



Power in space

Mission Shakti might have had one message for India, and another for the world

India has entered an elite space club with the Defence Research and Development Organisation blowing up a satellite in a Low Earth Orbit into smithereens. Such Indian capability to take out moving objects has never really been in doubt: the DRDO announced it as early as in 2011. Indeed, India has been in the business of testing long-range missiles for years, although public attention on the space programme has been mostly on its civilian and scientific aspects. The military dimension, though always latent, had not seen a verifiable demonstration as in the case of Mission Shakti, the Anti-Satellite (ASAT) missile test. The display of technological prowess through the test accentuates the military dimension and brings into play an overwhelming assurance of what the Ministry of External Affairs describes as a 'credible deterrence' against attacks on India's growing number of space assets. Although only three other countries, the U.S., Russia, and China, have previously demonstrated this capability, it is possible to surmise that countries with long-range missiles could do the same with equal effectiveness. But India, surely, is staking a forward claim as a space weapons power.

While the country celebrates the test as a scientific achievement, it must also dwell on the possibility that this might goad its none-too-friendly neighbour Pakistan into a competitive frenzy. Also, in the absence of a credible threat to India's space assets from China or any other country with Anti-Satellite missile capabilities, whether the 'deterrence' sought to be achieved by this test would lead to a more stable strategic security environment is not certain. There are other questions, too. Will the test spur space weaponisation? Prime Minister Narendra Modi, while announcing the success of the test, was clear that India wanted to maintain peace rather than indulge in warmongering. And, by targeting a low-orbit satellite, the missile test did the utmost possible to minimise space debris, which is an issue of international concern. But, within India, the timing of the test, when the country is already in election mode, does raise concerns whether this was aimed at the domestic constituency. The Election Commission is now seized of the question whether the Prime Minister might have violated the Model Code of Conduct. If it does find the timing amiss, the Modi government could be in for some serious embarrassment. Ideally, the test should not have been a matter for a partisan political debate, but given the hypernationalist political plank of the Bharatiya Janata Party, Mission Shakti might have more reverberations on the ground than it has had in space.

Dangerous precedent

The U.S. recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights is in bad faith

U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to recognise Israel's sovereignty over the occupied Golan Heights hardly came as a surprise given his administration's blatant pro-Israel stance. It may sound ironic that a President who promised to facilitate a deal between Israelis and Palestinians has turned out to be the most pro-Israel President in U.S. history. Mr. Trump has already recognised as Israel's capital Jerusalem, a city captured in parts in the 1948 and 1967 wars and which is claimed by both Israelis and Palestinians. Before he announced his intention to recognise Israeli sovereignty over Golan, a State Department report had dropped the word 'occupied' in references to Golan Heights and the Palestinian territories of Gaza and the West Bank, hinting at where the administration stood on the issue. Israel captured Golan, a strategically important plateau beside the Sea of Galilee, from Syria in the 1967 war. Among the territories it captured in the war, Israel has returned only the Sinai Peninsula, to Egypt. It annexed East Jerusalem and Golan Heights and continues to occupy the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In 1981, as it passed the Golan annexation legislation, the Security Council passed a resolution that said, "the Israeli decision to impose its laws, jurisdiction and administration in the occupied Syrian Golan Heights is null and void and without international legal effect".

Unlike Egypt in the 1970s, Syria has had neither the military ability nor the international clout to launch a campaign to get its territory back. President Bashar al-Assad tried to kick-start a U.S.-mediated peace process with Israel during the Obama presidency, but it failed to take off. And now, the Syrian government, after fighting eight years of a civil war, is debilitated and isolated, and the U.S. move is unlikely to trigger any strong response, even from the Arab world. But that is the least of the problems. Mr. Trump's decision flouts international norms and consensus, and sets a dangerous precedent for nations involved in conflicts. The modern international system is built on sovereignty, and every nation-state is supposed to be an equal player before international laws irrespective of its military or economic might. The U.S., by recognising the sovereignty of Israel over a piece of land that the latter captured from Syria 52 years ago, is challenging this and normalising occupation. The decision also overlooks the wishes of the inhabitants of the territory. Most of the Druze population that has been living in Golan for generations has resisted Israel's offer of citizenship and remained loyal to Syria. This they did even amidst Israel's settlement activities. This is a conflict that needs to be settled between Israel and Syria at some point of time under international mediation. Mr. Trump is making the possibility of any future peaceful settlement difficult by recognising Israel's sovereignty, just as he made any future Israeli-Palestinian settlement complicated with his decision to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv.

An Opposition narrative for 2019

Its challenge is to foreground economic and social issues without getting diverted into national security concerns



ZOAYA HASAN

Ahead of the 2019 Lok Sabha election, several political parties opposed to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have rallied around the idea of forming State-level coalitions to block the party's reelection. The first phase of polling for the 2019 election is barely three weeks away, some of the alliances, especially in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) camp, have been sealed, while alliances in the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) and Opposition camp are still taking shape. The Congress has sealed alliances in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Bihar, and Maharashtra but failed to do so in the crucial States of Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. The Congress not joining Opposition alliances in these two States and Delhi gives an advantage to the BJP, which is striving to polarise voters by playing its nationalism card after the Balakot air strikes.

Ground reality

Opposition parties have allowed short-term considerations to come in the way of alliances which can make a serious dent in the BJP's seat tally. Opposition unity is necessary because in 'India's first-past-the-post electoral system, aggregation of votes at the constituency level is vital for winning seats. The majority of the BJP's Lok Sabha seats are very disproportionately based on an unprecedented sweep in the Hindi speaking northern States, two western States and Union Territories in 2014. Replicating such a strike rate in the 2019 elections would be highly improbable'.

Given this improbability and given that the BJP's popularity is diminishing, the odds of the BJP beating the Opposition at the national level seems no better than even. Hence, the unease in the BJP camp is apparent. It is not surprising that both Prime Minister Narendra Modi and BJP national president Amit Shah have derided Opposition unity and the efforts to form what Mr. Modi called a "mila-vati sarkar" (adulterated government). Coalitions or "khichdi sarkar" will not deliver goes the common refrain. But there is no evidence that coalition governments are bad for the country; in fact decisive shifts have occurred under coalition governments and not one-party domination. The 1991 reforms and the UPA-I's landmark rights legislations were pushed through by minority and coalition governments respectively. At the State level, coalition governments have dominated Kerala and Tamil Nadu and several other States which are among the better governed and more developed States, whereas despite winning a massive majority in the 2017 Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections, the BJP's single party government has not been able to ensure development or governance or social peace.

For a decentered polity

These last five years raise important questions about the effectiveness of governments where power is concentrated in the hands of a centralised leader with a single party majority, particularly when it comes to their ability to represent India's diverse regional interests or to deliver development benefits for everyone. Coalitions, on the other hand, represent a more decentered polity and the ability of India's political institutions to reinvent and embrace the diversity of regional and social identities in the country and the different



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needs and interests of various sections, often suppressed under a centralised system.

But even as the limitations of strong leadership and single-party dominance are becoming evident, alliances and coalitions can only be a viable proposition if they offer an alternative politics. Exposing the government's failings which is the job of the Opposition (and the media) makes good political sense but it is not enough. Also, elections are not merely about arithmetic. The last five years lay bare the incompatibility between hate politics and economic growth. Going from State to State, it is clear that people are concerned primarily about livelihood issues that cut across all barriers, and not emotive issues. Even so, there are concerted efforts to deflect this concern through jingoistic nationalism by politicisation of the fight against terror, by sharpening communal polarisation, and by creating conflict situations over emotive issues.

Jobs are the really big issue for people and there is evidence of considerable discontent and restiveness over it. The problem is that the Opposition has not paid enough attention to it. The government is on the back foot which is obvious from the suppression of official jobs data (the Periodic Labour Force Survey of the NSSO) cleared by the National Statistical

Commission. The government claims have been exposed and hence the refusal to release official data.

The failure of the Opposition parties to weave all this into a cohesive narrative is certainly a matter of concern, but in all fairness it is not easy for State-based Opposition parties to offer a unified and consistent narrative. Still, the overarching narrative is clear. Pushing this narrative are two larger concerns. The first is the politics of hate and unprecedented ascendancy of right-wing communal discourse which appears grounded in division and negativity legitimised by the top leadership of the country. However, this volatile rhetoric cannot trump disappointment over the lack of jobs and rural distress. The latter narrative has been built up over the last few months and has gained traction. But after the Balakot air strikes the BJP managed to disrupt it. Foregrounding, once again rural distress, unemployment, the demonetisation fiasco, the goods and services tax impact, allegations of corruption and cronyism, and the subversion of state institutions, is thus crucial.

What the metanarrative is

Underpinning these issues is the metanarrative of an inclusive democracy based on communal amity, social justice and economic equity. However, such a perception of social justice cannot serve as the basis for any long-term vision unless it focusses squarely on distribution and common citizenship by instituting a set of fundamental socio-economic rights.

This can be done. One month after Balakot, the political build-up over air strikes might not be working on expected lines; hypernationalism may not sway voters except those in the BJP's bastions. The Opposition's challenge is to foreground economic and social issues without getting diverted into

national security concerns even while the BJP's redoubtable propaganda machinery will play up the last in a bid to quell the first.

The Opposition parties have to respond to the palpable public disquiet. Congress President Rahul Gandhi has finally done so with the promise of a guaranteed minimum income for the poorest quintile of the population, a move that has rattled the BJP. The big question, of course, is whether the Congress government, if it comes to power, will substitute Nyuntam Aay Yojana (NYAY) for existing social welfare programmes, which it musn't, in order to pay for it. So far there is silence on this. The workability and affordability of NYAY have to be debated, but, as an idea, it signals justice for the poor; it is at least an acknowledgement that the poor and not just the corporate sector need stimulus. The BJP knows the scheme has poll potential, it can develop into an effective counter-narrative which will take the spotlight away from the national security focus that the BJP is trying to push. Moreover, it could help the Congress to build its 2019 campaign around this issue, somewhat like the right to employment in the run-up to the 2004 parliamentary elections.

It would be surprising, if despite its poor track record, the present government is voted back to power on the basis of exaggerated national security concerns, air strikes and testing new space missiles. To avert this possibility, it is important to remember that howsoever necessary it is for parties to revive and rebuild and defend their social base from encroachment by like-minded parties, it is even more important for them to defend India's secular and democratic republic.

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The shape of an urban employment guarantee

Such a programme will not only improve worker incomes but also have multiplier effects on the economy

MATHEW IDICULLA, AMIT BASOLE & RAJENDRAN NARAYANAN

India is in the midst of a massive jobs crisis. The unemployment rate has reached a 45-year high (6.1%) in 2017-18 as per leaked data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) report of the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO). According to the PLFS report, the unemployment problem is especially aggravated in India's cities and towns. Aside from unemployment, low wages and precarity continue to be widespread. In urban India the majority of the population continues to work in the informal sector. Hence, India cannot ignore the crisis of urban employment.

Reviving India's towns

Both State and Central governments tend to treat towns as "engines of growth" for the economy rather than spaces where thousands toil to make a living. Programmes such as the Swarna Jayanti Shahari Rozgar Yojana (1997) that included an urban wage employment component have made way for those focussed on skilling and entrepreneurship.

India's small and medium towns are particularly ignored in the State's urban imagination. As per Census 2011, India has 4,041 cities and towns with an urban local body (ULB) in the form of a Municipal Corporation, Municipal Council or Nagar Panchayat. However, national-level urban programmes such as the Smart Cities

Mission and the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) only benefit a fraction of them. Most ULBs are struggling to carry out basic functions because of a lack of financial and human capacity. Further, with untrammelled urbanisation, they are facing more challenges due to the degradation of urban ecological commons.

Hence, we need new ways to promote the sustainable development of India's small and medium towns. In the context of the present employment crises, it is worthwhile considering to introduce an employment guarantee programme in urban areas. Along with addressing the concerns of underemployment and unemployment, such a programme can bring in much-needed public investment in towns to improve the quality of urban infrastructure and services, restoring urban commons, skilling urban youth and increasing the capacity of ULBs.

The idea of an urban employment programme is gaining traction in political and policy debates. According to multiple reports, it could be a key agenda of a possible Common Minimum Programme of the Opposition parties for the 2019 general election. In Madhya Pradesh, the new State government has launched the "Yuva Swabhiman Yojana" which provides employment for both skilled and unskilled workers among urban youth.

What shape an urban employment guarantee programme



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should take can be widely debated. We have offered one proposition in the policy brief "Strengthening Towns through Sustainable Employment" (<https://bit.ly/2utJLL0>), which was published recently by the Centre for Sustainable Employment, Azim Premji University. Such a programme would give urban residents a statutory right to work and thereby ensure the right to life guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution. To make it truly demand-driven, we have proposed that the ULB receives funds from the Centre and the State at the beginning of each financial year so that funds are available locally. Wages would be disbursed in a decentralised manner at the local ULB.

Given the State's relative neglect of small and medium towns and to avoid migration to big cities, such a programme can cover all ULBs with a population less than 1 million. Since it is an urban programme, it should have a wider scope than the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA); this

would provide employment for a variety of works for people with a range of skills and education levels. We emphasise that it would not come at the expense of MGNREGA but rather the two would go hand-in-hand.

Urban informal workers with limited formal education would benefit from this programme. They can undertake standard public works such as building and maintenance of roads, footpaths and bridges for a guaranteed 100 days in a year, at ₹500 a day. We have also proposed a new set of "green jobs" which include the creation, restoration/rejuvenation, and maintenance of urban commons such as green spaces and parks, forested or woody areas, degraded or waste land, and water bodies. Further, a set of jobs that will cater to the "care deficit" in towns by providing child-care as well as care for the elderly and the disabled to the urban working class have been included.

Skilling and apprenticeship

Another novel aspect is the creation of a skilling and apprenticeship programme for unemployed youth with higher education who can sign up for a contiguous period of 150 days (five months), at ₹13,000 a month for five months to assist with administrative functions in municipal offices, government schools, or public health centres, and for the monitoring, measurement, or evaluation of environmental parameters.

While the first category of work

is aimed at providing additional employment opportunities and raising incomes for those in low-wage informal work, the second category is to provide educated youth experience and skills that they can build-on further. We estimate that such a programme will cost between 1.7-2.7% of GDP per year depending on design, and can provide work opportunities to around 30-50 million workers. In light of the 74th Amendment, this programme should be administered by the ULB in a participatory manner by involving ward committees.

Our proposal provides strong transparency and accountability structures – proactive disclosure of information based on Section 4 of the RTI Act, proactive measures through mandatory periodic social audits, public hearing and reactive measures through a "Right to Timely Grievance Redressal" for workers.

An urban employment guarantee programme not only improves incomes of workers but also has multiplier effects on the economy. It will boost local demand in small towns, improve public infrastructure and services, spur entrepreneurship, build skills of workers and create a shared sense of public goods. Hence, the time is ripe for an employment guarantee programme in urban India.

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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.

Space power

While it is praiseworthy that India has acquired new technological capabilities, equally disquieting is its politicisation by the ruling dispensation to make capital out of it, perhaps with a view to reaping electoral dividends (Page 1, "Successful anti-satellite missile test puts India in elite club", March 28). The government appears to be checking all the boxes of "nationalism" in the run-up to the general election in the belief that this is a trump card which can cover its failures since 2014.

DEEPAK SINGHAL
Noida

While reaping the benefits of research and technology,

our present day politicians conveniently forget the efforts of stalwarts who began such work. But for their efforts, the present achievement would not have been possible. Considering the time of the test, and the announcement of the mission on national media there is a strong perception that there was a political angle to this.

D. SETHURAMAN,
Chennai

The unusual address after keeping the nation on edge ("India on the edge before PM's address", March 28) was not only a violation of the election code of conduct but also betrayed the ruling party's fears as far as what the electoral verdict can turn

out to be. By no stretch of imagination did national security concerns demand either conducting such a test or a statement from the Prime Minister at the present juncture. It is clear that this was done with the aim of influencing voters by shifting the narrative back to an emotive issue such as national security.

Incidentally, the country's capability to intercept and destroy adversarial satellites in space took shape in the early 2010s and without noise by the then government. On the flip side, the compliments being paid to the DRDO scientists should also be seen as tacit acknowledgement of the contributions of the much derided Jawaharlal Nehru

and successive Prime Ministers towards the development of space research.

S.K. CHOUDHURY,
Bengaluru

Job requirements

The recent study by the International Labour Organisation in collaboration with the International Organisation of Employers is startling ("66% employers looking for different skills than three years ago", March 28).

With the demands of industry and the service sectors changing at such a rapid pace, students need to be sharp and choose a career by being able to visualise what the future would look like by the time they

complete graduation; students should not go with the wave. Finally, the education system in India needs to be overhauled. But is the political class even aware of such a need?

VYSHALI KARTHIKEYAN,
Bengaluru

Private airline's woes

The Jet Airways saga (Editorial, "Saving Jet", March 28), only brings to mind the plight of the national carrier, Air India, which has been blamed for

deep losses and recommended for privatisation on the ground that as an inefficient public sector undertaking, it needs a smart private management model. But the crisis in Jet Airways and, preceding this, Kingfisher Airlines, stand as classical examples that nullify the argument recommending privatisation as the panacea for PSU woes.

A.G. RAJMOHAN,
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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In the interview titled "We have capacity to implement NYAY scheme" (some editions, March 28, 2019), the second deck erroneously referred to Praveen Chakravarty as the 'Chair of Congress' IT wing. He is the chairperson of the Data Analytics department of the Congress.

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