



The best laid plans

NITI Aayog's shift away from five-year plans requires more substance

Narendra Modi is not the first Chief Minister to have gone on to become Prime Minister. But given his well-known disdain for the erstwhile Planning Commission's control-and-command approach towards States and his oft-repeated emphasis on 'cooperative federalism', there were great expectations from the successor organisation, the NITI Aayog. The Five Year Plans – the last one ended on March 31 – were relegated to history, to be replaced by a three-year action plan. This was to be part of a seven-year strategy that would in turn help realise a 15-year long-term vision. When the Aayog's Governing Council that includes the Prime Minister and all Chief Ministers met, it was hoped that the fine print as well as the big picture of the new planning approach had been worked out. However, all that was handed out was a draft action agenda for the three years till 2019-20, with 300 specific action points. This agenda is meant to be the first step towards attaining the envisioned outcomes by 2031-32. This 'New India', as NITI Aayog Vice Chairman Arvind Panagariya put it, will ensure housing for all, with toilets, LPG, power and digital connections; access to a personal vehicle, air conditioner and white goods for 'nearly all'; and a fully literate population with universal health care.

Assuming that the economy grows at 8% annually hereon, the Aayog has presented estimates about the size of the economy and per capita incomes by 2031-32, though juxtaposing these with China's performance in the last 15 years is a bit odd. India's GDP will rise by ₹332 lakh crore in the next 15 years, the Aayog reckons. The bare details of the 15-year vision that have been shared seem like motherhood statements with some optimistic numerical guesswork. But even that is more than we know about the seven-year strategy. Without the larger strategy and vision in place, the three-year action plan is likely to be more of an abstract wish list that Chief Ministers will now evaluate and revert on. Effectively, till it is ratified by the Council, there is a vacuum in India's policy framework – similar to the delayed starts of past Five Year Plans. It is not yet apparent if the 12th Plan's innovation of painting alternative scenarios (of actions and outcomes) – a more useful tool for longer-term planning – has been adopted. Meanwhile, the PM's message to States to speed up capital expenditure and infrastructure development is important as pump-priming the economy is not only the Centre's task. All the same, asking the States to take the initiative on switching India's financial year to match the calendar year is unusual as it requires the Centre to take the lead by making public the report of the committee that has recommended this. To make cooperative federalism truly effective, the Council, or Team India as Mr. Modi calls it, must meet more often – a nearly two-year gap in doing so is a recipe for communication breakdown.

A stark choice

French voters assert their anti-establishment mood in the first round of presidential polls

The French follow their hearts in the first round, and their heads in the run-off – or so goes the cliché about France's politics. But the first round of this year's presidential election was held in such a highly charged environment that voters did not have easy choices before them. And the outcome was unusual, though not totally unexpected. For the first time in the nearly 59 years of France's Fifth Republic founded by Charles de Gaulle, neither of the mainstream left and right parties made it to the run-off, a clear indication of anti-establishment sentiment running high. All these years, France has been ruled either by a Socialist party leader or a conservative Republican. In the May 7 run-off, the fight is between Emmanuel Macron, an independent centrist with no substantial political experience, and Marine Le Pen, the far-right populist leader of the National Front. Mr. Macron, who campaigned on a pro-Europe political platform with promises of economic reforms and better governance, won 23.75% of the vote, while Ms. Le Pen, who during the campaign repeatedly attacked the EU, globalisation and France's immigration policies to drum up support, came second, polling 21.53%. François Fillon of the Republican party finished third, while Benoît Hamon of the ruling Socialist Party came a distant fifth.

Opinion polls predict that Mr. Macron will win the second round as a majority of voters regard Ms. Le Pen and her party as dangerous for France's democracy and its values. This is not the first time a National Front candidate is entering the second round. In 2002, Jean Marie Le Pen, Ms. Le Pen's father, shocked France by making it past the first round, but lost by a massive margin to Jacques Chirac, the incumbent. Large sections of the French political spectrum, from the conservatives to the leftists, then rallied behind Mr. Chirac to defeat the far-right, Holocaust-denying Mr. Le Pen. This year as well, as soon as the results of the first round were out, most of the 11 candidates, including Mr. Fillon and Mr. Hamon, announced support for Mr. Macron. If this support reflects in the popular will, Mr. Macron will repeat history. Still, Ms. Le Pen's chances cannot be ruled out. She has brought the National Front from the dark fringes of French politics to the mainstream by what analysts call "detoxifying" it – toning down the overt racist rhetoric of her father and broadening the party's appeal by mixing a strong anti-globalisation position with extreme nationalism. Her attacks on open borders and immigration resonated with at least sections of the youth at a time when unemployment is in double digits. In the coming two weeks, the political landscape is likely to get more polarised. It is a stark choice for French voters. Their decision will have a profound impact not just on France, but Europe as a whole.

Silence is not an option

Vigilantism has now spilled over from the domain of the creative arts to regulate the daily lives of people



NEERA CHANDHOKE

When was the last time the Hindu community asked itself the question 'who are we'? The last of the interrogators of Hindu society was, arguably, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. He catapulted to the forefront of the political agenda the many oppressions, discriminations, and exclusions of Hinduism, and thus compelled at least public intellectuals to investigate tradition and reflect on the malaise of the community. After him no one has really looked within the collective self, reflected, and considered.

This is a great tragedy, because unless a society asks fundamental questions of itself, it is doomed to complacency and stagnation, or simply doomed. Disdaining the stimulating intellectual exercise of examining the collective self, we have swept the failings of our society under the metaphorical carpet. Lulled into complacency by meaningless assertions – 'say with pride we are Hindu', or a 'New India', or a 'sanitised India', or a 'digital India' – few people ask why we still practise caste discrimination, why we continue to be disgracefully hostile to religious minorities, or why we are indifferent to the plight of our own people.

Silence as complicity

In a democratic political community, citizens owe obligations of justice to their fellow citizens. If the basic rights of an individual or a community are systematically violated, there should be pain, there should be empathy and outrage, and a determination to do some-



DEEPAK THAKUR/CHANDAN

thing about the fundamental infringement of what is owed to human beings: dignity and respect. But we follow our own star; indifferent to the deplorable lack of solidarity in our community.

This is our tragedy, a double tragedy, because we are the inheritors of a rich history of public intellectuals, philosophers, social and religious reformers, and national leaders asking crucial questions of Indian society since the beginning of the nineteenth century. This was the beginning of the Indian Renaissance, and these questions escalated till the middle of the twentieth century. But no more.

Today, Hindu society is complicit in massive crimes perpetrated against Dalits, Muslims, and women, because it is silent in the face of atrocities practised by vigilantes who single-handedly define what they consider 'morality', and who punish people merely on suspicion that they violate codes of Hinduism. Backed by powerful political patrons and a compliant police force, vigilantes are legislators, prosecutors, juries and executioners rolled into one. Reports in our daily newspaper bring stories of horrific violence perpetrated by vigilantes masquerading as the keeper of the keys to the Hindu kingdom. This abnormality in our political life has become a normal

way of doing politics. We should realise that democracy has been subverted, the rule of law has become redundant, and that our representatives are responsible for this serious deviation in political life. But we are silent.

Rising vigilantism

In early April, cow vigilantes attacked 15 Muslim men in the district of Alwar because they were transporting cows. One person died in the appalling violence, others were hospitalised. The Rajasthan Home Minister, Gulab Singh Kataria, defended vigilantes on the plea that cow smuggling is banned in Rajasthan. Apart from the fact that the victims possessed government documents allowing them to transport cows, the Minister's words trivialise the system of justice. If people break a law, they should be hauled up before a court of justice for 'the law to take its own course'. The law is, however, brushed aside as a slight inconvenience, as mercenaries attack the most vulnerable in our society, the Dalits and Muslims. This viciousness and this savagery is the new normal. And we watch in silence!

Vigilantism takes vicious shapes. In 2011 M.F. Husain died in loneliness and in exile, separated from his beloved country and its mythologies, to which he paid poetic

homage on canvas. Some years before his death, London-based vigilantes ransacked an exhibition in Asia House that showcased some of Hussain's paintings, and damaged priceless pieces of art. In India, the works of the gifted artist were not allowed to be exhibited, warrants were prepared for his arrest by the police, and Hussain had to leave the country of his birth. We live in an age when anyone, with no understanding, let alone appreciation, of aesthetics, metaphors, and allegories, can rule which painting, which book, which film can enter the public domain.

Deepa Mehta could not shoot her film on widows in the ashrams of Varanasi. And now Sanjay Leela Bhansali, known more for his lavish presentations than serious cinema, has been put on notice by the activist group Rajput Karni Sena. Bollywood producers, directors and actors have for long genuflected before the leadership of the Shiv Sena and Maharashtra Navnirman Sena to ensure that their films could be released. The process has reached its natural culmination point, and now self-appointed censors force film-makers to follow 'this' and not 'that' script.

The need to speak out

For readers of newspapers these are stories of vigilantes wreaking their perverse notions of correctness on culture, art, and society. But we cannot afford to be silent. Martin Niemöller, the well-known German Lutheran pastor and theologian, initially supported the Nazis, subsequently opposed them, and was banished to a concentration camp. Reflecting on his own silence in the face of social suffering, he authored a famous Holocaust poem: First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out – Because I was not a Socialist. / Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out – Because I

was not a Trade Unionist. / Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out – Because I was not a Jew. / Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak for me. Michael R. Burch, a poet, editor and publisher of Holocaust poetry, has authored a new version of this poem for contemporary America. 'They', he writes, came for the Muslims, then the homosexuals, and then the feminists, and I did not speak out because I belonged to none of these groups. He ends on a sombre note: "Now when will they come for me, because I was too busy and too apathetic, to defend my sisters and brothers?" Sages tell us that silence is a virtue, but silence when confronted by social oppression is tantamount to acquiescence.

There is a need to speak out, because vigilantism has now spilled over from the domain of the creative arts to regulate the daily lives of people. Nowhere is this more visible than in Yogi Adityanath's Uttar Pradesh. The Hindu Yuva Vahini, founded by him to enforce his writ on his home turf, now rules the State and polices relationships. The group stalks courting couples, forces closure of slaughterhouses, and sparks off communal riots. A few days ago, its members broke into a home in Meerut and barged into the bedroom of a couple.

Can we afford to be silent? Our basic right to privacy is at stake. Also at stake is our status as mature citizens who possess the capacity to decide what kind of life we want to lead, who to be friends with, who to love, and what kind of food should be on our dinner table. Abjuring silence, we have to ask basic questions about our own society, and about our role as fellow citizens.

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

The climate fight is global

The Paris accord requires vigilance by all global actors in view of the U.S.'s changed stance on climate change



SUJATHA BYRAVAN

Farmers from Tamil Nadu were gathered in Delhi recently, carrying skulls, apparently belonging to those among them who had committed suicide. They were seeking government assistance following the worst drought in the State in recent times. Concurrently, there are several droughts in many other parts of the world, including Bolivia and several regions of Sub-Saharan Africa. Scorched lands have led to dying livestock, withering crops, and parched communities.

Several recent extreme events such as wildfires, droughts, severe heatwaves and cyclones in other places have a clear signature of a changing climate, but in many cases these are exacerbated by other institutional failures. None of this has, however, persuaded the present U.S. government that anthropogenic greenhouse gases (GHGs) are responsible for climate change. The U.S. is still the world's second largest annual emitter of GHGs and has generated more than a quarter of the total anthropogenic GHGs in the atmosphere since 1850.

Even though the U.S. has not technically withdrawn from the Paris Agreement from last December, when countries came together and set climate-related targets for themselves, President Donald Trump's recent decisions are a sweeping repudiation of former U.S. President Barack Obama's policies to reduce and limit pollution and GHGs.

The curbs on power plant emissions by the Obama administration – the Clean Power Plan (CPP) – were aimed at reducing the power sector's carbon dioxide emissions by about a third below the 2005 levels by 2030. The regulations would require states and electric utilities to reduce emissions either by deploying renewables, reducing demand or increasing power plant efficiencies.

Effect of Trump's actions

Mr. Trump's orders not only directed federal agencies to cancel or amend policies that might interfere with domestic energy production, but also slashed research budgets for climate change.

In any case, the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) CPP has been in the courts for more than a year due to a legal challenge mounted by over half the U.S. states and a number of companies that opposed the rule. Nevertheless, even if Mr. Trump's order to eliminate the CPP were to go into effect, his adminis-



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tration is required by a 2007 U.S. Supreme Court ruling to regulate carbon dioxide. Moreover, the EPA's rules are themselves not easy to reverse by a stroke of the presidential pen, especially given another 2009 EPA finding that GHGs "threaten the public health and welfare of current and future generations".

How far Mr. Trump will continue to push for curbs on climate change reduction in the U.S. and any possible ripple effects from these remain to be seen. Under the circumstances, most commentators believe that his actions will have a limited impact.

Still, the recent moves by his President are a clear signal that the U.S. is no longer interested in curbing GHGs to stabilise the climate and neither is it keen to meet its Paris commitments.

Mr. Trump's actions also demonstrate that allowing countries to write their own Nationally Deter-

mined Contributions, seen as an improvement to a global top-down approach, still has to confront the same political problem – continued implementation of the agreement by successive governments within each country. That a major emitter is retreating from its former commitments is of course a danger to the world's climate, but this may not be a big step back if other countries persist with their efforts and if renewables continue to get more affordable as they have recently. This move also provides elbow room for renewable energy businesses elsewhere to pick up the slack in interest within the U.S.

Nonetheless, it does make one wonder how the U.S. or Europe would have responded if another country, say, India, had undertaken similar actions. There may have been little time lost before name-calling and shaming began, following which global trade sanctions would likely have been imposed, or perhaps other kinds of bans or penalties. The chance that any of this will happen now towards the U.S., still a superpower, appears to be slim.

Role of sub-national actors

Nation states are the proper agencies responsible for curbing emissions to the shared global commons. Nevertheless, Mr. Trump's recalcitrance shows that a change in political leadership could lead to

the backing out of an international treaty by any signatory. Global agreements are often tenuous and need support and pressure from other actors within and across countries who function at many levels: states, territories or provinces within a country, cities, policy think tanks, scientists, philanthropists, local communities, civil society organisations, investors, transnational groups and multinational industries.

For example, the new global movement created by 350.org and other climate protection advocacy groups in Europe and elsewhere has made impressive progress on many fronts. The regional commitments to reducing GHGs by states in large parts of the U.S., the philanthropies that are supporting improvements in efficiencies and innovations in the climate and energy sector, and cities such as New York and Seattle, which are committed to building a low-carbon future, are all examples of sub-national entities that have a powerful influence. Thus, whether it is Mr. Trump or a Democrat in the White House, the work for these players is quite important. Climate change, like democracy itself, requires vigilance and participation by both state and non-state actors.

Sujatha Byravan is Principal Research Scientist, Center for Study of Science, Technology & Policy, Bengaluru

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.

Vision plan

Two years have passed since the erstwhile powerful "cabinet-like" Planning Commission was replaced with NITI Aayog ("Step up spending on infra, PM tells States", April 24). Though a comparison between the two bodies at this stage is not justified, nevertheless an assessment of NITI Aayog is called for. With the Finance Commission reclaiming its position as the nodal agency for vertical and horizontal allocation of resources to States and the Finance Ministry asserting its command over the federal economy, the role of NITI Aayog has been confined to advising and pushing innovation in governance. At the political level, it has served as a platform for effective Centre-State coordination. On the flip side, NITI Aayog's mandarins are silent on dealing with issues such as unemployment and poverty. Ascendancy of growth on the back of

consumption expenditure without greasing the investment cycle will spell only short-term respite.

BIBHUTI DAS,
New Delhi

■ The road to rapid growth and development is through boosting investment in the country's infrastructure which provides an enabling environment for economic activities. However there is stark disparity among States in both spending and availability of state-of-the-art infrastructure. Bihar, U.P., Odisha and Jharkhand have a poor road network, bad digital connectivity and electricity generation. The most dismal situation exists in the Northeast, where there is an abundance of possibilities. A recent CAG report reveals that the Centre owes crores of rupees to various States. After the rollout of GST, disbursement of funds to States should be pursued.

GAGAN PRATAP SINGH,
Noida, Uttar Pradesh

■ Mr. Modi's suggestion to shift the financial year to January may not serve any purpose. What positive impact will it have on growth? Such a move will only lead to inconveniencing auditors, accountants and people at large. His advice to States to step up spending on infrastructure must also factor in how cost escalation of projects is too high because of poor infrastructure management systems. Governments must have a vision.

S. RAMAKRISHNASAVEE,
Ranjipet, Tamil Nadu

Shrivelling agriculture

Any form of agitation has a saturation level and the farmers might have called off their protest for some respite from their prolonged ordeal ("T.N. farmers call off protest", April 24). It is disheartening that neither the Prime Minister nor senior Union Ministers made any attempt to assuage the feelings of the

farmers; this is a reflection of the dwindling importance given to agriculture and its problems. Digitisation is not going to fill up the stomach of the common man. With the monsoons failing year after year, there has to be a long-term solution to relieving agrarian distress.

V. SUBRAMANIAN,
Chennai

Thermocol experiment

The decision to float thermocol on Vaigai dam to prevent evaporation is illogical and unconvincing. It is surprising that such a decision has been taken by a Minister in the State government. On a large river like the Vaigai, such scheme would be impossible to implement even if proven to be technically sound. While thermocol is thermal resistant, it is slow to biodegrade and will gradually absorb water at the rate of 0.5% for every seven days of exposure in

water. It is also brittle. After floating for some time, it may also crumble causing problems. Thermocol is alternately known as an expandable polystyrene. There is controversy and difference of view among scientists about the carcinogenicity of polystyrene. Therefore, it may not be an ecofriendly exercise to float thermocol on water.

N.S. VENKATARAMAN,
Chennai

World Book Day

The Hindu must be complimented for

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

A Sports page story headlined "Can Kings wriggle out of slump?" (April 23, 2017) erroneously said that Manan Vohra almost single-handedly hunted down a mammoth chase against *Mumbai Indians*. It was against *Sunrisers, Hyderabad*. The story also wrongly referred to Hashim Amla's century in *Kolkata* on Friday. Actually, Hashim Amla scored an unbeaten 104 at *Indore* on *Thursday*.

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: readers@thehindu.co.in; Mail: Readers' Editor, The Hindu, Kasturba 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