



Limited succour

Budget 2018 does well to focus on senior citizens, but action must be broad based

Finance Minister Arun Jaitley stressed in his Budget speech last week that “to care for those who cared for us is one of the highest honours”, underscoring the importance the Centre attaches to providing economic support for India’s growing population of senior citizens. He then announced several tax and related incentives to ease the financial burden on people aged 60 and above, all of which are very welcome given that the elderly face steeply escalating health-care costs on declining real interest and pension incomes. From affording a five-fold increase in the exemption limit on interest income from savings, fixed and recurring deposits held with banks and post offices to ₹50,000, and doing away with the requirement for tax to be deducted at source on such income, the Budget offers much-needed relief. This it does by leaving a little more money in the hands of elderly savers who are heavily dependent on interest income to meet their living expenses. Another useful tax change is the proposal to raise the annual income tax deduction limit for health insurance premium and/or medical reimbursement to ₹50,000 for all seniors. And a crucially allied step is the move to set the ceiling for deduction in lieu of expenses incurred on certain critical illnesses to ₹1 lakh, irrespective of the age of the senior citizen.

Separately, Mr. Jaitley also proposed extending the Pradhan Mantri Vaya Vandana Yojana by two years, up to March 2020, and doubled the cap on investment in the scheme to ₹15 lakh. This annuity-cum-insurance scheme entitles the senior citizen policyholder to a guaranteed pension that equates to an annual return of 8% on investment. This pension plan, unlike the entirely government-funded Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme for the elderly who live below the poverty line, is contributory and is run by the Life Insurance Corporation of India. While all these Budget measures are laudable insofar as they recognise that the right to a life with dignity doesn’t retire with the crossing of a chronological threshold, much more needs to be done to address the needs of this rapidly growing demographic cohort. With more than 70% of the 104 million elderly living in the rural hinterland, any serious initiative to improve the lot of senior citizens must incorporate adequate budgetary support for social welfare spending on the relevant programmes. While the Budget provisions ₹6,565 crore for the pension scheme for the elderly poor, its outlay for the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment’s assistance to voluntary organisations for programmes relating to the ‘aged’ at ₹60 crore is starkly inadequate. With the number of the elderly in India set to surge by 2050 to almost 300 million, or about a fifth of the population, governments need to make more comprehensive efforts to address the nation’s greying demographic.

Crisis in Male

Fresh elections, with the opposition free to contest, are the best option for the Maldives

Matters are coming to a head in the Maldives, with President Abdulla Yameen’s government pitted against the judiciary, polity and sections of the bureaucracy. Mr. Yameen has ruled since 2013 when he won power in an election, the result of which is still contested. He defeated Mohammad Nasheed, who had been deposed in 2012 and who, in 2015, was sentenced to 13 years in prison on charges of terrorism. Mr. Nasheed is now in exile. In an order on February 1, the Supreme Court cancelled his imprisonment term and that of eight other political leaders, reinstated 12 parliamentarians who had been disqualified last year, and ordered Mr. Yameen to allow the Maldivian parliament, or Majlis, to convene. Mr. Yameen has thus far failed to comply with any of these orders, despite an official statement on February 2 about his government’s “commitment to uphold and abide by the ruling of the Supreme Court”. The most egregious failure is the government’s refusal to cancel the imprisonment of the nine leaders, amongst whom is Mr. Yameen’s former vice president and his former defence minister, members of parliament and leaders of major opposition parties, apart from Mr. Nasheed himself. The President has also refused to allow the Majlis to meet, which has led to the resignation of its Secretary General. In fact, the government sent in the army to stop lawmakers from entering the premises, besides arresting two parliamentarians at the airport. Meanwhile, several officials, including two police chiefs and the prison chief have resigned or been sacked, reportedly for seeking to implement the Supreme Court’s orders. The Attorney General has now announced that only the Constitution matters, not “illegal orders” from the court. In short, the Maldives is in the midst of a constitutional crisis. Calling fresh elections, which are in any case due later this year, may be the best way out.

Amidst the turmoil, India has joined the U.S., the European Union and several other countries in calling for Mr. Yameen to carry out the Supreme Court’s order. New Delhi said in a statement that it is monitoring the situation in Male “closely”. But currently, Delhi’s leverage in the Maldives is less than it has ever been. Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s decision to cancel his visit to Male three years ago, has singled Maldives out as the only country in the South Asian and Indian Ocean Region that he hasn’t visited. Given that the Maldives has pulled out of the Commonwealth, and there is little semblance of a SAARC process at present, India’s influence in Male is further limited. It will require concerted action from the international community to persuade Mr. Yameen to steer the Maldives out of this crisis, without taking recourse to coercive means.

If that door should shut now

India cannot be so opaque to history as to say no refugees will hereafter be allowed to enter its territory



GOPALKRISHNA GANDHI

Additional Solicitor General Tushar Mehta has made an important statement before the Supreme Court (“India can’t be refugee capital: govt.”, *The Hindu*, February 1, 2018). Whether he intended it to or not, it contains a vision, a vision of India. Mr. Mehta presented that vision in terms of what India should not be.

Responding to a plea by Rohingya refugees in India, Mr. Mehta said in the Supreme Court last week: “We do not want India to become the refugee capital of the world.” He went on to say to the Bench headed by the Chief Justice of India that if the Rohingya were given refuge, “People from every other country will flood our country.” And, he added: “This is not a matter in which we can show any leniency.”

Four positions can be distilled from those observations: “We” speak for India; that India does not want refugees; people from ‘every other’ country are likely to flood India; we will not let India become the world’s refugee capital.

The ‘we’

This article is not on the Rohingya’s case upon which we must trust the Supreme Court to pronounce as the great Sanskrit dictum suggests, ‘*dirgham pasyatu ma hrasvam*’ (look far ahead, be not short-sighted). It is on the Additional Solicitor General’s observation on India which is so important as to merit – demand – analysis.

To start with the important opening word in his remark, “We”. Does he intend to use “we” in the Constitution’s sense of “We the people...”? I doubt it, for only Parliament would feel mandated to use that expression. And even if the Lok Sabha or the Rajya Sabha were to pass a resolution, they would in all likelihood use “this House”, rather than “we”.

A law officer, when he uses “we”, has to mean those who have the power, the prerogative and the privilege to instruct him in the matter before the court. But in the statement in question being about India’s very personality, the “we” has to go beyond the knot of individuals who have conferred on a particular brief. It has to convey the thinking of the government as a whole.

A departure

That brings us to the second position taken by him, namely, that refugees will hereafter be unwelcome in India. If that is indeed the government’s thinking, then we have been given a major modification in the vision of ‘*bahujana hitaya bahujana sukhaya*’, where vouchsafing the good of the many and the happiness of the many is a ruler’s dharma, with *lokanukampaya* – compassion for the human being – governing state action. It reverses the ancient tradition of the *janapada* being not just the home for its *jana* but a sanctuary for all in need of *ashraya*, refuge – *sarva lokashrayaya*. It is perhaps this ethos that helped persecuted Zoroastrian migrants from Central Asia settle in and around Surat around the 16th-17th centuries to maintain their religious tradition.

Old texts, tenets and traditions apart, the Additional Solicitor General’s statement marks a departure from modern India’s experience



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in the matter. By the new yardstick, independent India’s giving *ashraya* in 1947 to over seven million refugees, mostly Hindu and Sikh, from the newly created state of Pakistan was wrong. And, by the same token, Pakistan should have sent back another seven million and more refugees, mostly Muslim, who left India for Pakistan. By that logic, the Dalai Lama should never have been given refuge in India nor the nearly 150,000 Tibetans who have come to India during the last 50 years. And, by the same logic, India should have used force, in 1971, to drive back the estimated 10 million men, women and children seeking shelter in India from genocide in East Pakistan. Tamils fleeing Sinhala intolerance, now said to number 100,000, should have been driven back over the Palk Strait to Sri Lanka, not offered even temporary *tanjam*. Afghan refugees, now numbering 10,000, should, by that principle, never have been given space in India, nor should Baloch political dissidents be given *panah* today. Individuals like U Nu when he exited from Ne Win’s regime, Sheikh Hasina when she came to India in self-exile, and several political figures from Sri Lanka and Afghanistan should, by that principle, have been bolted out,

Taslima Nasreen never allowed to set foot in India.

Were Nehru, Shastri, Morarji Desai, Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, V.P. Singh, Chandra Shekhar, Narasimha Rao, Deve Gowda, Inder Kumar Gujral, Atal Bihari Vajpayee all naive or worse in not closing India’s doors to shelter-seekers? Were they un-patriotic? And were the people of India, in understanding the ethos of *ashraya*, equally mistaken?

The Additional Solicitor General’s remarks have amounted to saying “we” now have a new vision, a new perspective, a new philosophy of India that does not, will not, open its doors to the refugee. In fact, it has closed its doors to refugees and to refugee-hood itself.

Now, this is not just a passing opinion on a transient matter but a rock-hard position concerning India and the human condition of nobody-ness, of homelessness, of statelessness that seeks refuge. In terms of the statement of the Additional Solicitor General, sanctuary or *ashraya* (Sanskrit), *panah* (Urdu), *sharan* (Hindi), *tanjam* (Tamil) are no longer to be India’s attributes. ‘Back you go!’, ‘Out!’, are to be our answers to any refugee at our door.

Seeking refuge

The third proposition, namely, that India is in danger of being flooded with refugees “from every other country” must cause astonished disbelief. Is the world pinning for refuge in India? There is as much risk of India becoming the world’s refugee capital as there is hope of India becoming the world’s tourist capital. Common sense – a strong Indian trait – would tell us that only those in India’s neighbourhood facing the dire prospect of victimisation or death want India’s sanctuary. The

same common sense has, for a cousin, another sense, an uncommon Indian sense, of seeing the urgency, the sheer panic, that is caused by victimisation and ethnic hate. And that enables us to see the heartlessness and the hollowness of the fourth proposition, namely, that we will not let refugees into India.

If a neighbouring country, out of political spite, “or on account of race, religion, political opinion”, were to force Hindus out of its borders and into India, we would be right in giving them *ashraya*. And we would be right to demand world condemnation of the outrage.

Keeping our land and sea frontiers open for massive numbers of people to cross over is hugely problematic. And terrorists sneaking in as refugees with sinister designs constitute a grim reality. But when has India been spared of troubles that come ‘not as single spies but in battalions’? We, as a nation, cannot be so amnesiac, so altogether aphasic, so opaque to history as to say no refugees, none at all, will hereafter be allowed to enter our territory.

Non-refoulement and international law are neither my expertise nor my theme here. The human condition is. And its most tragic experience – fear of persecution, of the furious chase, the flying bullet. William Blake wrote about two centuries ago: “Each outcry of the hunted Hare/A fiber from the Brain does tear.”

India has not let the hunted hare die at its door. And if that door should shut now, a fibre from our collective brain must and will tear.

Gopal Krishna Gandhi is a former administrator, diplomat and Governor

Green shoots of renewal?

Rahul Gandhi must lead the Congress in a brainstorming session to nuance a new narrative



SMITA GUPTA

The Congress’s 3-0 score in Rajasthan, where it trounced the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in two Lok Sabha constituencies and one Assembly seat in by-elections, comes shortly after it breached the outer walls of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s citadel of Gujarat last year: it emerged from that contest with the air of a victor even though it did not win the election.

A challenging year

It is amidst these first green shoots in what had been an arid political landscape for the Congress that its recently elected party president Rahul Gandhi promised to create a “Shining New Congress” within six months. This is as he readies the party organisation for eight Assembly polls, including Rajasthan, this year, with the general election then due by the summer of 2019.

The Congress’s victories in Rajasthan have lifted spirits not just in the party but across the Opposition. At last week’s meeting of 17 Opposition parties, chaired by Congress Parliamentary Party chairperson Sonia Gandhi, the

consensus was that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is no longer unstoppable. Ms. Gandhi’s formulation – that despite conflicting interests in some States, the Opposition must agree on a national agenda that centres round confronting the BJP on its “politics of hatred” and its anti-people economic policy – found ready acceptance.

The Congress, as the lead Opposition party, has its task cut out. It is not enough for it to spell out the challenges, it must also offer a blueprint, a plan of action.

Creating a “New Congress”, therefore, must entail not only a comprehensive organisational overhaul in which young leaders such as Rajasthan State chief Sachin Pilot are given an opportunity but also an effective counter to the BJP’s deeply divisive agenda, a satisfactory response to the demand for reservation by several dominant communities, while addressing the aspirations of those in the burgeoning Dalit movement. Simultaneously, Mr. Gandhi’s Congress must offer convincing solutions to the crises in the rural economy and job market that are causing social ferment.

Mr. Gandhi has correctly identified intolerance and unemployment as the key issues that threaten India. Privately, too, he has shared with party colleagues the urgent need to work to “de-communalise” society, to create a



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lance among different faiths and seek answers to caste contradictions: in fact, he is probably the party’s first leader to call exclusive meetings of Other Backward Class (OBC) leaders.

There is now new energy – and hope – in the party.

Mr. Gandhi’s decision to set aside time three days a week to meet Congress leaders and workers is also being read as reflective of his desire to open up communication lines within a notoriously coterie-bound set-up.

Key questions

The key challenges to the Congress today all came into sharp focus during the Gujarat polls. How should the party promote secularism without giving the BJP the opportunity to label the Congress anti-Hindu? How should the party draw in the OBCs, roughly half the country’s population, many of whom have gravitated to the BJP? How can Dalits, once a critical Congress constituency, be wooed back? How should the Congress

convince Muslims that they have not been abandoned? What should be the party’s stand on the demand by dominant communities such as Patidars, Marathas and Jats for reservation? Can youth power, outside mainstream political parties and visible on the streets, be integrated into the battle against the BJP as it happened in Gujarat? And, most importantly, what is the Congress’s blueprint to address agrarian distress, unemployment and the collapse of the small-scale sector?

Opinion in the party remains sharply divided on the wisdom of Mr. Gandhi being described as a “janeu-dhari Hindu” (a sacred thread-wearing Hindu, i.e. a Brahmin) after a BJP blitz about him being listed as a non-Hindu in a register at Gujarat’s Somnath Temple. For some, it was a negative message to non-Brahmins for whom a “janeu-dhari” person symbolises a centuries-old oppressive social order, while the Nehru-Gandhis have been long regarded as pan-Indian leaders, representing all castes, faiths, creeds, regions, a mirror image of the Congress. Mr. Gandhi’s strength, too, lies in his pan-Indianness, not in his being a Brahmin.

The response to this argument has been that with the BJP deliberately portraying the Congress as “pro-Muslim”, some “shock treatment” was necessary to be back in the game.

Possible strategies on how to neutralise the BJP’s skill at polarising votes along religious lines are clearly top of the mind in the Congress. Simultaneously, there is a growing belief that much of the caste ferment among Dalits and OBCs, and angst among Muslims can be partially, if not fully, addressed through an alternative economic programme that focusses on the rural economy, the small-scale sector and job creation. Post-Mandal “social engineering”, BJP-style, does not come easily to the Congress, but it could work at social justice to break the BJP’s stranglehold over the ‘Hindu’ vote.

Finding its inner Congress

If Mr. Gandhi is serious about his promise of a New Congress, the churning in the party must now lead to a structured brainstorming session concluding in a new narrative, a practice the Congress appears to have abandoned in recent years. The meetings it organised in end-2014/early-2015 after its wipe-out in the last Lok Sabha polls were not purposive enough. The Congress needs a plan that can help heal the wounds of the last three years and recreate for the 21st century the ideals of the big tent party that wrested freedom 70 years ago.

Smita Gupta is a Delhi-based journalist

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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The fine print

Somehow, one cannot help get the feeling that the massive health scheme announced in the Union Budget, Ayushman Bharat, with a few sketchy details, is election-oriented and designed to give massive business to the private sector, especially hospitals (Editorial, “Get cracking”, February 3). Several questions crop up. Why was such a ‘path-breaking measure’ not implemented three years ago when economic conditions, including the government’s revenue position, were much better? Second, many sections using government hospital services also use secondary and tertiary-care facilities available in some government hospitals. Some render quality services. Why are such facilities not expanded after each Budget? This is a charge previous

governments must answer. There are also a few States managing their own hospitalisation schemes.

M. BALAKRISHNAN, Bengaluru

■ Ayushman Bharat is expected to function from late this year and several modalities have to be worked out before this happens. The National Health Protection Scheme (NHPS) already envisages public-private participation. For the success of the scheme, the whole-hearted participation of private players is essential. Treatment has to be cashless as beneficiaries cannot afford initial payment. Whether the trust or insurance mode is adopted, reimbursement to private players has to be prompt. Prescribed rates by the Central Government Health Scheme for almost all procedures exist. However, many private players find these rates to be

economically unviable. It is essential to have an informed dialogue between government and private players so that rates for all procedures acceptable to both parties are ready well in time.

GEORGE CHERIYAN, Chennai

Bofors again

Of all the costumes in the political Halloween chest, the Bofors one appears to be the most popular one with the government, with the recent Congress wins in the Rajasthan by-elections apparently having triggered its reuse (“CBI files appeal in Bofors case”, February 3). One is sure that cases concerning allegations around Robert Vadra and Vyapam may also be resurrected for a special occasion. Every government has made use of such effects in unending political dramas. It is time that these

Halloweens go in for newer and colourful ones and bid adieu to dated pieces.

R. NARAYANAN, Pune

Dear Mathrubootham

I would like to share my “concerned view” about Mr. Mathrubootham as far as his column, “Moon and doctor”, is concerned (‘Letter from a Concerned Reader’, February 4). It is strange that despite being an educated man, Mr. Mathrubootham didn’t enlighten the irrational doctor, but instead chose to liken “getting B.Sc in Botany or Zoology” – which are reputed subjects – to “something useless”. As concerned readers, we are embarrassed to know that he finds acquaintances such as Dr. Shankaramenon as excellent company.

HARI SRIRAM BANDI, Hyderabad

■ Sir/Madam, may I ask what

in the world is the meaning of Mr. Mathrubootham calling himself modern and talking nonsense, in sentimental undertones, to a newly-wed couple? I mean, where was Mrs. Mathrubootham when her old man was making a spectacle of himself with all the ‘family and children and parent stuff’? Mr. Mathrubootham is expected to state facts and not start quibbling about nonsense such as sentiment. As a concerned fan, I hope he returns to “normalcy” (‘Letter from a Concerned Reader’ - “I am very modern” (January 28).

T. YOGANANDHI, Salem, Tamil Nadu

■ Mathrubootham Sir, what do you mean by ‘China has taken over every inch of India’? I refer to your ‘Letter from a Concerned Reader’ - “Who said youth is best?” (January 21). Even if made in

a lighter vein, it is a comment that hits veterans below the belt.

M.N.S. THAMPLI, Thiruvananthapuram

Cricket and beyond

Recently, India’s U-19 Cricket Team played spectacularly against Pakistan, defeating its rival by an emphatic 203 runs in the semi-final; one can also think of Pakistan’s victory over India in the Champions Trophy 2017. But it is sad that instead of considering cricket to be cricket, both India and Pakistan regard it to be war. The derogatory language on social media used before or after a cricket match is an example of it spilling off the field. We should learn from the Ashes, which England and Australia have played in peace.

IQBAL AHMED KISAL, Jacobabad, Pakistan

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