



The visible hand

BJP must not stake claim to form a Ministry in Karnataka without an absolute majority

The political crisis in Karnataka that has been brewing for months has boiled over, threatening the Congress-Janata Dal(S) coalition government. With 13 of its MLAs resigning from the Assembly in phases, and one independent withdrawing his support, the coalition's original strength of 118 in the 224-seat House appears to have come down to 104. If all the resignations are found valid and accepted by the Speaker, the halfway mark will drop from 113 to 106. The BJP has 105 MLAs and the support of independent MLA Nagesh, who has resigned as a Minister. All the Congress and JD (S) Ministers have resigned to allow the leadership the space to lure back the dissidents. With allegations of bribery, and abduction and confinement of lawmakers, what is unfolding is a mockery of democracy and a shameful disregard for the 2018 verdict. Though there are contradictions in the coalition and both parties had fought last year's election separately, post-poll coalitions are a legitimate and honourable route to the formation of a government in a hung Assembly. The legislators driven by nothing more than their greed are not setting a good example. Even if the Congress and the JD (S) manage to quell the rebellion and save the government, the truce will be dubious and tainted.

The BJP's hand in the crisis is not invisible. In fact, its imprimatur is unmistakable in the turmoil. The party, which emerged as the single largest in the election but short of a majority, has not been able to accept the verdict and play the role of a responsible Opposition. The BJP's maximalist approach of seizing power by all means and in all places may have served it well in terms of expanding its footprint. But this approach does not conform to its claimed adherence to democracy. In Arunachal Pradesh and Goa, the BJP had acted on its philosophy that the pursuit of power justifies all means. In Karnataka, the party has used the strategy of engineering resignations of MLAs to force by-elections several times over the last decade. Given this pattern, and considering the BJP State unit's relentless attempts to destabilise the coalition from the word go, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's protestations in Parliament on Monday that the BJP had nothing to do with the current crisis in Karnataka carries little credibility. The party has meanwhile said that it would seek to form an alternative government, should the coalition crumble. The BJP must resist that temptation and instead wait for the results of the by-elections caused by the resignations. If the coalition collapses under its own weight, any alternative arrangement that is short of an absolute majority of the total strength of the House will be shaky and lacking in political legitimacy. That situation is best avoided.

A regrettable conviction

Mr. Vaiko being found guilty of sedition strengthens the case to scrap Section 124A

The conviction of prominent pro-LTTE politician Vaiko on the charge of sedition, based on a typically impassioned speech he had made in Chennai a decade ago, is a worrying development. Even though Section 124A, the IPC section that makes sedition an offence, attracts either a three-year term or imprisonment for life, the trial court sentenced him to a somewhat lenient one-year jail term. Yet, it is a matter of concern that political speeches are criminalised to the point of being deemed an offence against the state. Further, the timing of a political leader being found guilty of sedition is quite inopportune. In recent years, there has been an alarming rise in sedition charges being used to quell political dissent. This conviction will needlessly send out a message that such provisions are necessary to protect the government against being brought into hatred and contempt. Also, it comes at a time when demands to scrap the section is gaining momentum. There is greater recognition now than in the past that Section 124A is neither relevant nor needed today. The Law Commission released a consultation paper highlighting arguments for its reconsideration. There is a body of opinion that a modern democracy does not need a free speech restriction based on political concepts such as disloyalty and disaffection towards the state. Britain, which introduced the offence of sedition in India in 1870 to check the use of speech and writing to criticise its colonial administration, has abolished it.

It is true that Mr. Vaiko had unleashed a diatribe against the Union government by accusing it of betraying the Sri Lankan Tamil cause, and holding it responsible for the death of Tamil civilians in large numbers. However, whether his harshly worded indictment amounts to incitement of violence against the government is debatable. The speech was made at a function to mark the release of the Tamil version of a book that accused the Congress-led regime of complicity in Sri Lanka's military campaign. The court ruled that his allegations would sow the seeds of disaffection and hatred towards the government. Here is where the real mischief of Section 124A lies. Its definition of sedition as anything that excites disaffection against the government, or brings it under hatred and contempt, is too wide and can take in its fold not only incitement to taking up arms but also harmless, even if strident, criticism. In 1962, the Supreme Court limited its scope to acts that show actual intent or a tendency to create disorder or foment violence. Regrettably, the court has held that anyone who heard Mr. Vaiko's speech would develop hatred towards the government; that "mere advocacy" is the essence of the crime, and there need not be actual violence as a consequence. Higher courts will have the final say on whether he was guilty, but the case for abrogating Section 124A just became stronger.

Reinforcing caste hierarchies

The Maratha quota is a case in point of what a progressive Indian polity should not be doing



ASHWINI DESHPANDE

The description "backward" to define communities is yet another colonial relic which we, as a collective, embrace with such enthusiasm, that we almost forget what it is supposed to mean. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the arguments in favour of reservations by landowning castes that are politically and economically dominant. The demand for being classified as "backward" by Marathas has been ongoing since the 1990s. With the announcement of the inclusion of Marathas into the Socially and Educationally Backward Communities (SEBC), the Maharashtra government has, once again, yielded to the demands of this powerful caste group. This would be the third attempt in the last five years to grant this quota, which has been repeatedly struck down by the courts.

Turning to the state

The ferocity with which dominant castes, mostly rich, landowning, politically influential communities (Marathas in Maharashtra, Patidars in Gujarat, Jats in Haryana, Kapus in Andhra Pradesh), have turned towards the state and the public sector, demanding quotas in jobs and higher education, indicates that the economic growth in the last two decades, such as it was, did not manage to swing the fortunes of a large proportion of these communities upward enough. Their demand for being included in the quota bandwagon can be seen as an expression of their desire for good jobs and stable sources of livelihood for their youth, as their traditional sources

of livelihoods become more fragile due to a widespread and multifaceted agrarian crisis.

Yet, quotas are not magic wands that create jobs. And everyone would like a good job or a decent stable source of livelihood. Given that public sector jobs represent a shrinking and much coveted pie, what should the yardstick be to determine the validity of the demand for quotas?

Insights from data

What does the evidence tell us? Rajesh Ramchandran and I looked at data from the India Human Development Survey (IHDS), and compared Jats in Haryana, Patels in Gujarat and Marathas in Maharashtra. We compared these to Brahmins, non-Brahmin forward castes, existing Other Backward Classes (OBC) and Scheduled Castes-Scheduled Tribes, in their respective States.

The results are very stark. Marathas, similar to Jats and Patels, are more likely to own or cultivate land than all other social groups in their respective States. Marathas have a lower per capita consumption expenditure than Maharashtra Brahmins, but are at the same level as other forward castes and OBCs, and significantly higher than SC-STs. Marathas, on an average, are as poor as Brahmins and other forward castes, but less poor than OBCs and SC-STs. Maratha households have greater access to electricity compared to SC-STs. Marathas are 6 and 14 percentage points more likely than OBCs and SC-STs, respectively, to have access to a flush toilet in Maharashtra. The average years of education for Marathas is 6.58, which is lower than Brahmins by 2.18 years, but is similar to other forward castes and OBCs, and 1.22 years more than the SC-STs. The Marathas are 13 percentage points less likely to have completed 12 years



PRASHANT NAKHE

or more of education as compared to the Brahmins, but are very similar to the forward castes, and do 2 and 6 percentage points better than the OBCs and SC-ST, respectively. Summing up, in most of the crucial socio-economic indicators, the Marathas are second only to Brahmins in the State, and are significantly better off than all other social groups.

The main bone of contention and the main motivation for quotas is access to government jobs. The surprising fact is that even before being included in the quota, the access of Marathas to government jobs is already similar to that of Brahmins, and higher than that for other forward castes and OBCs, and not different from that for SC-STs.

We examined both rounds of the IHDS data to see whether the position of these dominant communities deteriorated relative to the other groups. The short answer is no.

In terms of average per capita expenditure, their position has improved over time. In terms of probability of being poor, there is no worsening. There is, however, some evidence of a decline in the probability of owning or cultivating land, which could be the reason for the heightened anxiety.

Factors underlying anxieties

The Marathas are a predominantly agricultural community which be-

nefited from the Green and White Revolutions. The structural transformation of the Indian economy, especially the declining importance of agriculture, and growth of corporatised agriculture and water shortages affecting productivity, have meant that these groups feel increasingly vulnerable.

Yet, data show that the Marathas have lower levels of casualisation of the labour force in both the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors, as compared to the OBCs and SC-STs.

Overall, there is discontent among powerful farming communities due to the perception that real economic power lies in the hands of the big corporations, and the state, overtly or covertly, acts in their interest. These communities feel their power slipping away or eroding, in addition to feeling ill-prepared to shift towards urban, formal sector livelihood opportunities.

Individuals or communities who feel strongly that the odds of economic success are stacked against them are more likely to feel deprived. Other estimates from IHDS panel data show that "forward castes were about 30 per cent more likely to feel that they were worse off in 2011-12 than in 2004-05". Thus, perceptions of being worse-off are real: our analysis suggests that these perceptions are exactly that - feelings - not supported by evidence on the ground.

Having said this, economic changes that give rise to widespread anxieties, definitely need to be understood and genuine grievances, including those that might come from forward castes dealing with agrarian transformations, need to be addressed.

However, is reservation the real answer? Given increasing privatisation, the base, i.e. total jobs that are eligible for reservations, is al-

ready shrinking. Our other research shows how existing OBCs and SC-STs are further lagging behind upper castes on a range of material indicators. In this context, extending quotas to relatively richer and powerful groups would amount to diluting the already small and shrinking entitlement for communities that are truly disadvantaged and discriminated against.

A dilution

Recently, the Marathas have had two main demands: one, being made quota beneficiaries, and two, the repeal of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. The State government has, once again, given in to the first. Should it consider the second, ours would be no country for the most marginalised.

Quite apart from turning the term "backward" on its head, the writing on the wall is clear. Despite the rhetoric that accompanied the 10% quota, the plan is not to move to a caste-free system. It is to dilute the entitlement of castes that are objectively "backward", stigmatised and discriminated against.

In the context of the lynching of Dalits for pursuing their traditional occupations, snatching away their livelihoods in the name of cow protection, violence targeted at inter-caste marriages, and other violence related to temple entry or for not following the illegal social norms dictated by untouchability, this move would likely reinforce the obnoxious hierarchies of the caste system. A forward-looking, progressive Indian polity should be discussing instruments to weaken the deadly tentacles of caste, not embolden and reinforce existing hierarchies.

Ashwini Deshpande is Professor of Economics, Ashoka University

A shot at economic logic

India needs to anticipate the promising impact of the African Continental Free Trade Area



MAHESH SACHDEV

The 12th Extra-Ordinary Summit of the African Union (AU) which concluded on July 8 at Niamey, the capital of the Niger Republic, saw 54 of its member states signing the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) for goods and services. Of these countries, 27 have already ratified it. Actual cross-border free trade could start by July 2020 with an elimination of custom duties on 90% of the tariff-lines. If taken to its logical conclusion, this audacious project would eventually create an African Common Market of 1.2 billion people and a GDP of over \$3.4 billion - the metrics are comparable to India's. The AfCFTA would be world's largest FTA, and in a world dependent on African markets and commodities, it would have global impact.

Hurdles and optimism

However, there are three main reasons to be sceptical about the viability of the AfCFTA. First, the African Union (founded as the Organisation of African Unity in 1963) has been largely ineffective in dealing with the continent's myriad problems such as decolonisation, underdevelopment, Islamic terrorism and the Arab Spring. The AU's grand plans, including

the Muammar Qadhafi-funded Africa Unity project, have been spectacular flops. It is, therefore, natural to take the AfCFTA, the AU's most ambitious project so far, with a ladleful of salt. Second, serious political, organisational and logistical challenges to the AfCFTA notwithstanding, the national economies in Africa are generally weak with a low manufacturing base. They also lack competitiveness and mutual complementarity. Only a sixth of Africa's current total trade is within the continent. Third, the AfCFTA seems to be counter-cyclical to the ongoing global protectionist trends as seen in the U.S.-China trade conflict, Brexit and the stalemates at the World Trade Organisation and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. World trade is likely to grow only by 2.6% in 2019, a quarter of last year's figure. Commodity prices are stagnant and globalisation is often being reversed. With Africa accounting for only 3% of global trade, can the AfCFTA defy the contrarian global tendencies?

Still, there are reasons to be cautiously optimistic. Given the strong global headwinds including a cooling Chinese ardour for Africa, greater collective self-reliance through African economic integration makes eminent sense. Further, the AfCFTA can build upon the experience of the continent's five regional economic blocks. While the AU Commission is not famous for efficient planning, it has prepared an extensive road map towards the AfCFTA with preliminary



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

work on steps such as incremental tariff reduction, elimination of non-tariff barriers, supply chains and dispute settlement. In December 2018, it organised the first Intra-African Trade Fair in Cairo with 1,086 exhibitors signing \$32 billion in business deals. A new breed of African transnational corporations such as Dangote, MTN, Ecobank and Jumia have continental ambitions. Indeed, the logistical and financial networks across the continent are poor and customs formalities are foreboding, but these can be eventually overcome with stronger political will. Moreover, vigorous "informal" trade across porous national borders is already a fact of African life.

Thus, by adopting the AfCFTA, African leaders are only following the economic logic. Looking into the future, a recent UN projection showed that nearly half the world's population growth between now and 2050 would come from sub-Saharan Africa, the population of which would double to nearly two billion. This surge in

consumer base would make the proposed AfCFTA even more important.

From the Indian angle

Africa is already an important economic partner for India with total annual merchandise trade estimated at \$70 billion or nearly a tenth of our global trade. India is Africa's third largest trading partner. While India's global exports have been largely stagnant, those to Africa have surged. For instance, exports to Nigeria in 2018-19 grew by over 33% over the previous year. Africa still has unfulfilled demand for Indian commodities, especially foodstuff, finished products (automobiles, pharmaceuticals, consumer goods) and services such as IT/IT-Enabled Service, health care and education, skilling, expertise in management and banking, financial services and insurance.

India needs to anticipate the AfCFTA's likely impact on its interests and try to influence and leverage it to enhance India-African economic ties. In principle, African economies becoming more formalised and transparent would be in India's interest. While local manufactured items and services may ultimately compete with Indian exports, Indian firms can co-produce them in Africa. If handled in a proactive manner, the AfCFTA is likely to open new opportunities for Indian stakeholders in fast-moving consumer goods manufacturing, connectivity projects and the creation of a financial backbone. India donated \$15 million to

Niger to fund the Niamey AU Summit. As the next step, New Delhi can help the AU Commission prepare the requisite architecture, such as common external tariffs, competition policy, intellectual property rights, and natural persons' movement. It can also identify various African transnational corporations which are destined to play a greater role in a future continental common market and engage with them strategically. The cross-linkages of a three million strong Indian diaspora spread across Africa can also be very valuable.

Finally, once the AfCFTA is accepted as beneficial game changer, the African elite could perhaps contemplate crossing another Rubicon: an India-African FTA.

Before Africa was "discovered" by the West, it had a thriving overland trade. Large camel caravans ferried commodities such as ivory, gold, mineral salt, precious stones and slaves across prosperous trading centres such as Timbuktu, Ghana, Kano, Burnu, Agadez, Edo, Zinder, Ghat, Addis Ababa, Dar es Salaam and Cairo. Subsequent colonialism and mercantilism destroyed internal trade routes, replacing them with an ecosystem in which Africans had better links with their foreign "mentors" than among themselves. By the AfCFTA, the Africans are only trying to correct this historic distortion.

Mahesh Sachdev was the Indian High Commissioner to Nigeria and the Ambassador to Algeria. He is the author of 'Nigeria: A Business Manual'

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.

Coalition power-play

The resignation of 13 lawmakers in Karnataka has exposed the innate vulnerability of fractured verdicts (Page 1, "CM to seek postponement of session," July 8). Governance in the State has gone for a toss as a result of constant political manoeuvring. It would be sheer naivete here to believe that the ruling party at Centre has had no role to play. However, this does not absolve the opportunistic coalition in the State of its responsibility either. Both groups have been playing power games, unmindful of ethics or people's interests. D.V.G. SANKARARAO, Vizianagaram, Andhra Pradesh

Vacuum at the top

The major reasons for the Congress's debacle were both its inability to remain a political force to reckon with and the BJP's success in convincing the Indian voter that they needed a party with a Hindu orientation at the helm (Editorial page, "The search for Chakraya", July 8). Rahul Gandhi failed to impress as a leader. References to the past, as done in the article, cannot justify the perpetuation of rule by the Nehru-Gandhi family for this long. The Congress has so far done disservice to the nation by blocking the emergence of more efficient leaders. V. LAKSHMANAN, Tirupur, Tamil Nadu

Some of us old-timers were delighted to see a Gandhi remembering and recalling K. Kamaraj, arguably the most self-effacing, disciplined and dedicated Congress president. We remember Kamaraj for the historic Avadi session when the party adopted as its aim the establishment of a socialist pattern of society. Jawaharlal Nehru trusted and admired Kamaraj as party president. But Indira Gandhi didn't. It didn't take much time for her to make the party "her field of action". This dynastic hold continues. Rahul Gandhi's resignation is not acceptable to the 'hangers-on' in the party. And though there are many such 'hangers-on' in Congress, there are also

youngsters who are committed, sincere and dedicated to the cause of the party. Mr. Gandhi has been wise in resigning as president. But he should ensure the Congress does not get a dummy leader as replacement. C.V. VENUGOPALAN, Palakkad, Kerala

Trading in EI leather

The Budget announcement of abolition of export duty on East India (EI) leather comes as a welcome corrective measure. Produced predominantly in Tamil Nadu for centuries, EI leather was exported for more than hundred years to European countries. Tanneries used natural materials like avaram,

Konnar barks and wattle extract and emitted less harmful effluents as compared to chrome tanneries. However, vested interests in the leather industry influenced the government and trade in EI leather was restricted first through quota and then using export duty. Many tanneries in places like Tiruchi Dindigul and Vellore were forced to shut down. The removal of export duty can spur employment opportunities and bring development to Tamil Nadu's backward regions. V.N. MOHAMED HUSSAIN, Chennai

Past continuous

The article, "Sub-soil water for Madras" (Op-Ed page,

'From the Archives', July 8) reminded me of the water crisis in 1969. A severe drought prevailed and thousands of animals died. The present crisis in Tamil Nadu is not much different and this is in no small measure due to the over-exploitation of natural resources. Former U.S. Congressman William Bourke Cockran once said: "The earth is a generous mother; she will provide in plentiful abundance food for all her children if they will but cultivate her soil in justice and in peace." We have to care for nature if we expect it to be kind to us. GOPAL MARIMUTHU, Chennai

MORE LETTERS ONLINE: www.hindu.com/opinion/letters/