



The Nepal reset

Delhi and Kathmandu should rebuild ties by focussing on deliverables

Nepali Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli's visit to India signals an important recalibration of bilateral ties. While the focus of the official pronouncements has been on connectivity, it is the perceptible absence of tensions in public interactions and official meetings, including with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, that gives hope that the rupture in ties over India's reservations about Nepal's new constitution is being repaired. The visit follows a great deal of preparation by both Delhi and Kathmandu. External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj made an unusual departure from protocol to visit Mr. Oli in Kathmandu and congratulate him for his election win even before he had been sworn in. It was a significant shift from 2015-17, when the five-month-long blockade of truck trade at the Nepal-India border and Nepal's ties with China placed a severe strain on the relationship. For his part, Mr. Oli put aside the anti-India rhetoric of his election campaign, and came to India on his first post-election visit abroad seeking 'friendship first, and friendship second and third'. Bilateral meetings at Hyderabad House were devoid of any sermonising and defensive postures, steering clear of contentious issues on the constitution and China; Mr. Modi promised support on development projects that meet "Nepal's priorities".

The reset is long overdue, and should be accompanied by a transformation in the tenor of the relationship. Kathmandu has been too susceptible to conspiracy theories about Indian meddling, while New Delhi and its diplomats in the Nepal embassy have sometimes lent credence to the theories by adopting a patronising attitude. A first step to the reset would be the completion of the ongoing process of updating the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship. Nepal would acknowledge that its citizens have benefited from the ease of employment and residence in India that the treaty provides. But India must recognise that as in all other developing economies, Nepal's aspirational young population is also looking beyond the open Indian border for opportunities, and Mr. Oli's desire to turn his "land-locked" country into a "land-linked" country with a merchant navy must be considered positively. From here on it will be the deliverables, such as road and railway links, power projects and post-earthquake reconstruction commitments, that will determine the success of the partnership, not just the announcement of new initiatives. India has residual concerns over enhancing the constitution's provisions for Nepal's plains-based Madhesi population, but these should be taken up discreetly and diplomatically. Recovery in the relationship is still fragile, and any grandstanding must be avoided.

Measuring excellence

Ranking educational institutions is useful, but the HRD Ministry's effort needs fine-tuning

The "who's who" of universities and research institutions published by the Human Resource Development Ministry, as the National Institutional Ranking Framework, 2018, should be viewed mainly as a proposition that data make it possible to assign objective credentials to some aspects of education. Its assessment of some of the top institutions such as the Indian Institute of Science, the Jawaharlal Nehru University, the IITs and the IIMs is unsurprising, given their record of research, peer-reviewed publications and outcomes for graduates. Even among the 3,954 institutions that participated, there is a clear skew towards southern, southeastern and western India. Participation levels are inadequate: there were 40,026 colleges and 11,669 standalone institutions according to the HRD Ministry's All India Survey on Higher Education for 2016-17. To the faculty and students in many colleges, what matters is the vision of the administrative leaders and a commitment to excellence. The governing bodies should make available adequate financial and academic resources to colleges, particularly the younger ones, to help them improve performance. These are measured by the NIRF in terms of the percentage of faculty with doctoral degrees, papers published in credentialed journals, inclusivity and diversity of students, and median salaries for the graduates.

Ranking educational and research institutes has practical uses, such as helping students make study choices, sponsors to identify research projects, and other universities to form partnerships. Yet, for the process to evolve and be relevant, it should be able to enrol all recognised educational institutions, not just the public ones. In the absence of such participation, older institutions with historical advantages could enjoy a higher ranking, obscuring newer entrants who may have stronger claims to excellence. Also, the ranking approach worldwide is critiqued for failing to capture the crucial metric of learning outcomes, relying instead on proxy data on faculty strength and qualifications. In the case of the NIRF, which is now in its third year, the final responsibility for accuracy of data lies with the participating institution, except for aspects like research publications that are independently verifiable. What is positive about the system is its emphasis on achieving measurable goals and bringing in transparency. The 2018 exercise added the disciplines of law, medicine and architecture and it hopes to cast the net wider in the future. Beyond competitive ranking, however, the higher order goal is to foster learning and scholarship. This can be achieved solely by encouraging faculty to exercise complete academic freedom, without the pressure of perception management. The NIRF ranks will measure the measurable, but there will be some dimensions it may not be able to fully capture.

Questions beyond Facebook

As he appears before Congressional panels, Mark Zuckerberg is a far cry from the liberal hero that he was



VARGHESE K. GEORGE

“By entering these premises you are agreeing to be photographed and video recorded,” read a signboard at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center in Washington DC that several thousand crossed this weekend to view the annual USA Science & Engineering Festival Expo. Hardly anyone noticed that, pretty much the way we all signed up for our Facebook accounts. In slices of the future that were on showcase inside were micro-sensors on the body that would capture health parameters around the clock, nano robots that could swim through the bloodstream and talk with robotic doctors, and airport cameras which could scan passengers to see if they were carrying some diseases into the country. “You will be called the Mars generation,” a NASA scientist told excited children, and horrified parents, at one of the presentations. Facebook, if it continues to rely only on people's proactive exhibitionism for its data and business, might face the fate of floppy disks, as these children grow up.

Enhancing capabilities

What the age of acceleration has done to its defining icon, the 33-year-old Mark Zuckerberg, and one of the richest persons on the planet, is a stark illustration of its cruelty. Mr. Zuckerberg will be appearing before two U.S. Congressional committees this week as an accused struggling to defend his

actions and honour, a far cry from being the liberal hero that he was around this time last year. Then he, and other leaders of the tech industry in Seattle and Silicon Valley, had taken public positions against President Donald Trump's anti-immigration policies.

The specific details of Facebook's arrangement with Cambridge Analytica, the British political consulting firm that mined data from the social media platform for the Trump presidential campaign for 2016, revolves around the breach of the terms of usage between the two. The fundamental principle that Facebook can and will share data is not under any serious examination at the moment. Most business models of the emergent, technology-driven future are based on the presumed ability to harvest, analyse and sell data. American lawmakers will come up with some sharp indictment of Mr. Zuckerberg, but there is limited reflection on the structural changes in the country's economic and political system.

According to futurist Raymond Kurzweil, what is unprecedented about the current advancement of technology is the pace at which it is enhancing human capabilities. A rocket enhances our ability to travel, more than the plane, which was more than the car, which was more than walking. Similarly, our ability to see, think, respond, talk... From that perspective, Facebook is an enhanced town square, or our village *chai* shop where people declared their political and social preferences and prejudices quite openly. Those utterances have never been private, but Facebook has allowed individuals to expand their reach beyond all geographical limitations. Politicians,



who responded to tea shop rants and town square graffiti, began to respond to social media chatter using the same medium. Mitt Romney and Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi, all used this.

At various points romanticists dreamed that such openness of people's views would not only help the rise of the first African American president but also spread democracy in West Asia and break up Chinese communism in a global digital insurgency. Facebook, far from being the cocoon of privacy, was designed to be the ultimate town square for the democrats, and a paradise for the exhibitionist.

Many data harvesters

A combination of computing power and the widespread availability of data takes this extension of human activities to a level of efficiency humanly impossible. We can ask 10 friends and find out what is the best Chinese restaurant nearby, but Grubhub has it ready on phone. It can predict what you might want to order next; Uber could alert you a day before a travel date that you might want a ride to the airport; Airbnb reminds you to book a place to stay once you have booked a ticket. When you

buy a painkiller, sellers of other painkillers would send you advertisements comparing theirs with what you bought. If you buy honey from Costco, Twitter tells you about the benefits of going organic with honey.

Nobody can beat Amazon in the game, because that is really where you put your money. Amazon, Google, Microsoft and numerous other companies hold data that Facebook cannot even dream of. Most of the things that Facebook knows about us are information that we have proactively shared; but the overall ecosystem of targeted advertisements online follows the digital trail that we leave behind every moment, most of it unwittingly but a large part of it unavoidably. For instance, as long as you are carrying a mobile phone, your location is not private.

This efficiency can be deeply unsettling for the life that we are used to. In 2012, an American teenager began receiving coupons for baby products from the supermarket Target. The outraged father of the teenager rushed to the local Target outlet, where the manager apologised to him. But as it turned out, the data analytics of Target that mapped the sale of 25 products to assign a pregnancy score to individual customers knew better than the father. The girl was pregnant and the Target algorithm guessed it right. In *Homoe Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, Yuval Noah Harari argues that voting in elections is something that algorithms will do more efficiently than humans. Humans are easily swayed by campaign jingles, slogans and emotions in the last moment, but a software that tracks our emotions, interests and

preferences over a longer period of time could take a more rational decision on who to vote.

Public vs private

While private companies are interested in gathering data for optimised marketing and product strategies, the state is interested in collecting data from citizens directly and by claiming control over data collected by private entities. The state has primarily two purposes, of planning and security. From traffic management to disease control, and urban planning to population management, aggregated private data could be of immense value in public planning. In a widely reported case from 2016, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) invoked an 18th century law to force Apple to break the encryption in a phone used by a shooter. Apple refused. The judicial dispute ended with the FBI withdrawing its demand after it broke into the phone with the help of a third party, but the underlying question remains unresolved. James Comey, former director of the FBI, had repeatedly called for resetting the privacy-security balance, which he believed is tilted too far in favour of privacy.

Issues involved in managing metadata are a subset of the issues created by the underlying technological disruption, but the debates often custom target our outrage at the company or the CEO in the dock at the particular moment. Examining the structural transformation of capitalism, which essentially is its unprecedented acceleration aided by technology, and its impact on democracy, would be more meaningful.

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A crisis that's been long in the making

The curious saga of Lula da Silva that has undermined democracy in Brazil



VIJAY PRASHAD

Over the weekend, Brazil's former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva turned himself in to the police after having been charged with corruption under the wide-ranging Lava Jato (Car Wash) investigation. Tens of thousands of people blocked roads across the country to protest his impending arrest. Thousands surrounded the metalworkers' union building where he had waited. When he insisted that he would turn himself in and begin serving his 12-year sentence, Mr. Lula da Silva was carried on the shoulders of the crowd waiting outside. It was a dramatic moment for a man who remains hugely popular in Brazil and is seen by many as a standard-bearer of the aspirations of the poor.

Before he went to prison, Mr. Lula da Silva released a statement of great feeling: "Those who persecute me can do what they want to me, but they will never imprison our dreams." Brazil is to hold a presidential election in October. Mr. Lula da Silva, who left office in 2011 with high approval ratings,

had been chosen by the Workers' Party (PT) as its candidate. By all indications, he would have swept to victory. He had promised to reinvigorate the pro-poor policies that had been a hallmark of his presidency which began in 2003. Those policies such as Fome Zero (Zero Hunger) had decreased hunger in the country and increased opportunities for children of poor families to go to school and college. One woman carried a sign that read, "Lula condemned for putting the daughter of a domestic worker through university."

A fragile democracy

Brazil's democracy is fragile. It was the trade union movement with which Mr. Lula da Silva remains affiliated and other such organised platforms that overthrew a U.S.-backed military dictatorship that had lasted from 1964 to 1985. Over the next 15 years, the civilian government did not uproot the institutions of the dictatorship nor weaken the oligarchy that had benefited from military rule. This power bloc remained firmly in control even during the PT-led governments of Mr. Lula da Silva (2003-2011) and Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016). During this period of high commodity prices, social welfare policies could be enacted but little else was possible. The oligarchy, impatient to retain control of Brazil, did everything possible to



undermine any democratic dynamic.

In 2016, Ms. Rousseff was removed from office not by an election but by the shenanigans of political horse-trading in parliament. At that time, it was said that the oligarchy had conducted a 'soft coup' against the PT government. Her successor, Michel Temer, has not been elected to his post by the people but was installed there by the National Congress. Most Brazilians view him as a 'bad' or 'terrible' president. Under Mr. Temer, the government withdrew many of the PT's social welfare policies. In 2014, Brazil was removed from the UN's Hunger Map but is likely to return on it.

Over the past year, Mr. Lula da Silva's Caravan for Brazil has moved from one poor community to another, where he has been defending the PT's policies and attacking the oligarchy. Mass movements such as Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement have backed him totally, even though they had

fought his timidity while in office. That he was a symbol for the poor was clear to the mass movements and the oligarchy.

Car Wash and other such investigations were made possible by strong laws against corruption put in place by Mr. Lula da Silva's government. In fact, few political figures have been immune from charges of corruption. In Brazil, trust in government is very low. It is advantageous to the oligarchy to see the influence of the government diminish. Now, threats to its immense power are not so sharp.

Mr. Lula da Silva has been accused of accepting an apartment from a contractor (OAS) in exchange for government contracts, a charge he has denied. Evidence for the bribe is weak to non-existent, and there is no paperwork to show that he received an apartment or owns it. A convicted executive of OAS whose prison sentence was reduced for his statement against the leader, gave evidence against Mr. Lula da Silva. The presiding judge in the trial, who has demonstrated on wiretaps his partisanship against Mr. Lula da Silva, accepted the statement and convicted him. Appeals were denied and considerations of habeas corpus rejected.

Democratic test

A series of consequential elections are to take place this year in Latin

America: Venezuela (May), Mexico (July) and Brazil (October). In Mexico, socialist candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador is the frontrunner. It is almost certain that he won on his first attempt in 2006 but was denied his victory by the ruling establishment. In Venezuela, the right-wing opposition is in disarray, which is likely to allow the Bolivarian movement to retain its hold on government. Each of these contests from Venezuela onwards will have an impact on the Left in the hemisphere. In each of these countries, if the elections were fair, the Left would win. But 'democracy' has been increasingly desiccated by institutional manoeuvres, such as the attack on Mr. Lula da Silva.

There is a widespread sense that Mr. Lula da Silva's prosecution, like the removal of Ms. Rousseff, is politically motivated. It would have been virtually impossible for Jair Bolsonaro, the candidate of the Right to defeat anyone backed by the PT.

If the courts now refuse to allow Mr. Lula da Silva to run in the October election as is expected, it will call into question the legitimacy of that vote. Democracy is in crisis in Brazil.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Slow wheels of justice

While I am neither elated nor anguished about the verdict handed down to actor Salman Khan, I just wonder why a case such as this has taken such an unduly long period to reach its logical end. The case could have ended in the conviction of or freedom for the accused within a few sittings. What has happened only shows how weak and pliable our criminal justice system is as a result of the designs of advocates. India needs to revamp and re-energise this slow-moving system and ensure that most cases pending before courts have a verdict within a reasonable timeframe. While large sections of the judiciary never fail to miss an opportunity to express their anguish over the huge pendency of undisposed cases, they never seem to be interested in effecting remedial measures. The Law Commission of India

has an onerous duty to perform.

BHAVANI RAMAN IYER,
Coimbatore

Adjourned *sine die*

It is a matter of grave concern that proceedings in both Houses of Parliament have been continuously stalled due to the obdurate stance of the Opposition. If a government servant is absent from work for more than seven days, an inquiry is conducted and he can face action if there is no satisfactory explanation. Why can't the same rule be used in the case of MPs? A proportionate reduction in their pay and allowances for each day the Houses are adjourned must be thought of (Editorial - "Broken Houses", April 9).

MANI NATARAJAN,
Chennai

■ A special session in order to finish pending business in Parliament cannot mitigate the severity of the erosion of accountability in Parliament.

Moreover, should it be considered a privilege for our parliamentarians to create an extra opportunity, and at the additional expense of taxpayers to transact business that they should have carried out? It is a shame that cutting across the political divide, most of our MPs never fail in reducing a session in the hallowed House to bedlam, resulting in a terrible loss of time and at great cost to the exchequer.

S. BALU,
Madurai

■ The idea behind telecasting parliamentary proceedings was to help people keep track of whether issues of importance were being debated. In the initial stage, there was mortal fear in parliamentarians that they would be watched. Gradually, this wore off. Both the government and the Opposition are equally responsible for this sorry state of affairs. Now that the general election is drawing

close, MPs from different States are looking for opportunities to strike a chord with the electorate back home. MPs have overused their rights while forgetting their responsibilities. When people are often advised to maximise productivity, it is a shame that productivity in both Houses of Parliament in the second part of the Budget session has been less than 10%.

R. SRIDHARAN,
Chennai

■ Having an intermediate session to clear unfinished business is welcome. But the continuing deadlock in both Houses is a dangerous prospect. Initially there were 4Ds – debate, discussion, dissent and decision. But it seems to have been replaced with a new set of 3Ds – delay, defer and deadlock. The leaders of all political parties should have a clear vision of the future for the country and must explore ways and means to find solutions. If

they wish, broken Houses can become better Houses.

A.J. RANGARAJAN,
Chennai

■ By inducing pandemonium in Parliament and not allowing the government to conduct any serious legislative business, the Opposition has assumed an obstructionist avatar. Such counter-productive tactics have created an unfortunate impression that the ruling dispensation has chinks in its armour to hide. In turn the feeling is that the Opposition is not well armed with facts to debate issues. Frequent disruptions only increase the government's inability to negotiate the floor of the House. Our elected representatives need to stop mistaking disruption for debate.

SHREYANS JAIN,
New Delhi

Not the right track

Production forestry is definitely not the right way to go about conserving

forests ("Smoke in the woods", April 9). Moreover, measuring productivity of forests in terms of the immediate monetary value of goods they provide is a sign of ignorance of their immense climatological and conservational benefits. Importance must be given to preserving endemic and natural forests in an area. On a recent trip to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, I was delighted to see majestic tropical evergreen trees, surrounded by several layers of smaller foliage. But when I ventured in, I found "plantations" of tobacco trees with hardly any canopy around and supporting no wildlife. I was shocked to find that these plantations are considered as forests. If an expansion of artificial plantations is the future envisaged by the draft Forest Policy, it will sound the death knell for our forests.

RISHIKA MALIK,
Gurgaon, Haryana

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