



For honour's sake

In an ideal world, the Bharat Ratna awards would be free from political considerations

It is in the nature of our polity to use any opportunity possible for political signalling, and the Bharat Ratna, the nation's highest civilian honour, has not been spared from this propensity. Over the years, ideological considerations have influenced the choices. While the Narendra Modi government's decision to confer the Bharat Ratna on the late Assamese singer Bhupen Hazarika (who contested on the BJP ticket in the 2004 Lok Sabha election) and the late Nanaji Deshmukh (a Bharatiya Jan Sangh leader and social activist) evoked little surprise, the choice of former President Pranab Mukherjee seemed to have caught everyone off guard and triggered fevered speculation. Prime Minister Narendra Modi described him as "an outstanding statesman of our times". While Mr. Mukherjee's seniority and contribution to the polity are not in doubt, the fact that he agreed to speak at an RSS event last year to the bemused disapproval of the Congress party was held out as a reason. And more unsympathetically, could the award have been a part of the BJP's strategy of embracing old Congress leaders such as Vallabhbhai Patel to highlight that its real opposition is to the Nehru-Gandhi family? It is no secret that Mr. Mukherjee's political ambitions were thwarted at one point by his inability to break the hold of dynastic politics in the Congress.

Whether or not someone deserves a particular honour is not an easy question to resolve. Idolised leaders are integral to the imagination of a community, and arguably, for nation-building. Such secular rites of veneration set an ideal that the community celebrates and strives for. This is of course different from the pursuit of partisan political interests. Unfortunately, competitive politics has overshadowed the majesty of the Bharat Ratna. The honour to M.G. Ramachandran in 1988 was widely seen as a cynical political move ahead of an election in Tamil Nadu. A promise to confer the Bharat Ratna to Madan Mohan Malaviya was made by Mr. Modi during the 2014 campaign, and he fulfilled it soon after coming to power. Claims and counterclaims for the honour have become part of assertions of power by various groups. The emergence of new political elites is often accompanied by a clamour for greater acceptance for their leaders in the national roll of honour. A democratic, plural community must resolve these demands with respect and sensitivity. But this must not lead to a devaluation of the honour. Transparency is not easy to achieve, and fairness is difficult to establish, given the contradictory demands of representation and majesty. But a good place to start is to discontinue posthumous awards. It is a slippery slope of arbitrariness. Idols and ideals unite diversities in a community, and Bharat Ratnas must be selected with this in mind. On this count at least, the Modi government's list will be contested.

Shutdown surrender

Donald Trump is forced to retreat by accepting a temporary end to the shutdown

The partial shutdown of the U.S. government was the first major showdown between President Donald Trump and the Democrats after the latter took control of the House of Representatives in the mid-term Congressional elections in November 2018. Mr. Trump had threatened to keep the government shutdown indefinitely unless Congress authorised \$5.7 billion to build a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border, one of his key campaign promises. He finally agreed to reopen the federal departments, on the 35th day, without getting anything in return. The Democrats, on their part, had insisted from the beginning that they first wanted the shutdown to end before discussing border security. The President had stormed out of a meeting with the Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi that was called to discuss the shutdown. But now he has agreed to hold talks, after reopening the government. There were a host of factors that influenced the turnaround. If the Trump team had hoped a prolonged government shutdown would break the Democratic Party's rank and file, it didn't happen. Instead, the longest government shutdown in America's history created fissures within Congressional Republicans. The FBI Director, a Trump appointee, was among the senior functionaries who decried the governmental dysfunction. The President's approval ratings fell and polls suggested that most Americans held him responsible for the crisis.

For Speaker Pelosi, who stuck to her demand despite the administration's posturing, it was a victory of sorts in the game of chicken played between Mr. Trump and her. But the key issue remains unaddressed. For now, the spending bills will allow the government to run till February 15. President Trump has said he would not back off from his demand for funding for the wall, which he believes is necessary to stop illegal immigration and cut crime — a claim that is contested widely as border-crossing apprehensions hit a 46-year low in 2017. But Mr. Trump has threatened to shut down the government again in February unless the Democrats agree to fund the wall, or he would declare a national emergency using his executive powers and redirect public funds to build the barrier. Neither option will be easy. The shutdown tactic has failed. Pushing the U.S. into another government closure would be catastrophic for millions of Americans. The national emergency idea lacks support even among the Republicans. Mr. Trump will be better off if he realises that holding the government to ransom to extract compromises from Congress is not a sound tactic for a President. He could adopt a less confrontational approach towards Democrats and hold talks with them with an open mind on immigration and border security. He may just get a deal.

Removing the roots of farmers' distress

Steps like limited procurement, boosting productivity and consolidating land holdings can help reduce agrarian distress



C. RANGARAJAN & S. MAHENDRA DEV

Recently, there has been active discussion on the strategies addressing farm distress. There are media reports that the 'interim Budget' may focus on the farm sector among other things. Agrarian distress, in the present context, is mainly in terms of low agricultural prices and, consequently, poor farm incomes. Low productivity in agriculture and related supply side factors are equally important. An issue that is connected is the declining average size of farm holdings and the viability of this size for raising farm incomes. Here are possible solutions.

Prices and incomes

Prices play a key role in affecting the incomes of farmers. Even during the Green Revolution, along with technology and associated packages, price factor was considered important. In the last two years, inflation in agriculture was much lower than overall inflation. The implicit price deflator for Gross Value Added (GVA) in agriculture was 1.1% while it was 3.2% for total GVA in 2017-18. The advance estimates for 2018-19 show that the implicit deflator for GVA in agriculture is 0%, and 4.8% for total GVA. In fact, agriculture GVA growth was at 3.8% for both nominal prices and constant prices in 2018-19, giving the price deflator of 0%. The consumer price index (CPI) also shows that the rise in prices for agriculture was much lower than general inflation in recent years. Market prices for several agricultural commodities have been lower than those of mini-

mum support prices (MSP). All these trends show that the terms of trade to be moving against agriculture in the last two years.

When output increases well beyond the market demand at a price remunerative to producers, market prices decline. And in the absence of an effective price support policy, farmers are faced with a loss in income, depending on how much the price decline is. The 'farm distress' in recent years has been partly on account of this situation, as the loss of income is beyond the ability, particularly of small farmers, to absorb. In a strange way, it is the success in increasing production that has resulted in this adverse consequence.

A few schemes have been suggested to address the problem of managing declining output prices when output increases significantly. The scheme of 'price deficiency compensation' is one such mechanism which amounts to paying the difference between market price and the MSP. At the other extreme is the 'open procurement system' that has been in vogue quite effectively in the case of rice and wheat, where procurement is open ended at the MSP. Is there a middle way that may be effective in some crops? One of us had suggested the option of limited procurement for price stabilisation. A 'price deficiency' scheme may compensate farmers when prices decrease below a certain specified level. However, market prices may continue to fall as supply exceeds 'normal demand'. An alternative is the limited procurement scheme. Under this scheme, the government will procure the 'excess', leaving the normal production level to clear the market at a remunerative price. Thus, procurement will continue until the market price rises to touch the MSP. The suggested 'limited procurement system' will not work if the MSP is fixed at a level to which the market



RAJEEV BHATT

price will never rise. There are costs involved which will go up as production increases above the average level. The government can sell the procured grain in later years or use them in welfare programmes.

Some States have introduced farm support schemes, examples being the Rythu Bandhu Scheme (Telangana) and the Krushak Assistance for Livelihood and Income Augmentation (KALIA) scheme (Odisha). One problem with the Telangana model is that it does not cover tenants, who are the actual cultivators. Basically, these schemes are income support schemes which will be in operation year after year.

Thus, raising the MSP, price deficiency payments or income support schemes can only be a partial solution to the problem of providing remunerative returns to farmers. A sustainable solution is market reforms to enable better price discovery combined with long-term trade policies favourable to exports. The creation of a competitive, stable and unified national market is needed for farmers to get better prices. Agricultural markets have witnessed only limited reforms. They are characterised by inefficient physical operations, excessive crowding of intermediaries, and fragmented market chains. Due to this, farmers are deprived of a fair share of the price paid by final consumers. States have also not shown any urgency in reforming agricultural markets. For better price for farmers, agriculture has to go beyond farming

and develop a value chain comprising farming, wholesaling, warehousing, logistics, processing and retailing.

Low productivity

The next issue is the low productivity of Indian agriculture. Basics such as seeds, fertilizers, credit, land and water management and technology are important and should not be forgotten. Similarly, investment in infrastructure and research and development are needed. Water is the leading input in agriculture. More than 60% of irrigation water is consumed by two crops: rice and sugar cane. Basically, it is not investment alone but efficiency in water management in both canal and groundwater that is important. India uses upto three times the water used to produce one tonne of grain in countries such as Brazil, China and the U.S. This implies that water-use efficiency can be improved significantly with better use of technologies that include drip irrigation. Yields of several crops are lower in India when compared to several other countries. Technology can help to reduce 'yield gaps' and thus improve productivity. Government policies have been biased towards cereals particularly rice and wheat. There is a need to make a shift from rice and wheat-centric policies to millets, pulses, fruits, vegetables, livestock and fish.

Land size

Another major issue relates to the shrinking size of farms which is also responsible for low incomes and farmers' distress. The average size of farm holdings declined from 2.3 hectares in 1970-71 to 1.08 hectares in 2015-16. The share of small and marginal farmers increased from 70% in 1980-81 to 86% in 2015-16. The average size of marginal holdings is only 0.38 hectares (less than one acre) in 2015-16. The monthly income of small

and marginal farmers from all sources is only around ₹4,000 and ₹5,000 as compared to ₹41,000 for large farmers. Thus, the viability of marginal and small farmers is a major challenge for Indian agriculture.

Many small farmers cannot leave agriculture because of a lack of opportunities in the non-farm sector. They can get only partial income from the non-farm sector. In this context, a consolidation of land holdings becomes important to raise farmer incomes. There was a lot of discussion on this topic in the 1960s and 1970s. In the context of rural poverty, B.S. Minhas had argued even in the 1970s that compulsory consolidation of land holdings alongside land development activities could enhance the incomes/livelihoods of the poor in rural areas. Unfortunately, there is little discussion now on land fragmentation and consolidation of farm holdings. We need to have policies for land consolidation along with land development activities in order to tackle the challenge of the low average size of holdings. Farmers can voluntarily come together and pool land to gain the benefits of size. Through consolidation, farmers can reap the economies of scale both in input procurement and output marketing.

To conclude, farmers' distress is due to low prices and low productivity. The suggestions we have made, such as limited procurement, measures to improve low productivity, and consolidation of land holdings to gain the benefits of size, can help in reducing agrarian distress. We need a long-term policy to tackle the situation.

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The essence of the next mandate

It must deepen the foundations of a deliberative democracy and ensure that a suppressed nation's soul finds utterance



ASHWANI KUMAR

The forthcoming Lok Sabha elections, widely seen as a watershed event in our contemporary history, are expected to redraw the nation's political landscape with implications for the future of Indian democracy.

The coming together of political leaders at Trinamool Congress leader and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's rally in Kolkata on January 19, representing a wide political spectrum opposed to the politics of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under Prime Minister Narendra Modi is to be noted. It signalled a common resolve to oust his government despite challenges inherent in such a coalescence. This coalition would not have been possible without massive disenchantment with the Prime Minister's leadership, confirmed by an unravelling of the National Democratic Alliance, setting the stage for a transformative political change in the months ahead.

A sense of betrayal

The dominant mood of the nation barely 100 days before the general election, reflects a sense of betrayal by its political chief executive who has failed to deliver on the promises made in 2014. Rising

unemployment, acute agrarian distress, corruption in high places, rising social disparities, continuing marginalisation of Dalits and Adivasis, insensitivity to the plight of vulnerable sections and glaring inequities of wealth et al have decisively demolished the Prime Minister's claim to good governance. Misgovernance and the accentuated social, political and economic inequities interrogate the government's claim of 'Sushashan' and 'Sabka Vikas'.

But this election is not only about failed promises and governance deficit. It is about foundational principles of the republic centered around the idea of India crystallised in United Progressive Alliance Chairperson Sonia Gandhi's message for the Kolkata rally. In her message, she lamented that the nation's "pluralist fabric stands vitiated" and declared that "this will be an election to restore the nation's faith in democracy, defend our secular ethos and our heritage, and defeat forces that are trying to sabotage the Constitution of India". Mrs. Gandhi's exhortation together with statements to similar effect by Congress President Rahul Gandhi, Ms. Banerjee and others should leave none in doubt that as far as the Opposition is concerned, this election is about the defence of democracy from the "tyrannies of power". Viewed thus, the 'mahagathbandhan' is not a 'summit of contradictions' but a loud affirmation of collective political will to rise in defence of freedom, inclusion, equality, jus-



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tice and dignity of citizens. Indeed, this election is about the ends of power, the legitimacy of its exercise and means of its pursuit. It is about a proclaimed preference of politics "grounded in humanism than in force". It should be about the end objectives of the state as much as about addressing challenges of an impoverished politics and debilitated institutions of democracy. The election must also be about restoring ideology and reason at the centre of politics and a reclaiming of the constitutional centre founded on our liberal, secular, progressive and dignity-based heritage.

This election is about a contest of ideas, about the meaning of democracy and for galvanising maximum support for the dignitarian values that gave birth to the nation. It is about the rejection of "convenient moralities" in favour of allegiance to an ideal of a just, inclusive and compassionate society. It is about a campaign that must yield politics elevated beyond the assertion of sub-identities towards a deepening of de-

mocracy that holds hope for all our people.

Those who suggest that the campaign against the BJP should focus essentially on issues related to "roti, kapda aur makaan" underestimate the nation's passion for freedom and liberty. How else can we explain the crushing defeat of the Congress in 1977 under one of its tallest leaders? Freedom, national security and patriotism are not mutually incompatible. No reason, tactical or otherwise, can justify less than a frontal, sustained and vigorous censure of the ruling party's divisive, sectarian, exclusionary, anti-libertarian and anti-dignity agenda of governance. It is imperative, however, to ensure an appropriate idiom to communicate a powerful appeal built around the assertion of the republic's core values. The politics of a free people wedded to the idea of accountable and restrained power must, forever lean on the side of freedom because "the battle of freedom is never done, and the field never quiet".

In a nutshell

Hopefully, the electoral mandate of 2019 will serve to strengthen the foundations of deliberative democracy and repel onslaughts on our liberties in the name of invented insecurities. The mandate must also serve to restore the credibility of political parties as protagonists of constitutional goals, and integral to the democratic process. We are entitled to expect that the outcome of the general election will

vindicate national conscience so that freedom prevails over fear, inclusion over exclusion and secularism over communalism. We know that the triumph of democracy is anchored in the equality of citizens and is sustained through freedom and assertion. The French philosopher, Alexis De Tocqueville, reminded us years ago that "a liberal, wise and energetic government" cannot "spring from the suffrage of a subservient people" and that "no citizen is so obscure that it is not dangerous to allow him to be oppressed, no private rights are so unimportant that they can be surrendered with impunity to the caprices of a government".

The dismal track record of the BJP's rule, irretrievably diminished by suppression of free thought, persecution and intimidation of political opponents, citizens and students, will hopefully carry the burden of argument against the party's continuation in office. Finally, we cannot forget that the pledge in defence of liberty and dignity of our people that we took as a nation on the midnight of freedom is a continuing one since we are once again called upon to ensure "that the soul of a suppressed nation finds utterance". Therein lies the extraordinary significance of the electoral outcome this year.

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Losing its lustre?

That the Bharatiya Janata Party will go to any extent to appease voters to be in power is evident from the government's decision to confer the Bharat Ratna, the nation's highest civilian award, on former President Pranab Mukherjee, musician Bhupen Hazarika (posthumous) and social activist Nanaji Deshmukh (posthumous). It reflects a deference to the dictates of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and probably a way to appease the electorate in the Northeast and even West Bengal. After blatantly interfering in the functioning of a number of constitutional bodies and even the judiciary to

achieve its ends, it is unfortunate that the BJP government is now using the highest civilian award to try and influence some sections of voters, especially as the countdown to the general election has begun.

THARCIUS S. FERNANDO, Chennai

Texts and science

The article, "Are we undermining our scientific temper?" (OpEd page, 'Yes, No, It's Complicated', January 25), left one rather dissatisfied. While two writers (for 'Yes' and 'No') were in agreement on information in the Puranas being left there instead of being used in discussion in

august conferences, the last writer ('It's Complicated') appeared to give the impression that he had misunderstood the meaning of 'temper' in the term 'scientific temper'. For us lay people, the word 'science' has a clear association with empirical experience, which means that it should be possible for the proposition to be repeatedly subjected to trial and that this should give the same result. Using this point, I would suggest that our ministers, vice-chancellors and other great people who keep harping on the validity of Pushpaka Vimanas, Brahmastras and evidence of plastic surgery in fixing an elephant's head

on a child's shoulders be given a tidy sum of money to delve into ancient texts, and using the information therein, to produce working laboratory models of such things. It is only then that they should come forward with their proposals to introduce their ideas — either in the field of education or in industry — and produce eyeball-grabbing scientific information as workable science and technology.

R. KRISHNAN, Bengaluru

Osaka's win

Japan's Naomi Osaka, the new Australian Open champion, has underlined that her win in the U.S.

Open last year was no flash in the pan and that she is no longer a pushover ("Sport" page, "Osaka overcomes nerves and a gritty Kvitova", January 27). Her game has not been built around power — a factor that is so dominant in women's tennis of today — but one that is more about a reliance on precision and angles to dislodge the power hitting of her opponents. This style of tennis has certain advantages as it could help

her be relatively injury-free. A new star has arrived and, hopefully, be in the limelight for a long time.

V. LAKSHMANAN, Tirupur, Tamil Nadu

■ Before the U.S. Open, Ms. Osaka was an unknown. But her rise in women's tennis has been spectacular. One looks forward to her going full steam ahead.

SHANMUGAM MUDALIAR, Pune

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

"The lockdown on zearalenone in cereals" (Who.What.Why.When.Where page, Jan. 27, 2019) talked about a 1974 hepatitis outbreak in Rajasthan and Gujarat that was linked to aflatoxin in wheat. It was actually linked to aflatoxin in maize.

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