

The task of restoring democracy

Civil society has a big role to play in restoring institutions that form the bulwark of democracy



G.N. DEVY

On April 24, an ultra-right wing Italian group assembled in Milan to resurrect Benito Mussolini. The day and the place were both symbolically significant. April 25 is celebrated as Liberation Day in Italy, and it was at the Piazzale Loreto in central Milan that Mussolini's body was hung upside down on April 28, 1945. Pictures of the people in the group showed them holding with one hand a big banner that read 'Honour to Mussolini', while their other hand was raised in the old fascist style of salutation to his memory.

This story is not dissimilar to how an ultra-right wing group recreated Mahatma Gandhi's assassination on his death anniversary this year. Not dissimilar, too, to how a Lok Sabha election candidate bragged about the 'patriotism' of Gandhi's killer. As we are seeing now, the memory of the assassin of the Mahatma is being brought to the surface by the ultra-right to take pride in what was clearly a shameful and sorrowful event in India's history.

The dark clouds of fascism

These instances send shivers down the spine of all those who shun violence. All over the world, decent human beings have spent the last seven decades thinking that fascism is a thing of the past and that the crimes against humanity that fascism consciously perpetrated will always be seen as the most heinous among brutal crimes. But that confidence is now becoming a precious luxury. This year, for instance, in Italy, the right wing Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini has proposed to put up a joint right wing front for contesting the upcoming election to the European Parliament. The ominous possibility of the ultras in Austria, Germany, France, and some 'new' European countries confronts Europe in the face.

The Italian development is not entirely unrelated to the outcome of the elections in Spain. While the Socialists won the election, the right wing



"The dark clouds of openly declared fascism have cast a large shadow over Europe." Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini with other European leaders of the far-right at a rally in Milan ahead of the European Parliament elections. ■AFP

continues to play an important role in the formation of the new government there. The Spanish election results bring to mind a term that has dominated the Indian media for the last few months – a hung Parliament. In Spain, the Socialist party (PSOE) has won 123 seats and the anti-capitalist Podemos, which has indicated a readiness to work in a PSOE-led coalition, has won 42, which makes it a total of 165. This is 11 seats short of a clear majority. The traditional conservative People's Party has got 66 seats; their stronger shade, the centre-right Citizens party has won 57 seats; and the far-right Vox, the type that wants to resurrect Mussolini, has won 24 seats.

The dark clouds of openly declared fascism have cast a large shadow over Europe. The history of Hitler's rule tells us how he befriended the rich industrial class and destroyed the German Parliament. His use of capital, science and technology for creating an unprecedented torture machine for Jews, homosexuals, gypsies, communists and all his critics was based on the capacities available in his time. Today, these capacities have increased beyond one's imagination. The technological aids for deeply invasive surveillance that the state has at its disposal are so advanced that the idea of individual freedom and non-conformist

thought will have no space left if the ideas of the ultra-right were to capture power.

The Lok Sabha election has come to an end and in a few days we will know what the ballot box has in store for us. Given India's place in the world, there is no doubt that all political parties in Europe will be keenly watching the outcome of the Indian election. Is it a small irony that a powerful bloc of nations, the BRICS, that was seen as being on an impressive and economic rise some years ago has changed so much? Brazil, Russia and China today have totalitarian and anti-people regimes, and India has obscurantist theological outfits openly claiming space in the decision-making process.

Challenges for the new regime

After the election results are announced, the new government will have many challenges waiting for its attention. These include jobless growth and a record drop in employment rates, deep agrarian distress, an education system that has completely eroded, caste discrimination and the continuing harassment of women. All these are real issues even if the government pretends they do not exist.

The most important, though, is the serious loss of credibility of democratic institutions. The Central

Bureau of Investigation and the gubernatorial offices have declined beyond repair. The Election Commission, the judiciary and the Comptroller and Auditor General can still be rebuilt. Many other institutions such as the University Grants Commission, the national academies, scientific institutions and data-gathering mechanisms will require not just first-aid care but serious cure. The TRP demon will hardly permit redemption of the electronic media, but traditional print journalism and online journalism will require greater self-reflection and self-regulation. No government will be able to cope with these challenges by itself unless many active sections of the citizenry participate in the task of restoring democracy.

The task I suggest will be difficult for the country to accomplish even if a non-right government is formed, no matter of what composition. Over the last seven decades, democracy has been protected by civil society, which has critiqued the faults of various regimes. This time, civil society will have to rush to the assistance of the government in restoring institutions that form the bulwark of democracy. This task will be enormously daunting if a right wing government comes to power. Curbing its jingoism and propaganda juggernaut will require heroic efforts. To keep vigil on complicit office-holders in key institutions will become full-time voluntary work for political opponents and non-party groups.

Yet, if many of us do not do this, we will provide an unintended impetus to the ultra-right. It is true that democracy has erred often. Yet, it is also true that democracy solidly stood the world's guarantee for averting wars. Democracy has erred, but it has not failed us. The idea of democracy today is a pale shadow of what it was imagined to be. U.S. President Donald Trump's vision for the country as a place only for Americans and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's imagining of India as a place for only those who agree with him are versions of democracy that have reduced their respective Constitutions to a forgotten baggage. Indians must hold vigil in both good and bad times. We will soon know if we can.

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FROM THE READERS' EDITOR

It's time for reflection, not prediction

Journalists must think about their role in the normalisation of extremist behaviour rather than focusing on exit polls



A.S. PANNEERSELVAN

It is important for the readers, who are now being subjected to an avalanche of exit polls, to look at the outcome of the Australian elections and take these numbers with a pinch of salt. Contrary to the predictions of multiple exit polls suggesting a narrow Labour win for the first time in six years, the ruling conservative coalition led by Prime Minister Scott Morrison has managed to retain power in Australia.

Why do I prefer in-depth reportage to pre-poll and post-poll surveys? A good field reporter bears witness to developments and records facts and diverse opinions. The reports that stay with us are not those that are centred around a single source, but those that painstakingly bring together facts culled from multiple sources. In the case of poll surveys, there seems to be no consensus as yet on the methodology, the ideal sample size, the right mix of qualitative and quantitative analysis, and the formula for converting the vote share to the number of seats in the first-past-the-post system. In 2003, the Brookings Institution carried an insightful piece, "Polling & Public Opinion: The good, the bad, and the ugly", which listed out the limitations in poll surveys in homogenous societies like the U.S. These factors get further complicated in India's heterogeneous polity.

A descriptive report may not give a precise idea of the final electoral outcome, but it does provide an insight into the issues that affect the people and helps to contextualise the campaign. If the act of verification differentiates journalism from other forms of communication, it is the ability to enforce accountability that distinguishes journalism from stenography or propaganda. According to the Lettre Ulysses Award for the Art of Reportage, "good journalism interprets events by contextualising elements such as historical background and causality, presenting readers with material for a more enlightened interpretation of world affairs".

In the run-up to the 2014 Lok Sabha election, I wrote two columns, "Not being pre-

scriptive" (April 7, 2014) and "Election coverage: Going beyond passions" (April 14, 2014). In those, I celebrated the Indian media, unlike the Western media, for not endorsing particular political parties, and suggested a form of journalism which is layered and nuanced, and which tries to capture complex Indian realities in their totality.

Whatever be the final composition of the 17th Lok Sabha, there are some disturbing questions that journalists must ask of their profession. Has the media created space for the furthering of hate speech? Has journalism done enough to arrest the spread of misinformation? What has been the role of the media in the normalisation of extremist behaviour by fringe groups? In the U.S., there is an intense debate about the role of the media. Lois Beckett, who covers gun policy, criminal justice and the far-right in the U.S. for *The Guardian*, came up with a searing piece titled, "How leftwing media focus on far-right groups is helping to normalise hate". She says that the endless debates on how to cover the "alt right", a fractured far-right movement of racists, misogynists and anti-Semites that greeted U.S. President Donald Trump's victory with euphoria, without "normalising" the true extremism of Mr. Trump and his allies have had the opposite outcome.

Questions that will haunt the media

Since 2014, the normalisation of extremism in India has been on the rise. I would like to know what went on in the minds of journalists who reported the nomination of Pragya Singh Thakur as the BJP's Bhopal candidate and her subsequent remarks on Mahatma Gandhi's assassin Nathuram Godse. What was the pushback when the Minister of State for External Affairs, General (retired) V.K. Singh, called journalists "presstitutes"? Margaret Sullivan, the media columnist for *The Washington Post*, said that "Trump won't stop coining nasty nicknames for his foes – but the media must stop amplifying them". What has been the Indian response to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's mocking reference to the "Khan Market Gang" in his interview to *The Indian Express*?

These are questions that will haunt the Indian media in the long run, and not the variable numbers thrown up by the exit polls.

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SINGLE FILE

Platforms of our own

How to ensure that social media evolves to become an enabler of transparency and democracy

ANIL K. ANTONY



Social media platforms allow political parties to reach millions of prospective voters and are therefore an integral part of elections. However, some authoritarian regimes across the world have used social media to manufacture positive public opinion. Worse, some established democracies have had to deal with propaganda, fake news and foreign interference in domestic elections. These developments point to the capacity of social media platforms to seriously undermine democratic practices worldwide.

Following the Cambridge Analytica scandal, where the company illegally harvested the personal data of millions of Facebook users without their consent and used that to influence their voting preferences, Facebook has been in the forefront in creating various checks and balances in cyberspace to create an environment for free and fair elections. It has created specialised global centres with the sole aim of promoting election integrity. As a platform that sees billions of posts each day, Facebook has identified Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning (AIML)-powered pattern recognition tools to be the most effective line of defence against "unnatural interference".

Whenever accounts are found that are similar to ones flagged in the past, and that are inaccurate, abusive, or violating the platforms' terms of service, they are systematically removed. At present, AIML tools assist the platform block or remove over a million accounts a day. According to a recent survey, one in two Indian voters has received some kind of fake news in the month leading to the elections. AIML tools also work to minimise the spread of such disinformation.

Some of the actions taken by these platforms, however, have not been that well received, especially by those who say that these platforms should not be deciding what is proper and improper in the Indian online space. For instance, Twitter's top officials, including global CEO Jack Dorsey, were summoned to appear before the Parliamentary Panel on Information Technology for alleged bias against right-wing voices on the platform.

With almost all the popular social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp, being foreign-owned, and with India having neither insights into their internal algorithms and functioning nor any viable homegrown equivalents, its population will always be susceptible to interference beyond its control. India's ability to create its own mass collaborative technology and independent institutions with technical expertise that can monitor and counter actions of the government, is paramount in ensuring that social media evolves into an enabler of transparency and democracy, rather than a cause of democratic recession.

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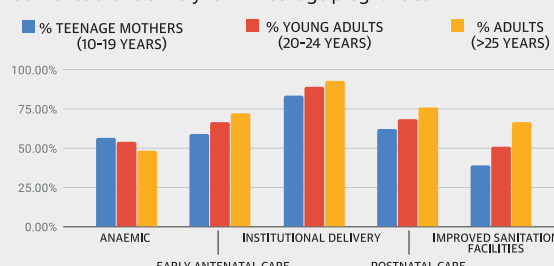
DATA POINT

Troubled teens

Pregnant teenage girls get poor maternal healthcare and bear children who are relatively more stunted than children of older mothers, according to a study by the International Food Policy Research Institute. The study was conducted in 2015-16 and was published last week. The highest number of teenage mothers were found in eastern and north-eastern India. By **Suman Sen**

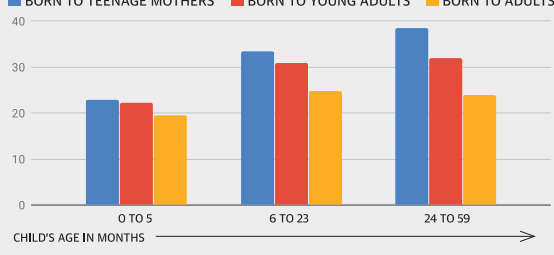
LACK OF HEALTHCARE

Pregnant teenagers are relatively more anaemic and receive less antenatal and postnatal care compared to older women. Pregnant teens are also exposed to poor sanitation facilities compared to women who have their first child in their twenties. Institutional deliveries are relatively low in teenage pregnancies



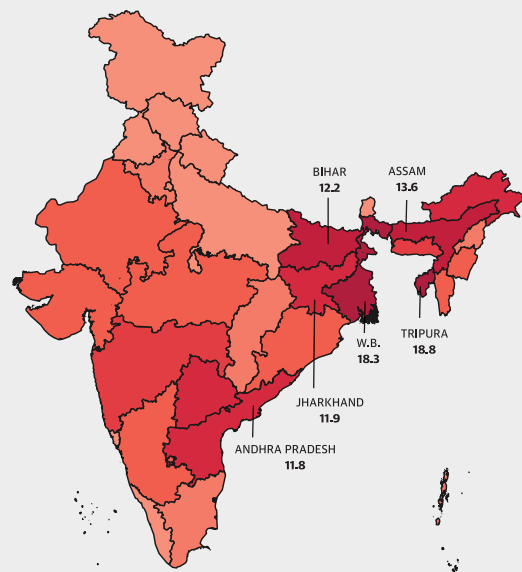
CHILD STUNTING

A higher percentage of stunting is observed among children born to teenage mothers compared to those born to young adults and adults. The gap significantly widens as the children grow older. The graph shows the % of children who are stunted across age cohorts



TROUBLE IN THE EAST

In many eastern and north-eastern States, a relatively higher percentage of mothers had their first child in their teens. The map shows the percentage of teenagers who were pregnant during the National Family Health Survey-4. The darker the red, the higher the percentage of teenage mothers



SOURCE: NATIONAL FAMILY HEALTH SURVEY-4 (2015-16)
THE LANCET CHILD & ADOLESCENCE HEALTH 2019
SAMPLE SIZE OF THE STUDY: 60,096 MOTHERS

FROM THE HINDU ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO MAY 20, 1969

No donations to parties

Parliament to-day [May 19, New Delhi] adopted an official Bill banning donations by companies to any political party and abolishing the managing agency system. The Bill, which was passed by the Rajya Sabha to-day, had been adopted by the Lok Sabha last week. Replying to the debate, the Minister for Industrial Development and Company Affairs, Mr. Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, vehemently denied charges of "corrupt practice" against his Ministry levelled by Mr. Raj Narain (S.S.P.). Mr. Ahmed bluntly told the House: "I am not going to resign at the dictates of Mr. Raj Narain. My political life is clean – perhaps cleaner than that of the honourable member." The Minister replied to two specific charges made by the member during the debate on Saturday last [May 17]. As Mr. Raj Narain angrily interrupted him, the Deputy Chairman, Mrs. Violet Alva, said he should listen to the reply, and she would not allow the interruptions to go on record.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MAY 20, 1919.

Disturbed Punjab.

The Indian Association [in Calcutta] has adopted a resolution protesting against the action of the military authorities in the Punjab in depriving the accused persons of the right of being defended by counsel of their choice, by refusing the latter permission to enter martial law area. The President of the Indian Association has sent the following cablegram to Mr. Montagu and Lord Sinha: At Lahore editor and others are awaiting trial for alleged offences punishable with death and transportation. They engaged Messrs. Norton, Roy and Chatterjee, three Calcutta Barristers, but the military authorities refused the latter permission to enter martial law area from outside the province. This order will prejudice the defence as the accused not having confidence in the local bar, are deprived of the help of a counsel of their choice. The Indian Association, Calcutta, solicit immediate intervention for interests of justice. A similar message was also wired to the Viceroy.

POLL CALL

Negative campaigning

Negative campaigning is a type of political advertising whereby a political party chooses to highlight the flaws or another candidate in its campaign instead of showcasing its own candidates or the achievements of its governments, present or past. Sometimes such advertising can be subtle, while at other times it can be quite overt. Negative campaigns typically focus on a candidate's political record, or lack of it. Negative campaigns are powerful and can especially persuade floating voters to make up their minds, but divisive campaigns can also backfire.

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