



## Fuel fractions

Both the Centre and States must bite the bullet to cut taxes on petrol and diesel

Last Wednesday, the public sector oil marketing companies cut the prices of petrol and diesel by one paise a litre – the first reduction for a while in motor fuel prices that had been frozen for 19 days in the run-up to the Karnataka elections, only to creep up thereafter. Not surprisingly, the Centre, already under fire for persisting with high fuel taxes despite the rise in the global prices of crude in recent months, faced fresh flak over this cursory cut. The same day, the Kerala government approved a reduction in the sales tax on motor fuel products to effect a ₹1 cut in prices per litre in the State starting June 1. For the BJP-led government at the Centre, gearing up for several Assembly elections this year followed by the general election in 2019, the pressure to check pump-level fuel prices is intensifying. Several formulations are said to be under consideration to soften the blow to the consumer, including a reversion to old-fangled ways such as asking oil producers to bear some of the burden. But there still remains great reluctance to consider the option of reducing excise duties that were raised nine times between November 2014 and January 2016 when global crude oil prices had gone down. It is in this context that Kerala’s decision to slash the sales tax on fuel changes the narrative of the debate as States have also been raking in easy oil revenue.

In all, the government raised central excise duties by ₹11.77 and ₹13.47 for a litre of petrol and diesel, respectively, followed by a ₹2 a litre cut announced in October 2017, when prices started rising. Additionally, States impose ad valorem duties on fuel products, which go as high as 39.27% (in Maharashtra) and average about 26% – so higher prices mean more tax revenue for them. To make matters worse, they levy value-added tax on the fuel price inclusive of central excise duties, not the base price, leading to double taxation and further price amplification. An SBI research report reckons that prices could go down for diesel by ₹3.75 and petrol by ₹5.75, a litre, if only this tax-on-tax-included-price anomaly was fixed. Giving up easy money is never easy, but the recent robust collections from GST should embolden both the Centre and States to bite the bullet now. Rising crude prices spike inflation and the trade deficit, putting pressure on the rupee and GDP growth. Industry has warned that domestic oil pricing policies are hurting the nascent recovery, and global rating agencies are already slashing India’s growth expectations for this calendar year, citing the oil issue. Two years ago, Petroleum and Natural Gas Minister Dharmendra Pradhan had said that the government was raising excise duties to protect the consumer. The logic: consumers could become vulnerable if exposed to low prices and feel a greater pinch when prices went up. The obvious corollary of that stance – that high taxes on fuel need to be cut when prices rise again – has been ignored so far.

## Fire without smoke

India is on track to curb cigarette use, but chewable tobacco is a health emergency

A report from the World Health Organisation on the occasion of World No Tobacco Day (May 31) suggests that India’s efforts to cut the prevalence of cigarette smoking are paying off. Between 2000 and 2015, this fell from 19.4% to 11.5%. By 2025, the report projected, it could drop to 8.5%, putting India well in line to meeting its 2025 target under a WHO global plan to tackle non-communicable diseases. While this is excellent news, it needs to be highlighted that smokeless tobacco is the bigger scourge in the country. The WHO report doesn’t model usage trends in this segment because of the paucity of global data. Other data, however, suggest that India is lagging on this front. Even though there is a 2011 government ban on the sale of food items with tobacco or nicotine in them, the consumption of gutkha, khaini and zarda continues to be rampant. The Global Adult Tobacco Survey in 2016, for example, found that 29.6% of Indian men and 12.8% of Indian women were users. Children are victims of this lethal addiction too. The WHO report noted that 7.9 million adolescents, between 13 and 15 years, used smokeless tobacco in the South-East Asian region. Given that 66% of the world’s smokeless-tobacco users are in India, a sizeable chunk of this number would be Indian teenagers. Against this background, the drop in cigarette smoking rates gives India little cause to celebrate.

Gutkha and other chewable tobacco items are equally, if not more, harmful compared to cigarettes. Surveys show that these products are sometimes mixed with carcinogenic compounds called nitrosamines. This is why India banned their sale under the 2011 Food Safety and Standards Regulations. Why do they continue to be consumed, then? Experts blame their availability on loopholes in the law. The food safety rules target pre-mixed tobacco products, such as gutkha, which contains lime, sugar and other spices. This leaves unflavoured items, such as khaini or surthi, out of regulatory purview. Meanwhile, mislabelling of smokeless tobacco is common. Even when a product contains tobacco, it is passed off as being tobacco-free. Worse, one of the tactics of the tobacco industry is to use flavours such as cardamom and saffron to attract youngsters, triggering life-long addiction. The WHO report notes that as cigarette usage has fallen in high-income countries, the tobacco industry has targeted younger users to make up for the revenue shortfall. While this trend applies to smoking, there is evidence that children are also a target of the chewable tobacco industry. With its war against smoking seemingly on the right track, India must turn its focus to the smokeless tobacco segment. The challenge is bigger, but so will be the reward.

# Heed the echoes of June 4

The story of Monica Felton, Rajaji, Mandela – and history’s call to today’s democratic forces to rally together



GOPALKRISHNA GANDHI

This is about two June 4ths, both of which bear a message for Indian politics today. The first is sited in Madras, 1959. The second, again, in Madras, 1964.

An Englishwoman, Marxist by conviction, an authority on urban planning and a passionate advocate of the World Peace Council, Monica Felton, had settled in India’s ‘southern capital’. Why, or for what combination of reasons this long-time London County Councillor representing St Pancras South West for the Labour Party should have chosen, of all places, Madras to settle in is not very clear. But a person from a very different, in fact, totally contrastive politics had made a powerful impression on her. She had little in common with Chakravarti Rajagopalachari’s political views. And yet there was a certain intellectual chemistry between them, love of English literature being certainly high on that shared list. She had even begun working on a biography of the octogenarian. And *Swarajya*, the English weekly that CR wrote for and was the soul of, was open to her to write in.

### A party is born

On June 4, 1959, Felton went, at Rajagopalachari’s casual suggestion, to a public meeting in Madras’s Vivekananda College called by the All India Agriculturists’ Federation (AIAF). It was to be addressed by AIAF’s leader N.G. Ranga and the Parsi ex-Marxist and urbanite intellectual from the

Right, Minoo Masani. The meeting was supposed to voice general dissent from the ‘statist’ politics of the Nehru government. But the audience, including the Englishwoman, was surprised to see CR and Jayaprakash Narayan arrive at it. And even more surprised when CR said, “This morning a new political party was formed. And the name of the new party is Swatantra Party.” The audience broke instantaneously into applause.

The party belonged to the Right, professedly and proudly so. The veteran socialist JP who was at the meeting did not join it, giving his good wishes to the idea of a democratic alternative to the Congress. Nor did the distinguished scholar-administrator C.D. Deshmukh, to whom CR offered its leadership. But Swatantra with CR being its powerhouse and *Swarajya*, his platform of expression, were to become a democratic force at the time, receiving respect from a cross-section, even if not active participation. Swatantra rallied non-Congress sentiment across the country.

Did CR’s new political avatar from the Right distance him from the ardent Leftist, Monica Felton? It did not. She found the octogenarian’s fervour quite fascinating. And *Swarajya*’s column space remained available to her, her politics, her world view.

This had much to with the liberal political atmosphere of the times, notwithstanding CR’s accusations of ‘totalitarian’ and ‘megalomaniac’ tendencies in Jawaharlal Nehru. Speaking at a public meeting in Madras, Nehru responded to CR’s opposition typically: “May I perhaps venture to say one word to him with great respect; and that is, a little charity in his thinking may sometimes not be out of place.” Felton asked CR, “Can’t you two work together?”

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He demurred but without retreating an inch from his opposition to “one party rule”, CR said of the equation between Nehru and himself: “We are positive friends and love each other.” Swatantra was to collapse in 1974, after CR died, but it had made a point: democratic opposition to a democratic party in power is a democratic desideratum.

### Over in South Africa

Five years on, the world watched with some wonderment one man create another democratic history. Served by very conventional, slow and ponderous technologies of news transmission, it observed this 46-years-young South African, said to be ‘non-Marxist, but close to South Africa’s communists’, well on his way to becoming the anti-apartheid resistance’s utmost charismatic leader.

Nelson Mandela was a prisoner and being tried for inciting strikes and trying to overthrow the government. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, it was said, had played a role in the apartheid regime’s pursuit of Mandela and five others for suspected collaboration between them and South African communists, particularly Joe Slovo.

In what came to be known, celebrated in fact, as the Rivonia Trial of 1963-64, Mandela made major political statements in the course of his defence. At the opening of the trial, he made his celebrated ‘I

am prepared to die’ speech with the lines:

“I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons will live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal for which I hope to live for and to see realised. But... if it needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.”

Among those ‘listening’ to Mandela’s scorching words, and watching the creative interaction between the African National Congress and South Africa’s communists, was Felton.

### Another June 4

On June 4, 1964, the Madras-based *Swarajya* carried an article by her about Mandela. It is a felicity that one of the early articles on him should have come in an organ of India’s political Right written by a figure from the Left. Titled ‘A Man Ready To Die’, her article said: “In this country, Mandela, whose ideas have been deeply influenced by India’s freedom struggle, is still not much more than a name.” She went on to say: “Although influenced by Marxist thought he did not become a communist. But there has often, he has said, been close collaboration between the African National Congress and the Communist Party.” And then she quoted Mandela directly: “Theoretical differences among those fighting against oppression are a luxury we cannot afford at this stage. What is more, communists were the only political group in South Africa who were prepared to treat Africans as human beings and their equals... Because of this there are many Africans today who tend to equate freedom with communism.”

Felton’s article showed the im-

portance of opposition unity in fighting oppression. South Africa’s liberation was still some three decades away, a period which would see Mandela jailed. It was night time for South Africa but somewhere its future ‘rainbow’ had been born.

Felton’s astonishing foresight helps us look back from these two June the 4ths and look ahead from them.

If that democrat of democrats, Nehru, could be faulted by seasoned democrats for fostering one-party rule, then, today, when a supremacist seeks to dominate Indian politics, the duty of democrats is clear. The pre-election example set by the Congress in backing Jignesh Mevani’s independent candidature in the Gujarat Assembly elections and that adopted by the Samajwadi Party, Bahujan Samaj Party, Congress, Nationalist Congress Party, Rashtriya Lok Dal, Rashtriya Janata Dal, Jharkhand Mukti Morcha in the Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Bihar by-elections won by them last week demands replication.

And if that leader of leaders, Mandela, could find it necessary to team up with South Africa’s communists to fight the racist oppression of apartheid, then, in India today all democratic parties must see the criticality of reaching out to that time-tested challenger of sectarianism – namely, the Left. They have nothing to lose and everything to gain if, in Tripura, West Bengal and Kerala in particular, they fight communal divisiveness in an alliance with India’s communist forces.

To borrow a Mandela phrase, India should see, in 2019, a truly rainbow outcome.

Gopal Krishna Gandhi is a former administrator, diplomat and Governor

# About a small Mauritian island

Why is India abandoning its commitment to secure the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace?



FRANÇOIS VERGÈS & VIJAY PRASHAD

Three hundred people live on the small Mauritian archipelago of Agaléga. They watch as their home is turned slowly into an Indian naval base. There is little that they can do. The government of Mauritius knows that there is far more to be gained from India than from the people of Agaléga. Mauritius is one of the main routes for foreign direct investment (FDI) into India. It earns Mauritius a considerable fortune in fees – money that is enough for Mauritius to renege on its pledge to its own citizens.

In 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Mauritius counterpart Anerood Jugnauth watched as Navtej Sarna (Ministry of External Affairs) and Sateevart Seebaluck (Cabinet Secretary, Mauritius) signed an agreement that allows India to “develop infrastructure” on the islands. The phrase is a euphemism for the building of military bases, which India is doing not only on Agaléga but also on Assumption Island (Seychelles).

Mauritius is the largest source of FDI into India, since multinational corporations have been able to take advantage of the India-Mauritius Double Taxation Avoidance Treaty and the lax tax regime to avoid paying taxes. After having given over Agaléga, Mauritius signed an amended treaty on taxes and by 2019 will effectively lose its status as the main funnel for FDI into India. Agaléga, which was the price for the extension of the treaty, will now be surrendered without benefit.

### Ocean as peace zone

On March 1, a group of Mauritians, Rodriguans and Agalégans met to form the Koalition Zilwa Pou Lape (Islanders Coalition for Peace). Solidarity with the people of Agaléga, as well as those in Chagos (Diego Garcia) and Assumption (Seychelles), animates this group. They have called for the Indian Ocean to be declared as a “zone of peace”.

The “zone of peace” idea takes us back to the 1970 Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit in Lusaka, Zambia. Various NAM members called upon all states “to respect the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace from which Great Power rivalries and competition, as well as bases” be excluded. They had in mind the 1965 excision of the Chagos archipelago from Mauritian territory by Great Britain, which

was then – in a 1966 treaty – handed over to the U.S. On Diego Garcia, one of the largest islands of the archipelago, the U.S. built a major naval base that quickly became essential in the Vietnam war. For the U.S., the “zone of peace” was a “very dangerous idea”. France, still a colonial power, did everything to stop this idea; La Réunion, south-west of Mauritius, became the centre of French naval military operations in the Indian Ocean after Djibouti won its independence from France in 1977. Nonetheless, the UN General Assembly voted a resolution in 1971 on the Declaration of the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace.

The idea of the Indian Ocean as a demilitarised area is not anachronistic. In 2014, National Security Adviser Ajit Doval evoked the idea of the zone of peace in his speech at the Galle Dialogue in Sri Lanka. What did he have in mind? A Chinese submarine had docked in Colombo, which raised the hackles of India.

### Keeping pace with China

In its “string of pearls” policy, China has built significant relations across the Indian Ocean, from Gwadar (Pakistan) to Hambantota (Sri Lanka) to Kyaukpnyu (Myanmar). A rattled India wants to exert itself in the same region and has developed reciprocal agreements with Australia, France and the U.S.



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to take advantage of bases as far flung as Cocos Islands (Australia) and La Réunion (France). Nuclear-armed ballistic missile submarines from India (Arihant) and from China (Song, Shang and Jin) will soon ply these waters. They will join the Ohio class (U.S.) and the Rubis class submarines (France) that already operate here.

China and India are bit players in the Indian Ocean. The main naval facilities here are held by the U.S.; their own string of pearls runs from Bahrain to Singapore. In the middle of this arc is Diego Garcia, from where Afghanistan and Iraq were bombed. Focus on the rivalry between China and India misses the long-standing problem concerning the U.S., which was the focus of the Lusaka resolution. In Lusaka, the NAM resolution said this base constituted “a direct threat to the independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and peaceful development of States of the region”. It remains a threat in

exactly this way.

The Koalition Zilwa Pou Lape’s statement evokes the full measure of the NAM statement but also goes beyond that. It speaks of the need to recognise the people of the Indian Ocean as one people with a “common past and a common destiny”; where the waters are treated as common property rather than as corporate and military property.

Mr. Jugnauth left the office of the Prime Minister not long after he oversaw the deal over Agaléga. He has been a fierce defender of the rights of Chagos, the islands that house Diego Garcia. When Chagos was taken by the British, Mr. Jugnauth’s predecessor, Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, had essentially given up the island to win independence for Mauritius.

Mr. Jugnauth has done the same with Agaléga, forfeiting it to India. India, which championed the zone of peace concept at Lusaka, has now fallen into old colonial habits. In a decade or so, the people of Agaléga will take their case, like the Chagosians, to the UN General Assembly. Like them, they will ask for their rights. India, like Great Britain, will then be in the dock.

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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.

### Getting battle ready

The Bharatiya Janata Party might have lost a string of prestigious by-elections. But a few swallows do not necessarily make a summer (Editorial page, “Chasing a rainbow alliance”, June 2). If the Opposition wants to pose a meaningful challenge to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP in the 2019 Lok Sabha poll, its very first task should be to find a credible common leader and then draw up a mutually acceptable agenda. Prospects for such a poll outcome are bleak considering the present reach and strength of each of the parties that is likely to be a part of the proposed grand alliance.

C.G. KURIKOSE,  
Kothamangalam, Kerala

■ The Opposition seems to have finally discovered the magic formula to stop the BJP juggernaut – the

consolidation of anti-BJP votes. However, it is debatable whether the rainbow metaphor is an apt depiction of the grand alliance of non-BJP parties. A rainbow is not merely a juxtaposition of different colours. It also conveys a sense of essential unity and wholeness. Individual colours seamlessly blend into the larger design of the whole. The Opposition alliance, on the other hand, does not convey a sense of organic unity. The only thing common is their hatred for the BJP. Whether the Karnataka model turns out to be an exemplary model of Opposition unity or a bad experiment that is not worth duplicating at the Centre will depend on how the Congress-JD(S) coalition performs in the next one year.

V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN,  
Thiruvananthapuram

### Kerala’s Nipah vigil

The commendable improvements in health-care delivery on account of an able administrative and medical set-up is evident in the way Kerala is tackling the Nipah virus outbreak (‘Ground Zero’ page, “Anatomy of an outbreak”, June 2). The importance of such a public health model becomes all the more significant especially at a time when we are constantly staring at instances of medical negligence such as Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh. Coordinated efforts by medical experts, dedicated nursing staff (a selfless nurse, Lini Puthusseri even sacrificed her life in the process), concerned Central and State government officials and health workers are what helped in containing an outbreak of such severity.

ANJALI B.,  
Thiruvananthapuram

■ The report was an interesting read. The efficiency of the administration in containing the virus is a welcome change against the backdrop of the devastating outcomes of epidemics we are much used to. Certainly, the high literacy rate and the level of awareness of the common man in Kerala must have also made the task of the local administration easier. However, the question of how the virus entered the human chain remains a mystery. The Kerala experience and model must be upheld as a template in health-care management for the rest of India.

KRISHNAGOPAL DHARANI,  
Adoni, Andhra Pradesh

■ The article has given words to the brilliance of India’s doctors and the effective response of the Kerala government. The fight may not be over, but it is

reassuring to know that the State is in full control of the situation. The outbreak and its handling are a case study in effective governance.

MAZIN MEHABOOB  
CHAKKARATHODI,  
Mumbai

### IPL betting

The report, “Arbaaz admits role in IPL betting: police” (June 3), is what prompts me

### CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

The picture caption that accompanied the report “Mayawati calls bungalow Kanshi Ram memorial” (June 3, 2018, some early editions) erroneously referred to Mayawati as *Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister*. It should have been *former Chief Minister*. The caption was corrected for later editions.

The report headlined “Citizenship Bill may have to wait for House nod” (June 2, 2018) erroneously referred to *Tarun Gogoi* as the Chief Minister of Assam. It should have been *Sarbananda Sonowal*.

In a Weekend supplement story “Give us this day our daily bread” (June 2, 2018), the reference to “unwed women” should be corrected to read as “unwed mothers”.

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