



Paved with big words

Revving up infrastructure spending is necessary, but not sufficient

The Central government is betting on a two-pronged strategy, revealed this week, to rescue the economy from the slowdown. Along with recapitalisation of public sector banks, it announced a huge roads project, which will help scale up public spending on infrastructure and boost job creation and growth. The plan is to spend almost ₹7 lakh crore to build 83,677 km of highways, traversing mostly the northern and eastern parts of the country, by March 2022. The government estimates that the Bharatmala Pariyojana, which constitutes a major component of this plan, could itself create as many as 14.2 crore mandays of work directly, in addition to permanent jobs after completion. The benefits to the economy are likely to be significant if the programme, as envisaged, manages to successfully connect 550 districts as well as coastal ports to national highways, among other things. While it is hard to quantify the likely economic benefits from the project, Transport Minister Nitin Gadkari expects the contribution to GDP to be significant. With money flowing in from the government and market borrowings, funding is unlikely to be an issue. The same, however, cannot be said about the other familiar challenges in the infrastructure space.

With this massive roads project, Prime Minister Narendra Modi may be banking on replicating, or even bettering, the National Highways Development Project of the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government. However, its success will depend largely on how the government tackles problems that have held back the implementation of infrastructure projects over the last couple of decades. While ₹2.09 lakh crore of the ₹5.35 lakh crore Bharatmala investment will be funded by market borrowings, over ₹1 lakh crore is expected to come in the form of private investments. Private infrastructure companies already reeling in the aftermath of aggressive past bids and leveraged balance sheets will need more clarity to be genuinely interested in such projects. This is an opportune time for the government to bring out of cold storage the blueprint for reviving public-private partnerships – prepared about two years ago by a panel headed by former Finance Secretary Vijay Kelkar. Just as it isn't clear why the government waited three years to unleash the full gamut of reforms needed to fix the banking sector's bad loan mess, it is difficult to understand why little has moved on the PPP framework after the Kelkar report came in late-2015. The NDA government's very first Budget allocated ₹500 crore to create a new body called 3P India to reboot the earlier PPP route that had left several projects stranded, with developers fleeing in the face of execution issues. That institution is still to see the light of day, while land acquisition reforms attempted in the NDA's first year have also been abandoned. More attention is needed on these fronts to ensure this infrastructure ramp-up delivers, and on time.

Big vision, hazy detail

India and U.S. have some way to go in charting the path to deeper strategic ties

Of the seven countries he visited last week, U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson chose to focus on India while spelling out his strategic vision. Just before starting the tour, he gave a speech on India-U.S. ties that was as broad as it was deep, talking of the road ahead together for "the next 100 years". He reserved his most ambitious words for the role of India in the U.S.'s plans in two spheres. In Afghanistan, as a part of President Donald Trump's new South Asia policy, and in the Indo-Pacific, as part of U.S. plans to counter China's influence and contain North Korea. On both counts, Mr. Tillerson's talks in New Delhi with External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and Prime Minister Narendra Modi made progress in developing a common vision, but appear to have made little movement on the specifics. For instance, he is said to have "mimned no words" when it came to tackling Pakistan's support to terrorist safe havens. Yet, the groups he referred to are not those that directly threaten India, but Afghanistan and, by extension, the U.S. soldiers based there. As for Indian hopes of increasing trade and development aid to Afghanistan through the Chabahar route, Mr. Tillerson's assurance that Washington does not seek to bar legitimate trade is welcome. However, it remains to be seen whether India can significantly ramp up cooperation with Iran to further its interests in Afghanistan at a time when the U.S. maintains its policy of isolating the Iranian leadership.

Finally, both Indian and U.S. officials spoke in detail, and in public statements, about building an alternative coalition to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative as well as its aggressive moves in the South China Sea – yet Mr. Tillerson did not add clarity on where the funding would come from. For its part, India desisted from any clear commitments on joint patrols to ensure freedom of navigation in the SCS, or even on the foundational agreements the Indian and U.S. militaries must conclude to deepen cooperation in the region. While India and the U.S. have taken great strides in aligning their vision and their hopes for future partnership, reality often trips up such lofty goals. One reason is geography – while American troops remain in Afghanistan, it is difficult for the U.S. to completely disengage from Pakistan. For India, while a maritime relationship with the U.S. is desirable, geographic proximity to China makes a very close alliance with the U.S. difficult. The other issue pertains to the strategic confusion within Washington and Mr. Trump's withdrawal from U.S. commitments in Asia, Europe and at the UN, drawing questions about its reliability as a partner. Given this, it may have been too much to expect more than the warm handshake and the encouraging words of hope Mr. Tillerson delivered.

The little dramas in Gujarat

Watching the State, one senses a different rhythm, a sense of anticipation, a need for difference



SHIV VISVANATHAN

Politics is sometimes seen as more than a stage where a predictable plot plays out. It is seen as a drama reflecting broader dreams and interests, a sense not just of who wins but what the game is about. One senses this in the recent events around the Gujarat elections. Commentators reduce the recent challenge to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to an aberration of the Patels. The standard caste scenarios so readily available before the elections start playing out. Interests are no doubt important, and it is easy to portray them in a realist scientific language. But sometimes something more nebulous such as a sense of the political game becomes tacitly significant.

A new script?

Watching television, listening to expert insights between the sentences, one senses a mood of boredom about the BJP – maybe it is a boredom of its current inevitability. People want to see new stories, new characters, new scripts. They want to give all players "a chance". The word chance is no longer an English word. It has been indigenised to mean a possibility of fairness, of luck, of an affirmative action in politics that allows other players an opportunity to show their mettle. Often as you talk of local candidates or a weak opposition the electorate would say, "They need a chance." It is a sense of openness that sustains the quality of the political game and allows politics to often become the world of the unexpected. Watching Gujarat, especially Gujarati TV which

is less linear than the English in allowing a play of body language and a sense of the vernacular, one senses a different rhythm, a sense of anticipation, a need for difference.

In fact, one can see it semiotically. One sees huge hoardings of Mr. Modi but he seems a distant god. The god might land up to announce a new ferry or spate of new projects. But as a hoarding he is stiff, remote and silent. He is an icon. Watching Rahul Gandhi, or Hardik Patel, one senses an animation, a new drive. Mr. Gandhi for a change looks fresh. The pink turban on his head suits him. There is a look of ease, of confidence, of having for once a new repertoire of tactics. It is not just the rumour around Alpesh Thakor, known locally for his organisation skills, or Mr. Patel's announcement that he is open to the Congress. It is the tremor of gossip that winds are changing, that new possibilities might be signalled, the sense of playing with a different set of scenarios. It is like shuffling a set of sub-plots and being excited even if the main frame is predictable. In fact, one sees a reversal of positions, almost as if it is a mirage. Mr. Modi plays the incumbent of distant Delhi which he has so often demonised in the past, and Rahul plays the local challenger.

The development model

The little dramas around the BJP attempt to video Congress meetings, "offer" of bribes to Patel dissenters adds a touch of spice, a hint that the BJP is not as confident as earlier predicted. There is a dramatic energy to these situations. Mr. Gandhi for once seems content and capable in the driver's seat. He looks fresh, well-groomed, well-shaved, holding forth confidently on demonetisation and GST. There is no longer a sense of fatalism, of the inevitability of defeat. The Congress at the local level has a few



things to crow about, including performance in panchayat elections, thanks to the skill of its State unit chief Bharat Singh Solanki. The addition of Mr. Thakor vitanises the party further. These are local chieftains from local territories who know local mathematics. It also highlights the unease among Thakors and Patels which might need fixing. Then there is Hardik Patel, a perpetual machine of dissent and dissatisfaction, casting doubts on whether Patels fit the Modi development model. One senses the emergence of a politics growing beyond resentment, a feeling that development in Mr. Modi's world may not be as inclusive as he promises.

Watching these political tremors (or hiccups, depending on your perspective), one senses a demand for the different and the new. Beyond this one senses that the government has not only alienated a few dominant castes but is indifferent to Dalit feelings and sensibilities. The tremors of discontent combined with a new aura of competence the Congress has begun projecting conveys the possibility of a dramatic struggle. There is a sense that the local is emphasising its vitality again and as a wag put it,

"A dogfight in Gandhinagar maybe more important than an election in Japan."

Experts, used to the predictable grids of interest group politics, who believe caste has the supreme theme, might dismiss such speculation as trite and temporary. To this friends in Gujarat add that the Navnirman agitation too began as a flicker in the pan. But realistically, one senses that doubts about the economy and the spectre of unemployment that haunts the youth are creeping in. The BJP is seen as a split world, electorally formidable but economically incompetent. The stars are still there but the sky is getting dimmer. The dour pictures of Mr. Modi and Amit Shah inadvertently add to the gloom. The BJP might return to power at the Centre but a few upsets at the State level might add space to the future of regional politics.

But there is a symbolic challenge here that we must examine. Gujarat today is iconic of the BJP. A change in vote share, even marginal, might bruise not just the political egos of the Modi-Shah combine, but make the BJP feel less symbolically confident and less all knowing. They will be seen as bumblebees of electoral math on home

territory, a crime the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) may not forgive the BJP for. It might create a buzz in national politics, catalyse the voter into thinking about side bets and alternatives. The immediate impact on the electoral fate of parties may not be so important. One senses the BJP effort to make assurance double sure in its attempts to offload a bonanza of lakhs of crores on the economy.

A collective exercise

The Election Commission has announced polling on December 9 and 14. The problem of time, one must admit, adds a realism to speculation and daydreams. The Congress does not have too much time to sanitise itself. The BJP, on the other hand has the RSS ready as an electoral machine. Simultaneously it has created networks of patronage that go deep into Gujarati society. Yet I think the recent winds of change are important. Sometimes a set of tremors tells you more about long-range geology than a return to normal. Somewhere one senses that there are chinks in the BJP armour, that a clever strategy might drive deeper wedges into its vote banks in the future. It is time the sages, shamans and planners of the Congress read the future to plan their strategies for the present. Mr. Gandhi is young enough for such a game. But more importantly, this has to be a collective exercise. One needs a panchayat of thinkers to tap into fresh problems on the ground and integrate it all into the making of policy. It will be disappointing if when the voter is ready, the Congress after a fortnight of resurgence were to return to its tired ways, content with glories of the past, oblivious to the fact that it has not been in power for decades in Gujarat.

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All the roads that lead to Kabul

India must expand its development role further and enhance its security profile in Afghanistan



HARSH V. PANT

The optics could not have been more significant. Just a day after U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson was in Kabul and on the day he landed in New Delhi, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani was hosted by India. As Mr. Tillerson chided Pakistan for not doing enough against terrorists operating from its soil, Mr. Ghani in New Delhi was underlining that the time had come for Islamabad to make a choice between abandoning state sponsorship of terrorism and facing the consequences. It was as perfect a piece of diplomatic choreography as it could get, aimed at sending a message to Pakistan that regional equations are shifting in a direction which will only isolate Islamabad if immediate corrective measures are not taken.

Mr. Ghani's visit came at a time when the Trump administration's South Asia policy has underscored India's centrality in the 'Af-Pak' theatre. As Washington plans to in-

crease its military footprint in Afghanistan, it is tightening the screws on Pakistan for supporting terrorism as an instrument of state policy. Both Washington and Kabul now view New Delhi as a player with considerable leverage over the evolving regional dynamic.

American outreach

A central feature of the Trump administration's new Afghanistan policy is an outreach to India. "We appreciate India's important contributions to stability in Afghanistan, but India makes billions of dollars in trade with the U.S. and we want them to help us more with Afghanistan, especially in the area of economic assistance and development," Mr. Trump had said in August while outlining his new South Asia policy.

Kabul has wholeheartedly embraced this strategy, with Mr. Ghani terming it a "game-changer" for the region as it "recommends multi-dimensional condition-based approach for the region." In Delhi, he was categorical in attacking Pakistan by suggesting that "sanctuaries are provided, logistics are provided, training is provided, ideological bases are provided." In a remarkable move, he went on to suggest that Afgh-



ghanistan would restrict Pakistan's access to Central Asia if it is not given access to India through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project. He referred to the Indo-Afghan air corridor as an effective response to Pakistan's attempt to deny India and Afghanistan any direct access. He also strongly rejected Islamabad's claims that India was using Afghanistan as a base to destabilise Pakistan. He made it clear that there were "no secret agreements" between Kabul and New Delhi.

Mr. Ghani also rejected "Pakistan-managed" efforts to broker peace in his country, and in line with this India too has emphasised that it believes peace efforts in Afghanistan should be "Afghan-led" and "Afghan-controlled". India continues to maintain that renunciation of violence and terror, and closure of state-sponsored safe

havens and sanctuaries remain essential for any meaningful progress and lasting peace. Afghanistan had participated in the sixth Quadrilateral Coordination Group meeting along with the U.S., China and Pakistan in Muscat, Oman, on October 16 in an attempt to revive stalled peace talks with the Taliban. National Security Advisor Ajit Doval had gone to Kabul to assess these developments on the same day.

In recent years, India has not shied away from taking a high-profile role in Afghanistan. It remains one of the biggest donors of aid to Afghanistan, having committed \$3.1 billion since 2001. Recently, it announced that it will be working on 116 new development projects in more than 30 areas. India's agenda is to build the capacity of the Afghan state as well as of Afghan security forces, enabling them to fight their own battles more effectively. This is in line with the requirements of the Afghan government as well as the international community.

Expanding India's development role further and enhancing its security profile with greater military assistance to Afghanistan should be a priority as new strategic opportunities open up in Afgh-

ghanistan. While the U.S. has its own priorities in the 'Af-Pak' theatre, India's should be able to leverage the present opening to further its interests and regional security. The recent bout of diplomatic activity in the region is a clear signal that India can no longer be treated as a marginal player in Afghanistan. Even Russia wants to keep India in the loop, as was underscored by Moscow's special envoy on Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov's visit to New Delhi for consultations in September.

A turnaround

Mr. Trump's South Asia policy is a remarkable turnaround for Washington which had wanted to keep India out of its 'Af-Pak' policy for long for fear of offending Rawalpindi. India was viewed as part of the problem and now the Trump administration is arguing that India should be viewed as part of a solution to the Afghan imbroglio. This is a welcome change and holds significant implications for India, Afghanistan and the wider region.

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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.

Spotlight on Gujarat

The editorial "The Gujarat stakes" (Oct. 27) is a sober assessment of the prospects of the Congress party in the Gujarat Assembly elections. So far, Congress vice-president Rahul Gandhi has only been reacting to what he perceives as the BJP's wrongdoing at the national level. His tweets make fun of the government and seem to be admired by his followers. He is drawing crowds too. But all this may not convert into votes. People are still looking for an alternative vision from Mr. Gandhi.

Y.G. CHOUKSEY,
Pune

Ever since he made his debut in politics, not a day has passed without Rahul Gandhi being critical of the BJP. Any policy or social welfare scheme floated by this government is met with stiff opposition from him. The latest is terming the GST as 'Gabbar Singh tax' and demonetisation and

GST as 'double tap'. These attacks border on immaturity. Dignified voices of dissent are occasionally heard from the top echelons of the Congress, from the likes of Manmohan Singh and P. Chidambaram. Mr. Gandhi must leave dissent to them and concentrate on rebuilding people's trust.

N. VISVESWARAN,
Chennai

Modi magic

It is a dream to presume that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has lost his charisma ("Has Narendra Modi lost his magic?", Oct. 27). Former U.S. President Barack Obama had started his poll campaign in 2008 with the slogan "Yes, we can". He could not fulfil all his poll promises during his first term of presidency, but he returned to power. In Germany, Turkey and other European nations, ruling parties have captured power a second time as people have reposed faith in them. This shows that a

party cannot execute all its poll promises in a single term. Similarly, Mr. Modi came to power with anti-corruption and transparency as his poll promises; the results are there for us to see. That demonetisation and GST will turn the tide is wishful thinking.

R. SRIDHARAN,
Chennai

The headline of the debate is objectionable. Why do you call Mr. Modi's administration 'magic'? Magic indicates clever manipulation with no actual change. Do you think the measures introduced him are temporary? Also, while inviting people to write on this subject, *The Hindu* should have chosen neutral experts rather than party cadres whose views we are already familiar with. Rahul Narwekar's opinion was balanced; we need more views like that.

J.P. REDDY,
Nalgonda

While it is debatable as to whether the charismatic Mr. Modi is fast losing his Midas touch, indications are that his image has indeed taken a beating after demonetisation and GST. An impression is gaining ground that he is running an authoritarian regime that has no qualms about thrusting 'reforms' and stifling dissent. The National Democratic Alliance is also further handicapped with allies like the Shiv Sena often striking a discordant. With opposition parties striving to unite against the BJP, Mr. Modi will have to pull out all the stops to retain power in 2019.

C.V. ARAVIND,
Chennai

Attack on Swiss tourists

On behalf of all Indians, I would like to apologise to the Swiss tourists who were attacked in Fatehpur Sikri ("S held for attack on Swiss couple", Oct. 27). The incident is appalling has brought embarrassment to

India. U.P. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath should not merely spout rhetoric but do more to ensure that tourists are safe. External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj's swift intervention to help the wounded couple was welcome. But she should have also sent a letter censuring the U.P. government and given an advisory to all the States to initiate steps to ensure the safety of travellers.

MOJIB SYED,
Gulbarga

Bank recapitalisation

The government's plan of capital infusion will soothe the situation in the short term, but long-term

solutions can only be implemented by the banking sector itself ("A bold step in bank reform", Oct. 27). There is a need to adopt proper guidelines for lending money to various kinds of borrowers and these have to be strictly followed by all banks. There's also a need to speed up Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code proceedings and make the code more effective in resolving NPAs. Mere recapitalisation of banks may widen the fiscal deficit further.

SHIVANI SINGH SENGAR,
Bhind

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS: A sentence in a report, "Gujarat is spottily but it's Karnataka on BJP's mind" (October 27, 2017) said: "Bombay Karnataka refers to the Marathi-speaking districts bordering Maharashtra..." It should have been Kannada-speaking districts.

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