



A formal break

V.K. Sasikala's removal as general secretary may be at the cost of the party's government

Finally, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam is without its deeply polarising figure, the interim general secretary, V.K. Sasikala. As a close friend of Jayalalitha, she had played a major role in the party's affairs for more than 25 years, evoking both fear and loyalty among the party's second line of leaders. Her removal was the precondition set by the O. Panneerselvam faction of the party for a merger, a first step before the party could reclaim its original identity and flag and election symbol. Whether the faction led by Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami adopted this course out of political necessity or out of a genuine desire to keep Sasikala out of the party's affairs is now immaterial: the break with the Sasikala family is real. The consequences of her removal at the meeting of the general council of the party will be immediate: greater political legitimacy for the ruling faction's claim to be truly representative of the party's organisational support base and increased isolation of the Sasikala clan from the party. While there are many in the party, including ministers, who still sympathise with Sasikala, or feel a sense of gratitude towards her, the party will no longer be remote-controlled by the 'Mannargudi clan'. The newly evolved collective leadership in the party, with Mr. Panneerselvam as the coordinator and Mr. Palaniswami as the co-coordinator, and the abolition of the powerful post of general secretary, will be resistant to the influence of Sasikala and her nephew T.T.V. Dhinakaran.

However, the Sasikala group under the leadership of Mr. Dhinakaran commands the overt support of at least 18 members of the Assembly, enough to pull down the government. They have been hesitant to form themselves as a breakaway group either for fear of being disqualified for defection or in the hope that they might be able to capture the leadership of the parent party. The general council meeting could only have accentuated the differences with the Dhinakaran group. A reconciliation is close to impossible now, although Sasikala has not been expelled from the party. The changed equations within the ruling party, which no longer appears to enjoy the confidence of a majority in the House, should force Governor C. Vidyasagar Rao out of his inaction. Mr. Palaniswami should seek another vote of confidence as, even by the admission of his own camp he is well short of an absolute majority in the Assembly. The political gains from the merger of the two camps notwithstanding, Mr. Palaniswami might have risked the stability of his own government by patching up with Mr. Panneerselvam. Just as he ties up one end, things are beginning to unravel at the other.

Cambodian slide

Political repression under Prime Minister Hun Sen has put the fragile democracy at risk

The crackdown in Cambodia is taking the form of criminalisation of the opposition and the media by Prime Minister Hun Sen ahead of the 2018 national elections. This slide into political regression is particularly troubling, as the country is still recovering from the memory of the genocide at the hands of the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s. Cambodia has enjoyed relative prosperity in recent years thanks to the boom in garment exports and tourism; it can ill-afford political unrest. Its democracy too is a work in progress, and while the long-ruling Hun Sen has never been an ideal democrat, in recent years his autocratic tendencies have become increasingly more pronounced. The detention earlier this month of Kem Sokha, leader of the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), on charges of treason, was accompanied by circumstances that led to the closure of an independent newspaper. In July, the government promulgated a law that enables the banning of political parties with connections to criminal convicts. Mr. Hun Sen, a former commander of the Khmer Rouge, whose lengthy rule since 1985 is often compared to the tenure of other dictators, is anxious to tighten his grip on the levers of power. Recently he declared his intent to carry on for another two terms. But it was the CNRP that made significant gains in the local body elections this June, even as the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) retained a majority of seats.

In his campaign during that election, Mr. Hun Sen barely concealed the instincts of a ruthless dictator when he openly threatened civil war in the event of the CPP losing the elections. Earlier, under its veteran leader Sam Rainsy, who is in self-imposed exile, the CNRP had challenged Mr. Hun Sen's 2013 re-election and extracted major concessions at the end of a protracted political crisis. The allusion in the latest treason charge is to Mr. Kem Sokha's comments before an Australian audience some years ago, pointing to the level of desperation in the ruling dispensation. The current political turmoil in Cambodia reflects an ongoing shift in international influence in the decades following the genocide. The U.S. had been closely involved in the restoration of democratic stability in the country, and the Cambodian turnaround is one of the United Nations' great success stories. But recent years have seen a dramatic rise in Beijing's bilateral and regional engagement with Phnom Penh, which under Mr. Hun Sen is using the great power rivalry to evade accountability by his regime. Cambodia's cancellation of the annual joint military exercises with the U.S. this year coincided with the first such engagement with China, underscoring the extent of the changing dynamics of big power diplomacy in Southeast Asia. The 'America First' approach under President Donald Trump is not likely to alter this trend. It is left to the international community to keep a sustained focus on Cambodia, and underline how precariously placed the Cambodian recovery still is.

Equality for what?

We must incorporate the right to equality into our political vocabulary to arrest deepening inequality



NEERA CHANDHOKE

In 1820 the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, in his magnificently crafted *Philosophy of Right*, had written with some despair of the moral squalor and of the ravages that poverty brings in its wake. The state of poverty, he argued, is not an aberration, it is a product of industrial society, of the overproduction and underconsumption which marks this social order. But it is precisely society that banishes its victims to the twilight zone of collective life. Here, removed from the advantages of solidarity that civil society offers, the poor are reduced to a heap of fragmented atoms, rabble, *poebel*. When the standard of living of a large mass of people falls below a certain subsistence level, he wrote, we see a loss of the sense of right and wrong, of honesty and of self-respect. "Against nature man can claim no right, but once society is established, poverty immediately takes the form of a wrong done to one class by another."

Hegel suggests that poverty is a social phenomenon. One, society is complicit in the creation and re-creation of poverty. Destitution, that is, is the outcome of a skewed economy. Two, poverty breeds unfortunate consequences, such as suffering, which seriously demoralises human beings. Three, the existence of large numbers of the poor pose a direct threat to the social order, simply because the poor are (justly) resentful of their exclusion from the benefits of society.

We should be seriously reflecting on Hegel's criticism of a society that refuses to correct the wrongs it



has heaped on its own people, in the light of the research findings of the economist Thomas Piketty and his colleague Lucas Chancel.

Inequality in India

In a paper aptly titled 'Indian income inequality, 1922-2014: From British Raj to Billionaire Raj?', they conclude that income inequality in India is at the highest level since 1922, when the country's income tax law was conceived, and that the top 1% earners corner 22% of income. These research findings should send a powerful warning signal to power elites, leaders who prefer to concentrate on the politics of beef, brutal repression of dissent, and curtailment of basic human freedoms, even as the lives of thousands of Indians are mired in mind-numbing poverty.

There is more to the proposition that some persons are poor beyond belief, and others are rich beyond belief in India. P is poor, we can say, when she does not possess access to the basic resources which enable q, or s, or m to consume nutritious food, avoid ill health, attend school, take up a job, and own a home, let alone go on holiday or possess a car. This implies that p is not just poor, she is unequal to q, s, or m, since the latter three, unlike p, have access to certain advant-

ages that p does not. Poverty is the effect of inequality as well as the prime signifier of inequality. And inequality is demeaning.

Implications for society

Arguably, inequality is not only a matter of statistics. It is a shattering reflection on the kind of society we live in. Logically, if the economic ordering of society is responsible for ill-being, it is obliged to remedy the wrongs that it has visited upon the heads of the poor. This constitutes a basic code of justice. People who have been wronged are entitled to ask for justice. If justice is not delivered, inequalities are reinforced and compounded over time.

Resultantly, people fated to occupy the lowest rungs of the social ladder are not only denied access to basic material requirements that enable them to live a decent life, they are likely to be socially overlooked, politically irrelevant except in times of elections when their votes bring parties into power, disdained, and subjected to disrespect in and through the practices of everyday life. To be unequal is to be denied the opportunity to participate in social, economic, and cultural transactions from a plane of equality.

Starkly put, the presence of massive inequality reflects sharply and pejoratively on the kind of social relations that we find in India. Because these social relationships are indisputably unequal, they cannot but be entrenched in massive discrimination and exploitation. Can we reflect on inequality without taking on exploitation and discrimination? And unless we confront these background inequalities directly, will not inequality continue to be produced and reproduced along with the production and reproduction of a lopsided social order, indeed as an integral part of this order?

Morality of mutual respect

Let us not understate the implications of inequality, it violates a basic democratic norm: the equal standing of citizens. Persons have equal standing because each human being has certain capacities in common with other human beings, for instance, the capacity to make her own history in concert with other human beings. Of course the histories that persons make might not be the histories they chose to make, but this is not the issue at hand. What is important is that each person realises this ability.

The principle of equal standing generates at least two robust principles of democratic morality. For one, equality is a relation that obtains between persons in respect of some fundamental characteristic that they share in common. Equality is, morally speaking, a default principle. Therefore, and this is the second postulate, persons should not be discriminated against on grounds such as race, caste, gender, ethnicity, sexual preferences, disability, or class. These features of the human condition are morally irrelevant.

These two postulates of political morality yield the following implications. To treat persons equally be-

cause they possess equal standing is to treat them with respect. The idea that one should treat persons with respect not only because some of these persons possess some special skill or talent, for example skilled cricketers, gifted musicians, or literary giants, but because persons are human beings, is by now part of common sense morality. If someone were to ask, 'equality for what', we can answer that equality assures equal standing and respect, and respect is an essential prerequisite for the making of human beings who can participate in the multiple transactions of society from a position of confidence and self-respect. If they cannot do so, the government is simply not taking the well-being of its citizens seriously.

There is urgent need, in the face of government inaction and insensitivity towards people trapped in inequality as a social relation to invoke the collective conscience of Indian citizens. If the right to equality is violated, citizens should be exercised or agitated about this violation. But for this to occur, for society to feel deeply about the right on offer, we have to incorporate the right to equality into political thinking, into our values, and into political vocabularies. The project requires the harnessing of creative imagination and courage on the one hand, and careful reasoning, persuasion, and dialogue on the other. The task also demands the investment of rather high degrees of energy and time. But this is essential because a political consensus on what constitutes, or should constitute the basic rules of society, is central to our collective lives. The political is not a given, it has to be constructed, as Karl Marx had told us long ago, through determined and sustained political intervention.

Neera Chandhoke is a former Professor of Political Science at Delhi University

We need to talk about rural distress

Farmers are under siege – a policy upgrade is essential



FEROZE VARUN GANDHI

A century ago, farmers in Bihar's Champaran district were forced to set aside 15% of their land to cultivate indigo under the *Tinkathia* system. Once planted, the farmers were still subjected to a variety of extortionist cesses, or *abwabs*. They rose in revolt but were crushed by the East India Company until the arrival of a barrister from South Africa. Yet, a century after Mahatma Gandhi fought against the exploitation of farmers, India's agrarian community still remains under siege.

At a granular level, marginal farming in India is a highly complex and decision-intensive process. Farmers have to make a variety of decisions starting with the choice of crops (annual or short term) and their time of tillage. Then there are rising prices of agricultural inputs, availability of water, soil suitability and pest management. All these factors create a narrow window of economic benefit for the marginal farmer. A wrong decision can wreak havoc.

Debt levels

This uncertainty is reflected in rural debt levels. A Panjab University study showed that in Punjab, large farmers with holdings greater

than 10 hectares typically had a debt-to-income ratio of 0.26, while for medium farmers, 4-10 ha, and semi-medium farmers, 2-4 ha, it was 0.34 – all seemingly affordable. However, small, 1-2 ha, and marginal farmers, less than a hectare, faced a greater burden of debt, with a debt-to-income ratio of 0.94 and 1.42, respectively; over 50% of their loans are from non-banking sources.

With average landholding size decreasing from 2.3 ha in 1971 to 1.16 ha in 2011, and average input prices rising, cultivation costs have also increased. A farmer now typically earns ₹2,400 a month per hectare of paddy and about ₹2,600 a month per hectare of wheat, while farm labourers earn less than ₹5,000 a month. Real farm wages have grown at an average annual growth rate of 2.9% between 1991 and 2012, with farm wages declining between 2002 and 2007. Effectively, about 30.5 million left farming between 2004-05 and 2010-11, seeking employment in the secondary and tertiary sectors. In 2011, the Planning Commission estimated that the size of this agricultural workforce would shrink to less than 200 million by 2020.

The consequence is farmers committing suicides. Farmer suicides have also grown primarily in States with limited irrigation and variable rainfall, comprising 87.5% of all farmer suicides in 2015. Over 3,21,428 farmers committed suicide in the last 20 years.

Large farmers in Maharashtra typically have access to modern



pumps, consuming huge amounts of water and leaving hardly anything for small and marginal farmers. Fertilizer and pesticide prices have also risen, causing marginal farmers to adopt organic means. The limited availability and high cost of high-yielding seed varieties also hampers agricultural productivity. Given such constraints, farmers have limited scope for crop diversification, choosing to focus primarily on staple crops such as wheat and rice, where the government offers a price guarantee for produce and the availability of post-harvest infrastructure.

Loan waiver politics

Institutional support has been provided in various forms since Independence. Established in 1982, the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development has sought to provide financing support for tube-well irrigation, farm mechanisation and other ancillary activities. The introduction of a nationwide agriculture loan waiver in

1990 had a deleterious impact on the provision of rural credit, providing a short-term palliative while breeding credit indiscipline among farmers and leading to a shortfall in rural credit growth.

The 2004-05 Union Budget sought to double agricultural credit, while a 2% interest subvention was provided in 2006, allowing farmers to avail of kisan credit card (KCC) loans at 7% per annum (up to ₹3 lakh). Another agricultural loan waiver was sanctioned in 2009, just before the Lok Sabha election. In 2011, the government provided a further 3% interest subvention for farmers making immediate payments on their KCC loans. More recently, the Uttar Pradesh government's farm loan waiver scheme has been replicated in Maharashtra, Punjab and Karnataka and estimated to total up to 0.5% of India's GDP. Similar demands are growing in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Haryana. Small and marginal farmers certainly deserve greater support from the government. However, India's agricultural policy has historically disincentivised the creation of a formal credit culture among farmers. When the next election is likely to bring about another farm loan waiver, why would any farmer seek to pay off his loans early? Such schemes can also prompt farmers to take on risky ventures that are beyond their capacity.

Ideally, India ought not to have rural distress. We have the second largest amount of arable land in the world. Yet, less than 35% of this

land is irrigated, with the remainder subject to fluctuations in rainfall.

Helping the farmer

The writing is on the wall. India's small and marginal farmers will need another agricultural loan waiver. However, this cannot continue in the future. There are other ways to mitigate their plight. Greater subsidies could be extended for the purchase of agricultural equipment, fertilizers and pesticides, while the medical insurance coverage could be expanded through the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojna. In addition, the scope of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act could be increased. Allowing marginal farmers to be paid for tilling their own fields could reduce their input costs. Such measures could also increase their net income.

Finally, we need a national conversation on rural distress. Unlike the Champaran Satyagraha, national attention has been curiously lacking. We ought to discuss the Swaminathan Commission's report in a full week's sitting of Parliament and decide which direction India's agriculture goes. With empathy for India's farmers and a truthful assessment of on-the-ground farming reality, we must make the right choices for Indian agriculture.

Feroze Varun Gandhi is a Member of Parliament representing the Sultanpur constituency for the BJP

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.

Going the Bullet way

Those who oppose the high-speed rail corridor project citing poverty and the extravagant cost of the project should realise that it is a long-term dream scheme of the nation, being funded at a meagre interest rate of 0.1%. It will create thousands of employment opportunities, directly and indirectly, in the long run ("An alliance on track", September 13). We are living in a world where technology is the need of the hour and India cannot afford to miss out on such projects. It was once argued by the Left that information technology was a bane but it was subsequently proven that India is a world leader in this area.

KSHIRASAGARA BALAJI RAO, Hyderabad

■ We have to learn lessons from the revelation that Taiwan's high-speed line

which used the same Japanese technology is experiencing heavy losses while Indonesia, which is to use Chinese technology, is facing land acquisition issues. We are witness to the Indian Railways struggle to obtain 'right of way' even for a small stretch of track. Prolonged litigation often pushes up costs. Have the Railways done their homework for the earmarked stretch? Given the speed at which large-scale projects are executed in India, the deadline of 2022 seems overambitious. The terms of the soft loan from Japan, though comparatively better than it was availed from the World Bank, may not prove to be economical. Fare tariffs for a bullet train are bound to be prohibitive. With its very poor safety record, the Indian Railways would do well to concentrate on

strengthening the existing track system and adopting coach technology that ensures safe and comfortable travel. Here, the aim seems to be to help Japan lift its stagnant economy and maintain a balance in relations with neighbours.

V. SUBRAMANIAN, Chennai

Rahul at Berkeley

It is unfortunate that the healthy convention of political figures not washing domestic dirty linen in public while abroad is now dead and buried. Today, politics in India is a no-holds-barred game, dirtier than ever and which most political leaders indulge in. While addressing an event at the University of California, Berkeley, Congress vice-president Rahul Gandhi played the role expected of him. Credit partly goes to the

government's blunders that seem to have infused a new life into Mr. Gandhi's otherwise flagging political career. While the BJP is up in arms over his speech and comments, one cannot but admit that the Prime Minister too has broken that convention time and again.

J. AKSHAY, Bengaluru

■ It is true that no democratic country has achieved what India has achieved by adopting 100% non-violence. Also, nobody would disagree that former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was responsible for introducing India's modern communication network. However, Mr. Gandhi could have skillfully refrained from talking about Indian politics while abroad. Students and the faculty would have been more interested in matters concerning developments in economic, academic and

scientific research in India, rather than politics.

M. SUBBIAH, Chennai

Being a rationalist

As a nation we have been pandering to religious sentiments for too long. Right from the days of Partition, the various riots, the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the Gujarat riots and beyond, the trail of violence and loss of lives and properties caused as a result of religion is too large to document. Even the father of the nation was eliminated by religious fanatics. The 'graded inequality' among

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In a PTT story, "Bhagat Singh case back in court" (Sept. 13, 2017), there was an erroneous reference to Section 120I of the Indian Penal Code. It should have been Section 120.

'India needs a thousand more prefab factories' (Interview, Business page, Sept. 12, 2017) erroneously said that a plant in Krishnagiri had been named after former President, Abdul Kalam. There is no prefab factory named after him.

The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in