

# Britain on the edge

Whichever direction the country takes from here on Brexit, it will remain deeply divided



VIDYA RAM

Over the past week, a 2015 tweet by former British Prime Minister David Cameron has been widely reshared online. "Britain faces a simple and inescapable choice – stability and strong Government with me, or chaos with Ed Miliband," he wrote on May 4, before the general election. Mr. Cameron won that election decisively, but the rest of his prediction has been looking darkly comic as Britain continues to stumble from one political crisis to another.

**Many adamant parties**  
Last week, the respite that came after the British Cabinet formally backed a withdrawal agreement reached with European Union (EU) negotiators lasted less than 24 hours, for a series of resignations later and the prospect of a no-confidence vote now threaten to disrupt the deal. Five Ministers are lobbying Prime Minister Theresa May to change the terms of the deal. Ms. May is adamant that she won't step down. She insists that her deal meets what the people voted for in the referendum and prevents the development of a hard border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Just as determined are the so-called hard Brexiters such as Jacob Rees-Mogg and Boris Johnson. They are eager to avoid any form of customs alignment with the EU that will dent Britain's chances of forging trade deals, even if the limits are only temporary. They've been lining up an increasing number of Conservative MPs to call for a vote of no confidence in Ms. May, though it is still unclear if and when they will have the sufficient numbers to do so. What worsens the situation is that, thanks to the general election that the government risked last year, it is now dependent on Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to get anything through Parliament. The DUP is deeply unhappy with the state of affairs, arguing that the graduated customs arrangement being proposed will threaten Britain's territo-



"To even begin to move forward, Britain needs a good dose of reality and an honest conversation." A scene near Parliament in London. •AP

rial integrity. The Labour Party, while insisting that it is committed to Brexit, wants the government to return to the negotiating table. It dubs the current deal a "huge and damaging failure" which fails to live up to shadow Brexit Secretary Keir Starmer's six tests to judge the deal.

**A bumpy road ahead**  
It is incredibly hard to predict where things will go from here. Should Ms. May win a leadership contest, it's highly likely that her deal would be chucked out of Parliament. Should she be replaced, there's a good chance that the hard line pursued by any successor would lead to no deal being forged and Britain crashing out of the EU on World Trade Organisation terms. Most rational observers agree that this situation would be disastrous for the country. There's also the increasing possibility of a second referendum, and the more remote one of a general election (this would require a two-thirds parliamentary majority and would be like Turkey's voting for Christmas for the Conservatives and the DUP). But what is remarkable is that all these scenarios share one thing in common: not one of them commands support from a majority of politicians or has clear support from the public. In a recent Sky Data poll, 55% backed a second referendum and just one in seven backed Ms. May's deal. This is far from the categorical endorsement that its proponents might have hoped for given the chaotic state of affairs and the very different visions of Brexit being presented to them.

Britain remains as divided as ever before – or possibly more so.

Many, particularly within the Conservative Party, have been scathing in their assessment of Ms. May for the current deal. The most contentious part of the 585-page document covering everything from Britain's £39 billion "divorce bill" to the rights and privileges of EU citizens relates to the backstop or insurance policy that will kick in to avoid a hard border in Ireland. Unsurprisingly, Ireland has been adamant on the need for this, but Brexiters are convinced that it would effectively run the risk of keeping Britain in what one MP described as a "Hotel California Brexit" – one in which Britain would never really leave but remain bound by EU customs rules without having a say in EU policy, as has been the case until now. It's true that the deal, as it stands, is far from ideal and does not deliver on the "taking back control" message that had been touted through the referendum campaign. But then again, that was always an impossible dream, one of the many lofty promises made by Brexit campaigners alongside the pledge that forging a trade deal with the EU would be the "easiest in history".

The trouble has been that right from the start, the Brexit envisaged could never have matched reality. The idea of Britain untying itself from Europe and magically floating around the world was never going to happen. This is a world of shifting priorities and this is a country whose supply chains for goods and services sector, which is a major component

of the economy, are enmeshed in Europe. The government's determination to run a hard-line immigration policy that continues to frustrate business and anger potential trade partners makes this vision even more farcical.

## The language of Empire

So determined have Brexiters been to shout down anyone warning of potential disruption that they've remained firmly oblivious of basic realities. Senior economists and business leaders, and even Britain's own Chancellor of the Exchequer who has warned of negative consequences, have been portrayed as anti-national establishment figures intent on "talking Britain down". Former Brexit Secretary Dominic Raab rather chillingly admitted that he had been unaware of how reliant British trade was on the crossing between Dover and the French port of Calais. Mr. Johnson dismissed some of the warnings of chaos as "pure millennium bug stuff", conveniently forgetting that issues had only been avoided in 2000 because of the tens of thousands of hours spent in preparation. Britain is as obsessed with its colonial history as ever – the language of Empire and one-upmanship has also been infused into the national debate. References to Britain being reduced to "colony status" or "vasalage" abound, while newspaper headlines rage indignantly against defeats or gloat over victories notched up against European negotiators.

The trouble is that in the hubris, the public had been left with a distorted sense of reality. It's not surprising that many think it's fine to leave the EU when they are fed such castles in the air. The idea of an independent trading nation not structured by pesky foreign courts or regulations is pure fantasy in today's world. An ugly debate around immigration has also taken hold (it's noteworthy that in her defences of the deal, Ms. May has repeatedly pointed to the end of free movement as if to justify all other compromises). Whichever direction Britain takes from here, society will remain deeply divided. To even begin to move forward, Britain needs a good dose of reality and an honest conversation.

vidya.ram@thehindu.co.in

## FROM THE READERS' EDITOR

# Journalism in the time of hate

Journalists must reclaim the public sphere from falsehood



A.S. PANNEERSELVAM

For journalism, winning back trust is much more important now than sorting out its business models that are being undermined by digital disruptions. Journalists have an immense responsibility: they must reclaim the public sphere from deliberate falsehood, the disinformation avalanche, and algorithm-driven hate content. The word polarisation means different things to different readers, but it fails to capture the cleaving of our social fabric, the erosion of empathy and the power of information silos in denying space for dialogue and in amplifying prejudices.

## What Jim Acosta did

Let's look at a recent example. The tumultuous interaction between the CNN's Chief White House correspondent, Jim Acosta, and the U.S. presidential staff during a recent press conference has been subjected to multiple interpretations. For the critics of President Donald Trump, the suspension of Mr. Acosta's White House press credentials was a sign of vengeance and intolerance. The President and his senior staff portrayed the episode as yet another illustration of how Mr. Trump is a victim of unfair journalistic practices. The solidarity expressed by the U.S. media with Mr. Acosta in legally challenging the White House decision was seen by some in India as the difference between the American media, which defends its rights despite having a hostile regime, and the Indian media, which has failed not only to hold our leaders accountable by asking tough questions, but also to stand by those who have.

The issue is not only about governments across the world becoming heavy-handed in their dealing with critical voices; it is also about the ideal approach that journalism should adhere to in these troubled times. Journalists, like other citizens, are human beings. They are emotional and hold political views. I do not underestimate any of the difficulties that journalists face today while trying to do their job credibly. But I also see

how journalism is moving away from its traditional standards that helped build trust in the first place. Anger is not an emotion that exists only in the Twitter space; it has also seeped into newsrooms and press conferences.

Al Tompkins and Kelly McBride of the Poynter Institute argue that Mr. Acosta's conduct showed that he wanted not so much to not ask questions as make a statement. They wrote: "In doing so, the CNN White House reporter gave President Donald Trump room to critique Acosta's professionalism. In this time of difficult relations between the press and the White House, reporters who operate above reproach, while still challenging the power of the office, will build credibility." They did a fine analysis of the press conference and found that Mr. Acosta was on track till he moved to making statements instead of posing questions to the President.

## What he could have done

Mr. Tompkins and Ms. McBride believe that the moment a journalistic query turned into a statement, it provided an exit route to the President, who has a troubled relationship

with the press. First, Mr. Acosta framed his question in a manner that could have elicited an easy 'no' for an answer: "Do you think that you demonise immigrants?" Mr. Tompkins and Ms. McBride are right when they suggest that a better question might have been: "How do you respond to the criticism that you are demonising certain types of immigrants, namely poor immigrants?" The wise counsel from the Poynter faculty applies to reporters everywhere: "Ask tough questions, avoid making statements or arguing during a press event and report the news, don't become the news."

It is crucial to build and retain trust in journalism by using the tried and tested formula of newsgathering, adhering to the separation of news and views, and recognising the line that divides advocacy and reporting. This responsibility extends to the desk too. On November 14, this newspaper carried a report, "Yechury rejects idea of projecting Rahul as PM candidate now". This was not a faithful reflection of the reporter's copy. The headline was later modified for the Web edition as "Yechury rejects idea of projecting anyone as PM candidate now" to give a fair picture.

readers.editor@thehindu.co.in

## SINGLE FILE

# Claiming Sabarimala

Will Kerala society live up to its celebrated progressive credentials by restoring the rights of Malayarayanans?

A.S. JAYANTHI



An unexpected fallout of the controversy surrounding the entry of women of all age groups into Sabarimala is the ownership rights of the Malayarayan tribal community over the hill shrine. The controversy has also led to arguments about the Brahminisation of at least some temples in Kerala, which some historians believe were either Buddhist shrines or in the control of the avarna castes. The United Malayaraya Mahasabha has now moved the apex court seeking ownership rights over Sabarimala temple. P.K. Sajeev, general secretary of the Aikya Mala Araya Mahasabha and a researcher, claims that the temples in Sabarimala and in adjacent Karimala were in the possession of the Malayarayanans until the early 20th century.

The first priest there was Karimala Arayan, Mr. Sajeev says, whose name was reportedly embossed on the first of the 18 sacred steps that leads up to the sanctum sanctorum. Ayyappa, according to him, was the son of Malayarayan couple Kandan and Karuthamma. The legend surrounding the 41-day penance that Ayyappa devotees follow is believed to be related to an episode in their life. The 18 steps are a symbol of the 18 hills around Sabarimala. The Thazhamon Madhom, now hereditary chief priests (tantrics) at the temple, snatched away the ownership of the temple from the Malayarayanans, the community claims. The right to perform honney *abhishekam* and the ritual of lighting the *makaravilaku* at Ponnambalamedu too were taken away, they allege.

This brings to the fore the argument by historians such as Rajan Gurukkal about the avarna ownership of the temple. Ayyappa, an uncommon name in the Hindu pantheon, could be the tribal chieftain Ayyan or Ayyanan, who might have been worshipped as a deity by the tribal population, they point out. The introduction of savarna rituals and the ban on entry of menstruating women could be a recent phenomenon, as tribal communities do not have any such practice.

M.G.S Narayanan and other historians have also written extensively about how ancient Kerala did not have a culture of temples. Most were *kavus*, or sacred groves, and temples came into being in the 8th or 9th century CE. Archaeological evidence points to the possible presence of a Buddhist culture too, which was gradually appropriated by Hinduism.

As the Supreme Court takes up writ petitions against its order allowing women of all age groups to the Sabarimala temple, it might also trigger questions about the rights of those communities pushed to the margins by modernity and by upper castes. Kerala is one of the few States that extends reservation to Dalit priests in temples governed by Devaswom Boards. It remains to be seen whether Kerala society will also stand up to its celebrated progressive credentials by restoring the rights of Malayarayanans.

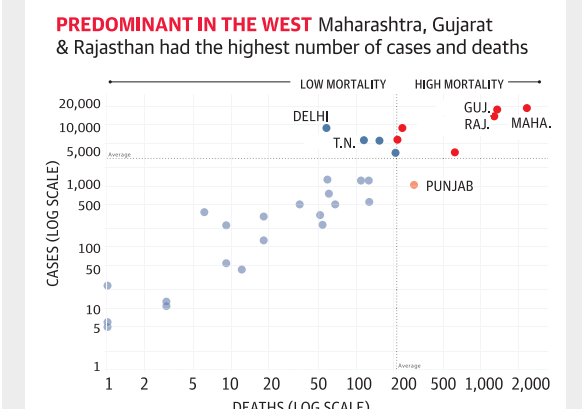
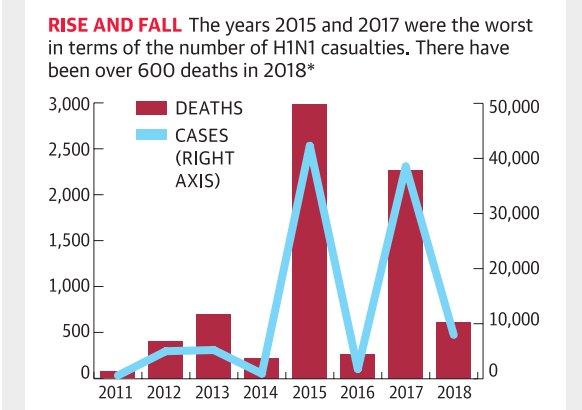
The writer is a Principal Correspondent at The Hindu Kozhikode



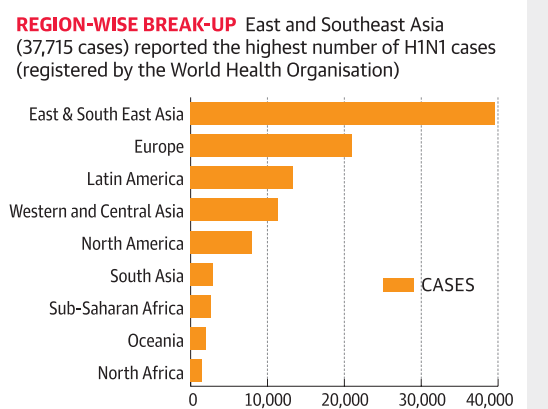
## DATA POINT

### Flu troubles

The number of swine flu cases has decreased this year in India, but mortality rates for those infected by the H1N1 flu virus remain relatively high. Varun B. Krishnan analyses the data



STATE OF FLUX: Punjab and Himachal Pradesh registered the highest mortality ratios in 2018. Tamil Nadu and Delhi registered among the lowest ratios. Table with 4 columns: State, Cases, Deaths, Mortality ratio.



## FROM The Hindu ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO NOVEMBER 19, 1968

### Problems facing Indian planners

The problems of Indian planning, both short-term and long-term, were discussed to-day [November 18] at a meeting of the President of the World Bank, Mr. Robert McNamara, had with the Deputy Chairman and members of the Planning Commission. Mr. McNamara was given a complete picture of the present state of Indian planning and of the Indian economy generally. Dr. D.R. Gadgil and other members of the Commission are understood to have explained to Mr. McNamara how they look at the planning effort of the last decade, its achievements and weaknesses. The problem of price stability figured in the discussion of the present position of the economy. The directions, in which the planners and the Government now propose to go in industry and agriculture, were explained to the distinguished visitor.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO NOVEMBER 19, 1918.

### Premium on Notes.

The following Press Communique has been issued [in Nagpur on November 18] by the Finance Department of the Central Provinces Government: The Government currency notes issued in place of silver coin are regarded with suspicion by ignorant people who have been led by the advice of interested persons into believing that substitution of paper currency for coin indicated that the Government is unable to meet its liabilities and that actual value of Government currency notes is less than its face value, the consequence being that people have been induced to submit to payment of heavy discount on all payments made in notes and higher prices have to be paid for goods whenever payment is made in notes, and this in turn has led to a not unreasonable objection on the part of poorer classes of population to receive dues in the form of notes and to the refusal of shopkeepers to accept notes at all in payment of goods.

## CONCEPTUAL

### Prediction market

#### ECONOMICS

This refers to any market platform where investors speculate on the probability of a future event or outcome. Prediction markets have been created to forecast elections, the weather, consumer demand, and a number of other things that are normally hard to predict. Instruments that are linked to various future outcomes are issued in these markets and openly traded by investors. The predictions of these markets are considered to be more reliable than the opinion of experts because investors are willing to bet real money to back their personal opinion. In fact, prediction markets have been empirically shown to be more reliable predictors of the future.

## MORE ON THE WEB

Video: A look at what Viswanathan Anand achieved in the years the rest of the 10 players in the Tata Steel Chess tournament were born.

http://bit.ly/ViswanAnand