



American voyage

The PM's meeting with Trump gives India a chance to study its options in a changed world

Three years after his first visit to meet U.S. President Barack Obama, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will travel to Washington for his first meeting with the new President, Donald Trump, on June 26. His visit in 2014 was made easier by a strong Indo-U.S. relationship built steadily over the previous two decades, and grounded in Mr. Obama's personal commitment to enhancing strategic ties. It also benefited from Mr. Modi's willingness to let bygones be bygones, over the earlier denial to him of a visa to the U.S., in order to build a new relationship, and his show of diaspora strength in the U.S. Mr. Modi now goes to Washington as a seasoned interlocutor, not the 'new kid on the world leadership block' he was in previous visits. But the situation in 2017 is different. In the five months since his inauguration, Mr. Trump has made it clear that no international relationship can be taken for granted, and it will be difficult to predict which American foreign policy principles will be adhered to in the new administration, and which will be dropped without ceremony. On the partnership with India, few will be willing to hazard a guess on what Mr. Trump has in mind. As President he has spoken to Mr. Modi twice, and sent his National Security Adviser to the region. But he has also criticised India on a tough tariff regime, on immigration and professional visas, and while withdrawing from the Paris climate accord, accused India of taking "billions and billions" of U.S. aid to fund its commitments. India has not been the biggest priority on Mr. Trump's list of meetings with world leaders; the focus has been on America's closest alliances in Europe and Japan, and problem areas such as China and Turkey.

Given the changed circumstances, officials in both India and the U.S. have reportedly set aside any formal agenda for the meeting on Monday, placing the emphasis on how the one-on-one meeting between the two leaders goes. Both sides have also, appropriately, toned down expectations of any big announcements. There are indications of likely agreements to be announced on counter-terror cooperation, maritime traffic facilitation and trade. However, it would be wise to put off more substantive decisions, on military co-operation, large defence purchases, Afghanistan and fighting regional terror, and the long-pending operationalisation of the nuclear deal to the next bilateral meeting, and focus instead on firming up the ground rules of engagement. That will allow Mr. Modi to get a true sense of what Mr. Trump's commitment to the relationship is, while India studies its options on how to chart its course amid the new uncertainty in world politics. That he is getting a sense of the changed U.S. administration may be clear from the decision not to hold any large gatherings of the Indian-American community this time, presumably in deference to the prevailing sentiment in Washington over immigration.

Macron once more

With a parliamentary majority, he is well placed to heal an ideological rift in Europe

The large majority for his La République En Marche in the National Assembly elections in France has cleared the path for President Emmanuel Macron's government to implement his ambitious, if sometimes contentious, policies. Along with its Democratic Movement allies, the LREM has won 350 of 577 seats. While the majority is smaller than the landslide many had predicted, the LREM's performance continues to show that the old system is being crowded out, with the mainstream Socialist Party on the left and the Republicans on the right suffering severe setbacks. From running the previous government, the Socialists have been relegated to a historically low position with around 30 seats, and their leader, Jean-Christophe Cambadélis, has resigned after losing his own seat. The Republicans and their allies have won 137 seats, down from 199 seats in the previous Assembly. On the far left, the Insoumise have secured more than the 15 seats required to form a parliamentary group. This is less than what their charismatic leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon had hoped for, but he himself has retained his seat and the Insoumise would be looking to develop as an opposition movement, especially in light of the attenuating Socialist Party. The far right's Front National, with its core xenophobic and nativist philosophy seen to be damaging not just to the Fifth Republic but to all of Europe, has done better than projected but is still well short of its goal of 15 seats.

Mr. Macron's economic policy proposals are a mix of right and left. They include cutting government spending and jobs, while investing in strategic sectors and increasing the scope of some welfare schemes. He has also proposed making labour laws more flexible. The argument that such a large majority for the LREM is dangerous is valid insofar as a strong and sizeable opposition is the cornerstone of a healthy democracy. But the 'neither left nor right' criticism of Mr. Macron's policies suggests an openness in the LREM's ideology. Additionally, some three-quarters of the new legislators did not hold a seat in 2012, and therefore they contribute to a renewal of the Assembly. Mr. Macron's first piece of legislation on 'moralising' politics, which seeks to bring greater probity into public life, is also good reason for optimism. Yet, Mr. Macron would do well to remember his presidential victory speech at the Louvre — a promise to reunite a deeply divided country and bring people back from the extremes. The need for this has been brought home again by a record abstention rate for the second round of elections on Sunday, of about 57%. If the month since the presidential election is any indication, Mr. Macron is well-placed to provide the strong leadership both Europe and the democratic world seem to need at the moment. This will have to start at home, where the way is now clear for him.

The art of positive messaging

The opposition parties might do well to take a leaf out of the BJP's playbook



HAPPYMON JACOB

“For all the killing and beheading they do on the LoC (Line of Control), we thrashed them so badly on the cricket field yesterday,” my Uber driver told me, with a palpable tinge of pride in his voice, the morning after the Indian cricket team won the ICC Champions Trophy match against Pakistan on June 4. “But Pakistan has beaten India several times in the past,” I reminded the young man who kept checking for WhatsApp messages on his smartphone at every traffic signal. “Yeah, sometimes *they* (the Indian team) let us down,” he complained, irritated. I imagine that would have been the response had I spoken to him now about India's defeat by Pakistan in the Trophy final on Sunday.

Notice the subject of the two references to the Indian cricket team: victory is associated with ‘we’ and defeat is associated with ‘they’ or ‘our team’. The underlying point is simple: we would like to associate with feelings and messages of positivity, prosperity and good news. And by extension, just as we would prefer bearing good news rather than bad news, we instinctively like those who give us positive messages and promise acts of pride and achievement. Several psychologists have reached these conclusions using scientific studies.

It's basic psychology that we like to hear good things — about our country, religion, cricket team, Olympic medals, etc. — as, they are, to some extent, an extension of our own selves. When our team wins a match, we are winning the match. But when they lose, we instinctively try to shift the burden of failure to the team. This desire and imagery of positivity is not limited to present achievements alone;



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rather, it extends to imaginary glories of the past, revenge on the enemy, sacrifices for collective good, among others. Politicians and political parties habitually use symbols and images associated with positivity to gather domestic political support. “Make America great again” and “Bharat Mata ki jai” are two of the best examples of positive messaging in our times.

Questions of pride

Having been in power for over three years now, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has little to show for itself in terms of economic growth, employment generation or national security. And yet, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's popularity has only spiked. What explains this? Part of the answer lies in their ability to master the fine art of positive messaging by effectively fusing national pride with our ordinary selves and daily lives. Mr. Modi's well-televised visits to great power capitals, accompanied by an abundance of glamour and grandeur, are choreographed to look like our own teleported visits there, and we feel that the ‘land of snake charmers’ has finally arrived on the world stage. From invoking ‘Gujarati asmita’ when he was the Gujarat Chief Minister to invoking national pride today, Mr. Modi's ability to give a positive twist to just about any situation is unparalleled. Consider, for instance, how Mr. Modi reframed the curse of poverty with clever word play: “I find great po-

tential among the poor. The poor are the strength of this country.”

There are three core styles of positive messaging that the BJP typically engages in, and thereby successfully connecting with the masses on the ground, who could do with some positive news amidst all the anxieties of their daily lives. The language of greatness and growth are the most prominent in the BJP's tool kit of political messaging. The promise of “*achhe din* (good days)” galvanised the national imagination and brought Mr. Modi to power in 2014. From A.B. Vajpayee's “India Shining” to “*Mera Desh Badal Raha Hai, Aage Badh Raha Hai* (my country is changing, its' moving ahead)” to calming, without any basis of course, that plastic surgery has ancient Indian roots, BJP leaders consistently emphasise India's lost glory, and the need to restore that. It strikes a chord with the average Indian voter.

The BJP also uses the language of revenge for positive messaging. What makes the post-Ur ‘surgical strikes’, giving an occasional ‘*muh tod jawab* (solid response)’ to Pakistan, or engaging in a war of nerves with China attractive to the public is not any novelty about them, given that previous governments have also done similar things, but the way these developments are packaged to project a strong India and a stronger Prime Minister.

Third, the BJP and Mr. Modi have managed to give a positive twist to

Bringing GM to the table

Promoters of GM food need to reach out to consumers in a transparent, engaging manner



RAMA MOHANA R. TURAGA

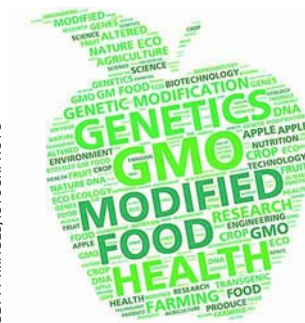
On May 11, 2017, the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC) — the scientific committee of the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change — that regulates genetically modified (GM) crops in India — had cleared GM mustard for commercial production. Anti-GM groups immediately opposed the decision and appealed to the Minister for Environment, who gives the final clearance, not to accept the GEAC's recommendation.

Issues at core of opposition

The question of whether India should allow commercial production of GM crops has been one of the more enduring public policy debates over the last decade-and-a-half. After the approval of Bt cotton in 2002, the attempt to bring Bt Brinjal into commercial production faced serious resistance in 2010. After the GEAC approved Bt brinjal for commercial production,

the then Environment Minister, Jairam Ramesh, placed a moratorium after undertaking extensive public consultation. Proponents of GM crops, including Noble laureates, insist that opposition to GM crops is driven by irrational fears of harm to human health and having an environmental impact and accuse opposing environmental groups of misrepresenting facts. Such arguments, however, are unlikely to convince the opponents of GM crops. While the debate is complex, involving a wide range of scientific, socio-economic, and political factors, it is important to understand two related issues that are fundamental to the opposition: invoking the precautionary principle for regulatory decision-making and a lack of trust in government and industry that promotes and benefits from GM technologies.

One of the principal reasons for opposition to GM crops is the potential for serious, irreversible damage to human health and the environment. This is especially relevant in the context of crops such as Bt brinjal which involve direct consumption by humans, unlike Bt cotton. The widespread havoc that chemical pesticides and fertilizers have caused since the Green Re-



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volution only adds credence to these concerns. While GM supporters claim that there is little scientific evidence of adverse impacts so far, GM opponents cite the need for longer term assessment of adverse impacts and more concrete evidence of no adverse effects. Implicitly, GM opponents are invoking the precautionary principle, which is a widely incorporated one in several international agreements and treaties on the environment. In the context of technologies such as GM crops, where there is significant scientific uncertainty over their safety, the precautionary principle suggests that we wait until a broader scientific consensus is achieved. For example, regulations in Europe, where GM crops face similar opposition, explicitly invoke the precautionary principle

as the basis for deciding whether GM foods should be allowed.

Lack of transparency

The lack of transparency in the regulatory process further amplifies apprehensions stemming from a precautionary approach. All the safety tests for regulatory approvals are typically conducted by the same party that applies for commercialisation of GM crops — whether it is Mahyco on Bt brinjal or Delhi University on GM mustard. This conflict of interest was made worse by the refusal of GEAC (in both cases) to publicly release the safety testing data submitted for regulatory approval until GM opponents filed a Right to Information petition. This tendency to operate in secrecy has not only created a serious distrust of the government and the promoters of GM crops but is also fuelling the conflict. Extensive research on public acceptance of GM foods in the European context identifies trust in regulatory agencies and industry as being a critical factor in public willingness to accept GM technology.

In a well-articulated decision letter at the time of rejecting Bt brinjal, the then Environment Minister, Jairam Ramesh, outlined the need

narrative is essentially make-believe, ignoring the power of positive messaging can be perilous for those involved in mass mobilisation in an age when post-truths and alternative facts tend to chip away at the fundamentals of fact-based debates. The non-BJP parties have typically ignored the lessons of positive messaging. Most of their narratives labour on about inability, inadequacies and a ‘what can we do, we are a Third World country’ refrain. While the Left parties critique the Congress and the BJP, they have been unable to sell their own alternative on a grand scale. Criticism, while important for the survival of a democracy, lacks positivity. Thanks to its historical baggage of family-centred politics and corrupt leaders, the Congress party has stopped inspiring people.

Left liberals are also accused of being too cynical. A few days ago, I received a WhatsApp message rhetorically asking why left liberals are so negative/pessimistic about the country. The left liberal tendency to focus exclusively on shortcomings and inadequacies does not seem to sit well with a country that needs positive affirmation and a sense of self-worth. Bearers of bad news aren't popular any more.

There is, of course, a limit to how long positive messaging alone can get people rooting for a political party or ruling dispensation. The reflected glory of imagined victories is bound to fade away eventually. How the BJP's earlier ‘India Shining’ campaign collapsed under its own weight in 2004 is a case in point. At a certain point, (real) GDP figures, shrinking employment opportunities and rising living costs will start to matter. But until then, the opposition parties might do well to take a leaf out of the BJP's playbook.

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for the GEAC “to draw up a fresh protocol for the specific tests that will have to be conducted in order to generate public confidence”. The GM mustard case does not provide much evidence that anything has changed since the moratorium on Bt brinjal.

If there is a genuine case to be made to allow GM crops to improve yields and address India's food security, GM supporters might want to start cultivating an environment of openness and transparency to allay genuine fears instead of dismissing GM opponents as being “irrational”. On its part, the government should adopt a participatory approach to bring together all stakeholders to develop regulatory protocols that restore trust in the process. The burden of proof lies with the promoters of GM technology to persuade consumers, farmers and activists that among various alternatives available for sustainable food production — e.g., organic farming, use of biopesticides — GM technology is at least a serious option that we should embrace.

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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.

The candidate

In nominating Bihar Governor Ram Nath Kovind, and a Dalit, as its presidential candidate, the BJP has bowled a googly, uprooting the ‘leg’ stump of the Opposition. The maximum the Opposition can do now is to either support Mr. Kovind's candidature or nominate another Dalit or someone else from a minority community and appeal for a ‘no ball’.

S. RAJAGOPALAN,
Chennai

■ The BJP's announcement may or may not herald a new dawn for the marginalised in India. We have had a Dalit President before — the sagacious K.R. Narayanan — and yet Dalits and Adivasis continue to labour under overwhelming disadvantages in our Republic. The question is, will the next Dalit President at least verbally defend the pluralist ethos of the Constitution?

VASANTHA SURYA,
Bengaluru

■ The BJP has a clear edge in numerical terms, further fortified by naming its Dalit candidate. However, it is clear that the move is more about “vote bank politics”. On its part, the Opposition should have sensed the BJP's line of thinking and announced, perhaps, the candidature of Meira Kumar who is also a fit candidate given her Lok Sabha Speakership background and as the daughter of Jagjivan Ram. The only sensible option left for the Opposition now is to support Mr. Kovind as he seems to be non-controversial. The Opposition can try to bargain for the vice-president's post by proposing Ms. Kumar's name. It would also brighten her prospects for elevation in the next presidential election.

V.N. GOPAL,
Chennai

Unrest in the hills

The Gorkhaland agitation in West Bengal appears to be gaining momentum with

each passing day (“Another summer of discontent”, June 20). Though it is understandable that Gorkhas want to preserve their unique culture identity, the demand for a separate State is ambitious. India is a country of myriads of minorities, and a separate State for each one of them will only polarise the cultural plurality and unity of India. State governments should be more pragmatic and not impose any language or culture on those in a minority at least for the sake of peace. In the case of Darjeeling, it will be decorous if various political parties do not take advantage of the mayhem and work towards cooperation in the State (Editorial - “End the violence”, June 20).

PAUL JOH,
Chennai

Policy and rights

One may tend to agree with the writer only when the piece is read fleetingly (“Legislation and legality”,

June 20). If the core argument — that sharing the particulars of one's Aadhaar and PAN numbers with others violates one's right to privacy leading to an infringement of fundamental rights — is correct, it must also be borne in mind that such a situation can be deemed to have some rightly perceived and ingrained exceptions. There is no judicial direction that an individual must share such particulars with another but only with the governmental authorities for the individual's credibility and safety. Take the case of one's driving licence, for example. If a driver is involved in a road accident, he is bound to disclose the particulars of his driving licence to the police and is not expected to protest that the particulars are extremely personal. Disclosure or linking of one's Aadhaar number to PAN is intended, *inter alia*, to streamline monetary transactions and to provide

identity to each individual. Can anyone cite an instance where the modality had gone wrong?

V. LAKSHMANAN,
Tirupur, Tamil Nadu

It's only cricket

It's sickening to see how obsessed the media is with cricket. Many of us expected front page coverage of India's win over Pakistan in hockey but were

left sorely disappointed. It is a tragedy that our national game is projected in poor light and a shame that even the Tamil Nadu Premier League, for example, gets better and wider coverage. It leads to the perception that where money flows, the media follows.

G. VIJAY,
Kayalpattanam, Tamil Nadu

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:
Editing error: A front-page report headlined “Splitting hairs on GST” (June 20, 2017) had incorrectly expanded GST as *General Sales Tax*. It should have been *Goods and Services Tax*.

In the graphic titled “Powerful strides” that was published along with the report, “Tangedco may post profit” (June 20, 2017, some editions), the figures corresponding to total revenue receipts and total revenue expenses for 2017-18 (budget estimates) got interchanged.

“Number theory” — the graphic that accompanied the report, “Low-profile Dalit leader tipped for the highest office” (June 20, 2017) — had a panel element that said the electoral college (for electing the President of India) comprises *all* Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha MPs and *all* the members of the 31 Legislative Assemblies. It is clarified that the electoral college comprises only *elected members* of the Lok Sabha, the Rajya Sabha and the 31 Legislative Assemblies.

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, Kasturji 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