



## A promise to live by

All political parties must be mindful of the core values that invigorate Indian democracy

As the countdown for elections to the 17th Lok Sabha begins, the world's largest democracy has a chance to re-imagine itself. Over the last 16 general elections and numerous elections at lower levels, the resolute trust that the founding fathers of the Republic put in the parliamentary democratic system has been substantially proven wise. India did make some dangerous turns and show signs of fragility, especially during the Emergency in the 1970s, but in the long term it expanded the scope of its democracy through widening representation, devolution of power and redistribution of resources. This is not to overlook the various maladies that have afflicted the country's democracy, such as disinformation campaigns, corruption, disenfranchisement of the weaker sections of the society, the corroding influence of money and muscle power in elections, and divisive majoritarian tendencies. While the representative character of institutions has in general improved, women and religious minorities are alarmingly underrepresented. The exercise of elections itself is a matter of great pride for all Indians. The Election Commission of India has over the decades evolved itself into a fine institution and plays a critical role in the sustenance of democracy. Its efforts to increase voter participation through a series of small steps over the years, including the use of the Electronic Voting Machines, have been praiseworthy.

The vulnerabilities of Indian democracy have been pronounced in the last five years, and some of its long-term gains have been undermined. Therefore, this election is more than an exercise to elect a new government. This should also be an occasion to reiterate and reinforce Indian democracy's core values, its representative character and its promise of a constant rejuvenation of the collective spirit. The ECI has announced a series of fresh measures to strengthen the integrity of the electoral process and curb some rapidly growing hazards such as the spread of falsehoods aimed at creating social polarisation for consolidation of votes. Measures such as better monitoring of social media campaigns, while steps in the right direction, are not in themselves adequate to deal with the challenges of these times. The stakes are high for all contenders this year, and Indian politics has reached a level of competitiveness where ground rules of engagement are routinely disregarded. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who rode to power in 2014 on the agenda of material progress through Hindutva, has to defend his reign to seek a second term. His opponents sense an existential danger from him and are trying to mobilise those left behind or who feel disempowered by his governance. While furthering individual interests, all parties must realise that democracy itself is at stake if the campaign is aimed at communal polarisation. Though the promise of Indian democracy has not been fully realised, voters have remained committed to it. They turn up in large numbers to vote, and consider the very act of voting as empowerment. That trust should be upheld.

## Avoiding a slowdown

Central banks are reversing the direction of their policies in a seemingly coordinated bid

Over the last few days, U.S. Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell has been trying to allay fears that it will continue to raise interest rates notwithstanding conditions in the economy. Many, including President Donald Trump, have been quite critical of the Fed raising rates despite a slowing economy and inflation staying well below its official target of 2%. In fact, many have argued that the gradual but persistent raising of rates may be the reason behind the slowdown in U.S. growth and the lacklustre inflation numbers. The American economy created a mere 20,000 jobs in February, the slowest growth in jobs in well over a year, and GDP growth in the coming quarters is expected to slow considerably from the rate of 3.4% in the third quarter last year. On Sunday, however, Mr. Powell termed the current interest rate level as "appropriate", and noted that the Fed does "not feel any hurry" to raise rates further. The Fed Chairman's remarks come around the tenth anniversary of the historic bull market in U.S. stocks, which began in March 2009 after policy rates were cut aggressively in order to fight the recession. This marks a significant change from Mr. Powell's hawkish policy stance since taking over last year.

But right now it is not just the Fed that has put the brakes on the normalisation of monetary policy through a gradual tightening of short-term interest rates. As economic conditions in Europe and Asia begin to deteriorate, central banks have been quick to turn more dovish. European Central Bank President Mario Draghi last week announced that rates in Europe will be kept low until next year and offered to lend cheaply to European banks. The People's Bank of China has promised further monetary stimulus measures to stem the fall in growth, and the Reserve Bank of India has started to cut interest rates as growth has slowed down each successive quarter this fiscal ahead of the general election. It should thus be obvious by now that central banks around the world are reversing the direction of their policies in what seems to be a coordinated effort to avoid a global growth slowdown. The brakes applied to the raising of interest rates by the Fed allows other central banks to lower their own policy rates and boost growth without the fear that disruptive capital flows could wreak havoc on their economies. While such coordinated monetary policy can certainly prevent slowdowns, it also raises the risk of extended periods of low interest rates leading to more destructive bubbles.

# A compromise is still possible

But there is need for clarity on the status of one mediator and the efficacy of mediation on Ayodhya



A. FAIZUR RAHMAN

The Supreme Court's attempt to maintain Hindu-Muslim harmony through a mediated settlement of the long-standing Babri Masjid dispute deserves appreciation. But it has raised a couple of concerns too. One relates to the choice of a mediator, and the other to the efficacy of mediation at this stage.

### Mediator neutrality

By definition, a mediator is a neutral third party who facilitates a negotiated settlement between adversarial contenders. Unfortunately, the neutrality of one of the three court-appointed mediators, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, has come into question as some of his public pronouncements in the recent past appear to negate his supposed disinterestedness.

A year ago, in an open letter to the All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB), Sri Sri Ravi Shankar had said: "People from both communities who are adamant on following the court's verdict are also driving the issue to a situation of defeat." The "best solution", therefore, is "an out-of-court settlement in which the Muslim bodies come forward and gift one acre of land to the Hindus who in turn will gift five acres of land nearby to the Muslims, to build a better mosque."

He even told Muslims that giv-

ing up their claim to the disputed property did not amount to "surrendering this land to the people who demolished the Babri Masjid or to a particular organisation. On the contrary, they are gifting it to the people of India".

Apart from the fact that this position betrays Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's bias in favour of disputants belonging to one religion, it is difficult to understand the justifiability of treating a gift to Hindus as a gift to the people of India. Does he regard only Hindus as "the people of India" to the exclusion of other communities?

Nonetheless, it stands to reason that Muslims would be in a position to gift the land only when their ownership of it is confirmed by the Supreme Court. If Muslims lose the case, the entire land would come under the control of Hindus and the question of Muslims giving up their claim would then be rendered redundant.

But the Art of Living founder thinks that even a Hindu victory would not be conducive to peace. It could foster Muslim resentment and may "lead to riots throughout the country", he told the AIMPLB, thereby insinuating that Muslims are violent. He seems to be unaware that Muslims have agreed to abide by the court verdict whichever way it goes. Now that he has been made a mediator, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar must clarify if he still stands by his statements.

### Advisability of mediation

Despite Hindu groups opposing a negotiated settlement, the Supreme Court made it clear that an attempt should be made to settle the dispute by mediation. It over-



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ruled their objections by invoking Section 89 of the Code of Civil Procedure (CPC) which allows the court to refer any dispute to one of the four modes of non-judicial resolution processes: namely, arbitration, conciliation, judicial settlement (including settlement through Lok Adalat), or mediation. In this case, the court opted for mediation.

This was again opposed on the basis of a two-judge Supreme Court judgment in *Afcos Infrastructure and Ors. v. Cheria Verkey Construction and Ors* (2010). It illustratively explained that mediation cannot be done in a representative suit which involves public interest or the interest of large number of persons who are not represented in the court.

But the five-judge bench led by Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi differed. Citing the provisions of Order 1 rule 8 CPC and Order XXIII rule 3-B, it stated that there was no legal impediment to making a reference to mediation. Whether the said CPC provisions would apply in the event parties arrive at a settlement in the mediation proceedings was left open to be decided later.

Also, what the Supreme Court

had frowned upon in *Afcos* was a civil court exercising power under Section 89 of the Code to refer a suit for "arbitration" without the concurrence of all the parties to the suit. But the court is free, the Supreme Court had said, to consider and decide upon any non-judicial resolution method other than arbitration such as judicial settlement or mediation.

Questions still remain. If the Hindu groups continue to reject mediation, how will this dispute be resolved? And if they agree to negotiate, will the compromise they reach with Muslims be binding on all Hindus in India?

Even Justice D.Y. Chandrachud, who conceded that a negotiated settlement is most 'desirable' in this case, was initially not sure if such a settlement could bind millions of Hindus and Muslims as the issue is not an ordinary dispute between two private parties.

### Win-win situation

If examined closely, it would be seen that the Babri Masjid dispute is not really an explosive issue affecting the religious sentiments of millions of Hindus and Muslims as has been portrayed. This may have been the case in the initial years after the illegal demolition of the Babri Masjid. But today, more than a quarter century later, such a portrayal should be construed as having entered the realm of political mythopoeia where myths of various kinds are created at the hustings for electoral advantage.

The fact is, there is no evidence to show that the handful of parties claiming to represent Hindus and Muslims in this case are fully backed by their respective com-

munities. In other words, the Babri Masjid/Ram Janmabhoomi imbroglio is no longer a life-affirming issue for the Indian masses, who are more concerned about jobs, poverty alleviation and access to affordable housing, health care and education.

That said, both communities cannot afford to let the Ayodhya dispute simmer forever and stall the country's socio-economic growth. The main reason for the unrelenting Muslim attitude is the fear that if they give up their claim on the Babri Masjid, Hindu groups would ask for other "disputed" mosques to be handed over. After all one of the post-demolition kar sevak slogans in 1992 was, "Yeh toh sirf jhanki hai, ab Kashi, Mathura baaki hai (This is only the trailer, now Kashi and Mathura remain)," in which Kashi and Mathura are metonyms for two more disputed places of worship.

### A question of trust

If this Muslim fear is addressed by the Hindu parties to the dispute, and also by influential organisations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the chances of amicably resolving this seemingly intractable conflict would exponentially increase. A collective assurance from the Hindu side that it would not stake claim to any other "disputed" mosque in India could be the face-saving compromise and win-win situation both sides are looking for.

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# Let them take flight

It is not late to declare the Tejas and Kaveri projects as 'national missions'



ARUN PRAKASH

At the Aero-India 2019 airshow and aviation exhibition, held in Bengaluru last month, there were two developments of significance, for India's national security as well its moribund aeronautical industry. On February 20, the Indian Air Force and the aviation community heaved a collective sigh of relief after the Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas Mark I, received its long-awaited Final Operational Clearance; this means it is combat-ready and can be exploited to the limits of its approved 'envelope'. However, a day later, came a rather unwelcome report: a Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) announcement at the show of its decision to shelve the Kaveri turbo-jet engine project. While one waits for this report to be confirmed or denied, given the criticality of this engine for India's aeronautical industry, the issue deserves a close look.

### Political myopia

Historically, all major aerospace powers have possessed the capability to design airframes as well as power-plants. Until India can design and produce its own aero-en-

gines, the performance and capabilities of any indigenously designed/built aircraft will be seriously limited by the technology that we are permitted to import. India has already had two bitter experiences in this regard. The Hindustan Aeronautics Limited's sleek and elegant HF-24 Marut fighter, of the 1960s and 1970s, failed to achieve its huge potential as a supersonic fighter for want of a suitable engine. Rather than exert itself to seek alternatives, the government of the day, with stunning myopia, closed the programme.

Similarly, many of the problems the Tejas faced emanate from lack of engine thrust. Even as the Kaveri has failed to make an appearance, U.S.-made alternatives such as the General Electric F-404 engine, or even the more powerful F-414, do not deliver adequate thrust for the Tejas Mk I, to meet all its missions. For the Tejas Mk IA, Mk II, the LCA Navy, and other aircraft programmes such as the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft, India will need turbo-jet engines of even greater thrust. Thus, it is vital for India to develop a family of homegrown jet engines to power indigenous combat aircraft as well as re-engine imported ones.

### A pivotal role

In this context, it is necessary to recognise that both the Tejas and Kaveri projects – which have seen more than their share of head-



K. MURALI KUMAR

winds and uncertainty – form key components of India's technological aspirations. Unless carefully guided, protected and nurtured, their failure could spell the end of India's aeronautical industry, or condemn it forever to licensed production. A long production run of, say, 250-300 aircraft for the Tejas and its advanced derivatives is essential if the industry is to hone its design and production skills.

The same holds good for the Kaveri, except that the design and production of a functional turbo-jet engine are even more challenging. The HAL claims to have "manufactured" nearly 5,000 aero-engines of British, French and Russian design, and overhauled 18,000 of them. Since this putative "manufacturing" process involves merely the assembly of imported components, several engine divisions of the HAL have failed to imbibe aspects of design, metallurgy, thermodynamic and aerodynamic engineering as well as the complex tooling and machining process required for the design and manufacture of aero-

engines, over the past 60 years – a sad commentary. In 1986, the DRDO's decades-old Gas Turbine Research Establishment (GTRE) was tasked with developing an indigenous power plant for the LCA, which was to replace the U.S. engines being used for the development phase of the aircraft.

Having developed two experimental engines, the GTRE took up a turbofan design, designated the GTX-35VS "Kaveri", for the LCA. Full-scale development was authorised in 1989 for 17 prototypes at a cost of \$55 million. The first complete prototype Kaveri began tests in 1996, and by 2004 it had flown on a Russian flying test-bed; albeit unsuccessfully. Since then, the Kaveri has made sporadic progress and the GTRE has been struggling with serious design and performance issues which it has been unable to resolve. As the Kaveri missed successive deadlines, the U.S. import option was mindlessly and gleefully resorted to.

### A series of troughs

Given the DRDO's penchant for secrecy and misplaced optimism, the true story of the Kaveri's halting progress has never been revealed to Parliament or the taxpayer. However, two details, available on the Internet, are revelatory of the organisation's 'modus operandi'. It has, at least, on two occasions, approached French and British aero-engine manufacturers for advice and consultancy in operationalising the Kaveri.

Despite reportedly attractive offers of performance-enhancement and technology-transfer, the negotiations stalled reportedly on cost considerations. It is also interesting to note that in 2014, this project – of national importance – was arbitrarily shut down by the DRDO only to be revived subsequently for reasons unknown.

It is obvious that the onus for repeated setbacks in these projects must lie squarely on India's political leadership; for its neglect as well as absence of a vision for the aeronautical industry. There are three more factors: over-estimation by the DRDO of its capabilities compounded by a reluctance to seek advice; inadequate project management and decision-making skills of its scientists; and exclusion of users – the military – from all aspects of the projects.

It is still not too late for the government to declare both these projects as 'national missions' and initiate urgent remedial actions. The success of both the Kaveri and Tejas programmes will transform the aerospace scene, and put India in the front ranks of aeronautical nations, perhaps even ahead of China, if the desired degree of resolve and professional rigour can be brought to the fore. If we miss this opportunity, we will remain abjectly import-dependent forever in this vital area.

Admiral Arun Prakash retired as India's 20th Naval Chief and Chairman Chiefs of Staff in 2006

## 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.

### In seven phases

The decision by the Election Commission to not hold Assembly elections with parliamentary polls in Jammu and Kashmir "owing to the security situation" will deprive the people of the State, who are an integral part of India, of their democratic rights (Page 1, "Lok Sabha polls from April 11 to May 19", March 11). Not holding simultaneous elections will widen the gulf with the rest of India. The Central government has virtually failed to usher in peace and tranquility in the State. Democracy is the only barometer by which to measure the needs of the people.

S.K. KHOSLA, Chandigarh

The national election is an astonishing feat and democracy in action on a striking scale. Proof of this democratic tradition is the flawless way in which our

elections take place and the smooth transition of power to the next government. The only disagreeable note is the increasing level of hostility in campaign speeches. Tolerance and respect for dissent are an important pillar of democracy.

H.N. RAMAKRISHNA, Bengaluru

### Pact in Tamil Nadu

The pact between the DMKD and the AIADMK-led alliance for the upcoming Lok Sabha polls may have been sealed, but the people of Tamil Nadu remember that both the PMK and the DMKD had campaigned extensively during the 2016 State Assembly elections on a strong anti-AIADMK plank, severely criticising it on major issues such as huge corruption, TASMAL outlets, agrarian examination and the NEET examination. Sadly, the politics of blatant compromises and opportunism have become the order of the day, with

principles conveniently ignored. Some smaller parties are now facing 'make or break' situations as far as their political survival is concerned, thus forcing them to seek the protective umbrellas of big and 'safer' parties and alliances.

A. MOHAN, Chennai

As the deal shows, in politics yesterday's foes can become today's friends; the opposite holds true also. The coming together of parties of various ideologies gives politics a strange look. How can parties with diametrically opposite views work together for the welfare of the people? The way in which parties are vying for seats shows their greed for power. The goings-on are being watched by the public.

### National security

The Pulwama episode has helped to establish new

benchmarks in countering terrorism; in this climate, the public narrative agrees well with military actions and we find ourselves vouching for militaristic autocracy (Editorial page, "Bringing politics back in", March 11). But it must be remembered that violence always gives way to more violence and to uphold the democratic traditions of the nation, we need to find a political solution to problems like terrorism. We cannot always bank on military solutions. Otherwise, we are no better than Pakistan.

KSHITIJ MANI TRIPATHI, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh

### Academic diversity

More than the diversity of backgrounds, we need to lay more emphasis on a diversity of ideas and innovation capacities as far as our universities are concerned (Editorial page, "The flawed unit of academic quotas", March 11). The QS world rankings for academic

institutions show the poor state of even our best universities.

LAKSHMI DEVAMMA SINGIREDDY, Koilkuntla, Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh

The idea of using a 'diversity index' as a criterion for grants to universities is based on the flawed notion that diversity in itself is a desirable end. In the West, this idea has generated much controversy. Given India's dismal standing in global academia, we must reject policies that substitute academic output for the cosmetics of communal representation.

ARAVIND S., Thiruvananthapuram

### Down memory lane

In the article, "A daughter on a special father" ('Open Page', March 10), the writer took me back to the late 1960s when her father, C. Rangarajan, was teaching at New York University and I was doing my doctoral thesis at Columbia. He was tired of

working on U.S. data and wanted to return to India and serve the country. Both he and his wife, Haripriya, invited me to dinner. When I met her years later, all she wanted to know was whether her cooking was okay. But I followed her research online. She did work of lasting value on Vaishnavism and on the icons worshipped by Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists.

N. BALASURAMANIAN, Bengaluru

### At the fourth ODI

Hitting a mammoth score of 350-plus against Australia in the fourth ODI made the Indian team overconfident. Ashton Turner, who is playing only his second ODI, has shown the world of cricket that nothing is impossible if one is cool-headed and determined. The loss should be a lesson for India.

M. PRADYU, Thalikkavu, Kannur, Kerala

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