laying the ground for right-wing politics to take root in what was until now inhospitable terrain for it; whether he is self-driven or being pushed by other forces. All these concerns are no doubt valid and require answers. However, in the immediate social and political context of present-day Tamil Nadu, other questions have to be raised first.

Why does Mr. Rajinikanth want to enter politics? He says the present system is not right and needs to be changed; that there is political degradation in Tamil Nadu; that the State has become a laughing stock; that rulers have become looters; and that if he did nothing to stem the rot even at this stage, he would be wracked by guilt till his death. It may appear that the situation he describes does prevail in Tamil Nadu after the demise of Jayalalithaa and the inability of Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) president M. Karunanidhi to remain active in politics for health reasons. The present All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) regime in Tamil Nadu is quite unpopular by all accounts. However, are the rest of the claims of the politician-to-be true? Politics did not suddenly degrade in the last one year and corruption is not a recent phenome-

non. If something causes great shame and embarrassment to the people of Tamil Nadu, it is the ease with which film personalities, both the famous and the also-rans, enter public life and are seen as natural political leaders. Most parties are led by those who do not create or tolerate a second-rung leadership and are virtually clubs run by individuals. Film stars have been floating political outfits based on individual popularity and converting their fan clubs into local units. There is little doubt that what Mr. Rajinikanth is planning is just one more party on this list. A party of one followed by numberless zeroes.

Endemic corruption has been punished by the electorate in the past. The verdicts of 1996 and 2011 in the State Assembly elections were clear mandates against the misdeeds of the AIADMK and the DMK regimes of the day. The State has a few core issues on which its interests are seen to be under threat, and parties, willy-nilly, have to take a position on these matters. It is difficult to avoid an issue-based agenda in the State. It is true that the two main parties have done their bit to render elections devoid of issues by their election-time promises of freebies and, in recent years, rampant voter bribery. The mere absence of a tall leader capable of helming the

# Among the multiple endings

How Kulbhushan Jadhav's fate is tied to the state of play in India-Pakistan ties



V. SUDARSHAN

The symbolism was inescapable. Two years ago, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi made an impromptu stop-over in Lahore to reach out to the then Pakistani Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, during the wedding of his grand-daughter, it was Christmas Day, December 25, 2015. Recall the circumstances. Ten days previously, Mr. Modi had addressed the Combined Commanders Conference aboard INS Vikramaditya. He had declared: "India is engaging Pakistan to try and turn the course of history, bring an end to terrorism, build peaceful relations, advance cooperation and promote stability and prosperity in our region." The Indian and Pakistani National Security Advisers, Ajit Doval and Nasser Khan Janjua, had met in Bangkok to work on the modalities for the

way forward, so we can presume that the Pakistani Army was more or less on board. So when Mr. Sharif suggested to Mr. Modi, who had called from Kabul, that he drop by, Mr. Modi let himself be persuaded. It was so last-minute that officials had to scramble to find an appropriate gift, and in the end Mr. Modi landed in Lahore bearing the message of peace.

### Back to square one

Two years later, by permitting naval commander Kulbhushan Jadhav's mother and wife to visit him in Islamabad on December 25, Pakistan's deep state was signalling that New Delhi should consider this a return gift. But that message of peace was torn to shreds in that metal container with a glass panel where India and Pakistan conducted fishbowl diplomacy. The rules of engagement need to be rewritten yet again, this time in a way that insulates bilateral relations from the vagaries of Pakistan's internal politics.

Was the outcome of Jadhav family reunion, with a disrupted conversation and the visitors' accessories confiscated, a failure of



anticipation? Consider the circumstances. There has been a downturn in relations with Pakistan in every sphere, against the backdrop of another domestic political upheaval that dislodged Mr. Sharif from the Prime Minister's post. External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj informed Parliament that what eventually happened in the Pakistan Foreign Office when Jadhav's wife and mother were allowed to briefly interact with him in highly restrictive circumstances was a "departure from the agreed understandings between the two countries in the conduct of this meeting." The Ministry of External Affairs also declared that "prior to the meeting, the two governments were in touch through diplomatic channels to work out the modalities and format. There were clear understandings..."

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There is still not enough detail in the public domain on what exactly were these modalities and understandings that had been worked out diplomatically and how much ambiguity was inherent in the resultant format for either side to interpret. That Pakistani journalists were allowed to repeatedly attempt to badger Mr. Jadhav's wife and mother, that no communication was allowed in Marathi, their mother tongue, that the footwear Mr. Jadhav's wife was wearing was confiscated and sent for unspecified tests indicate the potential for further diplomatic mischief.

But the larger point remains that Pakistan has not allowed consular access to Mr. Jadhav – that is, Indian diplomats in Islamabad have not been able to visit him in prison and record his version of how he came to be in Pakistan's custody, etc. It may not come as a surprise if it turns out that Mr. Jadhav was indeed a spy, but even that needn't detain us here. Nations spy on each other.

The issue here is the message

that Pakistan is conveying.

### Bruising episode

The question is: at the end of this bruising diplomacy, who is likely to walk away smelling more of roses? And certainly, it is not clear how all this has helped Mr. Jadhav's condition or eventual fate, whatever conclusion the International Court of Justice may or may not reach. From the debriefing the Ministry of External Affairs got from his mother and wife, it appeared to them that the alleged spy was "under considerable stress and was speaking in an atmosphere of coercion." Moreover, his appearance had also raised questions of his health and well-being.

Mr. Jadhav may well receive a presidential pardon, and be returned to India. There may even be a spy barter, though this occurs mostly before their cases come up for trial and rarely afterwards. So long as there are spies among us, the script has many potential endings. Which one will we eventually get to see?

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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.

### Moment of truth?

U.S. President Donald Trump has threatened to stop aid to Pakistan, almost naming the country as a state sponsor of terrorism ("U.S. foolishly gave money to Pakistan", January 2). But it remains to be seen whether he will match his rhetoric with action as past experience has shown him to take 'about-turns'. His threat could be the result of Jamaat-ud-Dawah chief Hafiz Saeed's shrill rhetoric over the U.S.'s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Mr. Trump's remarks against Pakistan may be music to the ears of our External Affairs Ministry but the crux of the matter is whether Pakistan will mend its ways following his terse call for zero-tolerance towards Pakistan's support to terror.

C.G. KURIAKOSE,  
Kothamangalam, Kerala

### On secularism

Those who drafted our Constitution were thinking and visionary people – to lay emphasis on the point

that all the fundamental rights provided therein are on a bedrock of secularism ("The secular condition", January 2, 2018). It was wonderful to have our own definition of secularism for the Constitution; not being irreligious, but treating all religions as equal. And it was not a new "invention", but laying emphasis on what was the millennia-old ethos of the land. Looking at the views expressed by people such as Union Minister Anant Kumar Hegde now, one shudders to think what might have happened to the country had it been the right wing that had come to power after Independence. We are fortunate from that angle. Yet, as the writer feels, we cannot let our guard down. Times have rapidly changed these past few years. We do not even want to recollect the events of 1992 and 2002. One wonders whether the edifice of our Constitution will suffer irreparable damage on account of backdoor methods. It is a worrying

prospect which does not seem to have registered.

M. BALAKRISHNAN,  
Bengaluru

Secularism has been an intrinsic part of Indian tradition since ancient times. Unlike the Western idea of secularism which demands a complete separation of religion and state, our Constitution has adopted a broader version of secularism wherein the state treats all religions with equal respect. When it comes to changing the Constitution, its makers have made necessary provisions for amendments to meet the demands of time. The amendment procedure does not confer unlimited power to Parliament to amend the Constitution. Even if Mr. Hegde wants to change the secular nature of the Constitution, the basic structure cannot be abridged or taken away by Parliament.

PADMAKAR GAIKWAD,  
Pune

### Fostering excellence

The article, "The ethics of excellence" (January 2),

shows how a major issue coming in the way of quality academic research in India is the attitudinal approach to teaching and research. As the writer mentions, citing a Stanford University advertisement, research and teaching both need "strong commitment" from teachers. In India, there is an unmanageable balance where teaching takes up most of a lecturer's time due to most students being average, the adverse teacher-student ratio, an indifferent appraisal system where research attempts get little credit, lack of competitive compensation, and a lack of recognition for research socially. It is a fact that wherever there is an environment that is research friendly, as in the premier institutes such as the Indian Institutes of Technology, research flourishes. Unless such bottlenecks are overcome, it will be difficult to achieve an "ethical commitment to excellence".

Y.G. CHOUKSEY,  
Pune

### Rajinikanth in politics

Tamil cine superstar Rajinikanth's entry into the turbulent world of Tamil politics needs to be looked at critically (Editorial - "Star turn", January 2). He has not floated any welfare scheme for the benefit of the people of Tamil Nadu. We have never seen him announce any financial support to people when in distress. These are points that matter and it is strange that his fans and the so-called intelligentsia with vested interests have encouraged him to enter politics. It is time all secular-minded parties come together and stop his moves.

THARCIOUS S. FERNANDO,  
Chennai

### CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In the Sunday Special story titled "Nizam made vain bid to buy Marmagao port from Portugal" (Dec. 31, 2017, front page) there was a reference to a letter from Mountbatten in October 1945 about Hyderabad's effort to buy Goa. It should have been Archibald Wavell.

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