



Food for action

The Supreme Court directive should lead to better access under the Food Security Act

The National Food Security Act, 2013, has met with prolonged political indifference, but there is some hope now since the Centre has been asked by the Supreme Court to ensure that States implement key aspects of the progressive law. The directives in the Swaraj Abhiyan case underscore the depressing reality that several State governments have not met key requirements in the legislation which empower the common person in securing subsidised food. Sections 14, 15 and 16, which require the setting up of a grievance redress mechanism and a State Food Commission with responsibility to monitor the implementation of the law, have been heeded only in name, as in Haryana, or not at all. Union Food Minister Ram Vilas Paswan's claim last November that the Act covers the entire country is, therefore, not consistent with the facts. As the court has pointed out, Article 256, which casts a responsibility on the States and the Union to ensure compliance with laws made by Parliament, also provides the remedy, as it can be invoked by the Centre to set things right. Unfortunately, the NFSA, which is vital for social security through the Public Distribution System and child welfare schemes, has suffered due to a lack of political will.

As a law with egalitarian goals, the NFSA should have set the floor for food security through the principle of universal access, though not every citizen would need it. There is great merit in providing highly subsidised foodgrains to targeted households chosen by the State governments, with a ceiling of 75% of the population in rural areas and 50% in urban areas. But the system should have in-built mechanisms to allow for the entry of new households that suddenly find themselves in financial distress, while others can exit it based on changed circumstances. Such arrangements can be made only when there is a full-fledged, independent machinery in the form of a Food Commission, and district-level grievance redress, besides social audits. All these are provided for under the Act, but have been ignored. Modernisation of the PDS, with the use of information technology, could incorporate such dynamic features to the supply of subsidised food to those who need it, and eliminate deficiencies and fraud. Now that the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution has been given specific directives by the court to complete the unfinished tasks this year, it should make up for lost time. As is widely acknowledged, some States are better at running the PDS than others, and the food security law is the best tool to raise standards uniformly. Food Ministry data presented to Parliament show that the present system does not reflect the true scale of public grievances, with a mere 1,106 complaints received from beneficiaries nationwide in 2016, including those reported in the media. The court's intervention is wholly welcome to make the NFSA meaningful.

Rouhani's challenge

Iran's President begins his second term in daunting circumstances at home and abroad

Hassan Rouhani has formally begun his second term as Iran's President in especially challenging circumstances. Conservatives at home are pushing for a hard-line agenda, Sunni states in the Gulf are consolidating a regional alliance against Shia-majority Iran, and the U.S. is turning up the heat on the country's missile programme. Mr. Rouhani, who won the election on a moderate platform, had drawn hope during his campaign that he would build on the momentum his first term had generated and initiate social reform. It was never going to be easy, given the resolve of the clerical establishment to push back any major attempt to change the *status quo*. In Iran's complex, multipolar political system, the President runs the government with a popular mandate but the security establishment reports directly to the Supreme Leader, who can override the government on critical issues. What Mohammad Khatami tried and failed and what Mr. Rouhani tested during his first term was to gradually push pragmatic policies, overcoming the conservative opposition. Mr. Rouhani's decision to go ahead with the nuclear deal despite concerns from the establishment was an example of his successful brinkmanship. The expectation was that in his second term, Mr. Rouhani would expand the reform agenda into domestic politics. The reformists have many demands.

However, one of the first decisions Mr. Rouhani has taken in the new term raises questions about his resolve to initiate meaningful reforms. On Tuesday, he nominated an all-men cabinet, which needs to be approved by Parliament. The chances of women nominees getting through the parliamentary process were high this time given that reformists and moderates make up a majority in the Majlis. Still, Mr. Rouhani preferred not to take the risk of antagonising conservatives. To be sure, these are hard times for a moderate President in Iran. The nuclear deal, the signature achievement of Mr. Rouhani's first term, is under attack, with U.S. President Donald Trump threatening to cancel its certification. With the U.S. imposing more sanctions on Iran over the missile programme and joining hands with its regional rivals such as Saudi Arabia, conservative sections find their hard-line views vindicated and would like Tehran to reciprocate in the same tenor. Mr. Rouhani may therefore have preferred to avoid a clash within the system over his cabinet nominations. It is not clear to what extent he may sacrifice the reformist agenda under pressure from hardliners. His supporters will hope that he will come around to simultaneously pursuing a pragmatic reformist agenda at home and a realistic foreign policy that doesn't succumb to external provocations. Only then would Hassan Rouhani live up to the expectations of the millions of Iranians who re-elected him.

The mood of the moment

Indian politics is in a phase never seen before, with the collective targeting of Opposition parties



VIDYA SUBRAHMANIAM

“We said the person who leads the country should be secular, should have a vision of inclusive growth. This country was constituted under a Constitution whose basic values, egalitarianism, pluralism and inclusiveness, together form what we call Bharat ka darshan or the idea of India. The question before us is: will the constitutional vision triumph or will we surrender to the ideology of division and polarisation?”

“If the other vision succeeds, the country will disintegrate and the Idea of India will collapse. India cannot be destroyed; we will not allow it to be destroyed...”

— Nitish Kumar, June 20, 2013

When a political alliance re-emerges from the debris of an earlier break-up, the reunion unfailingly prompts a journalistic revisit to the past – to the time when the partners said the foulest things to each other and swore eternal hate and enmity. The ritual, meant to expose the hypocrisy on either side, was expectedly repeated when Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar walked out of his alliance with the Lalu Prasad-led Rashtriya Janata Dal and walked into the eager arms of the Narendra Modi-Amit Shah-steered Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

It had indeed been a bitter parting of ways between Mr. Kumar and the BJP in 2013. Mr. Kumar said he would disappear into the bowels of the earth but not engage with Mr. Modi. Such was his contempt for the then Gujarat Chief Minister that he felt it an affront even to take his name. In Mr. Kumar's angry imagination, Mr. Modi occupied the



same dark space as J.K. Rowling's Lord Voldemort, “He who must not be named.”

Role reversal

Yet there was a standout piece in the swirl of accusations. Mr. Kumar's June 20, 2013 speech, made in the Bihar Assembly while seeking a fresh vote of confidence, rose above petty grievances to raise fundamental questions about India and its future. The speech, extracts of which are quoted above, summed up exactly what it was that Mr. Kumar rejected when he ended his 17-year-long partnership with the BJP.

On one side, he said, was the plural and inclusivist constitutional vision, and on the other a destructive counter vision (obviously that of Mr. Modi) founded on the politics of division and polarisation. And he, Nitish Kumar, would not allow the latter to succeed: “Let me promise you: we will never allow the politics of division to destroy this country.”

Having treated his rupture with the BJP as a service to the country, as a personal sacrifice to prevent its ideological colonisation, worse its likely vivisection, Mr. Kumar today tells us that there is no issue more important to him than the corruption of Mr. Prasad and his young son and former Deputy Chief Minister, Tejashwi Yadav. Mr. Kumar's decision to preserve himself rather than the country he was once pre-

pared to die for shows, of course, that his affected moral superiority notwithstanding, he is cut from the same cloth as the rest of the political crowd. But this is not all there is to this speedy journey from secular absolutism to sectarian iffiness. If today Mr. Kumar's conscience allows him not only to name “he who must not be named” but also embrace him in full view of the world, it is because he has realised that Prime Minister Modi is all there is to India's politics. Any political future there is only with him, especially with the Muslim vote, an earlier necessity, no longer a factor in ‘secular’ electoral calculations.

The fact that the BJP in power has pretty much followed the scary script Mr. Kumar envisioned in 2013 is obviously no longer a matter for concern. In the more than three years since Mr. Modi won a record majority, the BJP has moved closer and closer to the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh's dream of a Hindu Rashtra – not in the sense of a formal theocracy but in the sense of a nation Hindu in all respects, numerically, culturally and above all for being able to claim a 5,000-year-old civilisational legacy. This antiquity of culture and land demanded that all inhabitants acknowledge their common Hindu ancestry and agree too that this ancestry overrode any subsequent conversion to Islam or Christianity. The Hindu aggression implicit in

The short and the long of running

Usain Bolt and Mo Farah revived athletics and added new dimensions to human endeavour



N. SUDARSHAN

Until the 2017 IAAF World Championships in Athletics 100m final in London on Saturday, Usain Bolt's only opponent had been the clock. Ever since he descended in Beijing for the 2008 Olympics with his 6'5" frame, he has shredded to bits every competitive field assembled.

From 2008 to 2016, Bolt ran 21 global championship races – the 100m, 200m and 4x100m relay at three Olympics and four World Championships. He won 19 of them. The two ‘losses’ were because of a false start (100m, 2011 worlds) and the disqualification of a teammate who tested positive (4x100m relay, 2008 Olympics).

The 22nd race on Saturday didn't bring much cheer as he had to settle for a bronze. There will be one more shot at gold when he competes in his last race in the 4x100m relay later this week. But Bolt's phenomenon isn't limited by

mere numbers and the colour of the metal.

When he arrived, track and field was in crisis. L'affaires Marion Jones and Justin Gatlin – to name just two – had dragged the sport into the pits. Now, as Bolt prepares to leave, there is still no stemming the rot with the Russian doping scandal the latest to hit.

But in a decade-long career, the Jamaican has single-handedly restored hope. Of the 30 fastest men's 100m sprint times ever, only nine have been run by an athlete who has not been banned for doping. All nine are by Bolt. The way Bolt has managed to do this is his greatest legacy. Many consider the Olympic sprints to be the acme of sporting achievement. But never in history has anybody made it look as intoxicating, transcendental and more importantly accessible as him.

In his first ever Olympic 100m in Beijing, he shattered the world record in a race which ended with chest-thumping euphoria, well before the finish line. And in his last, in Rio, there was that sideways-looking giggle with a few metres still left, probably alluding to the ever-elusive competition.

It seemed that the world's fast-



GETTY IMAGES

est man was one of our own and was out there to have fun. At a time when there was – and still is – a deep sense of cynicism about sporting excellence of any kind, he was the ultimate escape artist.

Another running great

Mo Farah isn't one bit as glamorous. Neither is the sport he competes in – distance running. However, his place among the all-time running greats is in no doubt. The Brit is in line for his fifth consecutive 5,000m/10,000m double across two Olympics and three World Championships, after which he will move from track-racing to road-racing.

The 34-year-old does not possess the world record times in both

his events. Those belong to the legendary Kenenisa Bekele. The Ethiopian himself said that Farah needs to get the world record to achieve immortality. The ‘Greatest Ever’ tag often goes to the well-rounded of champions. Ask Bolt if he doesn't like the rhythmic allure of triple ‘three-peat’ of Olympic golds along with world-record times in all the three events.

But this should take nothing away from Farah's success particularly at a time when distance running is arguably more competitive than ever before. Quite unlike the sprint races, it gives ample scope to enact the ‘us against him’ battles. Farah's gold in the 10,000m in London was one example of this when a bunch of East African rivals did their utmost with repeated surges to break his rhythm.

In fairness, Farah may never endear himself to fans quite like Bolt. His coach Alberto Salazar being under investigation by the United States Anti-Doping Agency hasn't helped. Even in his greatest moments of triumph, reputational damage always seems round the corner, though there has been no illegality attached to anything Farah has done.

So when the two move away,

the private TV channels have morphed into vicious Opposition-eating beasts. Ideally they would like to beam Mr. Modi's activities 24 into 7. But that would mean sparing the Opposition, the decimation of which has to be a higher calling. The Modi government's dismal record on the economy, the devastating consequences of demonetisation, a failing farm sector and the deteriorating situation on the borders have paradoxically all added to the popularity of Mr. Modi and established that people will believe the wildest untruth if it is wrapped in “nationalist colours”. This narrow nationalism is co-opting an ever widening circle of people, with dissenters shamed as traitors and worse. An astonishing number of people today believe Mr. Modi can at once defeat Pakistan and China.

Mr. Kumar has grasped the jingoistic popular mood and Mr. Modi's unassailability for the foreseeable future. With his exit, the few and far between Opposition unity moves have collapsed with no guarantee of who will defect next to Mr. Modi's side. The last doubt about the state of the Congress has been dispelled by the sweat it has expended on l'affaire Ahmed Patel, and Jairam Ramesh's honest confession that the party is in an “existential crisis”

Indian politics is in a phase never seen before. The collective targeting of Opposition parties for corruption is an unseen first. Whether in 1977, 1989 or in 2011-2012 when the Anna agitation was at its peak, public anger was directed at the corrupt government, not the Opposition. Following its 1977 victory, the Janata Party government made every effort to pin corruption charges on Indira Gandhi who instead thrived in the hostile atmosphere. People saw it as a witch-hunt and brought her back.

Not happening today.

Vidya Subrahmaniam is Senior Fellow, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, Chennai

what kind of voids will they leave behind? It may be instructive to listen to what Bolt had to say on the eve of the London worlds. “I don't think it gets any worse than that,” he said, referring to the problems in Russia. “It's on its way back up now. Hopefully, athletes will see what's going on and understand that if they don't stop what they're doing the sport will die.”

It wasn't the tone of a man who had made athletics more popular. It was of someone who had provided the sport with a new lease of life. Without Bolt, it's back to square one and up to the likes of Christian Coleman, Wayde van Niekerk and Andre De Grasse to pick up the pieces.

Distance running, though equally infested with cheats, perhaps suffers less in terms of perception. It doesn't have a vertical and niche base like sprinting but is more horizontal and widespread. This gives greater potential to unearth a diverse number of champions. There is every chance that the great Mo Farah will be replaced by an equally great runner. Can the same be said of Bolt?

sudarshan.narayanan@thehindu.co.in

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.

Still unsafe

Despite a steady rise in crimes against women, no government has been serious about finding a solution to this issue. Of what use are the plethora of laws? Another disturbing fact is that we have been unable to stem instances of kidnapping, rape and stalking, reinforcing the perception that in a male-dominated society like ours, such incidents are common and can often go unchallenged. Finally, posing unwarranted questions to women is not only an infringement of their privacy but also acts as an impediment to women's freedom (Editorial “Pursued by danger”, August 8).

K.R. SRINIVASAN, Secunderabad

■ The incident of the stalking and murder of Swathi in Chennai a while ago is still fresh in memory. The very essence of a free nation is one where a woman should be able to reach home without any fear and at any time of the day. Patriarchal statements

such as “boys are boys” and “women should not endanger themselves at night” have no place here. Emaciated laws often pave the way for offenders to escape. Whether the BJP likes it or not, the Chandigarh incident is going to be a litmus test for a party that says that it is a paragon of ethics and that all are equal before the law of the land.

R. KRISHNAMACHARY, Chennai

■ Instead of allowing the incident to take on political overtones, it would be appropriate if society takes up the issue in its proper perspective and continues to fight such incidents with the same fervour as it did in the Nirbhaya case. As the woman in the incident said on social media, she could have ended up being attacked and finished off; this highlights the seriousness of the incident and must result in every citizen of a free India fighting back against crime.

VARGHESE GEORGE, Secunderabad

Nehru's relevance

The Congress party may have inherited many faults from history and we may critique Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi or Indira Gandhi and so forth, but we should not forget the respect these leaders deservedly earned both within and outside the country. Nehru still matters. He was a true democrat and held fast to his conviction that democracy was the right and correct path for India (“Why Nehru matters more than ever”, Aug. 8). He scrupulously respected parliamentary traditions. 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. He ushered in the concept of socialism and self-sufficiency, a popular path for nations of that time. This was largely inspired by the Russian model. He was instrumental in the setting up of large public sector corporations, and kickstarted our industrial foundation at a time when

the private sector was sceptical about such large investments.

H.N. RAMAKRISHNA, Bengaluru

Baggage of losses

With its monopolistic stature and ever increasing demand for its passenger, goods and catering services, the Indian Railways has no reason to incur losses; if it is in the state it is in today, this can be attributed to corruption and mismanagement at all levels. The Railways' losses can be linked to the web of corrupt contractors and railway officials, and also unscrupulous politicians (“Subsidise rail losses: PMO”, August 7). It is also time for introspection on why the public sector remains non- or underperforming, while private players are growing from strength to strength. Loopholes need to be plugged and steps taken to strengthen the organisations. Everyone knows where the problems lie.

KSHIRASAGARA BALAJI RAO, Hyderabad

■ There is strong logic in subsidising losses on strategic lines and in backward area operations. Similarly, suburban train services are highly subsidised. While commuters rightly expect good service from the railways, there is also a need for commensurate payment for the services rendered. The tariff for suburban services has been stagnant for years. If the government finds it politically unacceptable to hike fares, they should recover the amount from local bodies which benefit indirectly from suburban services, as done in many European cities.

A.N. APPAIAH, Mumbai

Water conservation

In the Ganga Doab region, groundwater is heavily contaminated with heavy metal residue as a result of industrial waste. There are no checks on irrigation carried out using groundwater (“A gathering crisis”, August 8). The problem becomes acute with subsidised electricity

rates. With increasing urbanisation, open spaces are shrinking, diminishing chances of aquifer replenishment. The pollution control boards concerned must be given more resources and the teeth to curb water pollution.

GAGAN PRATAP SINGH, Noida, Uttar Pradesh

■ The article must be read along with the report, “Metrowater plans rainwater harvesting audit” (Chennai editions, August 2). In the recent spells of rain in Chennai city, some of us who maintain rainwater harvesting structures were able to harvest over 2,000 litres of rainwater. The amount may be insignificant, but my household was able to take care of certain chores in the house with this drop in the ocean. Had most households in Chennai maintained RWH structures, they could have enjoyed the bounty, even if small.

L.A.P. SUBRAMANIAN, Chennai

MORE LETTERS ONLINE: www.hindu.com/opinion/letters/