

# The dark side of grand narratives

The pursuit of national greatness must not impose a cost on the weak in the periphery



VARGHESE K. GEORGE

“The impossible is now possible” is Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s slogan for the 2019 elections. His supporters believe his vision and leadership have resulted in a new resolve for the country. They believe we now have a ‘New India’. Two incidents last week provided glimpses of this resolve – the testing of an anti-satellite (ASAT) missile on March 27 and the detention by the police of development economist Jean Dreze in Jharkhand the next day. If the first was yet another tentative claim of India’s superpower status, the second was instructive of the indisputable intolerance of the state. Mr. Dreze is a voice of India’s weakest, and the police stopped him from campaigning on the right to food in a place where three out of 100 children die before their first birthday. Since September 2017, activists have catalogued 18 deaths linked to the collapse of social security schemes in the BJP-ruled State. The missile test and the arrest are linked; in the drumbeats of hyper-nationalism, the whimpers of the weak are a dissonant note.

## Timid or not?

One school of strategists has always lamented that India is a ‘soft state’ reluctant to use power to achieve its goals. Hindutva strategists have linked this alleged softness of the Indian state to the ‘timidity’ of Hindus, as well as ‘appeasement’ of Muslims and Christians by the Congress. Over the last five years under Mr. Modi, India has ostensibly shed its timidity. Union Minister Arun Jaitley said after India’s airstrikes in Pakistan: “I remember when the U.S. Navy SEAL had taken Osama bin Laden from Abbottabad... Today it is possible [for India] also to conduct such operations.” In a recent speech, Mr. Modi said about terrorists, “We will enter their homes and eliminate them.” In his first campaign speech, on March 28, Mr. Modi said “terrorists and their supporters across the border” wanted him to lose. BJP president



“The search for greatness could numb our soul.” Prime Minister Narendra Modi addresses a public meeting in Balangir, Odisha. ■ BISWARANJAN ROUT

Amit Shah said on the same day: “Only two countries in the world avenged their soldiers’ deaths earlier: the U.S. and Israel. Now, India is the third.” India, which is synonymous with Mr. Modi in the narrative, is decisive, capable and willing not merely to achieve its domestic goals, but also to coerce other countries to fall in line.

Hindutva’s geographical core is in north, central and western India, and its social core consists of upper caste Hindus and the emergent middle class. Hindutva tried to reach out to the periphery by entering into alliances under Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who became its first Prime Minister. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) during the Vajpayee years roped in ethnic parties in the south and lower caste parties in the north by suspending its three most controversial objectives: abrogation of Article 370 that grants special status to Jammu and Kashmir, the uniform civil code, and construction of a Ram temple in Ayodhya at the spot where a Hindutva mob demolished the Babri Masjid in 1992. With its support in the core consolidated and expanding, Hindutva 2.0 under Mr. Modi went for the jugular in the periphery.

This approach has been demonstrated the starkest in Jammu and Kashmir. In 2014, as Prime Minister, Mr. Modi campaigned relentlessly against the two regional parties in the State, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and the National Conference. After the elections, the BJP

and the PDP formed a coalition government, but far from brightening the prospects of a political solution in the State, it has been downhill since then. The Modi government reversed all the gains made in the State towards normalcy. The BJP-PDP partnership did not temper the hyper-nationalism of the former as many hoped; it delegitimised the PDP before its supporters, weakening New Delhi’s link with the Valley further. The BJP is part of the government in seven of the eight north-eastern States now, by forming social coalitions of its own, such as in Tripura, or by forming alliances with regional parties, such as in Manipur. The BJP is soft-peddalling its cow protection agenda in the Northeast, but its goal of full cultural integration of the region with the mainland, or with the Hindi-Hindu nationalism of the Sangh Parivar, is never hidden.

## Trimming society

Hindutva has a grand vision for India, and even the entire world, if one were to go by Mr. Modi’s speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2018. Mr. Modi’s pursuit of that grand narrative of ‘India as a leading power’ is happening even as the perils of several grand strategies that came before are playing out. The U.S. and Israel, the models that Hindutva proponents want to emulate, continue to pay a heavy price. The U.S.’s project to remake the rest of the world as its clones has come a cropper, but not before huge costs were

paid in terms of lives and resources. Beijing is pursuing its own grand vision of reshaping the world.

For all such pursuits of grand ambitions, which appeal to the core of any society, aggregation and diversion of national resources from the weakest in the periphery are essential. Trying to trim any society to fit into a straitjacket, unidimensional notion of greatness generates agony and hardship as it requires massive use of force. Authoritarian societies achieve it easier, as in China. When a democracy does this, it drifts away from its ethos and turns authoritarian, as has happened in the U.S. and Israel. “How can we talk about being free in this country when we have to leave each day in fear of gun violence in schools... and even from law enforcement?” African-American Senator Cory Booker, who is running for the Democratic presidential nomination, said on the same day that India declared parity with the U.S. in anti-satellite warfare. He will surely be accused of talking the language of America’s enemies by the hyper-nationalists in the country.

Subordination of particular aspirations, and even human rights, to a nationalist grand narrative was not impossible before Mr. Modi. Testing ASAT was also not impossible. The Indian state is not designed to be, and has not behaved, soft by any standards, as Gyan Prakash depicts in his recent book, *Emergency Chronicles: Indira Gandhi and Democracy’s Turning Point*. India’s dealings with insurgencies of various kinds have been brutal, and the elimination of Sikh separatism during Congress rule is a case in point. At the same time, the Congress system had a mechanism to deal with the aspirations of the social and geographical peripheries of the nation. There were restraints to global adventurism and peace was sought with insurgents, sometimes successfully.

In Hindutva 2.0’s grand vision, the periphery is only a theatre to demonstrate strength before the core. The weakest amongst us will pay for this – as slain soldiers, petty criminals shot dead by the police, starvation victims and hapless undertrials. Their voices will be muffled. The search for greatness could numb our soul.

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## FROM THE READERS’ EDITOR

# What is missing in the 2019 election coverage

The media’s coverage of the Election Commission is too gentle



A.S. PANNEERSELVAN

When the Election Commission (EC) announced that Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s address to the nation on Mission Shakti did not violate the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), it raised questions. The EC was forced to examine the issue following a formal complaint from the CPI(M) regarding the address. The EC arrived at the decision on the basis of a report submitted by a committee of officers. The committee found that the address was not live, and stated that Doordarshan’s source for the telecast was Asian News International. What the EC failed to explain is how this detail meant that the address did not violate the MCC.

## Autonomy of EC under a cloud

When T.N. Seshan was the Chief Election Commissioner, the EC exercised its powers freely. Rules were not only implemented but were widely seen as being implemented. However, in the campaign to the 2019 general election, the autonomy of the constitutional body seems to be under a cloud. When the BJP displayed hoardings with Indian Air Force Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman’s photograph on them, the EC merely asked political parties to “desist from displaying photographs of defence personnel”. People do not expect the EC to behave weakly.

The idea of having a strong leader and weak institutions is not endorsed by many in India. The India Digital News Report, published by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, revealed the many elements that are impacting journalism and the way people access news. Two findings stood out.

The first is that fear lurks among Internet users in India, and there is trust in institutions to fix this system in which misinformation thrives. The survey covered English-speaking Indians. Nearly 55% of the respondents said that speaking their mind could get them into trouble with the authorities. Fifty per cent said they tend to “think carefully while expressing [their] political views openly on the Internet because this could make

work colleagues or other acquaintances think differently” about them.

The study says the levels of concern in India are comparable to those found in Brazil and Turkey. It pointed out that these high levels of concern could be based in part on recent events in India. Since 2012, at least 17 people have been arrested for posting material that was considered offensive or threatening to a politician. People who spoke out against Prime Minister Modi, former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath were arrested. In December 2018, a journalist was jailed under the National Security Act for criticising the BJP and the Manipur Chief Minister. The second crucial finding is that 64% of the respondents, compared to just 41% in the U.S., felt that the government has a role in acting against disinformation.

To better understand disinformation problems in India, the study asked its English-language Internet users about their exposure to, and concern over, different types of potentially problematic content that previous research for the Reuters Institute identified as examples of what the public associates with fake news and disinformation. The study revealed that people do not conflate issues and find “poor journalism” to be hurting as much as disinformation. The categories include false news narrowly defined (stories that are completely made up for political or commercial reasons), and also hyperpartisan political content, whether from politicians, pundits, or publishers (stories in which facts are spun or twisted to push a particular agenda), poor journalism (stories that respondents consider marred by factual mistakes, inaccuracies, etc.), and more.

**Failure of the media**  
A closer reading of both the Reuters study of the digital news space and Indian newspapers shows an obvious failure in Indian journalism. It has not examined the slow transformation of the EC from the T.N. Seshan model to the pre-1990s system. From issues relating to the allocation of symbols to smaller parties to the conduct of by-elections in a State like Tamil Nadu where nearly 10% of the Legislative Assembly is unrepresented, the media’s coverage of the election body is too gentle.

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## SINGLE FILE

# Taking a chance with Imran

Imran Khan is India’s best bet in years to ensure a durable peace with Pakistan, including on the Kashmir issue

UDAY BALAKRISHNAN



In the recent firefight between India and Pakistan following the Pulwama attack, Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan showed a maturity rarely displayed by any of his predecessors. However much we’d like to believe that Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman was repatriated because of international pressure, it is entirely possible that Mr. Khan, overruling his army, ordered his release to establish himself as a voice of reason.

India lost the chance to gracefully accept its downed pilot’s release by Pakistan and loosen just a bit of the grip of Pakistan’s generals over Mr. Khan. Instead of viewing Mr. Khan as a stooge of the Pakistan army, India must start working with him to achieve a durable peace by notching up a series of small successes that could lead to bigger ones. Each of these, like the steps taken to open the Kartarpur corridor, will likely build up Mr. Khan’s capacity to be his own man and stand up to an army that in the past has always scuttled any peace move with India.

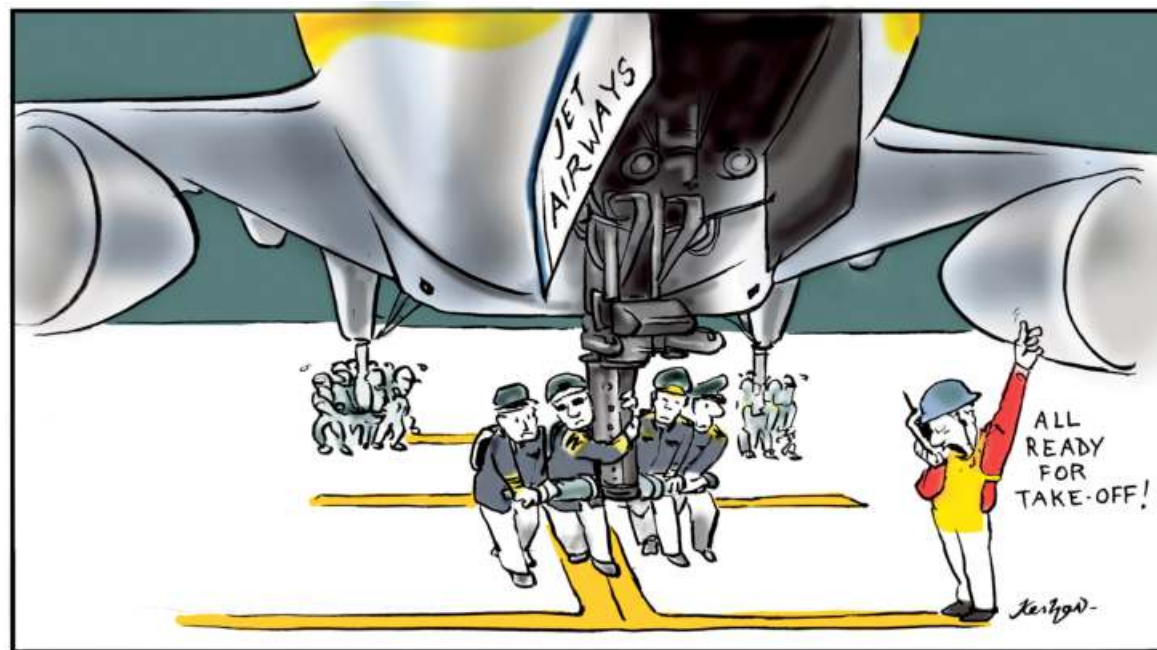
Indeed, Mr. Khan might be different from his predecessors, having been a much-loved national hero long before he became Prime Minister. He continues to be popular and admired by Pakistan’s youth who make up much of that country’s population. As Madiha Afzal states in a recent article in *Foreign Affairs*, Mr. Khan is no pushover for the army.

Mr. Khan is widely perceived to be honest, unlike his immediate civilian predecessors, and might well have a genuine desire to better the lot of his people. Mr. Khan also realises Pakistan’s terrible predicament – broke and caught in a Chinese debt trap it cannot talk about, besieged by militants within, and facing an India with a new-found determination to hit back when hurt.

For 71 years Indians have made Pakistan central to their lives. India’s greatest joy is when it beats Pakistan on the battlefield or the cricket pitch or corners it in the United Nations. Indians have built up Pakistan as a formidable adversary, which it is not.

Just one State in India, Uttar Pradesh, has a population that is larger than Pakistan’s. India is about four times bigger than Pakistan area-wise. And its GDP, in PPP terms, is about 10 times greater. To Pakistan it is India that is a formidable enemy, one at whose hands it has suffered violent vivisection and a monumental military defeat. It is no wonder then that Pakistan is paranoid about India and has always leveraged its only strength, a much more strategic location, to corner it. In Mr. Khan India now has a popular Pakistani leader it should engage with. He is India’s best bet in years to ensure a durable peace with Pakistan, including on the Kashmir issue. It is in India’s interest to reach out to Mr. Khan boldly and with hope.

The writer taught public policy and contemporary history at IISc, Bengaluru



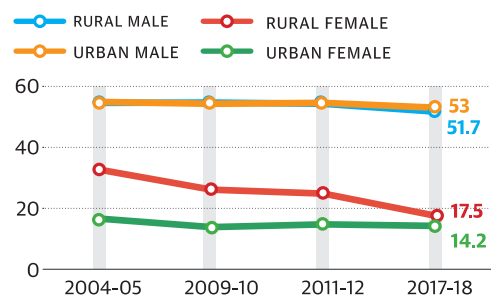
## DATA POINT

### Rural job crunch

The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data have revealed a drastic increase in the number of unemployed in India. A comparison of the employment-to-population ratio (EPR) in rural versus urban areas shows significant variations. Rural EPR came down relatively more in 2017-18 compared to urban EPR, according to the PLFS data accessed by *The Hindu*

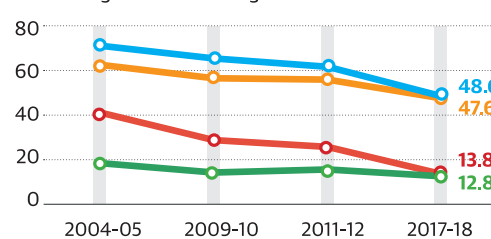
#### Rural women hit the most

Among all the cohorts, the EPR of rural women registered the sharpest decrease in 2017-18. It reduced by 7.3 percentage points from 2011-12, while the corresponding figure for rural men was 2.6 percentage points. The graph shows the EPR among usual workers (workers who worked regularly in the past year)



#### Rural youth affected

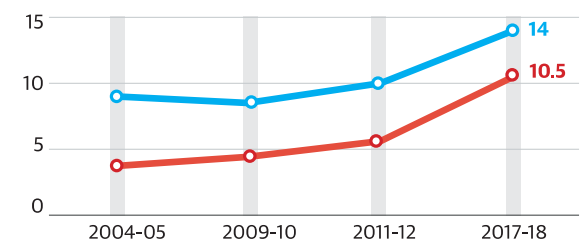
Among those aged 15 to 29, the decrease in the EPR of rural men and women was higher than that of their urban counterparts in 2017-18. The graph shows the EPR among usual workers aged 15 to 29



Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey

#### Share of rural salaried employees goes up

In 2017-18, the share of regular wage/salaried employees went up significantly among rural men and women workers while that of casual labourers went down. The graph shows the share of regular wage/salaried workers among all those employed in rural areas



#### Lower quality of jobs

Though the share of salaried workers has gone up, the quality of jobs has come down among rural men. The table on the right shows the % of regular wage/salaried rural workers without written job contracts

Period	% of regular rural workers not eligible for paid leave		% of regular rural workers not eligible for social benefits	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
2004-05	47.3	48.7	55.5	60.8
2009-10	50.2	47.6	55.8	61.5
2011-12	51.7	48.1	56.8	63.4
2017-18	58.1	47.9	51.9	55.1

## FROM THE HINDU ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO APRIL 1, 1969

### Yahya Khan installs himself as Pak. President

General Yahya Khan assumed the office of President of Pakistan to-day [March 31], six days after taking over powers from Field Marshal Ayub Khan, it was officially announced in Rawalpindi. The Pakistan Government issued a statement saying that Gen. Yahya Khan was assuming the Presidency until a new Constitution was framed in Pakistan, which has been under martial law since Mr. Ayub Khan stepped down as President. The 52-year-old Commander-in-Chief of the Pakistan Army who became the Chief Martial Law Administrator last Tuesday [March 25], as violence mounted in Pakistan, becomes the third President of the county. A tough veteran infantry officer of World War II, Gen. Yahya Khan succeeded President Ayub who himself took over from President Mirza in a bloodless coup in 1956.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO APRIL 1, 1919.

### Two Disallowed Resolutions.

H.E. Lord Pentland has disallowed two more resolutions of the Hon’ble Mr. B.V. Narasimha Iyer before his departure from these shores. The resolution which had been admitted and included in the preliminary agenda already published recommending the appointment of a committee to inquire and report upon the conditions of Indian Labour recruited and transported from the Madras Presidency to the Malay States, etc., has been on reconsideration disallowed by H.E. under rule 3 (c) which states that no discussion shall be permitted except with the Governor’s sanction [on] any matter which is the subject of discussion between the Governor General in Council or Secretary of State and the Local Government. One wonders whether H.E.’s sanction given at the preliminary agenda can be withdrawn now, or whether the existence of a correspondence has suddenly been discovered.

## POLL CALL

### Election manifesto

An election manifesto refers to a statement issued by a political party fighting an election that informs people about the party’s programmes and policies on a wide range of issues. The manifesto cannot contain anything that is repugnant to the ideals and principles enshrined in the Constitution and must be consistent with the letter and spirit of the Model Code of Conduct. While political parties can promise welfare schemes in their manifestos, they cannot make promises “which are likely to vitiate the purity of the election process or exert undue influence on the voters in exercising their franchise”. The manifesto should reflect the rationale for the promises made and the ways in which such promises can be met financially.

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