



Homestretch

The Karnataka election will signal Congress's preparedness to contain the BJP in 2019

Karnataka was supposed to be the Bharatiya Janata Party's point of entry into southern India. But after its historic victory in the 2008 Assembly election, the party lost its way in the State, and the Congress staged a comeback five years later. Now, far from expanding to the neighbouring States, the party is struggling to return to power in Karnataka in the face of a determined defensive battle by the politically savvy Congress Chief Minister, Siddaramaiah. A relatively new entrant to the Congress, he has created his own space in the faction-ridden party and in the wider public sphere by traversing caste divides and resisting communal polarisation. Thus, the single-phase election on May 12 could witness a face-off between the BJP and the Congress, with the Janata Dal (Secular) a distant third. The BJP's challenge is mounted by the old warhorse B.S. Yeddyurappa, its most valuable asset and arguably also its greatest liability. If he won it for the BJP in 2008, he also ensured a defeat in 2013. After he resigned as Chief Minister following allegations of involvement in illegal mining and land deals, Mr. Yeddyurappa tried to run the government through handpicked men. When there was resistance to his meddling from the outside, he formed his own party, the Karnataka Janata Paksha, to down the BJP in 2013, but returned in time to help the BJP perform creditably in the 2014 election. In the absence of other evidence, it must have seemed to the BJP's national leadership that it could win only with the active assistance of Mr. Yeddyurappa.

Mr. Siddaramaiah has used divisive tactics of his own. His government aided demands for religious minority status for Lingayats, a Shaivite section from which Mr. Yeddyurappa, and by extension the BJP, draw substantial support. And he indulged regional sentiments by unveiling a Karnataka State flag. Both decisions are awaiting the approval of the Centre, but the Congress believes that irrespective of what the BJP-led government at the Centre does, the dividends are for it to reap. Agitations against the use of Hindi in Metro stations are also being turned to the disadvantage of the BJP, which is trying to refurbish its image as a Hindu-Hindi party by stressing solely on the Hindu aspect. Karnataka will not be the last State to go to the polls before the Lok Sabha election of 2019, but it holds great importance for the campaigns of the Congress and the BJP in the run-up to 2019. A loss for either will be a dampener, and a win a great morale booster. Leaders of both parties need to convince themselves, more than anyone else, that they have their nose ahead as they near the homestretch.

Rogue nation?

The West must find some means to bring Russia to the negotiating table

Russia made headlines for all the wrong reasons this week, when a clutch of countries led by the U.S. expelled more than 100 of its diplomats and intelligence officers over suspicion that the Kremlin was behind a nerve agent attack on a Russian spy and defector to the U.K., Sergei Skripal, and his daughter Yulia, in Salisbury on March 4. Besides the U.S., 14 member-states of the European Union, including Germany, France, Poland, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Italy, Denmark, the Netherlands and Latvia, undertook coordinated expulsions, with Australia also joining them. In a sense this move, seen as the most dramatic, concerted such purge since the Cold War years, has been coming for some time. Last week the U.K. led the way when it expelled 23 Russian diplomats, but the week before that the U.S. had slapped Russia with sanctions against multiple individuals and entities for interfering in the 2016 U.S. presidential election through covert online propaganda, including fake news. Beyond these specific charges lie other alleged violations: in Afghanistan, President Donald Trump's senior-most ground commander has accused Russia of arming Taliban militants; on the North Korean crisis Mr. Trump mentioned in January that Russia was helping Pyongyang avoid UN sanctions; and the EU last year voted to extend into 2018 sanctions that prohibit its businesses from investing in Crimea. Has Russia truly gone rogue, and is this its grand strategy to reclaim its superpower status?

The answer is yes and no. To an extent the U.S. response, significant though it may appear on the surface, signals to Russia an inconsistent application of any principles of bilateral and multilateral engagement. Scarcely a week ago, Mr. Trump congratulated Russian President Vladimir Putin on his re-election, apparently against the advice of senior White House officials, and this drew sharp criticism even from fellow Republicans. He apparently did not deem the nerve agent attack a subject deserving of mention on that phone call. Yet, shortly thereafter he replaced National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster with John Bolton, a long-standing Russia hawk. What would concern democracy-minded Americans is that the expulsion of Russian diplomats might serve as an easy distraction device in the ongoing investigation into whether Mr. Trump or his associates colluded with Russian entities to influence the 2016 presidential election. Whatever the true intentions of the current U.S. administration are, it would be naive to assume that Moscow will miss any opportunity to tighten its strategic grip on global geopolitics, whether in terms of influencing foreign elections, undermining Western coalition forces in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, or shadow manoeuvres that exacerbate instability in the context of North Korea and Iran. Contrarily, it is imperative that the West, perhaps led by the U.S. or the EU, find some means to bring Mr. Putin to the negotiating table, the corollary of which is that he must eschew his current preference for political subversion.

Birth pangs of a new federal polity

Siddaramaiah runs the risk of defeating his valid pitch for more powers to States by mixing it with electoral politics



D. SHYAM BABU

A new flag for Karnataka has been ushered in by the Congress government of Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, who has urged the Centre to formally endorse it. Whether the Centre accepts his demand or rejects it, he is bound to reap electoral dividends at the cost of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the ruling party at the Centre. He appears to have used the same logic in granting separate religion status to Lingayats.

Brimming with symbolism

One must also not lose sight of the symbolism involved. If allowed to have a flag, Karnataka would become the second State after Jammu and Kashmir to have its own flag. It would be a terrifying prospect for those who regard India as a crumbling edifice.

Interestingly, both the BJP and the Congress are united in viewing with suspicion every expression of sub-nationalism, cultural autonomy, or love for one's language or way of life. A level-headed approach would be possible if one recognises India's strength as a multicultural nation with parts having little in common but being proud to be its parts.

"Is the desire of the people of Karnataka to have a flag for their state, to give primacy to Kannada language and to have greater say in the running of their own lives," Mr. Siddaramaiah asked 'anchors in

Delhi studios' in a long Facebook post, "inconsistent with the objective of building a strong nation?" In fact, 'anchors in Delhi studios' appears to be a euphemism for the Congress high command which expressed unhappiness last year over his move to have a flag for Karnataka.

The flag issue is being regarded as a part of electoral politics in Karnataka, but it also symbolises two broad trends in the country. One, there is a widespread disquiet among non-Hindi States at the increasing onslaught of conformity. Two, there is resentment at the skewed Centre-State relations wherein States find themselves as mere pillion-riders. This concern is shared by all States but those States where the 'national' parties are in power are gagged by party discipline.

Being a protégé of the late Ramakrishna Hegde, Mr. Siddaramaiah has managed to weave both issues into his poll plank. He may or may not be victorious at the hustings, but he has already managed to mainstream the issues.

A pushback

It is but natural that a project to steamroll the entire nation into an abstract entity of one culture and one language should have produced a backlash. Identity politics is becoming front and centre not only in poll-bound Karnataka, but in non-Hindi States as diverse as Telangana and West Bengal, not to mention Tamil Nadu where sentiments of cultural autonomy are strongest.

Meghalaya Governor Ganga Prasad recently delivered his address to the State Assembly in Hindi and ended up inciting anti-Hindi com-



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

ments from several MLAs. Mr. Prasad was oblivious of the thin line between his love for Hindi and the mindless expression of which offended legislators who could not understand him.

Consider the new State emblems of Telangana and West Bengal. While the former uses English, Telugu and Urdu, the latter has only Bengali and English. Both emblems retain 'Satyameva Jayate' in Devanagari more as a graphic, being part of the national symbol of the Lion Capital. This is a clear departure from the earlier practice of States using Hindi along with other language(s).

Similarly, the new flag of Karnataka (of yellow, white and red) contains the State's emblem in the middle. Though the emblem originally has 'Satyameva Jayate' in Devanagari, it is not clear whether the script has been retained in the flag.

Hence the question: Why do non-Hindi States resist Hindi but have no qualms with English in State iconography/symbols?

As the nation is entering the poll season leading up to the general election in the summer of

2019, we run the risk of magnifying these mundane issues of identity and autonomy into matters that put a wedge between people and regions.

A generation ago, the non-BJP and non-Congress parties resorted to Mandal politics to stop the Hindutva juggernaut. Nitish Kumar at that time described the paradigm so evocatively as Mandal versus Kamandal politics, though he moved effortlessly between these two poles.

The nation appears to be moving towards a more dangerous counter to Hindutva having, in addition to usual ingredients, sub-nationalism and north-south divide as the rallying cry.

Centre-State balance

Mr. Siddaramaiah's Facebook post is not only a strong defence of States' right to enjoy cultural autonomy (he is 'a proud Kannadiga' as well as 'a proud Indian'), but a passionate appeal for India to become a federation of States. It may be recalled that his guru Hegde was instrumental in mounting a nationwide critique of the misuse of Article 356, which resulted in the appointment of the Sarkaria Commission on Centre-State Relations in 1983.

Many issues that Mr. Siddaramaiah has now raised fall broadly into two groups. One group is the long-standing grievances of States such as the Centre's mischievous practice of dictating to them (through the so-called Centrally Sponsored Schemes) how they must spend their share of Central tax revenue. This practice robs the States of their right to determine how best they can utilise their money as well as helps the Centre to

take credit for the success of these schemes. The second group of issues pertains to the need to empower States to have a say in formulating the Centre's economic and trade policies since they can adversely affect them.

Mr. Siddaramaiah's push for a federation of States is perfectly in sync with the vision of our founding fathers. During the discussion in the Constituent Assembly on the draft Article 356, B.R. Ambedkar made it clear that: 1) India's is a federal Constitution; 2) the Centre has no business in determining good governance in states; and 3) "the Provinces [States] are as sovereign in their field which is left to them by the Constitution, as the Centre is in the field which is assigned to it."

Therefore, rebalancing Centre-State relations to be in tune with the 21st century needs will also amount to restoring the original scheme of the Constitution on the subject.

If Mr. Siddaramaiah is serious about phase two of moving towards a federal polity, he must keep the agenda above electoral politics. The least he can do to promote his cause is to refrain from his extreme partisanship displayed in his Facebook post: "Historically, the South has been subsidizing the north." In addition to being offensive, this argument can be applied across regions and social groups. It would not be far-fetched for one to argue that thanks to Bengaluru south Karnataka subsidises north Karnataka. So on and so forth.

D. Shyam Babu is Senior Fellow, Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi. The views expressed are personal

A game-changer for higher education

The renewed focus on RUSA is welcome, but its litmus test will be in how impartially it is administered



B. VENKATESH KUMAR & ASHOK THAKUR

The Union Cabinet's decision recently to not only continue with the Rashtriya Uchchar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA) - a Centrally sponsored scheme launched in 2013 to provide strategic funding to eligible State higher educational institutions - but also give it due importance augurs well for the system of higher education in India. That the government is backing the scheme speaks volumes about the robustness and relevance of the scheme.

Ground realities

India is estimated to have over 800 universities (over 40,000 colleges are affiliated to them). About 94% of students of higher education study in 369 State universities. But the Central government's slant toward premier institutions has continued ever since the Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-12), where in spite of a nine-fold increase in Budget allocation State institutions have been left to fend for themselves with funding mainly directed towards starting more Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Indian Institutes of Management and Central universities. Today about 150 Centrally-funded institutions

(less than 6% of students study in them) - corner almost the entire funding by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD). To make things worse, investment by State governments has been also dwindling each year as higher education is a low-priority area. The University Grant Commission's system of direct releases to State institutions which bypasses State governments also leads to their sense of alienation. Though they are the face of higher education in India, State institutions have been getting short shrift.

It was to address these critical concerns that the MHRD launched RUSA. The scheme is largely based on the conditional release of funds linked to reforms in the key areas of governance, learning-teaching outcomes, reaching out to the unreached and infrastructure support. Unlike other schemes which are foisted on State governments in a one-size-fits all manner, under RUSA, States and institutions have to give an undertaking expressing their willingness to the idea of reform and agreeing to meet the States' share of the cost.

RUSA is a process-driven scheme. Its design and conceptualisation were finalised through extensive consultations with all key stakeholders, especially State governments. Preparatory grants were released to States to have the required systems, processes, and the technical support in place. Despite being voluntary, all States except a Union Territory (Lakshadweep) are a part of RUSA. All the



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State Higher Education Perspective Plans for five/10 years have been prepared after extensive stakeholder consultations. RUSA began with a modest allocation of ₹500 crore, but over time has seen its resource allocation being increased.

For the current year, ₹1,300 crore has been provided. Since funding is conditional to performance, it is critical to have a robust monitoring and evaluation system in place. In this regard, geo-tagging, introduction of a public financial management system, a fund tracker and reform tracker system and regular video conferences have proved effective tools, since 2015.

Reform as core

Governance reform is central to the scheme. State Higher Education Councils (SHECs) which have eminent academics, industrialists

and other experts have been created, playing a major role, from an academic and professional point of view, in the formulation of medium- and long-term State perspective plans. In order to avoid arbitrariness, a State, for example, has to also give its commitment to creating a search-cum-select committee in the selection of vice-chancellors. Mitigating the bane of the affiliation system is also a major objective. This is achieved through a reduction in the number of colleges affiliated per university by creating cluster universities and promoting autonomous colleges. An important precondition is the filling up of faculty positions and lifting the ban on recruitment (as in some States).

To improve learning-teaching outcomes, there is an effort towards improving pedagogy by capacity-building of faculty, selecting teachers in a transparent manner, adopting accreditation as a mandatory quality-assurance framework, implementing a semester system, and involving academics of repute and distinction in decision-making processes.

Visible change

An independent performance review (of four years) of the scheme was done by IIT Bombay in 2017. It concluded that the funding linked to reforms has had a visible impact on higher education. When RUSA began, the gross enrolment ratio (GER) was 19.4%, faculty vacancies were at a shockingly high level of 60%, and a large number of un-

iversities were bloated with a teacher-student ratio of 1:24. Today, the GER is 25.2%, faculty vacancies are down to 35%, the ban on faculty recruitment by States has been lifted, and the teacher-student ratio is now 1:20. Several universities in Karnataka, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have been right-sized, and critical governance reforms such as the formation of the SHEC and merit-based appointments of vice-chancellors in Odisha, Goa, Jharkhand and Tamil Nadu are visible. There has been an improvement in the number of institutions accredited and their scores. In 2012, 106 State universities and 4,684 colleges were accredited. By 2017, an additional 145 State universities and 5,445 Colleges were accredited.

RUSA can prove to be a real game changer for higher education in the country. It has not only prioritised the country's needs, from funding just a few premier institutions to reaching out to institutions at the bottom of the pyramid, but has also changed the way regulators need to function. However its litmus test will be in how impartially the scheme is administered by the MHRD and the degree to which State governments allow the SHEC to function. Letting go of the governmental stranglehold over universities is linked to this.

B. Venkatesh Kumar is Professor and Chair, Centre for Governance and Public Policy, Tata Institute of Social Sciences. Ashok Thakur is a former Secretary Higher Education, Government of India

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.

EC's functioning

The detail about Election Commissioner O.P. Rawat's recusal and the otherwise absent Sunil Arora's abrupt order in the AAP MLA case have cast doubts on the neutrality of the Election Commission (Editorial, March 27). Is there the sleight of hand by a master? The disqualification of the MLAs on non-maintainable grounds only lends credence to ill-motives. The recent conduct of the EC is making many uncomfortable. Caesar's wife must be above suspicion.

C. CHANDRASEKHARAN,
Madurai

Quota for cricket?

It is surprising that when India should be looking to get rid of all sorts of quota, suggestions to have a quota in sport (cricket) are being proposed even when there are better options (Editorial

page, "Does Indian cricket need quotas?", March 27). Having a quota is myopic. A solution would be having in place accessible sports infrastructure, cricket academies in rural areas, and scholarship programmes to support "poor but talented cricketers". A BCCI 'rural wing' might be more fruitful. Quotas would be against the spirit of sport which stands to unite people. Lessons from India's quota history reflect its divisive nature. Importing the South African model will have its ill-effects as the socio-economic milieu of India is different. Instead, we need to emulate the Chinese model of sports development. The need is to have mechanisms of talent hunt and nurturing them.

SUNIL DAGAR,
Bengaluru

An obstacle many budding cricketers face is the lack of finances. And given the uncertainty of their selection, they chose to focus their energies on other professions which assures them a stable life. Here, people from well-to-do families have an undue advantage. Quotas are not a long-term solution. Reservations can be in place for admission into sport academies where the marginalised can enhance their skills under proper supervision.

SHARATH ANANTH,
Hyderabad

Cotton and infestation

While most other countries grow Bt cotton 'varieties', India is the only one cultivating Bt cotton 'hybrids' ("A perfect storm in the cotton field", March 27). Although, cotton yield is less in 'varieties' than 'hybrids', this is more than

compensated for by 'varieties' lending themselves to be densely packed per acre when compared to 'hybrids' (the latter occupying more space per plant). The writer has highlighted the issue with growing Bt 'hybrids' longer. Another reason, as pointed out in a report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine in the U.S. is that the emergence in only India of secondary pests and resistant pink bollworm is a typical example of the non-implementation of the 'refuge strategy', where 10-15% of acreage is reserved for non-Bt cotton refuge to delay resistance development. There is also need to ensure that expression of the Bt genes is optimal to kill the pest or pests every season. Earlier, the institutions concerned messed up the development of cotton

'varieties' by allowing Monsanto 'hybrid' contamination. Only now, the Central Institute for Cotton Research, which is in Nagpur, is talking about releasing both Bt and non-Bt cotton 'varieties' in a year or two. This only underscores the fact that apart from a commitment to generate cotton 'varieties', there needs to be vigorous

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

The second deck headline of the report, "P&W begins replacing faulty A320neo engines in India (March 27, 2018), wrongly said the DGCA had grounded planes of IndiGo and Spicejet. It should have been IndiGo and GoAir.

In the article titled "Farming in Tamil Nadu ready for a turnaround" (March 25, 2018, some editions), there was a quote by Vice-Chancellor of the Tamil Nadu Agricultural University K. Ramasamy, in regard to the figures of cotton cultivation in the Cauvery delta. According to the office of the State Agriculture Secretary, the coverage of cotton cultivation in the Cauvery delta during 2016-17 was about 29,375 acres (11,977 ha), and not as published.

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: readerseditor@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