



Uniting line

The CPI(M)'s compromise on its political line will still need a practical resolution

By adopting a political resolution acceptable to both the majority and minority sections, the 22nd party congress of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) averted a divisive contest for the post of the general secretary and gave a fresh term to the incumbent, Sitaram Yechury. In its essence, the political line was not very different from the draft political resolution backed by the majority section led by former general secretary Prakash Karat, but it was sufficiently vague to give some manoeuvring room to the beleaguered Mr. Yechury. The clause of contention related to allying with the Congress to defeat the BJP – with the majority Karat line, backed by most of the Kerala unit, against it, and the minority Yechury line, supported by most of the West Bengal unit, for it. The compromise involved replacing the phrase “without having an understanding or electoral alliance with the Congress party” with “without having a political alliance with the Congress party”. The end-result allowed both sides to claim victory. For the Karat side, ruling out a political alliance meant ruling out an electoral alliance; for the Yechury side, the withdrawal of the specific bar on understanding and electoral alliance with the Congress opened up the possibility of taking such a course. For those not used to the intense debates in Communist parties this might seem more like word-play than sword-fight. But the differences are rooted not only in a theoretical understanding of the threat posed by the BJP, whether it is communal authoritarianism or fascism, but also in the practical difficulty of fighting the Congress in Kerala and allying with it elsewhere. If fascism were the only concern for the West Bengal unit, an alliance with the Trinamool Congress should have been just as viable.

However, reducing its whole politics to the question of allying with the Congress would have been a serious mistake for the CPI(M), which built its support base first on the back of working class struggles, and later in opposition to the growing threat from neo-liberalism, represented in equal measure by the BJP and the Congress. The political line, in any case, allows for an understanding with all secular opposition parties, including the Congress, on agreed issues inside Parliament, and a broad mobilisation of people against communalism. The happy compromise allowed Mr. Yechury a second term, leaving the question of whether the unity on theory will hold in practice to be answered at the time of a general election in West Bengal. True, the current political line does not prohibit the CPI(M) from having seat adjustments or a post-poll understanding with the Congress. But not even an imaginative reading of the resolution can allow for the type of alliance the two parties had in West Bengal in 2016.

Best-laid plans

President Erdoğan attempts to consolidate power in Turkey with a snap election

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan did not take many by surprise last week when he called presidential and parliamentary elections in June, more than a year ahead of schedule. In power since 2002 first as Prime Minister and since 2014 as the first directly elected President, he has overseen the country's steady lurch towards right-wing authoritarianism; the snap poll could be another step in that direction. Last year he won a controversial referendum favouring an executive presidency, and he is clearly anxious to complete the transition, as the changes only come into effect after the presidential election. Mr. Erdoğan had pulled off a slender victory in the plebiscite, though the exercise was held under a national emergency and several opposition leaders were in detention. The outcome reinforced concerns about the sagging popularity of his Justice and Development Party (AKP). The risk of Turkey's economy overheating, besides soaring inflation, would make Mr. Erdoğan wary of leaving time for the opposition to consolidate. For now, averting a run-off would be uppermost on his mind. Observers cite recent developments as a prelude to the elections. One highlight is the alliance the AKP struck a few months back with its one-time rival, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). The latter's hard line on the Kurdish question and opposition to the Western alliance – notwithstanding Turkey's membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and long-standing ambition to join the European Union – are well-known. Curiously, MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli spoke about early elections just a day before Mr. Erdoğan made the actual announcement.

The pact between the two parties is emblematic of Mr. Erdoğan's overall political shift to a hardline stance at home and in his foreign policy. Turkey's offensive in January against a Kurdish enclave in north-west Syria tapped into a deep hostility at home against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), an insurgency movement. Conversely, the attack on Afrin drew strong condemnation from Ankara's NATO allies, who count on Kurdish militias in their military campaign against the Islamic State. At home, democratic space in Turkey has severely shrunk since the imposition of a national emergency and the crackdown following an unsuccessful military coup in 2016. Since then, countless critics have been detained, including journalists, and Turks are careful about voicing their opinions openly. A recent clampdown in a reputed Istanbul university over Turkey's offensive on Afrin has raised concerns over academic freedom. The routine labelling of protesters as terrorists and communists reflecting a creeping intolerance against even normal expressions of dissent. Even as he seeks to consolidate his hold on power, Mr. Erdoğan can only salvage his reputation if he starts restoring civil liberties ahead of the election.

A summer of gathering discontent

The genie of Dalit unrest has escaped from the bottle of social control. We must understand why



SANJAY HEGDE

At the First Round Table Conference in 1930, B.R. Ambedkar reminded his audience: “The men who fought with Clive in the battle of Plassey were the Dusads, and the Dusads are Untouchables. The men who fought in the battle of Koregaon were the Mahars, and the Mahars are Untouchables. Thus in the first battle and the last battle (1757-1818) it was the Untouchables who fought on the side of the British and helped them conquer India.”

The battle of Koregaon was fought on January 1, 1818, between the upper caste army of the Peshwa empire of the Marathas on one side, and the East India Company's army manned by Mahars and their British officers on the other. The result is viewed with mixed emotions in today's India. It is easy to say that an Indian empire lost to the British company. But it is difficult to not acknowledge that probably the Indian empire lost because of its insistence on treating fellow Indians as untouchables.

In Ambedkar's footsteps

In pre-independent India, as part of his movement on behalf of the depressed classes, Ambedkar used to commemorate the victory of the battle of Koregaon, and often visited the site of the battle itself. That tradition of celebrating the rare triumph of broken men, over the twice-born, has been followed without interruption even after Independence.

Two hundred years after that battle, no lessons appear to have been learnt. New year this time began with the bicentennial celebrations of the “victory” of the lower

castes being attacked by mobs led by upper-caste leaders. The Devendra Fadnis-led government in Maharashtra, which is often called the new Peshwai, seemed to have done enough on New Year's Day to justify that label. The leaders of the anti-Dalit violence were allowed to roam free and Dalits are even today agitating for the arrest of Sambhaji Bhide, who is said to be one of the principal instigators of the violence.

Anti-Dalit violence is not limited to Maharashtra alone. On February 15, a retired revenue officer and Dalit activist, Bhanubhai Vanar imolated himself in the District Collectorate of Patan, north Gujarat, to protest against the State government's failure to regularise ownership of land titled by a Dalit. Also in Gujarat, on March 30 a 21-year-old Dalit youth called Pradip Rathod, of Timbi village in Bhavnagar district, was killed allegedly by upper caste men for owning and riding a horse. Around the same time, the Allahabad High Court dismissed a petition of a Dalit man, Sanjay Kumar Jatav, who had sought its protection to ride a horse at his baarat (wedding procession) around a village in western Uttar Pradesh's Kasganj district. An administrative solution was sought to be brokered by the district administrator to allow Sanjay to arrive on horseback at his marriage. At least five Dalit MPs from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party have publicly voiced misgivings about the Central and State governments' handling of Dalit issues.

Into this bubbling caste cauldron, on March 20, came the Supreme Court judgment in *Subhash Kashinath Mahajan v. the State of Maharashtra*. The court in effect, defanged the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. The judgment directed, “in respect of offences under the Atrocities Act, no



V.V. KRISHNAN

arrest may be effected, if an accused person is a public servant, without written permission of the appointing authority and if such a person is not a public servant, without written permission of the Senior Superintendent of Police of the District... As and when a person arrested is produced before the Magistrate, the Magistrate must apply his mind to the reasons recorded and further detention should be allowed only if the reasons recorded are found to be valid. To avoid false implication, before FIR is registered, preliminary enquiry may be made whether the case falls in the parameters of the Atrocities Act and is not frivolous or motivated.”

Outpouring of anger

Notwithstanding the government's feeble protestations of not being responsible and despite filing an immediate review petition, the judgment was perceived as the straw that broke the camel's back. A nationwide bandh in the first week of April saw an outpouring of Dalit anger that resulted in at least 10 deaths, mostly protesters. Protests had to be put down with the heavy hand of the state. The genie of caste unrest has however escaped from the bottle of social control. There has been a counter-mobilisation to do away with caste-based reservations in favour of the Scheduled Castes. The nation stands teetering on the precipice of a hot summer of discon-

tent. It appears, as Ambedkar put it in his last address to the Constituent Assembly on November 25, 1949, that “those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which this Assembly has so laboriously built up.”

He had prophetically warned: “On the 26th of January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. In politics we will be recognising the principle of one man one vote and one vote one value. In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man one value.”

It is an inescapable task of nation-building to seek to restore equal value to each individual who has been rendered less than a whole by socially assigned caste fractions. Ambedkar's postulate for Dalit and Savarna alike was: “So long as you do not achieve social liberty, whatever freedom is provided by the law is of no avail to you.” He warned: “It is not enough to be electors only; it is necessary to be law-makers; otherwise those who can be law-makers will be the masters of those who can only be electors.”

Politics reflects society. From the days of the Poona Pact of 1932, Dalits have been co-opted into the power structure on terms dictated by others. They have been given a share of the pie, but never the rights to distribute or allocate the pie. It took nearly 50 years after Independence before a subaltern party headed by Kanshi Ram, managed to install a Dalit Chief Minister in its own right. That “miracle of democracy”, to use P.V. Narasimha Rao's felicitous phrase, grew into a full majority in 2007 with Mayawati serving a five-year term as Chief Minister till 2012.

In the Lok Sabha elections of

2014, despite a largely intact vote share, her Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) failed to win a single seat in U.P. Dalit representation even in the reserved seats was provided by BJP members, many of whom had been with the BSP earlier. In terms of political power, Dalits today are no more independent wielders, but have been subordinated to their assigned roles within the Hindutva umbrella.

Solidarity of the oppressed

The wiling of the Dalit political clout has simultaneously seen an increase in the use of legal and illegal force against them, by those who think that they have at last regained their rightful roles of dominance. In response, attempts are now being made to harness the Dalit vote to the votes of others who feel equally alienated. Immediate results have followed, in the form of victories in by-elections for the Lok Sabha from Phulpur and Gorakhpur, which were constituencies earlier represented by the current Deputy Chief Minister and Chief Minister, respectively. Retribution came in the Rajya Sabha elections, when the defeat of a BSP candidate also called Bhimrao Ambedkar was loudly hailed as the revenge of Chanakyaniti.

Political power, however, cannot be an end in itself. The attempt must be to bring about a far more equitable distribution of political and social power than has hitherto happened. That power must be used to achieve social transformation and cultural change for an egalitarian India where Liberty, Equality and Fraternity are available to all. We must strive to achieve “a just society... in which ascending sense of reverence and descending sense of contempt is dissolved into the creation of a compassionate society”.

Sanjay Hegde is a senior advocate of the Supreme Court

Shinzō Abe's difficult year

Alleged scandals, and their cumulative effect, have eroded trust in the Japanese Prime Minister



PALLAVI AIYAR

Japan's Prime Minister, Shinzō Abe, is in the eye of a scandal-generated storm. Usually apolitical Tokyoites are taking to the streets in the tens of thousands questioning his trustworthiness. He has faced hours of questioning in Parliament and his popularity ratings have plunged to the lowest since he took office in December 2012.

Shadow over next poll

With accusations of corruption and cover-ups being levelled against Mr. Abe, doubts are being raised about whether he can win another three-year term as Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leader in a September vote. There is speculation that he might resign as early as June, at the end of the current session of Parliament – all this despite the fact that he led the LDP to a decisive victory in snap polls last October.

Mr. Abe is facing two charges: of facilitating a licence for a friend for

a veterinary school, the country's first new such school in more than 50 years; and of involvement in a heavily discounted sale of state-owned land to Moritomo Gakuen, a kindergarten operator with ties to Mr. Abe's wife, for an alleged profit of \$7.5 million to the school. The evidence against him smacks of nepotism and dishonesty.

The Moritomo incident emerged early last year but resurfaced after a revelation that official documents related to the sale had been doctored, with references to Mr. Abe and his wife, Akie Abe, scrubbed. Ms. Abe was originally listed as the honorary principal for the school planned on the land in question, although she stood down after the controversy broke.

In the veterinary school matter, although Mr. Abe has repeatedly denied using any influence to help his friend, an official document has emerged that suggests otherwise.

Media pursuit

In both cases, the often-tame Japanese media has been dogged in its pursuit. The *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper first broke the story in February 2017. Although the controversy died down after the Moritomo Gakuen operators were arrested on fraud charges last July,



the paper resuscitated the scandal in March this year, with a hard-hitting investigation about the Finance Ministry altering documents related to the land sale before submitting them to lawmakers.

The Ministry admitted to the change a few days later. But the *Mainichi* newspaper has recently reported that prosecutors have decided not to pursue a case against any Finance Ministry personnel because “the main point of the document remains the same”, despite the admitted-to alterations.

The media have been similarly tenacious in following the veterinary school story, breaking the news that officials from Ehime, the prefecture where the school has opened, visited the Prime Minis-

ter's Office in 2015 to discuss the school licence. Mr. Abe's then-secretary, Tadao Yanase, reportedly described the project to the officials as “a matter related to the Prime Minister”. Although Mr. Yanase has repeatedly denied any recollection of the conversation, the Agricultural Ministry has now found a document that outlines this meeting.

Mr. Abe has denied all the allegations. Last year he had announced that he would resign if any proof of his involvement surfaced. Now that a cover-up by the Finance Ministry has emerged, he has parried the matter by claiming that the unaltered documents may have mentioned his name but did not constitute evidence of either his or his wife's involvement with the land sale.

Abe's strategy

Mr. Abe, who supports a muscular brand of nationalism, has tried to shift the focus to the geostrategic threats Japan faces. He has been pushing for greater military preparedness in the context of missile threats from North Korea and the growing clout of China, with which Japan has a territorial dispute over islands in the East China Sea.

The strategy proved successful

in last year's elections. But the persistence of the scandals and their cumulative effect has eroded trust in Mr. Abe despite his attempts to portray himself as the only strongman capable of dealing with security threats.

For both the media and, if opinion polls are to be believed, the people, holding their leaders to the basic ethical standards of honesty appears to be at least as important as nationalist tough talk. It is possible, of course, that Mr. Abe may yet weather the current storm and retain LDP leadership in the event of North Korea deciding to test further missiles or a ratcheting up of tensions by China.

For one of Japan's longest-serving leaders, to be brought down by what in many countries would be considered “minor” nepotism may seem admirable. Or perhaps what is noteworthy is that more countries do not demand the highest levels of probity from their elected leaders. The leaders that any society chooses are after all a reflection of that society. What this says about India is best left to introspection.

Pallavi Aiyar has reported from China, Europe, Indonesia and Japan. She is a Young Global Leader with the World Economic Forum

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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A mirror up to the govt.

One is at a loss for words after reading the report, “Don't create fuss over a couple of rapes: Minister” (April 23). How low can a Minister, who is expected to be a role model, get by calling a serious issue such as sexual assault as something is being unworthy of discussion? An act of crime is an act of crime whether it is committed once or occurs in waves. The reality in India is that only a few cases of rape come to public notice. Another fact is that such cases take years for the courts to settle. Minister Santhosh Gangwar must remember that even a single incident of rape is enough to tarnish the image of the government. Perhaps he needs to follow the Prime Minister's advice (“Exercise restraint, says PM”, April 23).

D. SETHURAMAN, Chennai

Capital punishment

The ordinance which provides for the death penalty, imprisonment for 20 years or for life for the rape of a child below 12 cannot be qualified as a well-reasoned and rational response to public anger over increasing instances of rape. The perpetrators of sexual crimes are in most cases known to the survivors, and this includes family members. With the ordinance, reporting rape will not only become harder but can also become more traumatic for the survivor. Arguments by activists that the provision of the death penalty can endanger the life of victims cannot be shrugged off. Also young girls and boys are increasingly being subjected to sexual violence.

M. JEYARAM, Sholavandan, Tamil Nadu

State of the judiciary

It is perhaps for the first

time in India's history that there has been a move to impeach the Chief Justice of India (CJI). It should be remembered that such a move is a result of an institutional crisis which has been brewing for some time. Demarcating the role of the judiciary as an umpire invited criticism when Subba Rao resigned as the CJI in 1967 to contest the presidential elections. The move was widely criticised by eminent jurist M.C. Setalvad. This was in the wake of his judgment in the Golaknath case. Then came the judgment of the Supreme Court in the ADM Jabalpur case where it upheld the proclamation of Emergency by the executive arm of the state. Ironically, in his historic dissent in this case, Justice H.R. Khanna could not ascend to the post of CJI. One also has the Second Judges case which underlined that the

appointment of judges was a prerogative of the Supreme Court. All these cases and more have collectively contributed to the erosion of the credibility of the institution and constitutional values. The charges levelled against the CJI are serious. They go against the cardinal values of the judiciary – namely, no person can be a judge of his own cause and that justice should not only be done but also seen to be done.

N.G.R. PRASAD, RAM SIDDHARTHA, Chennai

Stop the demolitions

The report, “Can private intervention save Kolkata's crumbling heritage?” (April 23), throws light on an often neglected part of India's culture – of the need to acknowledge and preserve our architectural heritage. While the residents of

Kolkata appear to be enthusiastic about helping to save their city's architectural marvels, one can come across a diametrically opposite response in Chennai. Barring a few feeble voices, there seems to be general apathy to the state of numerous heritage structures in one of India's oldest cities. A number of such buildings in Chennai face neglect or have been demolished, the D'Angelis Hotel or the Bata Building on Mount Road being the latest instance. Perhaps the Tamil Nadu government needs to take a leaf out of Kolkata's book.

MEENAKSHI SUBRAMANIAM, Chennai

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

A sentence in an article, “Stories that stamps tell” (Open Page, April 22, 2018) said: “The *Black Penny*, the world's first postage stamp, released in the 1850s...” It's the “*Penny Black*”, which was released in the 1840s.

The Reader's Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in