



## Quota politics

The Adityanath regime's move to confer SC status on 17 backward castes has no legal basis

The Uttar Pradesh government's latest attempt to extend the benefits available to Scheduled Castes to 17 castes that are now under the Other Backward Classes (OBC) list has no legal basis and appears to be aimed at making political gains ahead of a round of by-elections to the State Assembly. It is fairly well-known that Parliament alone is vested with the power to include or exclude any entry in the SC list under Article 341 of the Constitution. Union Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment Thawar Chand Gehlot has clarified this position in Parliament, while suggesting that the State government follow due process. Uttar Pradesh has unsuccessfully tried to get some backward castes declared as Scheduled Castes in the past, once during the tenure of Mulayam Singh, and again during the rule of Akhilesh Yadav. In 2016, a notification was issued stating that 17 castes were to be treated as Scheduled Castes. The matter reached the Allahabad High Court, but in an interim order in March 2017, the court observed that in case any certificates were issued on the basis of the notification, these would be subject to the outcome of the litigation. More than two years later, this order has been utilised by the Yogi Adityanath government to restore the proposal in an oblique manner. Though it is quite apparent that it is not a judicial directive, the State government has asked authorities in all districts to issue certificates to those from these castes.

No doubt, these 17 castes comprise the most disadvantaged among the backward classes. Categorising the backward classes into two or three sections has been seen as one way to apportion the benefits of reservation among many social groups. In such an exercise, these castes may qualify for a compartment within the OBC quota. However, treating them as Scheduled Castes is beset with problems. For one thing, they may not qualify to be treated as SCs because they may not have suffered untouchability and social discrimination. Given the legal limitations on the State government's power to expand the SC list, it is not difficult to discern a political motive behind any move to confer SC status on sections of the OBC. When the Samajwadi Party was in power, one could say moving them to the SC list would have freed up more opportunities for the influential and politically dominant Yadavs in the OBC category. For the present BJP regime, the move could help carve out a vote bank from the newly declared SC groups. The Bahujan Samaj Party, which has opposed the move both in Parliament and outside, understands that new additions would shrink opportunities for the existing castes in the SC list. That is why its leader, Ms. Mayawati, has hinted that the reservation pie can be shared among more claimants only if its size is increased. The U.P. government would be well-advised to avoid misleading vulnerable sections with the promise of SC status.

## The last four

India has retained the tag of favourite as the cricket World Cup enters the semifinal stage

The ICC World Cup has entered its business end much after it commenced on May 30. Including the inaugural game that featured host England and South Africa at the Oval in London, 41 matches were played, while four contests became victims of the fickle English weather. In the lead-up to cricket's premier championship, India, England and Australia were the favourites and the expectation was that one among New Zealand, Pakistan, South Africa and Sri Lanka, would be the fourth contender. As the dust settles on the league phase, India, Australia, England and New Zealand qualified for the semifinals. Virat Kohli's men topped the table with consistent performances. The solitary loss against England was more of a wake-up call than a serious setback to the path to the knockout phase. This Tuesday, India will take on New Zealand at Manchester's Old Trafford and the second semifinal pits old foes Australia and England at Birmingham's Edgbaston on Thursday. The Men in Blue have an edge but it would be prudent to remember that in the warm-up fixture at the Oval on May 25, New Zealand won by six wickets. Since then Kohli's men have gained strength. India's arsenal rides on the top-order, which has Rohit Sharma top-lining it with 647 runs and a mind-boggling five centuries, besides K.L. Rahul and skipper Kohli. The middle order, though, is under-cooked. Hardik Pandya and Rishabh Pant had their moments while M.S. Dhoni punctuated a series of dots with a hit to the fence.

The bowling, though, has its fangs thanks to a fast unit helmed by the incisive Jasprit Bumrah. That India masked its weaknesses and overcame the loss of players like Shikhar Dhawan and Vijay Shankar to injuries is evidence that the outfit has resilience. New Zealand, meanwhile, has always been an opponent where the sum is bigger than the parts. In Kane Williamson it has a supreme batsman and an astute leader, but the Black Caps tailed off with three losses and the slide has to be reversed if India is to be challenged. As for Australia, the defending champion leans on the opening combine of captain Aaron Finch and David Warner, Steve Smith, and the left-arm menace of speedster Mitchell Starc, who leads the attack with 26 scalps, while maverick Glenn Maxwell lends the X-factor. Finally, England gets a chance to show that it can excel in limited overs cricket; it is banking on the belligerence of men like Jonny Bairstow, Jason Roy and Ben Stokes. It is an interesting mix at the last-four stage, and all that the eventual champion will need are two days of excellence. Anything could happen, as South Africa showed by defeating Australia in the last league encounter. But the force is with India and a final at Lord's on July 14 beckons.

# The search for a Chakrayya

Led by a new dynamic leader, the Congress party must redeem the nation's trust which it has not lost, only let go awhile



GOPALKRISHNA GANDHI

Resignations are not an intention. Nor are they something to be offered, like an explanation or an apology. There is no such thing as "I am resigning". You either resign or do not resign.

When, immediately after the Indian National Congress's comprehensive defeat in the general election, 2019, Rahul Gandhi announced his resignation from the office of President of the Congress, he did something that was politically responsible. His mother's instinctive declining of the Prime Ministership of India in 2004 was from the crest of victory. It bore the moral carat of instinct. It was universally hailed.

Rahul Gandhi's relinquishing of his high and historic position 15 years later was from the hollow of defeat. It carried the ethical gramage of principle. It was applauded by democrats across the country.

### The family factor

But the ideationally null and valuationally empty in the Grand Old Party were a-tremble. They feared that their entries in the Gandhi-Nehru family's ledgers of loyalty would go up in the air. They resisted the idea. Tacticians of power play in the party also were unsure, to the point of panic, about who or what could replace 'the family' as the Congress's selling-point. These individuals may not be judged too hastily, for they have never known their party without the Nehru-Gandhis. True, as Congress Presi-

dent, K. Kamaraj's was a self-powering position. But even then, the fact of Indira Gandhi being Prime Minister made the party (as Kamaraj himself soon realised) as much her field of action as it was that of the party chief and his Working Committee. So, barring the atypical interlude when P.V. Narasimha Rao was Prime Minister and when the quizzical Sitaram Kesri headed it, the Congress has been dependent on descendants of Jawaharlal Nehru.

Four generations of them have done the thinking, planning, strategising, campaigning, defending, leading for them. They have been the party, the party them. And it has to be said, not just in fairness to the Gandhi-Nehrus but in fairness to modern Indian history, that they have played this role through the most trying periods in the party's history, facing the fustilades of India's growing disenchantment with dynastic politics. They have done this from the loneliness and vulnerability that is the lot of any pinnacle.

### Stepping down

Seen against this backdrop, Rahul Gandhi's announcing of his resignation was as cathartic for his party as it was natural for democracy. It was as incredible for the Congress as it was admirable for conscientious politics, as unacceptable to hangers-on as it was admirable to the disinterestedly interested. After four weeks and more of uncertainty about the seriousness of his intention, he has had to re-assert, as he did on July 4, that he has resigned, that he is not Congress President any longer, that the party must now find another leader. The interval of doubt has certainly dulled the shine of his initial announcement and reduced its impact. But late is



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better than never. He has relinquished status, he has retrieved stature. He has been brave, he has been wise.

And now that his resignation is 'official', will he be that which is about more than being wise? Will he be humble? Not in the theatricality of formal self-diminution which Golda Meir put down in one of her Ministers with, "Oh don't be so humble-humble; you are not that great!" No, not in the sense of an obligatory humility but of genuine preparedness for another person being effective and better than oneself as the party's sentinel and captain. Will he move to the side, not to maintain a side-view of things, not to prompt from the wings, not allowing anyone to tell him to be the power behind the throne, but to actually be just a plain billeted soldier of the party? If he does he will reap a harvest of genuine goodwill which is different from fawning deference. And, freed from the compulsion of functioning as an alternative Prime Minister and of out-doing Prime Minister Narendra Modi, he will bring to his new leader, his Congress President, the dividend of a new reading of the public pulse, a new understanding of the popular will from the real-world's pitted ground rather than the distancing plinth of a hyped rostrum.

The humility that he could do with, has a very hard, practical side to it as well. It is about the process of the identification of the new Congress President. Those who are loath to part from the family's apron strings will say to him and, even worse, nudge the party towards the appointment of a person who is 'a tried and trusted family loyalist'. That way lies the party's interment.

### Change and how

Rahul Gandhi must discourage that emphatically. His statement that the party needs to change fundamentally is most reassuring. It is in fact, redemptive. As much as his earlier statement that the new President should not be from the Nehru-Gandhi family. The question that needs to be asked, therefore, is: Should not that change mean that the party President is elected as openly and as seriously as Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose was elected, in 1938 and 1939? Netaji, it will be recalled, defeated Gandhiji's chosen candidate Pattabhi Sitaramaya. In that election and its aftermath lies another lesson for today's Congress. The party's new President should be elected as 'grandly' as Netaji was but she or he should not be treated as Netaji was, by the Gandhi-loyal Working Committee of the day. The new President should be left completely free to form the Working Committee, from out of persons whose service-mindedness not boss-mindedness, is manifest.

On May 31, 1947, Gandhiji lamented the dying of a young Congressman, Chakrayya, with these words: "The time is fast approaching when India will have to elect the first President of the Republic. I would have proposed the name of Chakrayya had he been alive..." Not many had heard of Chakrayya

then, hardly anyone knows of him today. Chakrayya was a Dalit from Andhra Pradesh. Now he is a metaphor, the unknown Congressman from a deprived background, uncompromised by power, unspoilt by flattery, untempted by office, who, if entrusted with the responsibility and left free to wield it, can startle us. Such a Congressman or Congresswoman is impossible to name. But is not non-existent. An election, openly announced and freely conducted, can yet surprise us. No leader will be found if the attempt is to find a dummy, not a leader. A dummy President will make a dummy of the party.

### Word of advice

A final word for and to what I would like to see as the New Congress. In 1923, the Congress gave of itself the Congress's Swaraj Party. Headed by Deshabandhu C.R. Das, with Pandit Motilal Nehru as its General Secretary, it functioned as the party's legislative wing, opposing the Raj's unjust raj, while the main Congress Party functioned outside legislatures as a mass movement led by Gandhiji. The Congress MPs and MLAs of today and the Congress Ministries where they exist, should see themselves as the Swaraj Party of today, leading the charge in legislatures, legislatively. The Congress Party outside, led by a new dynamic leader, the Chakrayya equivalent, should galvanise its popular base programmatically, addressing life and death issues on our natural resources, our farms and mines, and with a zero-corruption, zero-cronyism, zero-communalism plural ethic, redeem the nation's trust which it has not lost, only let go awhile.

Gopal Krishna Gandhi is a former administrator, diplomat and governor

# Reclaiming the Indo-Pacific narrative

The ASEAN's intent to be in the driving seat is clear as it seeks to manage the emerging regional order with policy moves



HARSH V. PANT

At the 34th summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Bangkok in June, its member states finally managed to articulate a collective vision for the Indo-Pacific region in a document titled "The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific". At a time when the geopolitical contestation between China and the United States is escalating, it has become imperative for the ASEAN to reclaim the strategic narrative in its favour in order to underscore its centrality in the emerging regional order.

Though there were divisions among ASEAN member states in the run-up to the summit, they managed to come up with a non-binding document. It underlines in the document the need for an inclusive and "rules-based framework" to "help to generate momentum for building strategic trust and win-win cooperation in the region". An awareness of the emergence of a great power contest around its vicinity pervades the document as it argues that "the rise of material powers, i.e.

economic and military, requires avoiding the deepening of mistrust, miscalculation and patterns of behaviour based on a zero-sum game".

Despite individual differences and bilateral engagements ASEAN member states have with the U.S. and China, the regional grouping can now claim to have a common approach as far as the Indo-Pacific region is concerned and which the Prime Minister of Thailand, Prayuth Chan-ocha, suggested "should also complement existing frameworks of cooperation at the regional and sub-regional levels and generate tangible and concrete deliverables for the benefit of the region's peoples".

### Conduct in the China Sea

What has been interesting also is the ASEAN member states agreeing to push for a quick conclusion of a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, an increasingly contested maritime space which is claimed largely by China and in parts by the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia. Tensions continue to rise over the militarisation of this waterway; in June, a Philippine fishing boat sank after it was rammed by a Chinese vessel. It is hoped that the first draft of the code for negotiations will see the light by this year end. With these moves, the ASEAN is clearly signalling its intent to be in the driv-



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ing seat as it seeks to manage the geopolitical churn around it.

Engaged with the Indo-Pacific concept for some time now, it has now been pushed into articulating its formal response with a sense of urgency after other major regional players began laying their cards on the table. The release of the U.S. Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy report in June – it focusses on preserving a "free and open Indo-Pacific" in the face of a more "assertive China" – was perhaps the final push that was needed to bring the ASEAN discussion on the subject to a close. Japan had already unveiled its Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept in 2016, while Australia released its Foreign Policy White Paper in 2017, detailing its Indo-Pacific vision centred around security, openness and prosperity. Prime Minister Narendra Modi articulated India's Indo-Pacific vision at the Shangri-la Dialogue in 2018, with India even setting up an Indo-Pacific wing in the

Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) earlier this year.

For a long time, the ASEAN has been reluctant to frontally engage with the Indo-Pacific discourse as the perception was that it may antagonise China. But there was soon a realisation that such an approach might allow others to shape the regional architecture and marginalise the ASEAN itself. And so the final outlook that the ASEAN has come up with effectively seeks to take its own position rather than following any one power's lead.

### The framework

While the ASEAN outlook does not see the Indo-Pacific as one continuous territorial space, it emphasises development and connectivity, underlining the need for maritime cooperation, infrastructure connectivity and broader economic cooperation. The ASEAN is signalling that it would seek to avoid making the region a platform for major power competition. Instead its frame of reference is economic cooperation and dialogue. The fact that the ASEAN has gone ahead and articulated an Indo-Pacific outlook is in itself a seeming challenge to China which refuses to validate the concept. But the ASEAN's approach is aimed at placating China by not allowing itself to align with the U.S.'s vision for the region completely.

India has welcomed the ASEAN's outlook on the Indo-Pacific as it sees "important elements of convergence" with its own approach towards the region. During U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's visit to India in June, India was categorical that it is "for something" in the Indo-Pacific and "not against somebody", seeking to carefully calibrate its relations with the U.S. and China in this geopolitically critical region. As External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has suggested "[and] that something is peace, security, stability, prosperity and rules". India continues to invest in the Indo-Pacific; on the sidelines of the recent G-20 Summit in Osaka, Japan, Mr. Modi held discussions on the Indo-Pacific region with U.S. President Donald Trump and Japan Prime Minister Shinzo Abe with a focus on improving regional connectivity and infrastructure development.

With the ASEAN finally coming to terms with its own role in the Indo-Pacific, the ball is now in the court of other regional stakeholders to work with the regional grouping to shape a balance of power in the region which favours inclusivity, stability and economic prosperity.

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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 Karnataka

The resignation of 12 Karnataka legislators, if accepted, could spell the end for the Congress-Janata Dal (Secular) coalition (Page 1, "Karnataka govt. teeters as 12 lawmakers resign," July 7). The alliance, from the outset, had no clear road map either for the State's development or for addressing issues such as drought and drinking water problems. Its only agenda was to cling on to power, even if this meant ignoring the differences among elected representatives. Members of the Congress had been unhappy as they were fighting the JD(S) in different constituencies for survival. The Lok Sabha election results acted as the final nail in the coffin.

M.R.G. MURTHY,  
Mysuru

■ Karnataka has had an infamous track record when it comes to coalition

governments. Political parties which join hands to form such alliances do so for power and are unconcerned about the interests of the State. The Congress Party's high command must take the blame for the current political imbroglio as it chose to repeat a failed experiment and unconditionally extended support to the JD(S) without even seeking the opinion of its State leaders. Voters who chose the MLAs have been consigned to the status of mere spectators as they watch the machinations and dirty games of disgruntled legislators belonging to both the parties.

N. SADHASIVA REDDY,  
Bengaluru

### Budget pros and cons

A grand move by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has been the relaxation provided on angel tax for start-ups, which can now focus on intensification and

modernisation. The government's allocation of ₹400 crore to craft a world-class higher education ecosystem is also commendable. For a very long time, there has been a huge gap between the skill set required by the industries and what has been provided by the engineering colleges in our country. The government's push will advance the skills of youth in areas such as 3D printing, the Internet of Things, Artificial Intelligence, cybersecurity and Big Data.

VIJAYKUMAR H.K.,  
Raichur, Karnataka

■ One fears that the proposal to impose a duty of 5% on imported books would adversely affect readers/book-lovers, especially those who read books on engineering and social and political sciences. Though domestic publishing needs to be encouraged as an industry, books published in

India often miss out on quality information. The proposed 10% duty on newsprint could also result in an increase in the cover price of dailies. However, as newspapers have become an unavoidable component of social life, readers will be forced to come to a compromise.

P.R.V. RAJA,  
Pandalam, Kerala

■ Ms. Sitharaman's maiden Budget speech was a propagandist exercise on the so-called "achievements" of the first Narendra Modi government, which failed miserably to deliver on the promise of *ache din*. The proposal to raise duties on petrol and diesel was unnecessary and will have a cascading effect, affecting all citizens but the poor more severely. There is no move to support agriculture, the sector of the economy under acute distress. The Budget also does absolutely nothing

for the youth of our country, apart from re-introducing failed schemes such as Skill India and MUDRA loan scheme.

UNNIKRISHNAN E.S.,  
Thrissur, Kerala

■ The Finance Minister's use of a red-clothed *bahi-khata* (ledger bag) instead of a briefcase was a mere ploy to divert the attention of voters. Though Chief Economic Adviser Krishnamurthy Subramanian called this a departure from the "slavery of western thought", the irony here is that the government still called the process a 'budget', a word derived from French word *bougette*, which refers to a 'leather bag'. As is the general norm at present, the packaging matters more than the product. You can sell anything to the unsuspecting public, as long as it is well-packaged and well-marketed.

VENKATARAMAN KRISHNAN,  
Kowloon, Hong Kong

### Hitman on a high

After scoring five fantastic centuries, including three consecutive ones, in the ongoing Cricket World Cup and accumulating 647 runs, 'hitman' Rohit Sharma has deservedly grabbed all the headlines. Captain Virat Kohli, whose team has finished at the top of the points table and cruised its way to the knockout stage, has aptly said that Rohit is the best ODI batsman in the world today. The opener's batting is a blend of classic strokes, scintillating shots and lightning sixes, making him a modern-day great. Further, Rohit's post-match press conferences give a glimpse of his commitment and dedication to the team. Cricket fans across the country would want his consistency to fetch India World Cup glory.

M. PRADYU,  
Kannur, Kerala

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