



Hasina's triumph

After the Awami League landslide, she must repair Bangladesh's bitter political divisions

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's party was always going to win Sunday's parliamentary election. She remains immensely popular, her government sought a fresh mandate with a formidable record of economic growth and social progress and her party, the Awami League, set the agenda for the election and dominated the campaign. Still, the scale of the victory would have taken even her supporters by surprise. The party's Grand Alliance won 288 of the 299 seats contested, more than the 234 seats it won in 2014 when the Bangladesh Nationalist Party boycotted the poll. This time, the Opposition coalition Jatiya Oikya Front, led by the BNP, secured only seven seats. But there are conflicting claims about the way the election was conducted. As soon as the results were known, Kamal Hossain, the leader of the Opposition coalition, called it a farcical election and demanded that the Election Commission call a fresh poll. More than 40 Opposition candidates pulled out of the race after voting began on Sunday, alleging rigging. However, the Election Monitoring Forum and the SAARC Human Rights Foundation, which includes both local and international observers, said in its preliminary evaluation that the election was "much freer and fairer" than previous ones. In the past, Bangladesh had seen governments declining to hold elections, one being cancelled and called again, and others being delayed amid violence. This time the election was called on time. Participation was higher, with the turnout at 66%, compared to 51% in 2014.

The challenge before Ms. Hasina is daunting. To begin with, she has to heal a country rattled by political divisions and violence. The government and the Election Commission could have held the election without being open to charges that it was manipulated. There was a crackdown on the Opposition in the run-up to polling day. Pro-Opposition websites were taken down, thousands of activists were jailed, and political violence was unleashed to target BNP members. The situation was so grave that even one of the election commissioners said there was no level playing field. The Election Commission should conduct a fair investigation into allegations of rigging to restore faith in the poll process. Ms. Hasina should reach out to the Opposition. Her otherwise impressive record has been marred by her government's authoritarian character. The victory is a chance for Ms. Hasina to mend her ways, to be more inclusive and run a government that respects the rule of law, the basic rights of citizens and institutional freedom. For India, Ms. Hasina's victory is good news. New Delhi and Dhaka have deepened economic, security and strategic ties under her leadership. This should continue, no matter what the general election outcome in India in 2019.

A liberal move

Rajasthan strikes a blow for democracy by removing educational criteria for local polls

Among the first decisions taken by Ashok Gehlot's government after assuming power in Rajasthan was to scrap minimum educational requirements for candidates contesting local body elections. This is a progressive move and will restore the right to contest, at least in theory, to a large section of the population in the State, where the literacy rate, according to the 2011 Census, was 52% for women and 79% for men. The previous government headed by Vasundhara Raje had stipulated, first through an ordinance in December 2014 and then through the Rajasthan Panchayati Raj (Amendment) Act passed in 2015, educational prerequisites to stand for local polls. It was made mandatory for candidates contesting for the post of sarpanch to have cleared Class 8, and for those in the fray in zila parishad and panchayat samiti elections to have passed Class 10. The move was ill-considered from the very beginning. At the time, the amendment was seen as a bid by the then BJP government to lower the average age of those in the fray based on the assumption that its voters tended to be younger. It was, however, an act of paternalism that militated against the basic assumptions of a liberal democracy. It penalised the people for failure to meet certain social indicators, when in fact it is the state's responsibility to provide the infrastructure and incentives for school and adult education. And it defeated the very purpose of the panchayati raj institutions, to include citizens in multi-tier local governance from all sections of society. These requirements had the effect of excluding the marginalised.

The Rajasthan government's decision should also force a rethink in Haryana, where the newly sworn-in BJP government had, also in 2015, legislated a series of eligibility requirements for panchayat elections, including education levels and a functional toilet in the candidate's home. The Haryana Panchayati Raj (Amendment) Act, 2015 was upheld that year by the Supreme Court in *Rajbala v. State of Haryana*. And the temptation to expand educational eligibility requirements remains. Union Women and Child Development Minister Maneka Gandhi, for instance, has previously spoken of persuading other Chief Ministers to take the cue from Rajasthan and Haryana, as an incentive for women to study. The decision of the new Congress government in Rajasthan should force a recasting of the debate on finding ways and means by which elected bodies are made more representative. In a liberal democracy, governments must desist from putting bars on who may contest, except in exceptional circumstances, such as when a candidate is in breach of particular laws. To mandate paternalistically what makes a person a 'good' candidate goes against the spirit of the attempt to deepen democracy by taking self-government to the grassroots.

Diary of the year to come

A cluster of anniversaries exhorts all Indians to be true to their conscience in 2019



GOPALKRISHNA GANDHI

As one year dips and another dawns, a calendar of anniversaries is un-scrolled. In India, this happens with the hectic intensity of a traffic jam. The year that begins today is the 150th anniversary of the birth of Mahatma Gandhi and the death of Mirza Ghalib.

Hundred years ago

What is it notably the 100th anniversary of? Curiously, not of historic persons as much as of three historic happenings. First, a much-hailed enactment, the Government of India Act of 1919, which increased the participation of Indians in the Government of India. Second, a much-hated law, Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act of 1919, known notoriously as the Rowlatt Act or Black Act, which entrenched war-time restrictions on civil liberties – indefinite preventive detention or judicial review of those suspected of terrorism, trial without juries, jailings without trials. Third, a national trauma that arose from the vortex of protests against the Rowlatt Act – the massacre by army bullets of 379 according to the Raj, and some thousand men, women and children according to the Indian National Congress, at Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar. Terrorism is wrong, Gandhi and other leaders said, violence evil. But are the civil liberties of a whole people to be frozen? Rabindranath Tagore returned his knighthood a hundred years ago, this year. But scores of other 'Sirs' and 'Rai Bahadurs' did not.

So this is the centenary of so-

mething that brought enchained India some hope, as well as huge despair and, hauntingly, mass death. And it is also the centenary of heroic courage, of sacrifice.

And 50th? This is the 50th anniversary of the Gujarat riots of September-October 1969, that involved massacre, arson and looting said to constitute "the most deadly Hindu-Muslim violence since the 1947 partition of India". Out of the 512 deaths reported in police complaints, 430 were Muslims. Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, then nearly 80, visited India that year. A guest of the state and of the people of India, he fasted for three days for communal peace, went to Ahmedabad to see things for himself. In his acceptance speech while receiving the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding, he repeated to the audience what a Muslim girl in Ahmedabad had told him: "Muslims were being asked by Hindu communists to leave the country or live like untouchables." And in an address to a joint session of Parliament, he was brutal in his assessment: "You are forgetting Buddha." This is the 50th anniversary of that chastisement.

Two sides of 1984

Thirty-five is not a particularly memorable number but when an event is of some moment, its 35th anniversary carries something of that moment's star-dust. This year marks the 35th anniversary of one such.

The year was 1984, the month April. Squadron Leader Rakesh Sharma of the Indian Air Force was going round the earth aboard the Salyut 7 Orbital Station (*picture*). He was the first Indian to be in outer space. The ISRO-Intercomos Indo-Soviet space programme had put six men into space, five from the U.S.S.R. and our own Rakesh, then all of 35



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years old. Rakesh received a satellite call from India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. She asked Rakesh, "*Upar se apko Bharat kaisa dikhta hai?*" (How does India seem to you from up there?) Footage shows the hero-in-motion slightly startled by the question but collecting himself in a moment to respond reflectively: "*Sare jahan se achha* (Better than all the world)." That immortal half-line from Allama Iqbal's song reverberated through the air-waves into millions of homes watching the first-ever Indian orbiting the planet we live in. And as the nation heard and saw him, a sense of India's greatness stirred within it. This year is the 35th anniversary of that dizzy moment.

Not a star twinkles over India as an envious eclipse veils it. We celebrate India only to be checked by our misfortunes.

Orbiting with stars Rakesh Sharma did not know that India had a date with another 'star' within two months that very year – Operation Blue Star, leading to Indira Gandhi's assassination and the killing of anything between 8,000 and 17,000 Sikh Indians at the hands of fellow Indians. Large numbers of Indians reached out to the victims, taking them to hospitals, sheltering them. And, most important of all, documenting their trauma to fight for them another day. But much larger numbers did no such thing. They stayed put, watching with glazed eyes.

This year is the 35th anniversary

Dead ends of specialisation

With a focus on expertise, polymaths are becoming rare in the 21st century



SUJATHA BYRAVAN

Among scholars and knowledge makers in history, one can identify a large number of intellectuals whose interests lay in seemingly disparate spheres. A poet and philosopher could also be an astronomer, technical innovator and mathematician. A traveller and writer could be a linguist and painter. Consider for instance Al Khwarizmi, Ziryab, Leon Battista Alberti, or Leonardo da Vinci. Each person's many spheres of knowledge created a syncretic world view that contributed to a broad perspective, an easy ability to see connectedness among multiple domains of knowledge of the natural world and human interaction.

One might today refer to these as non-partisan points of view, neither left nor right, or generalised independent scholarship – indeed there seem to be few words to describe such people. While there still are some scholars interested in more than one domain, such as Noam Chomsky or Ramachandra Guha, polymaths are rare in the 21st century. With greater

and deeper development of various fields of science, technology and even the social sciences, specialisation is inevitable and even necessary in the contemporary world. This has no doubt yielded many important, even life-saving results. But, the fetishising of "expertise" and its blinding righteousness contributes to a host of problems that are being called the Anthropocene.

Distinct worlds

While polymaths are not in high demand, I suspect that the increasing call for cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge is a recognition of this shortcoming without quite being able to label it. The tragedy of specialisation is that it leads members of the knowledge industry to see little beyond their bulwarks. And indeed, the world views of highly specialised domains are often so distinct that they have created not only disparate paradigms but distinct worlds. It, therefore, becomes difficult or impossible for an economist to appreciate the importance and value of biodiversity or why its loss is a major casualty (unless he or she tries to monetise it), or for an engineer to understand why decentralised solar power that allows greater democratisation among local communities is an opportunity to be grabbed instead of installing large solar parks by me-



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ga-corporations. It also makes it near impossible for a molecular biologist to understand that more targeted and improved ways to cut and paste DNA is not the point being made by those concerned about genetically modified organisms. It is about ownership, biodiversity, science and soils – cross-cutting domains that super-specialists will not be able to see.

Never mind that corporate interesters, personal promotion, careerism and pandering to their own vested interests create elite networks of corruption in different academic spheres. And these may of course confound arguments regarding specialisation and intellectual generalists. In a recent article in *The New York Times* Pankaj Mishra writes, "in their lust for power [Alfred Kazin] could see how intellectuals as accomplices of political elites were prone to confuse their private in-

terest with public interest."

With increasing specialisation, what one gets are experts who do not understand the connections between knowledge systems and ways of knowing. Instead of treating an approach to knowledge or a paradigm as simply a heuristic or a framework, they begin to regard it as fixed, offering specific solutions that cannot be argued against and carrying all truth. The limits of each knowledge system are not part of the training and their own blinkers are not apparent to them. Instead, one's own paradigm of analyses turns into the sole framework for study and its outputs the only possible truths.

Current challenges

The principal challenges of the Anthropocene are the breakdown of the planetary boundaries. In fact, when this system was represented and described by scientists as the planetary boundaries of the natural world, there was opposition from social scientists. Upon their insistence, social structures have also been incorporated now into the system. This obvious necessity only points to the fact that there is so much fragmentation that specialists have painted themselves into dead ends.

So, while geoengineers say that we need to seed the upper atmosphere with exotic chemicals to cool the planet, there is rightly a

freedom. Threats to Right to Information (RTI) activists and whistleblowers and attacks on them, trolling of dissenters on social media and even murder, constitute democratic India's single greatest failure, shame. In the eighth decade of its independence, India ought to be afraid of nothing, save its conscience.

The second is the liberation of our politics from the stranglehold of money. Which, in effect, means saving our national resources from the darkness of deceit and exploitation. Money minted by illegal mining, unauthorised clandestine monopolies and brazen preferment has a vice-like grip over our polity, particularly over our electoral politics. Money frustrates democracy, negates it. Ruling parties everywhere say, "Our hands are clean!" The Opposition says, "Show us your pockets." And when they change places, the charge changes direction.

The third – and most difficult – is the liberation of ethics from the hegemony of lifeless conformism. For far too long, centuries in fact, have custom, and callousness overwhelmed conscience in India. Routine and rote rule over humane instincts, making women, tribals, the Scheduled Castes, children, prisoners, the mentally challenged and physically unable exposed to danger. The same dulled sensitivity has rendered our wetlands, rivers, coasts and commons vulnerable to misuse, misappropriation. Whoever be the Asoka or the anti-Asoka on Magadha's throne, India's Bodhi-tree needs an Enlightened One to sit by its root-bed and speak to it now, more than ever before, to be able to say to it to become not just '*sare jahan se achha*', better than all the world, but '*apne dil se sachcha*', to its own self, true.

Gopal Krishna Gandhi is a former administrator, diplomat and governor

hue and cry from many quarters; when renewable energy experts call for more biomass plantations, others worry about the displacement of farmers, the reduction of food production and the loss of biodiversity. Of course, still other specialists insist that they have the right technology to produce food for the entire world in factory farms.

The academic system of rewarding greater specialisation has fed the knowledge industry and universities too prepare students in precisely this manner. Policy makers are listening to the experts seeking their guidance, thus coming full circle and promoting further fragmentation. The assault on nature from the ramparts of specialisation creates narrow reductionist viewpoints that are fiercely defended by specialists who seem to have a lot at stake in terms of careers and reputations. Those at the short end are (ironically) the most vulnerable creatures and humans on earth making up the vast connected webs of life. As Max Weber wrote in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*: "specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilisation never before achieved."

Sujatha Byravan is a scientist who studies science, technology and policy

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.

Modern icons

Equating our icons with the nation itself was one of the greatest tragedies of India (Editorial page, "The travails of the modern icon", December 31). No party can claim the exclusive right of owning any freedom fighter; they all happened to be products of our freedom struggle. It is another tragedy that the party that won freedom for India has become a virtual fiefdom of a family. If the Indian National Congress had been disbanded, as advised by Gandhiji, it would have been one of the finest things to have happened to India and its politics.

C.G. KURIAKOSE,
Kothamangalam, Kerala

Gandhi and hope

As the writer of the article, "Gandhi and the audacity

of hope" (December 29), rightly says, it is the audacity of hope that made Gandhi stand out. Will India understand him or at least remember him in the right manner? In India's chase of the golden deer (the economy) the nation seems to be overlooking the message of this icon, who is remembered when it is convenient and forgotten when it is expedient.

K.R.A. NARASIAH,
Chennai

Blood transfusions

It is sad to know that in Tamil Nadu, a pregnant woman was transfused with suspected HIV-infected blood (Editorial, "HIV reality check", December 31). A prime reason cited for the transfusion was anaemia in late pregnancy. More than 60% pregnant women in India have this

preventable condition. Its common reasons are nutritional deficiency, hookworm infestation and frequent/multiple pregnancies. The primary mode of prevention is to identify vulnerable groups prior to pregnancy and treat them with simple measures such as health education and giving them iron supplementation. The government health system registers all pregnant women with the village health nurse and if haemoglobin is found to be deficient (less than 11 g), treated with oral iron tablets from the third month of pregnancy. Most anaemia is mild to moderate, which can be treated with iron tablets and a single dose of an anti-helminthic tablet. Women intolerant to oral iron may be given iron

injections. Blood transfusion is needed in cases of severe anaemia identified late in pregnancy (after 34 weeks), acute blood loss during pregnancy and delivery and cardiac failure due to anaemia. Even after full screening of blood, the recipient is not 100% safe as the donor might have viral infection in a dormant state. There are also other risks. A blood transfusion demands all safety precautions.

Dr. P.R. REETA VIJAYA SELVI,
Vellore, Tamil Nadu

■ The problem with blood banking in India is a paucity of transfusion medicine specialists or diploma holders trained in this speciality. The easiest solution would be to centralise blood banking activities to regional centres.

Blood storage facilities (rather than blood collection and processing) can be made available across hospitals in all small cities and towns that can be managed with staff who are under the direct control of their designated regional blood bank. This is also a system followed in most parts of the world.

Dr. R. SUTHANTHIRA KANNAN,
Coimbatore

Dream win and year

The Indian cricket team moving into the new year on a bright note is heartening because it not only won the Melbourne Test but also retained the Gavaskar-Border trophy. However, as the show is still on, the comprehensive win has offered a golden opportunity for India to script history on Australian soil. It was Jasprit Bumrah's mesmerising spell in both innings well supported by

Ishant Sharma, Mohammed Shami and Ravindra Jadeja that put India on the winning track after Cheteshwar Pujara, Virat Kohli, Rohit Sharma and debutant Mayank Agarwal put up an impressive total. One looks forward to Sydney.

K.R. SRINIVASAN,
Secunderabad

A titan falls silent

With the passing away of Mrinal Sen, the remaining leg of the tripod that held up meaningful Bengali/Indian cinema has given way. Sen never shied away from showcasing his political convictions through his films and without compromising on their artistic sensibilities. In the pantheon of greats, he has an exclusive seat.

AVYASSERI RAVEENDRANATH,
Arannmula, Kerala

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