



Slowing down fast

The downturn in industrial activity and the spike in retail inflation pose a policy challenge

Yet another indicator, worryingly, points to the Indian economy slowing down fast. Industrial growth was just 0.1% in February from the year-earlier period, the slowest pace in 20 months. Industrial output had expanded by 6.9% in February 2018. Industrial growth, as measured by the index of industrial production, has been slowing down considerably in recent months, dropping to just 0.2% year-on-year in November. Manufacturing, which has a weight of almost 78% in the index, continues to be the biggest drag, with output contracting by 0.3% as compared with an 8.4% jump in the year-earlier period. The largest contributor to the slowdown in February was the capital goods sector, which shrank by close to 9%, with the contraction widening from the preceding month's 3.4%. That the revision in this closely watched proxy for business spending plans has widened, from the 3.2% contraction reported last month, is striking. GDP grew by just 6.6% in the quarter ended December, the slowest pace in six quarters. Various institutions such as the Reserve Bank of India and the International Monetary Fund have been lowering their expectations for India's growth in the coming quarters. With other economic indicators such as the purchasing managers' index and high-frequency data like automobile sales also signalling weakening momentum, the overall scenario, when viewed along with the slowdown in industrial output, suggests that a turnaround in economic growth is not in sight.

Retail inflation as measured by the consumer price index reached a five-month high of 2.86% in March due to the rise in food and fuel prices. While price gains still remain below the RBI's stated inflation threshold of 4%, the trajectory is hardly bound to be reassuring. The RBI, which has cut interest rates at two successive policy meetings to help bolster economic growth, is likely to be tempted to opt for more rate reductions. While monetary easing could be an easy solution to the growth problem, policymakers may also need to look into structural issues behind the slowdown. The high levels of troubled debt in not just the banking sector but the wider non-banking financial companies are hurting credit markets, and unless these issues can be resolved, no amount of rate cuts would serve as an effective stimulus. To a large extent, the slowdown is due to investments in sectors that turned sour as the credit cycle tightened. In the fiscal year ended March, new investment proposals fell to a 14-year low, says the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy. Easing interest rates without reforms may only help hide investment mistakes instead of fostering a genuine economic recovery.

A mammoth election

Much is at stake in Indonesia's presidential, parliamentary and provincial polls, all in a day. Indonesia's single-day presidential, parliamentary and provincial elections on April 17 will be a mammoth exercise. It will also test the popular mood on President Joko Widodo's moderation, which has been under attack from the religious right. Popularly known as Jokowi, he is seeking a second and final term, as Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority nation, approaches 75 years since gaining independence from the Netherlands in 1945. Mr. Jokowi, a former Jakarta governor, from the ruling Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, faces Prabowo Subianto, a former army general, of the Great Indonesia Movement Party; they had clashed in the 2014 race too. Opinion polls show Mr. Jokowi winning comfortably. The roughly 5% rate of growth in GDP in the last few quarters is well below the President's 7% target, but is still an improvement over previous years. Sentiment has also turned positive since the rupiah regained its value after the slide during the 2018 currency crises in emerging markets and the return of capital flows. Jakarta's current account deficit, owing to a slump in exports, could cause concern unless the U.S.-China trade dispute is settled amicably. But the liberal-leaning President's challenges are linked to the poll-time rise in religious tensions.

In the 2014 contest, Mr. Jokowi's opponents played the identity card by claiming that he, a Javanese Muslim, was a Christian and a communist. In 2017, an ethnic Chinese and Christian successor of Mr. Jokowi as Jakarta governor was convicted of blasphemy soon after re-election. The government's subsequent ban on Hizb ut-Tahrir, an Islamist organisation wedded to the establishment of an international caliphate, underscored the difficulties in balancing conflicting political interests. Rising religious militancy in some regions of Indonesia has also endangered the rights of the LGBTQ community, denting the country's record of respect for cultural pluralism and tolerance of heterodox social behaviour. While the constitutional court in 2017 rejected a bid to ban same-sex marriages, human rights groups are concerned over the lack of anti-discrimination protections for gay persons. Mr. Jokowi's choice of an orthodox Islamic cleric as running mate is being viewed as an attempt to boost his religious credentials. In a unique Indonesian electoral operation, votes for thousands of seats, fought by hundreds of thousands of candidates at various levels, are tabulated manually in full public view during daylight hours. Final results of the April 17 polls are expected after weeks. The complex nature of the process and provision for quick counts based on a sample of the actual votes cast have in the past led rival camps to trade accusations of manipulation and intimidation. Mr. Jokowi, whose party narrowly won the 2014 legislative and presidential vote after spectacular poll ratings, would be acutely aware of the high stakes involved. A nascent democracy, Indonesia will hope to see through this transition with fortitude.

An India without the Left?

To understand the Left's central role, one has to take stock of the mass mobilisations to highlight injustice and inequity



VIJAY PRASHAD & SUDHANVA DESHPANDE

One out of every two Indians goes to bed hungry at night. That's almost 700 million Indians. The number comes from McKinsey. But you don't need a consultant to tell you about the distress in India. It is evident on our streets and in our fields. Agrarian distress (amplified by the suicide of farmers) and urban distress (illustrated by the growth of slums) have become normal. Policy from the Central government does not effectively address any of the challenges faced by over half of the Indian population. Deprivation and desolation set the mood. The emotional dial switches to anger ever so often.

The voices of peasants and workers, of Dalits and Adivasis are muffled. Most political parties ignore them, making their appeal to the middle-class as if this class should set the terms for political decision-making. It is evident that the real beneficiaries of government policy since 1991 have not been this middle class, but it has been what should be called an oligarchy (10% of Indians own 75% of India's social wealth). Centre-stage have been the interests of prominent business houses. Not the voice of Chinnna Balayya (a farmer from Parigi mandal, Andhra Pradesh, who killed himself) nor the voice of a 16-year-old girl from Gaya, Bihar who was killed in an

honour killing, nor hundreds of lakhs of people like them.

Amplifiers on the street

The amplifiers of the voices of the farmers and the workers, the women and the Dalits are one section or the other of the organised Indian Left and of leftist movements. One often hears chatter about how the Left is anachronistic or how the Left is marginal. Yet, in 2018, the Left played a central role in hundreds of public actions by ordinary people whose extraordinary courage stunned the nation. It was the long march of the farmers of Maharashtra in 2018 that pushed a section of the urban middle class to acknowledge the suffering in the countryside and to welcome the marchers to the outskirts of Mumbai late on a Sunday evening. When the farmers realised that the next day an examination for students had been scheduled, they picked up their belongings and marched into the night to reach Azad Maidan. This sensitive gesture won the hearts of Mumbai. It is one thing to keep saying 'farmers', and another to say that the farmers came as part of the All-India Kisan Sabha, a mass organisation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Farmers suffer the agrarian distress in a relatively isolated way, and the suicide of farmers is an illustration of their solitary experience of sorrow. It is the organisation that takes this loneliness and makes it political.

Across India, over the past year and more, people agitated against the vicissitudes of capitalism and the failure of the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to address this turbulence. There



was the agitation of the ASHA and Anganwadi workers, the workers and peasant march into Delhi, and the general strike in early January 2019 as well as other, smaller public actions. All of these were organised by trade unions and peasant and agricultural worker platforms of the Left. The Left and other left-liberal platforms – pushed by sensitive sections of the Indian public – fought against the dangerous cow protectors and the honour killing murderers. The most volcanic of these agitations were the cascading kisan mobilisations by the Left mass fronts in Rajasthan. These protests, along with those in Maharashtra and the peasant march into Delhi, put agrarian distress on the table. They are what contributed to the churning of political fortunes in the three Hindi-speaking States – Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh – where the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was defeated in the Assembly elections last winter. That the Left was not able to convert these mobilisations into more seats for Left candidates is a sad commentary on the Indian electoral system – where caste and other sectarian

Weathervane of democracy

The Election Commission's weakening commitment to the Model Code of Conduct is cause for concern



RASHMI SHARMA

For the first time since the general election of 1996, the reputation of the Election Commission of India (ECI) has taken a beating. Subsequent to the 1996 election, which marked a turning point in the reduction of electoral malpractices, surveys showed that trust in the ECI was the highest among the major public institutions in India. However, there are now perceptions that the ECI has responded inadequately, or not at all, to violations of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), which is in effect from March 10 to May 23. Some examples in this election include the Prime Minister's announcement on national television of India's first anti-satellite weapon test, the Rajasthan Governor making statements in favour of the ruling party, leaders of the ruling party invoking the Indian Army in their election campaign, and, in a spate of dubious media initiatives, a continuous line of statements along communal lines. The MCC, like the ECI itself, is a unique Indian innovation and encapsulates an important story about democracy in India – the conduct of free and fair elections.

Though just a brief set of guidelines, not law, the MCC is a powerful instrument. It comes into force when the ECI announces election dates and comprises directions to government functionaries, political parties and candidates aimed at an impartial election process. Important provisions include barring governments from making policy announcements to sway voters and restraining political actors from inciting hatred against any group, or bribing or intimidating voters.

Down the years

The origins of the MCC lie in the Assembly elections of Kerala in 1960, when the State administration prepared a 'Code of Conduct' for political actors. The leading political parties of the State voluntarily approved the code, which proved useful during the elections. Subsequently, in the Lok Sabha elections in 1962, the ECI circulated the code to all recognised political parties and State governments; reports were that it was generally followed. The emergence of the code and its voluntary acceptance by political parties showed the commitment of the political elite to the holding of free and fair elections.

However, from 1967 till 1991, as political competition intensified, political actors began to resort to corrupt electoral practices. Governments made populist announcements on the eve of elections,



had pliant officials in key positions while intimidation of voters and booth capturing increased. The ECI's appeals to observe the code of conduct were largely ignored. The ECI now resorted to a familiar, but ineffective, strategy in Indian public life. It refined the code, making it more stringent by including a section about the misuse of powers by ruling parties and renamed it the MCC. Though it demanded that the MCC be incorporated in the law, no such law could be passed.

A turning point

After 1991, the ECI used new means to enforce the MCC. The then-Chief Election Commissioner, T.N. Seshan rebuked prominent political actors publicly and even postponed elections, thereby re-interpreting the ECI's power to fix election dates. The burgeoning electronic media of the time reported these initiatives with enthusiasm, while candidates were happy to capitalise on the mistakes made by their rivals. Conse-

quently, political actors began to take the MCC seriously, fearing it even if they did not respect it. The MCC now countered the lack of commitment of the political class to free and fair elections, the ECI began to command a new respect and electoral malpractices declined dramatically.

The Kerala example

A pall of gloom descended on the country after the disaster of demonetisation and the goods and services tax, after the daily reports of lynching and communal mobilisations, after the ghastly anti-science drift of intellectual institutions, after brutish language began to define public discourse. Meanwhile, in Kerala, the Left Democratic Front government provided an alternative discourse and practice. Small gestures of care were offered to break the rigidities of culture. The government provided free sanitary pads for schoolgirls in government schools, so that they would not feel the social penalty heaped on women for menstruation. Transgender rights came into focus, with some of Kochi Metro's ticket collectors being recruited among the transgender community. The divisiveness of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh was consistently fought by Kerala's incomparable Chief Minister, Pinarayi Vijayan, and his fellow Ministers.

Then came the massive flood that swept through the small State. Central government aid was paltry and slow. It was a reflection of how parties like the BJP tackle tragedy. Relief and rehabilitation, particularly for the poor, takes ages. When we travelled recently across the length and breadth of Kerala, in cities as well as the countryside, it was hard to imagine that the State had been ravaged by ferocious floods. A large part of the credit goes to the people of Kerala and the culture of public action in the State. They organised them-

selves in myriad, more or less spontaneous ways to help each other. The courage of the fisherfolk who ventured into the waters with no regard for their personal safety is one example. There were so many others.

Coupled with this was the attitude and fortitude of the Left Democratic Front government itself. It plunged into rescue and relief in an absolutely non-partisan manner. This was contrasted with the attitude of the Modi government at the Centre, which sought to penalise the people of the State for the government they had elected. It is also in sharp contrast to the Hindutva organisations, which gave even this colossal tragedy a sectarian and communal colour.

Being human

Imagine if there were no Left in India. Would anyone pay attention to the voice of the worker and the peasant, the voice of the dispossessed and the frustrated? Would anyone amplify their dreams and desires, their aspirations for a good life? Who would take up the Supreme Court order to allow women into the Sabarimala temple, or go out on the street to form a Women's Wall of lakhs of women? Who would stand for reason above division, social care above individual wealth? Years ago, Akbar Allahabadi sang, "You were people. With great difficulty you became human." That 'difficulty' is the place where the Left lives. Without its efforts, would humanity survive?

Vijay Prashad and Sudhanva Deshpande are Chief Editor and Managing Editor, respectively, at LeftWord Books, New Delhi

quently, political actors began to take the MCC seriously, fearing it even if they did not respect it. The MCC now countered the lack of commitment of the political class to free and fair elections, the ECI began to command a new respect and electoral malpractices declined dramatically.

New flashpoints

Today, the MCC is at a crossroads, as is the ECI. Two distinct trends are visible. One, electoral malpractice has appeared in new forms. Voter bribery and manipulation through the media have become the techniques of unethically influencing voters in place of voter intimidation and booth capturing. These malpractices are harder to stem. Booth-capturing is an identifiable event, taking place at a particular time and place. Voter bribery is spread over time and space. Voters resent being intimidated and are likely to cooperate with authorities in preventing it, but may be willing to be bribed. The misuse of the media is difficult to trace to specific political parties and candidates.

The ECI's response to the new challenges has been inadequate. It has appointed expenditure observers, evolved a code for social media, and, very recently, after a spate of criticism, stopped the release of biographical pictures that could influence voters. But there is little evidence that it has got to the core of the problem as it did after

1991. As in the pre-1991 phase, its efforts have hardly borne fruit. At the same time, the misuse of money and media power has intensified since the last two elections.

The second trend is that the ECI's capacity to respond to the older types of violations of the MCC has weakened. Its response to inappropriate statements by powerful political actors has been weak, or delayed. Consequently, political actors are regaining the confidence to flout the MCC without facing the consequences. As the ECI's capacity to secure a level playing field has dipped, attacks on it have increased. They now encompass its processes such as the use of electronic voting machines, which had become acceptable when the ECI was stronger. A vicious cycle has been set in motion.

The MCC is, in many ways, the weathervane of our democracy. The initial idea of free and fair elections was embraced by the political elite voluntarily, and the MCC emerged. Over time, the commitment of the political class to free and fair elections declined, and it flouted the MCC. During the early to mid-1990s, the ECI enforced the MCC on reluctant political actors, and MCC began to feared, if not voluntarily followed. Today, the ECI's own commitment to the MCC seems to have weakened, a bad omen for our democracy.

Rashmi Sharma is a former IAS officer

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.

Opposition on EVMs

The move by some parties in the Opposition to approach the Supreme Court again to demand verification of at least 50% of VVPATs with the electronic voting machines is odd (Page 1, April 15). It appears that the Opposition wants to disturb established democratic processes, such as stalling the checking of money power in elections and raising unwarranted doubts over the EVM which has shown its worth in terms of faster and error-free operations, thus enabling free and fair elections.

Does the Opposition want to return to an era of booth capturing and a troublesome ballot box system? Why this wicked and cunning intent to derail a working system?

V.S. GANESHAN, Bengaluru

Opposition over the dependability of EVMs is strange. Will these leaders care to recollect that it was on the basis of these very EVMs that they were returned to power in States such as Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh? Do these leaders mean to say that the EVMs started misbehaving after the completion of Assembly elections? To the common man, the new and renewed demand sends out a signal that these leaders and parties are making accusations in anticipation of their defeat. While there is always scope for improvement in efficiency and transparency, making wild allegations does not help in creating a positive image

S.V. RADHAKRISHNAN, Chennai

■ The move by some Opposition parties could have a snow ball effect. The continuous levelling of

allegations about the credibility of EVMs could destroy the trust of the common man in the electoral process. It could discourage people from voting and have long-term implications on the voter turnouts. Also, the global perception that the most transparent electoral process takes place in India could be reversed. The Opposition has to understand the impact of what it is doing.

SIMRAN AGARWAL, Jaipur, Rajasthan

■ Technology always moves forward and the demand for paper-based votes is backward thinking. Instead the demand should be for incontrovertible proof of tamper-proof software. In the event of an EVM malfunctioning, there must be a foolproof spare EVM. This is where the ECI needs to be nimble and give no room for complaint. The electoral system cannot be subverted by wily politicians

out to ensure their self-preservation. The poll code also needs to be reinforced.

B. GANGA RAJU, Hyderabad

Corporates and deals

It has become a fashion to berate the corporate world for political gains without examining the role they can play in the development of the country (Page 1, "Anil Ambani firm got tax relief after Rafale deal: French paper", April 14). No doubt there are procedural lapses in the Rafale deal which definitely warrant a probe. However, the revelations have not progressed beyond that phase to the level of evidence of corruption. No middlemen were involved in the exercise. In this context, the 'continued assault' on the business house connected with the Rafale deal, on the basis of conjecture largely based on media reports, is nothing but a tactic especially by the

Opposition to gain political mileage in the general election. For argument's sake, if the government was favouring the business group, would its owner be in such dire straits today and faced with a crumbling empire? In this entire saga, one only wishes that the NDA government had yielded to a probe instead of stonewalling as soon as reports of alleged transgressions surfaced earlier. This would have not only helped clear the air but also avoided a court intervention and prevented uneasiness in the corporate world.

V. SUBRAMANIAN, Chennai

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In the FAQ page story on capturing the image of a black hole (April 14, 2019), the reference to *Sagittarius A* needs to be corrected to *Sagittarius A\**. In the same story, in the answer to the question, 'What has been discovered?', the reference to 55 trillion light years should read 55 million light years.

It is the policy of The Hindu to correct significant errors as soon as possible. Please specify the edition (place of publication), date and page. The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300 (11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday); Fax: +91-44-28552963; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in; Mail: Readers' Editor, The Hindu, Kasturi Buildings, 859 & 860 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002, India. All communication must carry the full postal address and telephone number. No personal visits. The Terms of Reference for the Readers' Editor are on www.thehindu.com