



## Values to live by

PM Modi's call for inclusiveness in the Maldives and Sri Lanka is relevant in India too

During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Male this month, his first trip abroad after his re-election, he delivered a speech rich in meaningful metaphors to the Maldivian Parliament. He referred to the ties that bind India to the Maldives, and which could be extended to other maritime neighbours in the Indian Ocean as well. Pointing out that the waves that wash the Indian shores are the same as those that reach the shores of the Maldivian island chain, Mr. Modi called them "messengers" of peace, friendship and trust that exist between the two countries. Going beyond geographical proximity, the speech spelt out common interests in maritime cooperation, democracy, pluralism, climate change, and in battling the twin scourges of terrorism and radicalisation. The agreements announced during the visit followed these themes as well: including MoUs on hydrography cooperation and sharing 'white shipping' information, and India's decision to fund a conservation project for Male's Friday Mosque built with coral in 1658. The Prime Minister expressed a resolve for the common fight against terrorism and radicalisation, which he called the "litmus test for today's leadership", and said "state sponsorship of terrorism" remains the biggest threat to all humanity today. On his next stop, for a few hours in Colombo, he spelt out the same message, making a detour after landing to visit the St. Anthony's Shrine in Kochchikade, one of the sites of the Easter Sunday terror attacks that left more than 250 dead.

Mr. Modi's twin visits underlined several initiatives that he had promoted in his first tenure, including his commitment to "Neighbourhood First" and "Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR)" for the Indian Ocean Region. Going forward, it is necessary to ensure that these themes receive constant attention through steady communication, and that relations are not allowed to fray as they did in the first few years of that tenure. The next imperative is the delivery of all projects that India has committed to, on time and within the budgets estimated, an area where India's reputation has suffered in the past. Finally, Mr. Modi chose to speak in Male about two important liberal values as common causes: democracy, which he called the Maldives a "glowing example of", and inclusiveness. He repeated his motto, *Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas aur Sabka Vishwas* (together with all, for the development of all and with the trust of all), and his outreach to the mosque in the Maldives and the church in Sri Lanka reinforced the words. These words must be buttressed by the power of example, as India's neighbours will see whether the same values that India hopes to see in its neighbourhood are implemented within the country.

## Starting at three

Extending the right to education to younger children would be a welcome step

India's far-sighted Right to Education Act is making slow progress in mainstreaming equity, in the absence of a strong political commitment in several States. The proposal to extend its scope to younger children through early childhood education is, however, wholly positive. The move suggested in the draft National Education Policy to put children three years and older in a stimulating nursery environment is a welcome logical measure. The pedagogical view is that the pre-school phase is crucial to stimulate a child's curiosity and help her prepare for schooling at age six. The NEP proposal to infuse the existing child development schemes, which are primarily nutrition-oriented, with a learning component is in line with this thinking on holistic development. An extension of the RTE would be a big step forward, but in the absence of measures that will deepen equity, the law cannot be transformative. The Centre has to guarantee that in its totality, the Right to Education will encompass all schools bar those catering to minorities. This is necessary to achieve its moral goal of bringing quality schooling to all in the 6-14 age group; adding the early childhood section, now under the Ministry of Women and Child Development, will then be meaningful. Unfortunately, the evidence indicates that only 12.7% schools comply with the law's requirements, and at the pace seen since RTE became law in 2010, it will take decades to achieve full coverage.

Giving all children aged three and above the right to an education can become a reality only if the state is willing to live up to its promise of devoting more financial resources. An expenditure of 6% of GDP on education could have transformed the sector, given the large wealth generated since economic liberalisation. But far less is spent – for instance, 2.7% in 2017-18. The last years have cost millions a brighter future, but the draft NEP provides an opportunity to make amends. Bringing more children into the formal stream needs a well-thought-out road map. The Centre has to play a leadership role to ensure that States, some of which have done a poor job of implementing the RTE Act, are persuaded to implement urgent reform. The NEP's proposal to have well-designed school complexes, where pre-primary to secondary classes will be available, is in itself an ambitious goal that will require mission-mode implementation. Shortcomings in anganwadi centres must be addressed in the expansion plan. State governments will have to fill teacher vacancies and ensure that the training of recruits is aligned to scientific, child-oriented teaching methods. Education reform is vital to prepare for a future in which cutting-edge skills will be necessary for continued economic progress. Changes to the RTE Act that will prepare all children for a more productive schooling phase can help make India's educational system morally fair and more egalitarian.

# A summary of fears and possibilities

Why the Narendra Modi government should be cautious about a majoritarian agenda



HARSH MANDER

In the heady first flush of a newly elected government, commentators often compose, as usually unsolicited counsel, optimistic lists of what the government should do in its first 100 days in office.

### Ideologically-driven signals

I am in an entirely different frame of mind after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's emphatic victory in India's 2019 midsummer election. Instead of optimism I experience a mounting disquiet. This deepens when I observe Mr. Modi's choices for India's Home Minister and for the Minister for Human Resource Development.

I worry when against a backdrop of violent cow vigilantism, Animal Husbandry and Dairying is separated from the Ministry of Agriculture and carved into a separate ministry stewarded by three Ministers who have a history of hate speech and hard-line Hindutva politics.

The messaging is abundantly clear. The signals are of a much more openly ideologically-driven government than even the first tenure of Mr. Modi, one determined to advance its agenda of hard-line majoritarianism at all costs. This will play out variously in its approach to fraught questions such as citizenship, Kashmir, Hindutva terror, the Ram temple, and dissent. The government will feel mandated to rewrite history, decimate left-liberal universities, abandon the scientific temper, and amend cow protection laws to

make these more draconian.

### A possible line of action

Therefore, my list here is different. It is of what I hope this government will not do, but intensely dread that it will. I do not fear that the letter of India's Constitution will be changed. But what will be torn to fragments would be its practice. I fear, first, an even more frightening rise in hate speech; and the hate violence that this will instigate and encourage. Lynching should not become an indelible part of the broken social contract, pushing Muslims further into underserved ghettos transacting their lives in everyday dread.

I fear that the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam will manufacture statelessness at a scale no country has known. There is no chance of Bangladesh accepting these so-called 'stateless persons'; so, they will continue to live in Assam: some in concentration camp-like detention centres, but most stripped of rights in local communities. This will create a Rohingya-like situation, with widespread social violence and routinised state repression. The Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, if passed, will ensure that excluded Bengali Hindus will be absorbed as citizens, thereby barring only Muslims from citizenship. This will create a frightening cleavage between communities, reminiscent of Partition, and will be the most decisive death-blow to the Constitution of which the centre-piece is the idea of equal citizenship to people of every faith.

The suffering to millions of Assam's most disadvantaged peoples will then be spread to other parts of India, beginning with Bengal, where the lethal combination of the NRC and the Citizenship Bill will push many millions of India's Muslims into the vortex of dread



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about their futures as Indian citizens, crushed by merciless and partisan state institutions.

Just as a spurious (and unconstitutional) link of citizenship with religion would be created, another bogus link of religion with terror could be re-established. All cases of Hindutva terror would be white-washed and alleged perpetrators such as Pragna Thakur and killers of rationalists such as M.M. Kalburgi and progressive journalists such as Gauri Lankesh will be freed from any taint, and the arrest of Muslim youth for terror will mount once again.

The three Ministers who head the newly created Animal Husbandry Ministry could design even more stringent laws against cow slaughter, with draconian punishments and the dilution of evidentiary standards. This would further encourage cow vigilante groups to extort and lynch Muslims and Dalits. Impoverished Muslim dairy farmers such as in Mewat and Uttar Pradesh, will be forced to abandon dairying, but will find it hard to survive with any other livelihood. Dalits will struggle to look for work which does not require them to skin cattle. The agrarian economy will flounder further. Tribal, Dalit and Muslim communities will lose access to their only source of cheap protein, as beef eating (and even eating meat of

buffaloes) will become too high risk an enterprise for poor communities.

The Kashmir Valley would burn with an even more muscular militarist approach to protests. But these smouldering fires could explode into terminal explosions of public rage if the Central government persists with its perilous resolve to abrogate Article 370 of the Constitution which accords a special status to Jammu and Kashmir, and Article 35A which flows from this to enable it to sustain the demographic character of the State.

The Central government may use the pathway of legislation to pave the way for the building of a Ram temple in Ayodhya at the very spot where the Babri Masjid was demolished. The communal triumphalism which would accompany this could lead to a rash of anti-Muslim violence in every corner of the country like a raging forest-fire in a dry jungle, as in 1992 after the demolition of the Babri Masjid.

### A relook at history

There could be a massive project to rewrite textbooks country-wide, to plant the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's (RSS's) version of history in literally millions of young minds. Ancient India will become a golden land in which every scientific accomplishment of the 21st century was already anticipated and achieved. Brahmanical violence against Dalits and Buddhists will be air-brushed. Medieval India will become homogenised as an era of unmitigated darkness, in which Muslim rulers oppressed their defenceless Hindu subjects and subdued their religion and culture. India's freedom struggle will discover many unknown Hindutva patriots, and others like Sardar Patel, Lal Bahadur Shastri, and even Mahatma Gandhi and B.R.

Ambedkar will be recast as Hindutva icons. Gandhiji's lifelong struggle for Hindu-Muslim unity and his assassination for this reason in the hands of a Hindutva ideologue will be erased from history.

Progressive thought and dissent in universities will die. Dissenting social movements and civil society institutions will be starved of funds and criminalised. Every public institution including the higher civil services (through lateral entry), institutions such as the Lokpal, the Central Bureau of Investigation, the National Investigation Agency, and even the judiciary will be packed with ideological sympathisers. Even the armed forces won't remain unaffected. Labour, land acquisition and environmental laws and banking regulations will all be 'reformed' to benefit selected big business houses. The media will become even more pliant in its abject metamorphosis into cheerleaders of the government, and its majoritarian and pro-business policies.

We can debate the reasons why so many Indian voters chose Mr. Modi. But there can be no doubt that Mr. Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party view the mandate as one for consolidating the master plan of the RSS – the ideological mentor of the BJP – and thereby changing India forever.

My wish-list for the new government, therefore, is not of what it should do, but what it should not do. If any or all of this is what the new Narendra Modi-Amit Shah government actually accomplishes, then the country we give our children will no longer be a place of freedom and justice, or even ordinary kindness. I have very little hope, but I would be overjoyed if I am proved wrong.

Harsh Mander is a human rights worker, writer and teacher

# Back to Kashmir with an open heart

Any delay in holding Assembly elections in the State will only deepen the sense of alienation



V. SUDARSHAN

Before the 2019 general election, Prime Minister Narendra Modi asserted that the problem in Jammu and Kashmir has been kept confined to "two-and-a-half districts" and that the panchayat polls (December 2018) were an indication of the enthusiasm in the State for democratic processes. It is surprising that he has been able to make this claim unchallenged. No one asked him which seven-and-a-half districts in the Valley are shining examples of a problem being satisfactorily solved. It is a kind of 'Alice in Wonderland' syndrome. Given the nature of prime ministerial interviews, often minutely scripted and choreographed, his advisers also seem to be suffering from this syndrome, characterised by a significant distortion of reality. The attempt to put off the Assembly elections till after the Amarnath yatra is a piece of this distortion.

### Beyond the lockdown

Consider these developments in the State. On April 4, over a month-and-a-half after the Pulwa

ma attack (in February), an announcement was made that the National Highway between Baramulla and Udhampur would be closed to civilian traffic for two days a week to facilitate convoy movements. It did not get the attention it deserved in the national media, but many security planners were agast.

The highway is a lifeline for the local population, with many later roads and passes through more than two-and-a-half districts. The armed forces are so heavily deployed and the necessity for supplies and replenishments so constant that they use the roads more than two days in a week. If the ban now stands lifted, it was because it is untenable.

### A sense of alienation

Like Alice in the Hall of Mirrors, Mr. Modi has presented us an illusion. He has slipped into the habit of telling various interviewers the official version of the way people in J&K are warming up to elections. He told one: "You have seen the peaceful manner in which panchayat elections (December 2018) were conducted in the Valley. It has enthused us and shown the love of common Kashmiris for democracy." To another he pointed out: "Local-level elections were not held for many years in the Srinagar Valley. Earlier governments were obstructions. Right now we



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have conducted elections; 75% of the polling took place and there was not a single incident of violence. Hundreds of people were killed in panchayat elections in West Bengal, but there was not a single incident in Kashmir. Are conditions bad in Bengal or in Kashmir?"

The panchayat polls, held over as many as seven phases, were marked by the absence of the mainstream political parties such as the Congress or the National Conference or the Peoples Democratic Party. It is not prudent to interpret the enthusiasm here and project it on to the Assembly elections.

A parsing of the panchayat poll figures also shows a different reality, marked by astoundingly low polling in many wards, no representatives in hundreds of other wards, overall something that was

reiterated more effectively in the Lok Sabha election.

In the parliamentary constituencies of Baramulla, Srinagar and Anantnag, voter turnout dipped while in the Shopian and Pulwama areas there was hardly any enthusiasm. At dozens of booths no one turned out to vote, the most dismal voting figures since the late 1980s. That's how far back Mr. Modi's policies have set the clock. Not the best advertisement for a problem that is confined merely to two-and-a-half districts.

Worse, this low turnout was not the result of separatists trying to enforce a boycott. All of the Hurriyat leaders have been taken out of the reckoning. As there was not much violence, militants were not out in strength in trying to intimidate people from voting. The people were simply not interested in voting. A great sense of alienation and a rejection of democratic process alone explains this abysmal turnout.

### Arresting the drift

Though the Prime Minister often says that he has taken the high road of his predecessor Atal Bihari Vajpayee (recall the former Prime Minister's 'Insaniyat, Jamhooriyat, Kashmiriyat' formulation) there is little evidence of this on the ground and in the minds of Kashmiris. Only if the stage is set for an

early Assembly election can something be salvaged. By not holding Assembly elections soon, the two-and-a-half district problem is not going to be halved. The bulk of the Indian Army is not deployed in West Bengal because of some trifling two-and-a-half district problem. It is deployed in Kashmir. If the problem was indeed so small, it should have been easy enough to have held the Lok Sabha and the Assembly elections simultaneously in J&K. The results of the Lok Sabha election have confirmed the deep political divisions.

Yet now is the time to hold Assembly elections. It is easy enough to find reasons not to hold polls till an option suitable to New Delhi emerges: it is easy enough to cite the "tourism season" and the Amarnath yatra to put off the decision till November, when the capital shifts to Jammu. And so on. In the 1990s, when Governor's Rule was imposed for nearly seven years, militancy soared. The longer the decision is put off, the more young and educated people, who are already disillusioned with the way things are going in that area, are going to drift towards militancy. Now that the Prime Minister has made a conciliatory start, he should extend the same sense of inclusiveness to the Kashmir Valley, and begin anew.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### GDP over-estimation

The former Chief Economic Adviser's startling revelation (Page 1, June 12) that GDP figures from 2011-17 were overstated – when growth was actually 4.5% – is a severe indictment of both the UPA and the NDA governments, but more the latter. This was apparently done to show that the economy was doing all right when the situation was not as bright as it was made out to be. This flies in the face of the government trumpeting its achievements and claiming that the country was the fastest growing economy. The sour note is that the former CEA took such a long time to come out with this when he should have done so while in office.

V. PADMANABHAN, Bengaluru

Mr. Subramanian's argument needs to be

debated in order to come to an acceptable appraisal of the economy. In the recent past, there has been debate on the methodology adopted in estimating growth rate. Contradictory data relating to the growth rate only create confusion and erode our confidence. The unprecedented rise in unemployment, a fall in industrial production and manufacturing and the alarming issue of non-performing assets can all affect the growth engine. The government needs to take appropriate policy measures and in a transparent manner.

V.V.K. SURESH, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh

It is often said that if a group of five economists get together, they will each come out with six different opinions. Therefore, Mr. Subramanian's "revelation" should not be a cause for surprise. The irony is that

during his tenure as the CEA, he "failed" to notice this irregularity. That such over-estimation happened under the watch of Manmohan Singh as Prime Minister – also an economist of repute – makes the issue more intriguing. The common man hardly understands the significance of GDP to an economy, leave alone getting to the roots of methodology or changes in it to estimate the GDP. It would be a pity if he is taken for granted and fed with imaginary figures to make him believe that we are a buoyant economy. Any government will only be willing to project a rosy picture of the economy. However, the reputation and credibility of economists would be under stress if they are inclined to tow the line of the government of the day, ignoring prescribed rules of computing economic data, which is also an unethical act. When there are such

variations advanced by different economists, one wonders how the budgeted estimates would prove effective in a large economy such as India's. Instead of attempting to come up with a defence, the government would do well to revisit the tenuous link between the estimate and reality.

V. SUBRAMANIAN, Chennai

### The classroom today

The article, "Truth, technology and the teacher" (OpEd page, June 12), should be read by all those who are involved in making the children of India responsible and better citizens. Today, children, especially those of impressionable age, face a difficult time sorting fact from fiction. As for teachers, they are slowly becoming robotic. Smart boards can probably help supplement a teacher's work but cannot make him a smart teacher. It

is no surprise that children are unable to face the real world, as well-grounded and knowledgeable individuals.

N. NAGARAJAN, Secunderabad

There is a misconception that educational technology is the panacea for all shortcomings in the achievement of educational goals. Under this false notion, effective teaching can be accomplished through the use of technological gadgets, with most private educational institutions vying with one another in advertising their 'smart' classrooms. No doubt technological gadgets such as radio, television, computer and the Internet can enhance learning and be valuable adjuncts to the teacher. But all these can only supplement a teacher's work and cannot supplant him. Ultimately, it is the teacher

who has to plan, decide and use the most effective tool in his or her teaching.

Unfortunately, teachers are being marginalised. Finally, even parents who always dream of instant results as far as their children are concerned have more and more complete faith in the 'drill master' in coaching centres than the regular classroom teacher.

A. PANNEERSELVAM, Puducherry

### Great humorist

In the passing of "Crazy" Mohan, Tamil Nadu has lost a redoubtable stage artist. His heart and soul were embedded in theatre first and cinema second. His "clean humour", a brand that will be hard to replicate, struck a deep chord with families.

MANI NATARAJAN, Chennai

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