



The plane truth

As things stand, only greater transparency will clear the air on the Rafale deal

The Rafale deal has been the subject of heated claims and counter-claims on two broad issues – that the contract to purchase 36 French multi-role fighter aircraft was grossly overvalued and that it was tainted by crony capitalism. Ammunition for the second charge came from an unexpected quarter with former French President François Hollande stating in an interview that it was India that suggested the Anil Ambani-owned Reliance Defence Ltd. as the offset partner for the deal. This squarely contradicts what the Modi government has been saying all along. While the Centre has insisted that the choice of offset partners is entirely that of the manufacturer, or of Dassault Aviation, Mr. Hollande's remarks were widely perceived as bolstering the Congress allegation that the Rafale deal was structured to favour one industrialist. In the storm that ensued, the clarificatory statements issued – by the Centre, the French Foreign Ministry and Dassault – did little to clearly address what Mr. Hollande had said. The Defence Ministry's statement merely reiterated that governments have no role in offset contracts, which are purely commercial. The French government said pretty much the same thing, and Dassault's statement reaffirmed that it had chosen to tie up with Reliance Defence. But all this merely begs the question: did the Centre suggest a partnership with Reliance Defence as Mr. Hollande said? Also, if so, what form did it take? A firm ruling in that direction? A quiet whisper in someone's ear? Who suggested to who? And when? It remains to be seen whether Mr. Hollande will now choose to complete his half-finished remarks to the French investigative website.

No questions have been raised about the capabilities of the Rafale jet, and the corruption allegations have persisted in the absence – unlike in the case of some other defence deals such as Bofors – of a financial trail. But a fair part of the reason for the concerns about the deal relate to process. If it was the temptation to make a headline-grabbing announcement that led Prime Minister Modi to unexpectedly announce the decision to purchase 36 Rafale aircraft, during his France visit in April 2015, it was a bad mistake. It is true that the deal was signed only in September 2016, after clearance from the Cabinet Committee on Security, but Mr. Modi's 2015 declaration of a new deal clearly caught even many of his senior officials unawares, who were labouring under the belief that negotiations for the purchase of 126 Rafale aircraft, initiated by the UPA government, were still on. As things stand, greater transparency is the only way to clear the air. Private briefings to Opposition leaders and the disclosure of all information that doesn't jeopardise national security or impact the aircrafts' operational capability are good starting points. The decision to reject the formation of a Joint Parliamentary Committee to examine the deal should be reconsidered. If the political war over Rafale continues, it is defence modernisation that will become the real victim.

On edge

Friday's panic sell-off raises the alarm about risks that face the Indian markets

Volatility is back in the Indian markets. Stock indices witnessed an extraordinary swing on Friday, with the Sensex moving 1,500 points between its high and low during the day and the Nifty almost by 370 points. The Sensex and the Nifty were down 279 and 91 points, respectively, at the end of trading on Friday after a significant recovery, but the day-end figures failed to capture the panic that struck investors during the day. Non-banking financial companies (NBFCs) were the major force behind Friday's extreme volatility. Shares of Dewan Housing Finance Corporation Ltd (DHFL) had lost 42% of their value by the end of trading, after having fallen 60% during the day. Other financials such as Indiabulls Housing Finance, LIC Housing Finance, and Repco Home Finance also witnessed similar steep falls. The market panic was attributed to DSP Mutual Fund's sale of bonds worth ₹300 crore issued by DHFL at yields higher than normal, leading to fears that it could be a precursor to higher borrowing costs that adversely affect the profitability of NBFCs. The Infrastructure Leasing & Financial Services Ltd.'s continuing default on its various liabilities also shook investors. The 29% fall in shares of Yes Bank, after the RBI refused to extend the term of its chief executive officer beyond January, further added to the panic. But Friday's fall was not simply limited to financials, as scrips across the board witnessed panic-selling.

The market's impressive recovery from the day's lows, which was fuelled by strong institutional buying, has offered some reason for optimism to investors, who believe the fall was simply a temporary correction in a bull market. Such optimism may be warranted, at least partially, after looking at how both the Sensex and the Nifty have recovered since their previous deep sell-off in February. That said, market breadth continues to remain a major concern since the last sell-off. Midcap and smallcap indices have failed to replicate the recovery that has been witnessed in the Sensex and the Nifty since February. The panic sell-off also raises the alarm about stretched valuations and other risks faced by the Indian markets. The depreciating rupee and the likely increase in the fiscal deficit in the run-up to the general election are the most immediate concerns. The need for corporate earnings to catch up with current valuations is another. The systemic risks posed by rising interest rates to corporate debt and various lenders also cannot be ignored. Investors, as well as financial market regulators, will do well to understand and act against these risks.

A pan-India Dalit assertion

The story of the Bhim Army of western U.P. is a lens to understand the Dalit challenge to the Hindu Right



G. SAMPATH

In a move that took many by surprise, the Uttar Pradesh government recently released Chandrasekhar Azad, the founder of the Bhim Army Bharat Ekta Mission, from jail. It was unexpected for many reasons. For starters, he had been arrested last year following clashes between Dalits and Thakurs in Saharanpur in western U.P. In November 2017, when the Allahabad High Court granted him bail, it observed that the charges against him seemed "politically motivated".

Why now?

Notwithstanding the bail order, the U.P. government had invoked the National Security Act (NSA) to arrest him again. It kept him in jail – without trial and without any charge sheet being filed – for more than 15 months. He was not due for release until November 2. So why did the Yogi Adityanath government suddenly change its mind and release him two months early?

The official explanation is that the decision was taken in response to a request from Mr. Azad's mother. But that doesn't explain why her request remained unheeded for so many months.

It is likely that the real reasons involve a combination of two factors. First, the petition filed in the Supreme Court challenging his detention. Dalit groups have claimed that the petition was up for hearing soon, and that the government wanted to avoid a reprimand from the apex court, as it would have given the Opposition a fresh open-

ing to paint the BJP as 'anti-Dalit'.

The other reason is that the Dalits in U.P. have been getting increasingly restive over Mr. Azad's continued incarceration. The campaign for his release was becoming a tool for uniting Dalits across the country. A national-level mobilisation of Dalits for the release of an Ambedkarite leader jailed by a BJP government would not only bust the claims of the Bharatiya Janata Party-Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh of upholding B.R. Ambedkar's legacy but also put Dalit leaders within the Sangh Parivar under immense pressure, as it indeed already has. Besides, Dalit unity and political awareness were precisely what Mr. Azad had been working towards, and continuing to keep him in jail made no sense if the very fact of his detention was catalysing the achievement of these objectives.

In other words, to borrow a metaphor from chess, the Bhim Army chief's early release was what one might call a 'forced move'. It not only represents a moral victory for the Dalit community but is also part of a larger pattern of Dalit assertion that is gathering steam across the country. It is a phenomenon that the ruling dispensation views as a threat, but it is a threat to which it has no coherent response. Its inability to come up with one is not accidental. It is unable to do so because this threat is a manifestation of the contradiction at the heart of their political project, the creation of a Hindu Rashtra.

Different from before

The singular contradiction that is steadily unravelling the Hindutva project even as it seems to be making progress is the same element that is fuelling Dalit assertion in India today: caste society. Ironically, it was the demon of caste that necessitated the ideology of Hindut-



va in the first place. It is an ideology that seeks to bury this demon by propping up another in its place: the demon of hatred towards the Other. While the default Other of Hindutva is the Muslim, the communal demon is broad-minded enough to consider other minorities as well on a need-to-hate basis.

Rendering the fault lines of caste invisible in a fog of communal paranoia has only one objective: the creation of a nation of Hindus. This brings us to the second contradiction in the Hindutva project: a nation, by definition, is a community of (notional) equals. But a community whose nationhood is predicated solely on the religious and cultural identity of being Hindu can never be a community of equals, for as Ambedkar elucidates with breathtaking clarity in *Annihilation of Caste*, Hindu religious belief and cultural practice are marked by the graded inequality of caste at their very core.

This is the kernel of Ambedkarite insight that the Bhim Army has been planting in young Dalit minds through its hundreds of tuition centres in western U.P. Much like its founder, who used to be a member of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the Bhim Army's ranks are filled with people who have dallied with the Hindu Right. Their disillusionment with

the Sangh Parivar was almost always triggered by the refusal of their saffron brothers to back them in inter-caste clashes. This proved to be a moment of truth that set in sharp relief the moral and other kinds of support that they had received when their antagonists happened to be a religious minority instead of upper-caste Hindus. In other words, their experience in the Parivar had primed them into ideal subjects ready to imbibe what the Bhim Army had to say.

The Bhim Army, emblematic of the current phase of Dalit assertion, is different from earlier mobilisations in one important respect – its recognition that social unity is more important than political unity. So much so that loyalty to the Dalit community precedes every other affiliation, including that to political parties.

If the current wave of Dalit assertion, which seems to have taken to heart Ambedkar's slogan of "Educate, Agitate, Organise", were to succeed in its project of invoking Dalit pride as a common factor to knit the thousands of Dalit-Bahujan sub-castes across the country into a singular political community, it could mark the beginning of the end for the Hindu Right, whose 'foot-soldiers', in many cases of targeted communal violence, have historically been Dalits. The very condition of possibility for a Hindu Rashtra requires that Scheduled Caste communities remain invested in the social identity proffered by their respective sub-castes while continuing to identify politically as Hindus. Activists or outfits focussed on educating Dalits and propagating an Ambedkarite self-respect are naturally inimical to this project.

It is, therefore, not surprising that the ruling dispensation is panicking at the spread of a Dalit political consciousness. And panic is

not the best frame of mind in which to initiate counter-measures. So, first came a judicial manoeuvre to dilute the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act – a move that backfired. It backfired so badly that the Union Cabinet scrambled to quickly pass an amendment nullifying the Supreme Court judgment.

Next was the arrest of five social activists for their alleged involvement with the Bhima-Koregaon event on January 1, 2018, an annual programme whose very objective is to celebrate Dalit pride. The term used by the police to describe the detainees, "urban naxals", is already gaining currency among Dalits as the state's vindictive label for people who fight for Dalit empowerment.

Clues in nomenclature

And most recently, the Central government, citing a High Court order, issued an advisory asking the media to stop using the word 'Dalit' altogether and stick to the term 'Scheduled Caste'. While it remains unclear why a self-proclaimed 'pro-Dalit' regime would want to eliminate the very term from usage, the move has managed to further alienate Dalits from the BJP.

Interestingly, the first thing Mr. Azad said after being released is that he would work hard to ensure the BJP's defeat in the 2019 Lok Sabha election. He also squelched any speculation that he might serve as a counter-weight to Bahujan Samaj Party supremo Mayawati, by swearing loyalty to her. What remains to be seen is whether this rare convergence of Dalit political assertion and social unity acquires a fully pan-Indian character, and how it plays out in the electoral arena.

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The primary anchor of a health-care road map

The key to success is to integrate prevention, detection and treatment



MEENAKSHI DATTA GHOSH

Universal health coverage is getting prioritised as a part of political reform with the launch of two pillars of the Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY): Ayushman Bharat (AB), where 1.5 lakh health sub-centres are being converted into health and wellness centres; and the National Health Protection Mission (NHPM), which aims to provide health cover of ₹5 lakh per family, per annum, reaching out to 500 million people.

The "best health care at the lowest possible cost" should be: inclusive; make health-care providers accountable for cost and quality; achieve a reduction in disease burden, and eliminate catastrophic health expenditures for the consumer. All of this is not happening overnight simply because an audacious, nation-wide health-care programme is on the anvil. It could come about, however, if accompanied by the nuts and bolts of good governance that will support solutions and systems to achieve these objectives.

Align entitlement to income

In the matter of inclusion, over 15 years ago, the Vajpayee government commissioned the Institute of Health Systems (IHS), Hyderabad to develop a 'family welfare

linked health insurance policy'. In 2003, the Director of the IHS Hyderabad delivered a broad-based Family Health Protection Plan (FHPP), open to all individuals. The fact is that any discourse on universal health care in India gets stymied by the sheer size and ambivalence of the numbers involved. This 2003 solution of the Vajpayee-era recommended, *inter alia*, that good governance lies in aligning the income lines for health and housing. In other words, de-link entitlement to health care from the poverty line. In that event, the income lines for housing (updated from time to time), could be simultaneously applicable for health entitlement. The government could then proceed, as per capacity, to scale the health premium subsidy in line with housing categories – economically weaker sections (entitled to 75-90%), lower income (entitled to 50%), and middle income groups (entitled to 20%).

Build in accountability

The NHPM is pushing for hospitalisation at secondary- and tertiary-level private hospitals, while disregarding the need for eligible households to first access primary care, prior to becoming 'a case for acute care'. We are in danger of placing the cart (higher-level care) before the horse (primary care). Without the stepping stone of primary health care, direct hospitalisation is a high-cost solution.

Last month, the Union Minister for Health and Family Welfare, J.P. Nadda, said that while the PMJAY would help improve availability,



accessibility, and affordability for the needy 40% of the population, the Prime Minister was looking for one additional requirement – that the PMJAY must continue to maintain credibility.

This leads me to a caveat. Public sector health capacities are constrained at all levels. Forward movement is feasible only through partnerships and coalitions with private sector providers. These partnerships are credible only if made accountable. The National Health Policy 2017 proposed "strategic purchasing" of services from secondary and tertiary hospitals for a fee. Clearly, we need to contract-in services of those health-care providers (public and private) who are assessed as competent to provide all care for all the medical conditions specified; who will accept and abide by standard treatment protocols and guidelines notified, as this will rule out potential for induced care/unnecessary treatment; and who will accept the AB-NHPM financial compensation package (with fixed fees per episode, and not per visit).

The credo for participating private providers should be "mission, not margin". Health-care providers (public/private) should be ac-

credited without any upper limit on the number of service providers in a given district. The annual premium for each beneficiary would be paid to those service providers, for up to one year only (renewable), as selected by beneficiaries. The resultant competition would enhance quality and keep costs in check. Upgrading district hospitals to government medical colleges and teaching hospitals will enhance capacities at the district level. Service providers will become accountable for cost and quality if they are bound to the nuts and bolts of good governance outlined above.

Transform primary care

Third, elimination of catastrophic health expenditures for the consumer can come about only if there is sustained effort to modernise and transform the primary care space. Bring together all relevant inter-sectoral action linking health and development so as to universalise the availability of clean drinking water, sanitation, garbage disposal, waste management, food security, nutrition and vector control. The Swachh Bharat programme must be incorporated in the PMJAY. These steps put together will reduce the disease burden.

At the 1.5 lakh 'health and wellness clinics' (earlier, health sub-centres), register households to provide them access to district-specific, evidence-based, integrated packages of community, primary preventive and promotive health care. A public education media campaign could highlight

the merits of personal hygiene and healthy living. Kerala and Tamil Nadu have demonstrated that high-performing, primary health-care systems do address a majority of community/individual health needs. The health and wellness clinics must connect with early detection and treatment. The cornerstone of the Vajpayee-era FHPP was the primary medical clinic providing ambulatory primary care, out-patient consultation, clinical examination, curative services, and referrals. Robust delivery of preventive, clinical and diagnostic health-care services will result in early detection of cancers, diabetes and chronic conditions, mostly needing long-term treatment and home care. This will further minimise the demand for hospitalisation. Investment in primary care would very quickly reduce the overall cost of health care for the state and for the consumer.

Technology and innovation are further reducing costs. AI-powered mobile applications will soon provide high-quality, low-cost, patient-centric, smart wellness solutions. The scalable and inter-operable IT platform being readied for the Ayushman Bharat is encouraging.

As we integrate prevention, detection and treatment of ill-health, the PMJAY will win hearts if people receive a well-governed 'Health for All' scheme.

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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.

Below par

With the 2019 Lok Sabha election drawing closer, it is unfortunate that the level of political discourse is also deteriorating. The use of slang and disparaging language, especially against the Prime Minister, is shocking. If the Opposition wants to take on the ruling party, it needs to keep track of the pulse of the public. It should also keep in mind the image of the country. Today's politics is no longer Greek and Latin for the common man.

MANOJ SAXENA,
New Delhi

It gets murkier

Former French President François Hollande's salvo

has added a new twist to the intrigue around the Rafale fighter aircraft deal. Instead of clearing the air, some in the BJP have adopted the defence that it is best to paint the Congress as the worst political offenders in terms of corruption. It is absurd for the BJP to take shelter under the plea that a clarification on the price and contract would compromise the nation's security. It is also time that the government sheds light on the facts and figures to clear lingering doubts.

MANOHAR ALEMBATH,
Kannur, Kerala

■ If the government continues to stonewall efforts

to get answers to the crucial point about how the deal was struck, perhaps the time is right for the Supreme Court to intervene and order a probe.

ISMAIL MULLA,
Kannur, Kerala

■ State-owned Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) has handled almost every technical collaboration in the past and built a number of fighter aircrafts. In comparison, the private sector company "that has been selected" by Dassault is a very new entity. Even if Dassault "made its own discretionary choice" in choosing its offset partner, it might have been technically prudent for the Defence

Ministry to highlight HAL's expertise.
R. SRIDHAR,
Bengaluru

■ I attach little credence to Mr. Hollande's remarks. It may make exciting copy for a hungry media in India but makes no sense for those in business. Regardless of who the offset suppliers are, one is certain that Dassault is sure to impose rigid quality control standards so that the final product will clear stringent benchmarks. Dassault is unlikely to sacrifice its reputation to please either India or the Indian industrialist in question. Even if he was recommended to Dassault, I would not hold it against

whosoever might have suggested his name as it would enable opportunities for employment. The Congress's new-found concern for HAL is only part of a political drama.

T.C. NARAYAN,
Bengaluru

Growing old

"We think our fathers fools, so wise we grow. Our wiser sons, no doubt, will think us

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In the report titled "Ban on adoption by live-in partners lifted" (Sept 22, 2018), the full form of CARA was given as Child Adoption Regulatory Authority. It should have been Central Adoption Resource Authority.

"There's no escaping Jim Sarbh" (The Hindu Weekend, Sept. 22, 2018), erroneously described "One Flea Spare" as Rajat Kapoor's play. Actually, it was directed by Rehana Engineer.

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