



Trial by voters

With the disqualification of 18 rebels upheld, CM Palaniswami needs a fresh endorsement

It is not often that byelections acquire the significance and importance of a general election, opening up the possibility of bringing down a government. But with the Madras High Court upholding the disqualification of 18 legislators for defection, Tamil Nadu appears set to witness elections to 20 seats, including two rendered vacant by the death of the members. With the government of Edappadi K. Palaniswami hanging on for dear life, the result could be the difference between his continuance and an ignominious exit. The AIADMK, which now has 116 members in the Assembly including the Speaker, will need to win at least two seats to retain its majority. But with four of its sitting members nursing grievances against the party leadership, it may need to win six of the 20 seats to remain in power. Of course, if the disqualified MLAs decide to appeal against the High Court ruling, and obtain a stay against the holding of a re-poll in their constituencies, then the government might get a longer lease without having to face voters. But if Mr. Palaniswami, who became Chief Minister in the political upheaval in the AIADMK following the death of Jayalalithaa, is to retain his political legitimacy, he will need to win a vote of confidence from the people, and not just a group of MLAs artificially held together by the fear of election, and the comfort of being associated with a party in power. Indeed, the arithmetic of the numbers in the Assembly aside, the AIADMK would need to win a majority of the seats at stake in the byelections in order to keep its flock of MLAs together and fight off erosion in the wider support base.

If the byelections could mean moving from a position of power to political wilderness for Mr. Palaniswami, they also pose a serious political test for M.K. Stalin, the new president of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. So far he has managed to keep the party together under his leadership, but the ultimate test will be at the polling booths. Together with the DMK's allies he has the support of 97 MLAs, but he needs to win all 20 to get a majority. Else, he will need the support of the breakaway AIADMK group led by T.T.V. Dhinakaran, who enjoys the support of the disqualified 18, to form a government. The byelections, when they happen, will be akin to a mid-term election. It is not clear now when they will be held, but if they are held in the next few months, the party that performs best will have a distinct edge in next year's Lok Sabha election. With film stars Kamal Haasan and Rajinikanth already preparing the ground to mount a challenge in the Assembly election, every additional share of the electoral pie will mean a lot for both Mr. Palaniswami and Mr. Stalin. And these byelections will represent a big slice.

Think small

Decentralised sludge management systems are vital to achieve clean water goals

Bad sanitation is India's worst-kept secret, but recent data from Uttar Pradesh show that in spite of working in mission mode to expand sanitation, 87% of faecal sludge expelled from toilets in urban areas is untreated. Viewed against the 2030 goal to achieve clean water and sanitation for all under the UN Sustainable Development Agenda, this depressing statistic shows how much work remains to be done. State support for improved housing and planned development has never been strong, and the National Urban Sanitation Policy of 2008 has not changed that significantly. At the national scale, a United Nations report of 2015 estimates that 65,000 tonnes of untreated faeces is introduced into the environment in India annually. The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan promised a major shift, but it has focussed more on the basic requirement of household and community toilets in rural and urban areas. The study in U.P. conducted by the Centre for Science and Environment has now exposed broken links, of faecal sludge and septage being collected from household tanks and simply discharged into drains, open land and wetlands. The problem of the waste not being contained, collected without manual labour, transported and treated safely is becoming graver. It is now time for a new approach. This has to be decentralised and different from the strategy being used to clean the Ganga, for which the NDA government announced an outlay of ₹20,000 crore in 2015. That strategy relies on large sewage treatment plants for riverside cities and towns.

Immediate investments in decentralised sludge management systems would bring twin benefits: of improving the environment and reducing the disease burden imposed by insanitary conditions. It is welcome that the CSE study is being followed up with a mapping exercise on the flow of faecal waste streams in individual cities. The results for Varanasi, Allahabad and Aligarh in particular should be revealing, since the collection efficiency for sludge in these cities ranges from just 10% to 30%. One immediate intervention needed is the creation of an inter-departmental task force to identify land to build small treatment systems for sludge, and to provide easily accessible solutions to houses that are currently discharging waste into open drains. The business of emptying faecal material using tanker trucks needs to be professionalised and de-stigmatised. It is untenable that manual scavengers continue to be employed in violation of the law to clean septic tanks in some places, and caste factors play out in the recruitment of workers even in the mechanised operations. All aspects of the business of sanitation need reform if India is to meet Goal Number 6 of the Sustainable Development Goals with egalitarian policies. A large State such as Uttar Pradesh provides the opportunity to demonstrate commitment to policy. Success here can transform lives.

Our time begins now

India stands to suffer most from climate change. A road map to transit quickly to a near-zero carbon economy



SUJATHA BYRAVAN
& SUDHIR CHELLA RAJAN

Even at the time of its signing in 2015, it was clear that the Paris Agreement on climate change would not be enough to avoid global warming of 1.5° C over pre-industrial temperatures. In fact, early analyses revealed that the collective effect of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) would result in 3-5° C of warming. More recently, there has been mounting pressure on India to raise its pledges further. The Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report on 1.5° C has come at a time when there are multiple alarms for India. Another study in *Nature Climate Change* identifies India as the country with the most expected damage from rising levels of carbon dioxide. How should India respond?

India's NDC is already ambitious and it has made decisive changes in its energy sector. Meanwhile, the U.S. has pulled out of the climate treaty, and the support of Australia and Brazil teeters on the outcome of their respective elections. Some countries are also doing less than they claim. According to Kevin Anderson at the University of Manchester, with aviation, shipping and trade counted, the U.K. has made no reduction to its greenhouse gas emissions.

A socio-economic challenge

India has two complex and inter-related problems. The first is to bring a vast population out of poverty and into decent lives. The second is to do this while dealing responsibly with the global carbon challenge and building resilience to climate change.

While India is often mentioned

along with China in climate-related discussions as a large emerging economy, the two are very different. India ranks 130 among nations in the Human Development Index, and China ranks 86. In spite of remarkable recent improvements, India still has 364 million living in multidimensional poverty. Nearly a third (27.5%) are multidimensionally poor and about a fifth (19.1%) are vulnerable to becoming poor. Almost half the country is therefore at high risk from events such as loss of a job or ill health of a family member. Combined with damage from a severe cyclone, flood or drought, each subsequent shock will have a multiplier effect on hundreds of millions, potentially pushing them deeper into poverty.

Add to this the current rural distress and the large youth bulge with few job prospects, and the country is in dire straits. It is clear that past development frameworks have not improved well-being across social strata. Instead, evidence indicates that economic growth has gone hand-in-hand with rising inequality and the creation of a small but powerful class of the super-rich.

SDGs are crucial

It turns out that the most sensible way to deal with these complex challenges is to deepen and expand India's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The synergies of meeting SDGs, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to a changing climate can only be fully realised if transformative and cross-scale changes are conceived, deliberated upon and tested widely. Further, "scaling up" may not be the correct way to think about what is needed; rather, replication with context-relevant modifications through local and institutional innovation may be more appropriate for a country of India's size and ecological diversity.



The 1.5° C report calls for societal transformation on a global scale that "reflect(s) the links, synergies and trade-offs between mitigation, adaptation and sustainable development." Recent events, however, show that we cannot trade off forests, urban water bodies, riverine ecosystems, waste management or groundwater as these come back to bite us as floods, landslides, droughts and infectious disease.

India, nevertheless, has a large number of successful examples of transformative innovation around energy production and access, land, livelihoods and climate resilience. The Bureau of Energy Efficiency showed how government 'nudges' are made effective through appliance labelling and large-scale procurement of efficient devices. In the building and cement industry, innovation around housing and new materials, including natural fibre composites, could make far-reaching changes in infrastructure through low-carbon modular technologies.

India expects to reach its ambitious solar target of 100 GW capacity by 2022 primarily through large centralised solar power plants, but these require significant amounts of land, water and evacuation infrastructure and support from mega-corporations. Instead, as some States have shown, renewable-based microgrids can become an important feature of electricity policy. Jharkhand, which has 249 remote villages powered by solar microgrids, is now considering the use even in vil-

Driven by notions of purity and impurity

The Sangh Parivar's opposition to the Sabarimala judgment has little to do with religious belief



BRINDA KARAT

While heated debates and discussions were expected after the Supreme Court's Sabarimala judgment, what is unusual is the kind of public intervention made by Union Minister Smriti Irani in her widely reported speech in Mumbai. Quite apart from the crudity of the statement, which is objectionable enough, Ms. Irani advised women to accept that menstrual blood is impure and that a menstruating woman desecrates a place of worship. When she was criticised for her statement, she put out a defence which made this even more clear: "Since many people are talking about my comments – let me comment on my comment. As a practising Hindu married to a practising Zoroastrian I am not allowed to enter a fire temple to pray. I respect that stand by the Zoroastrian community / priests and do not approach any court for a right to pray as a mother of 2 Zoroastrian children. Similarly Parsi or non Parsi menstruating women irrespective of age DO NOT go to a Fire Temple."

A believer may indeed make an

individual choice not to go to a temple when she is in her menstrual cycle, but how does that justify a ban on women's entry? Ms. Irani's approach has less to do with religious belief and more to do with Manuvadi notions of purity and impurity, which hold Dalits and menstruating women to be equally impure. For example, to quote the *Manusmriti*, in Chapter V, Clause 66: "(A woman) is purified on a miscarriage in as many (days and) nights as months (elapsed after conception), and a menstruating female becomes pure by bathing after the menstrual secretion has ceased (to flow)." Again, Clause 85: "When he (the twice born) has touched a Kandala, a menstruating woman, an outcast, a woman in childbirth, a corpse, or one who has touched a (corpse), he becomes pure by bathing."

Defending misogynist beliefs

Once you accept the validity of a ban based on purity/impurity, as Ms. Irani does, then it could be equally valid for menstruating women to be disallowed in places other than a "house of God", as mentioned by her – for example, in the "temple of democracy", as Parliament was once described by the Prime Minister. Indian women and their movements for equality have fought against – and defeated – these misogynist upper-caste



notions and practices which are now being defended and resurrected by those in power, in the name of respect for beliefs and traditions, although this has nothing to do with religious belief whatsoever.

For example, in the Sabarimala case, there was no blanket ban on women of fertile age going into the temple until 1991 when the Kerala High Court, acting on a complaint by an individual named S. Mahendran, gave an order that henceforth, no woman aged between 10 and 50 can go to the temple. However, the judgment itself gave examples of how women, including the then Maharani of Travancore in 1940, had not only worshipped at the temple but participated in many temple ceremonies. The judgment said: "There was thus no prohibition for women to enter the Sabarimala temple in olden days, but women in large number were not visiting the temple. That

lages that are already grid connected.

In the near future, entrepreneurs could make use of rapidly lowering storage costs to build decentralised, neighbourhood-scale micro-utilities, managed by locally owned enterprises and cooperatives. With modern power electronics and innovations in hybrid waste to energy, water recycling and community gardens could be integrated as standalone modules that are connected to larger grids.

Sustainable approaches to land are evident in cases such as forest conservation in Mendha-Lekha village in Maharashtra and community delivery of public services in Nagaland. These and several other instances are documented in initiatives such as Vikalp Sangam. Similarly, in a recent comment in *Nature*, Harini Nagendra points out that India has for long had strongly rooted cultural movements about living sustainably with land and its ecology that provide practical models.

Some research groups have recognised that agro-ecology methods are best suited for increasing crop yield, raising profits, trapping soil carbon, reducing dependence on fertilisers and pesticides. Successful models are already effective on small scales in many States. Andhra Pradesh is attempting to replicate widely one such approach, Zero Budget Natural Farming, to all its farmers by 2024 with an expected savings of 2 million tonnes of carbon dioxide per year. This is with 6 million farmers across 8 million hectares. If similar methods were used for the entire country, the savings would be substantial.

In transport and urbanisation, the challenge is to create isotropic communities in the areas of the peri-urban, the rapidly expanding hinterland, which would have to be designed around not cars but walking, cycling and sustainable neighbourhood vehicles. Work

and industry would also have to focus on the small and medium scale of about 300 employees and modest capital investments, which reduce the risk of speculation and jobless growth.

Energy and livelihood gains from such alternative visions could be far more significant than conventional ways of replacing fossil-fuelled infrastructure with renewables. But they also involve a lot of learning-by-doing, living laboratories and innovation, practice, patience and support from government and academia.

Putting plans into action

The next round of state action plans on climate change now being developed might begin with identifying successful development approaches overlaid with expected climate impacts in each ecological zone. Policymakers, with inputs from academia, community workers and the public, could then work on how these would be repeated in other contexts keeping climate impacts in mind.

Large investments are needed to make the transitions in each sector that would take the country to a near zero-carbon economy. But given the shortage of external support and the need for rapid deployment, India will not be able to rely entirely on external funds. Some of this could instead be financed through a 'luxury' carbon tax that curbs non-essential consumption. Savings can also be expected from the economic and social transformation itself.

Political pressure and activism across the globe may soon turn the tide in other countries, but India needs to begin now with its enormous untapped successes. We cannot be pressured from outside, but need to change from within.

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Shingnapur temple, but after the court's intervention and when the BJP-led State government was put in a spot, the RSS had to welcome it. In Kerala, the RSS first supported the Sabarimala judgment, but when a section of devotees protested, it took that as an opportunity to push its anti-Left retrograde agenda, did a U-turn, organised protests, and is now dangerously working to inflame religious feelings and communal tensions.

The Congress's flip-flop

The widespread Left-led campaign to explain the issues is gaining public support, and surely the people of Kerala and, indeed, citizens across the country will reject the toxic politics of the RSS-BJP. But what of the Congress party? In contrast to the first statement of their all-India spokesperson welcoming the judgment, against their own history of linkages of social reform with the national movement, in Kerala today the Congress shamefully stands with the BJP and the RSS. Not only has it taken a virulent stand against the judgment, it has also demanded a Central ordinance to reimpose the ban on women's entry. Yet its national leadership has fallen strangely silent.

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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.

Crisis in the CBI

The government's remedy is worse than the CBI's malady ("Midnight rumble", October 25). While the government has sent CBI Director Alok Verma and Special Director Rakesh Asthana on leave to apparently restore confidence in the CBI, it has had the opposite effect. The government could have facilitated a meeting of the Prime Minister, the Chief Justice of India and the Leader of the Opposition to take stock of the situation instead of making the affair murkier. The CBI looks like not only a caged parrot but also a chained one.

D.V.G. SANKARARAO,
Vizianagaram

When there are so many

allegations of corruption at the top level of the country's premier investigating agency, how can people be expected to repose any faith in the CBI, especially in cases where financial fraudulence is being investigated? All the major cases go to the CBI in the belief that the truth will be exposed. Instead, the CBI seems to have become a punching bag for the Opposition and a tool in the hands of the ruling dispensation.

R. SRIDHARAN,
Chennai

One wonders how the Centre was oblivious to the happenings in the agency all this while. Are we expected to believe that it was caught unawares till

the recent developments surfaced?

V. SUBRAMANIAN,
Chennai

Anger in a temple town

The law and order situation in Sabarimala is deeply concerning ("Kerala police plan to turn Sabarimala into fortified zone", Oct. 25). It is attributable largely to the doublespeak on women's rights by many so-called progressive political parties. With the Lok Sabha elections round the corner, these parties would obviously never risk losing a sizeable chunk of their vote bank by openly supporting women's entry into the temple and incurring the wrath of many people. They are quite happy to play it safe

by using phrases like "maintaining sanctity", "respecting beliefs" and inserting all their 'ifs' and 'buts' in their statements. All their big talk on espousing gender equality is a sham. It is crucial for the Kerala government to uphold the court's verdict.

A. MOHAN,
Chennai

I condemn Union Minister Smriti Irani's statement ("Everyone has the right to pray but not right to desecrate, says Smriti Irani", Oct. 25). How can women be deprived of worshipping their gods? This is not a matter of desecration of places of worship; it is politics that has compelled her to speak against her own gender. If

women themselves defend such regressive beliefs against them, what can the apex court really do?

QEYAMUDDIN,
Mumbai

Impact on education

On the one hand, the government is worried that there are no Indian universities in the top 100 universities of the world; on the other, it shows a lack of understanding regarding the difference in the role played by teachers and other public sector employees ("An 'anti-national' regulation", Oct. 25). University teachers are expected to teach students how to analyse critically, think logically and approach issues rationally so that they emerge as

scholars, thinkers, writers, administrators, inventors and innovators. But if the teachers are subjected to civil service conduct rules and a suffocating atmosphere is created in universities as a result, what critical thinking training can possibly be given to the students? It looks like educational reforms are going in the reverse direction. After the implementation of these rules, no teacher who is a public employee can engage in public discussions on government policies through lectures, articles, or even letters to the editor.

RAMEEZA A. RASHEED,
Chennai

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