



Faint glimmer

The tentative revival in industrial activity must be built on through prudent policy support

Industrial activity in the new financial year appears to have started on a healthier note than the trend witnessed in the last quarter of the previous fiscal, the government's latest quick estimates show. Industrial output rose 3.4% in April, buoyed by a generally broad-based revival that saw electricity, mining and even manufacturing post faster growth compared to the listless performance witnessed in the January-March period. In fact, manufacturing output growth, which had decelerated sharply from the pace of 8.2% in October to a revised level of less than 0.1% in March, rebounded to a four-month high of 2.8%. A look at the use-based classification reveals that all six segments were in positive territory, with only infrastructure and construction goods marking a slowdown from both the earlier year and March levels and providing cause for some concern. Hearteningly, capital goods, a sector that serves as a closely tracked proxy for business spending intentions, posted a 2.5% expansion, snapping three straight months of contraction. To be sure, the growth even in this key area trails the pace of 9.8% that was reported in April 2018 by a wide margin, and it would be premature to celebrate the single reading until a more abiding trend emerges in the coming months. It would be interesting to see what growth-supportive policy measures Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman unveils in the newly elected government's and her own maiden budget.

This week's other data release from the government was, however, less reassuring, revealing as it did an acceleration in retail inflation to a seven-month high. Price gains measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI) quickened to 3.05% in May, from April's 2.99%, as prices of vegetables and pulses jumped by 23% and 10% respectively in urban areas, contributing to a bump-up in food inflation. The Reserve Bank of India had last week flagged the risks to the inflation trajectory from factors including spikes in vegetable prices and international fuel prices and marginally raised its CPI inflation projection for the fiscal first half to a 3% to 3.1% range. While the inflation reading remains below the RBI's inflation threshold of 4%, policymakers would need to keep a close watch on price trends, especially as global energy prices continue to remain volatile amid heightened geopolitical tensions in West Asia and uncertainty on the demand outlook owing to the ongoing China-U.S. trade spat. And while the monsoon is forecast to be normal this year, the actual rainfall and its spatial distribution will have a significant bearing on agricultural output and food prices. A fiscally prudent budget, with incentives to support the nascent industrial recovery, would surely tick several boxes at one go.

City on edge

Protests over the extradition Bill in Hong Kong underline the tensions with mainland China

The mass protests in Hong Kong this week against an extradition Bill the city legislative council is planning has brought the focus back on the difficult relationship between the territory's Beijing-appointed authorities and its pro-democracy movement. The legislation, championed by Hong Kong's Chief Executive Carrie Lam, will allow the local government to extradite a suspect to places with which the city has no formal extradition accord, including mainland China. Ms. Lam argues it is needed to close a loophole in the criminal justice system that, she says, has let criminals evade trial elsewhere by taking refuge in Hong Kong. But the protesters see the Bill as an attempt by Beijing to increase its influence in matters to do with the city. The extradition law would practically allow the city authorities to send any suspect wanted by Beijing to mainland China, where the judiciary is unlikely to go against the wishes of the establishment. Activists point to the abdication of Beijing's critics and the growing authoritarian nature of the city government, with instances of elected lawmakers being disqualified, activists banned from running for office, a political party prohibited and a foreign journalist expelled. They fear that the new legislation would further erode the freedoms people enjoy under the Basic Law, the city's mini-constitution.

When Hong Kong was handed over to China in 1997, both sides had agreed that the city would remain a semi-autonomous region with the Basic Law for 50 years. When the extradition agreements were finalised, Taiwan and mainland China were excluded because of the different criminal justice systems that existed in those regions. But China has steadily tried to deepen its influence. In the case of the extradition Bill, two members of the Politburo Standing Committee have called for its approval. But Hong Kong has always resisted top-down changes. In 2003, the city's first Chief Executive, Tung Chee-hwa's bid to pass stringent security legislation triggered mass protests, which forced him to back down. In 2014, the local authorities' proposal to change the city's electoral system attracted more protests. In less than five years they are back: a million people assembled at the legislative council on Wednesday, demanding withdrawal of the extradition Bill. These incidents suggest a fundamental contradiction between the way Hong Kong is ruled by the pro-Beijing elite and the expectations of civil society. The local authorities' insistence on going ahead with unpopular measures such as the extradition Bill is only sharpening this contradiction. Beijing should reach out to the people of Hong Kong, alleviate their fears and concerns and assure them of their rights guaranteed under the "one country two systems" model. Else, Hong Kong is likely to remain caught in a cycle of protests and repression.

Democracy can die in daylight too

How influential sections of the news media turned cheerleaders in the 2019 election



KRISHNA PRASAD

Modesty is not a virtue of the media in the pixel age, in which preening is a 24x7 pastime. There is neither a demand for it from consumers, nor a supply of it from the practitioners. Equilibrium has been achieved in the marketplace of the mind. Even so, while print, electronic and digital news purveyors use the benefit of hindsight to retro-fit Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "stunning" victory into a grand narrative arc, it should not escape the attention of the discerning that an otherwise boastful section of the media is uncharacteristically, modestly, not acknowledging its own not insignificant part in paving the way for India's precipitous lurch to the right.

Elephant in the room

Whilst any number of 'ex post facto' rationalisations may be adduced to explain the Bharatiya Janata Party's logic-defying triumph, it is impossible to ignore the elephant in the room: a large and influential part of the news media which blithely abdicated its role as the eyes and ears of the people – and turned into an undisguised, unthinking and unquestioning mouthpiece of the reigning ideology. That the same boosters are now blaviating about India's future as a secular, liberal democracy and offering gratuitous advice to the Opposition is, at best, a self-fulfilling prophecy. At worst, it is a parody.

Notwithstanding Mr. Modi's advertised disdain for journalists, making the media forget their core tasks – to witness, to verify, to investigate, and to make sense, in the words of the British media scholar George Brock – was al-

ways a vital weapon in the manufacture of consent for the 'Gujarat Model'. Despite early failures as Chief Minister, Mr. Modi deftly achieved this goal. Established media houses were tamed by patronising their competitors. Some pesky editors were reined in or eased out by intimidating owners. Advertisements were turned off and on to let the bottom line send signals to managers.

Result: by 2014, without being explicitly coercive, Mr. Modi was able to manage the headlines, craft respectability and plug himself into the consciousness of the bourgeoisie as the poor, incorruptible, reformist Hindutva icon – the son of the soil who was a victim of the liberal English media.

During the 2017 Assembly election campaign in Gujarat, a BJP TV commercial unwittingly reminded voters of how the Modi machine viewed the media. Two young men are discussing Mr. Modi in a barber shop. One of them calls him a "dictator" and says he has harassed them a lot. They are interrupted by a third person who is awaiting his turn and is listening in on the conversation. "You look like reporters," says the man who identifies himself as 'Vikas'. In other words, journalism – asking, criticising, digging, unearthing – is an obstacle in the grand project.

Inasmuch as this is revealing of a cultivated anti-media mindset – cultivated, because Mr. Modi, the 'pracharak', would often wait outside newspaper offices in Ahmedabad in the 1990s, well past midnight, to have a cup of tea with useful reporters on the political beat – it is the ease with which he, the 'pradhan sevak', was able to negotiate a 'with-me-or-against-me' arrangement across the landscape that staggers the mind, and serves as a sobering reminder of the limits of the free press. "Democracy dies in darkness" is the *Washington Post* motto. Here, it would appear, it died in broad daylight.



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From North and South America (Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro) to West and East Asia (Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Rodrigo Duterte), the playbook of the 21st century populist-nationalist politician contains the same to-do list: a) turn the public against the media by berating them as an "enemy of the people"; b) delegitimise the media by ascribing motives, calling them news traders, "presstitutes"; c) choke the media by limiting access; distorting the discourse with fake news, alt-right media; d) intimidate the media with draconian laws; by trolling, doxing, threatening journalists; and e) bypass conventional media using one-way radio addresses, made-for-TV events and social media.

As the results of the 2019 election show, the best student in the class – the "first Prime Minister in 70 years to know where the camera was" – in the words of one political scientist – was able to alternately emasculate and weaponise media, and turn it into a force multiplier at the ballot box. The searing commentary in the foreign media of what is in store shines the mirror on the below-par inquiry by some of our own. And the decision of the Congress, Samajwadi Party and Janata Dal (Secular) to keep their panelists out of partisan TV debates puts the stamp on the perfidy bordering on complicity.

'Wot won it'

When the Conservative Party unexpectedly came to power in Britain in 1992, Rupert Murdoch's mass-selling tabloid *The Sun* proclaimed on its front page, "It's The

Sun Wot Won It", to lay claim to its contribution. It is nobody's case that the BJP won the 2019 election because of the media. India is larger, its democracy more layered, and the media mosaic vastly heterogeneous for such a glib conclusion. But a closer examination of the last five years will reveal the insidious role some in the media played in conditioning minds, building myths, deflecting attention, normalising the abnormal, and poisoning the pool.

Precisely how this was achieved by a provincial leader, a self-declared "outsider" in Lutyens' Delhi, is difficult to put a finger on. Certainly, home-grown tactics – bogus FIRs, criminal cases, arrests, IT raids, monitoring – were improved upon. Antagonism became the bedrock of the relationship. There was no media interface in the Prime Minister's Office, just a PRO. The Prime Minister's plane was off-bounds for hacks. There were no press meets. Journalists' deaths were not counted. Targeted tweets crowned the new courtiers. In ways subtle and brutal, the message was conveyed and received that hagiography had to replace scrutiny.

In retrospect, the move to allow the Finance Minister to also handle the Information and Broadcasting portfolio after Mr. Modi formed his Cabinet in 2014 will probably go down as a masterstroke in taming the circus, top-down. Dodgy corporates and media houses lived in dread of the taxman. Media licences and clearances were difficult to come by. Using carrot and stick, the circuits of news flow were rewired, the tramlines laid out on who could be attacked and who couldn't be touched. Still to recover from the economic downturn that began in 2007-08, a media aching for 'achhe din' fell in line.

Self-censorship, co-optation, and a free ride followed. From Aardha to Electronic Voting Machines, and from Doklam to Pul-

wama with Rafale in between, the biggest scandals lay buried. From LPG to GDP, from missing planes to missing jobs data, the grandest claims lay unexamined. The fake, the frivolous and the frothy – anthem, flag, beef, love jihad, JNU, urban naxals, *azaan* – got more air time than subaltern protests of farmers, weavers and workers. And agenda-setting studio warriors flayed minority ghosts each night – 'Hindus in danger', 'illegal immigrants' – fostering a siege mentality that reeked of victimhood.

In the post-truth world, where social media takes propaganda into the pockets of voters without filter, there is nothing to suggest the election verdict would have been the other way round had mainstream media been less dormant. But when a former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court says the media should not forget that its primary responsibility is to be a watchdog, not a guard dog for those in authority, or when a former Chief Election Commissioner warns that "the fourth estate has become the fifth column of democracy", it is useful to wonder if they are seeing the cracks in the pillar with greater clarity.

No end date?

When the media's darkest days – the censorship under Indira Gandhi's 21 months of Emergency – are invoked, L.K. Advani's quote that the press crawled when asked to bend is airily recalled. But at least the media of the time was adhering to a formal order which had a start date and an end date. In the 21st century, it didn't take a presidential order for the 'feral beasts' to suspend their instincts, to look the other way, to stoke majoritarian fires, to fearlessly question not the ruling party but the Opposition, and usher in Modi 2.0.

Krishna Prasad is former Editor-in-Chief, 'Outlook', and former member, Press Council of India

Liberals need to think again

On the problem with justifications of the face veil with arguments about 'free will'



TABISH KHAIR

The face veil ban in Sri Lanka – which, like a similar ban in France, is aimed at all religious groups, not just orthodox Muslims – has wrong-footed many of my liberal friends once again. They seem to have little choice but to try to oppose the veil ban in the name of free will. This and similar arguments cut very little ice with most non-Muslims, and have actually contributed to the rise of non-Muslim (sometimes anti-Muslim) rightist and reactionary groups all over the world, from the U.S. to India – not to mention the continuing marginalisation of liberals as a political force.

Excuse for the orthodox

If you are not a Muslim (or a generous non-Muslim liberal), you can easily slash the argument of 'free will' into shreds with reference to your own inheritance. For instance, a Hindu can take up the old institution of Sati, or widow

immolation. Sati was sanctioned by some Hindu religious traditions and it was argued that widows who committed Sati did so of 'their own free will'. Reactionary Hindus might still make this claim, but most Hindus, even religious ones, would not want to reintroduce Sati.

Or let's move to Christianity in 19th century Europe, when divorce was mostly impossible for women (and poor men) to obtain. Once again, there was scriptural sanction for this, and it was argued that 'good wives' always choose to stay within a 'heaven-made' marriage – no matter how uneven or abusive – of 'their own free will'. Today, almost no European would subscribe to this view.

The list is long. Every people have had, and to some extent still have, various traditions and customs that seem to be the result of 'free will' – if seen from a position of privilege, and from positions that do not or cannot question this privilege. After all, even slavery was justified not just by slave-owners but also, on historical evidence, by some slaves as the 'best of all choices' for a particular and hugely exploited branch of humanity.

The hard fact remains that if a



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group of people are under pressure to comport in certain ways, then they cannot be said to choose that particular option. Even if the option is 'freely' chosen, it is not a free choice. For a choice to be free, other options need to have equivalent prestige and acceptability, both within the community and around it. This is seldom the case for anyone, and never the case with subaltern groups such as women in a patriarchal set-up.

A wife faced with degradation and starvation as a 'single woman' in 19th century Europe had no choice but to 'freely' stay within the confines of her marriage. An Indian widow faced with neglect and possible abuse after her husband's death had no choice but to 'freely' become a Sati. If a woman is made to believe that a certain deportment or dress is vital for her

well-being in this world and the next, then the choice of that deportment or dress can never be a free one.

There are many orthodox Muslims who do not insist on veils because of 'free will'. Far from it. Actually, they would argue that the matter of free will does not arise: according to them, God has ordained that women should dress in a certain way and that is that. One could, as Fatima Mernissi does in her scholarly books, question their reading of the scriptures, but that is another matter, and it is a matter I have no desire to raise. What I am saying is that many orthodox Muslims – or reactionary Hindus, for that matter – insist on a certain treatment of women because they consider it God-ordained, religion-based and definitely not a matter of personal choice or 'free will'.

This also makes the liberal argument of 'free will' around such matters rather ludicrous: liberals invoke 'free will' to defend practices that are considered obligatory and pre-ordained by their proponents! No wonder liberals fail to cut ice with the vast majority.

Not all bans

There are two good reasons not to

'ban' personal matters, whether it is the consumption of food or drink, or the wearing (or not wearing) of a particular kind of dress. First of all, such bans often create a bigger backlash, at least in the future. Second, and more importantly, any such ban introduces the public into the private: there are very good (liberal) reasons to keep governments out of drawing rooms, toilets and kitchens. If liberals want, they can argue along those lines, and they might or might not convince others.

But for God's sake, it is time for liberals to stop fooling themselves and talking of 'free will' in order to justify tradition, custom and other forms of direct or indirect coercion. It might make them feel good to be so generous and accepting, but it is neither the truth nor politically useful. In the longer run, it is even detrimental to whatever 'beleaguered' community liberals choose to champion along these lines, for it provides that community with superfluous feeble crutches to hobble on when it actually needs to put its two feet to the grounds of reality and start walking.

Tabish Khair is an Indian novelist and academic who works in Denmark

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.

Neighbourhood issues

It appears as though one more opportunity to resolve differences between India and Pakistan is going to be missed at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit at Bishkek as no bilateral talks have been scheduled between Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Imran Khan ("Navigations in Bishkek", June 13). This is a pity. Dialogue is the only way of resolving issues and it must be initiated with a sense of urgency. There is nothing to lose and everything to gain with a friendly, peaceful neighbourhood.

D.B.N. MURTHY,
Bengaluru

The Prime Minister's well-thought-out visit to the

Maldives and Sri Lanka is a signal that India will balance out China's presence in the Indian Ocean Region and counteract its String of Pearls diplomatic policy ("The importance of being neighbourly", June 12). Apart from focusing on nations that China is trying to woo, India must concentrate on the neighbourhood in general as events happening in the neighbourhood have a direct impact on India.

VRINDA RAJIVANSHI,
New Delhi

A secular India

I cannot agree more with the writer that a second term for Prime Minister Narendra Modi indicates that a significant number of Hindus endorse the Hindu

supremacist ideology of the RSS ("A summary of fears and possibilities", June 13). Gone are the days of secularism. Most Indians nowadays think along communal lines. The reasons why Opposition parties did not raise issues such as mob lynching and violence against Muslims are not far to seek. In my cynical view, they are fully aware that the very mention of the word 'Muslims' will bring about accusations of appeasement and result in a loss of votes. It is not without reason that Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Kamal Nath invoked the National Security Act in a case of alleged cow slaughter, though he regretted it later. However, the transition to a Hindu

state will not be as smooth as the re-installation of a Hindutva government; it will be marked by internal conflict. The possibility of people getting disenchanted with the politics of hate in the long run cannot be ruled out either. Indians will come to their own conclusions only if they experience something directly, not through public discourse.

ABDUL ASSIS P.A.,
Kochi

Instead of writing objective articles by stating facts, some of *The Hindu's* columnists engage in rhetoric and speak as though Indians at large have been made gullible fools by the BJP's propaganda. Words like toxic masculinity and

hyper-nationalism are frequently bandied about. While I highly appreciate and value the newspaper's journalistic endeavours in unravelling the truth and holding the government accountable (such as in the Rafale series), publishing biased columns does no good for the newspaper.

SAUMYADIP MOITRA,
Vasco da Gama

Caste in everyday life
A government employee being rejected by the local people because of her Scheduled Caste status does not square with India's claim of being a fast-developing nation ("Caste Hindus say 'no' to anganwadi workers at Valayapatti", June 14). If one begins to probe the caste identities of all the service

providers of the country, one cannot eat in hotels, travel in buses, trains and flights, or do anything for that matter. This country has a Constitution that was framed by a Dalit icon. People should be taught to shed their casteist outlook. I have one other request to *The Hindu*: please say 'so-called upper castes' or 'caste perpetrators' in your reports instead of saying 'caste Hindus' just as the word 'Dalit' has been widely accepted for describing the SCs. 'Caste Hindus' sends out a wrong message that caste is relevant only to the so-called upper castes and not to the Dalits.

A. CLEMENT,
Chennai

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