

# RCEP: A rural disaster

It will deepen the ASEAN FTA impact

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Fast-paced moves are on to conclude the talks on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and seal an agreement. There have been noises of protest from the Congress party which was the chief architect of the India-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and numerous other FTAs in the pipeline. Protests even from within the Sangh Parivar have not deterred the Modi government from pursuing the mega FTA.

The disastrous impact of the Indo-Sri Lanka FTA and ASEAN FTA on Indian farmers especially in the plantation sector—tea and coffee, spices, rubber, coconut and oil seeds—is well known. RCEP would be worse than ASEAN FTA.

Even as the UPA Government was negotiating the India-EU FTA, one of the prime concerns expressed by organisations of farmers, experts and even the largest milk cooperative Amul, was over the threat of import of milk and milk products, especially skimmed milk powder and butter oil from the EU.

Milk, as farmers in Rajasthan point out, is their ATM which provides them money for their daily expenses while incomes—if at all—from crops is seasonal. In India, small and marginal peasants owning less than a hectare account for 48.4 per cent of land owners. While they own merely 25 per cent of land, they own about 50 per cent of the cattle. About 10 crore farmers in India, mostly poor and marginal and a majority of them women, are engaged in dairying.

The RCEP would allow the dairy industry of Australia and New Zealand to compete with our resource-strapped farmers. Both these countries are eyeing the huge market in India. It is notable that New Zealand exports 93.4 per cent of its milk powder, 94.5 per cent of its butter and 83.6 per cent of its cheese production. Removal of tariffs, which at present are 60

per cent for milk powder and 40 per cent for fats, will allow dumping of these products.

The plantation sector, horticulture, sericulture, floriculture, seed industry, pharmaceuticals, small and medium industries, and fisheries are also in trouble due to the ASEAN FTA.

Farmers cultivating groundnut, oil palm, mustard, sunflower, soyabean will be affected adversely. The past experience of groundnut and coconut farmers seeing a fall in demand due to import of cheaper palm oil is all too evident.

The plantation sector in India, especially Kerala, bore the worst impact of FTAs (starting with the Indo-Sri Lanka FTA) signed in December 1998, and which came into force from March 2000. Tea, pepper, nutmeg, coffee, rubber, cardamom and coconut were badly hit. The removal of quantitative restrictions in April 2001 under the WTO regime further exposed these crops to international competition. The then Congress government, despite all this, went ahead with the ASEAN FTA in 2009 with the opposition BJP in tow.

The ASEAN FTA gradually reduced import duties for tea, coffee and pepper while natural rubber, cardamom and few tariff lines on coffee were kept under the exclusion list. Yet, rubber farmers suffered losses due to large-scale imports. Farmers have been repeatedly complaining of inferior Vietnamese pepper coming through Nepal or Sri Lanka leading to a fall in prices.

Fears that tea from China could be routed through any ASEAN country having a duty advantage, are not unfounded. The presence of China, Australia, New Zealand and Japan in RCEP will also affect sericulture, horticulture as well as floriculture in India. The Centre should seek the opinion of States rather than sign the mega FTA unilaterally.

The writer is Joint Secretary, All India Kisan Sabha



# Theatre of the absurd in Kashmir

Escorting a set of European hardliners and stage-managing a local election hardly count as efforts towards nurturing peace



POORNIMA JOSHI

In its reinvented image of disciplined soldiers under the command of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah, the ruling BJP has undoubtedly infused a heightened sense of nationalist purpose to governance and politics in India. Add to this a touch of melodrama and powerful rhetoric and even the routine policy measures acquire majestic overtones, almost always aimed to convey that a historical wrong is being righted.

After the dramatic pronouncement of demonetisation that was meant to halt corruption, erase black money, demolish the parallel economy and stop terror funding, an extraordinary midnight session of Parliament was convened to roll out GST.

A corollary of these ostensibly historic decisions was the passage this August of two statutory resolutions in Parliament to do away with Article 370 and reorganise Jammu and Kashmir into two separate Union Territories. The triumph of the BJP's ideological will overshadowed the stark reality that Article 370 had already been divested of its spirit through as many as 45 Presidential Orders, the most critical being the Order of 1954 extending fundamental rights, jurisdiction of the Supreme Court *et al* that Constitutional purists have often described as conquest by the Indian Union of the Kashmir Valley.

But the ruling party, with the stated purpose of correcting historical wrongs, augmented its de-

cision to eliminate the process of Constitutional assimilation of a troubled State into the Union by divesting its people of what remained of their residual autonomy; they have been isolated further by reorganising J&K into two separate Union Territories.

Aided enthusiastically by plant media houses, the government has since packaged extremely unfortunate decisions to impose a communication blockade in the Kashmir Valley, ordering the arrest and detention of all significant political leaders, including former chief ministers and the ageing MP from Srinagar Farooq Abdullah, and preventing any political leader from the Opposition from even visiting Kashmir as necessary precautionary measures towards restoring "normalcy" in the Valley.

## BDC elections

The successful conclusion of Block Development Council (BDC) elections last week was similarly hailed as a major instance showcasing that democracy has returned to J&K.

A few facts about the BDC elections need to be placed in this context. Of the total 307 blocks in the State, 81 were won by the BJP, one by the Congress, eight by J&K Panthers Party, and 217 by independents. These BDC chairpersons were elected by 26,629 Sarpanches and Panches who had, in turn, been declared winners after a direct election for the Panchayats held last year.

To get to a clearer picture about the facts of the indirect BDC elections, an examination of the BJP's victory in eight blocks in Shopian district is illuminating. The eight BDC heads were elected by Panches and Sarpanches in Shopian who had, in turn, been "elected unopposed" last year. There are a total of nine blocks, 98



State of affairs A complete breakdown of trust

Panchayat Halqas, 791 Panch constituencies and 1,45,442 voters in Shopian.

But none of them voted and the Panches and Sarpanches were simply "elected unopposed". A perusal of the records from the Directorate of Rural Development, Kashmir, reveals most of these "elected unopposed" were from a few select families. Further, one member of a family was seen to be occupying multiple posts of Panches and Sarpanches in each Panchayat.

For instance, in Mastapura Panchayat Halqa of Keller block in Shopian, a man named Javid Ahmad Qadri is occupying three posts of Panch from Mashwar 7, Mashwar 3 and Mastapura 1 constituencies. Similarly, in the Imamshah block, the Sarpanch of the Handew Panchayat Halqa is a woman named Usha Bhat who is the wife of Brij Nath Bhat. Brij Nath Bhat, on his part, occupies two posts of Panch from Handew 1 and Handew 3 Panch constituencies.

In Chootigam Panchayat of Hermain block, the Sarpanch is Vijaya Koul who is the son of Ashok Ku-

mar Koul. Ashok Kumar Koul is himself a Panch from Khanwara 6 constituency in the same Panchayat Halqa whereas a man named Chand Ji Koul has been declared elected Panch from as many as three constituencies in the same Halqa—Abalwani 10, Chootigam 3 and Abalwani 9.

## Showcasing 'normalcy'

The sense of the absurd and the surreal gets further enhanced when the Centre showcases this stage-managed "normalcy" by escorting a group of far-right-wing EU parliamentarians invited by a hitherto unknown think-tank to the Valley. This total departure from India's stated policy of Kashmir being an "internal matter", an argument that was used to disallow even UN bodies to send their representatives to the Valley, has been made at the behest of an obscure organisation, the Women's Economic and Social Think Tank or WESTT, led by a woman named Madi Sharma.

Would the Centre have attempted such a farce anywhere else in India without inviting public

scorn and protest? The intermittent instances of violence, stone pelting and silent protests in Kashmir signify a complete breakdown of trust, a widely accepted psychological causation for severing of any significant relationship.

Nowhere has the link between trust deficit and end of association been so well understood and internalised as in the negotiation of complicated relationships within modern nation-states. Most mature democracies have institutionalised mechanisms to foster faith, especially in relation to troubled regions and fraught relationships. The conferring of special status to Scotland and Wales and Northern Ireland within Great Britain, to Greenland and Faroe Islands *vis-à-vis* mainland Denmark and even the treatment of Hong Kong and Macao by the Chinese are all instances of nations using relative autonomy as a strategy for diffusing and resolving conflict.

India is no stranger to the process of Constitutional assimilation of troubled people and regions into the Union. The gradual and steady advance of the Indian Union into Kashmir through Article 370 was one such strategy as are Articles 371(A), 371(G), 371(B), and 371(C) that validate indigenous political forces in States like Nagaland, Mizoram, Assam, Manipur *et al* within the Union.

Having broken down the Constitutional framework through which such assimilation was being negotiated, the Centre has failed to demonstrate a genuine alternative to dispel the prevailing sense of unease and distrust. Escorting a set of European hardliners and stage-managing a local election hardly count as sincere efforts towards fostering kinship and genuine local political engagement. It is, indeed, an offence towards people who have been living under a communication blockade, constant security and surveillance for the last almost three months.

## 5 THINGS to WATCH OUT for TODAY

**Top American** and Chinese negotiators will meet to find a solution to the 18-month trade impasse between the two economic giants. On Monday, US President Donald Trump said that he expected a "phase one" trade deal with China at the APEC summit in Chile. However, the Chilean government has cancelled the event due to political unrest in the nation.

**Defence Minister** Rajnath Singh will represent India at a two-day meeting of the Council of Heads of Government (CHG) of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in Tashkent. This is the third CHG meeting of the SCO after India became the member of the grouping in 2017.

**Apple will** launch its premium subscription service, Apple TV+, worldwide. Users of iPhone, iPad, Mac or Apple TV can get to buy or get on rent movies personalised and curated through Apple's premium OTT offering. Apple TV+ is priced in India ₹99/month and allows six users to access the content.

**Bank of India, YES Bank and Central Bank of India** will declare their results for the second quarter. Corporates such as JSW Energy, Hawkins Cookers and Dr Reddy's Laboratories are also set to announce their Q2 numbers.

**A medical board** will provide its opinion to the Delhi High Court on the health of former finance minister P Chidambaram, who had applied for interim bail on health grounds on Wednesday. He was taken to AIIMS on Monday, after he complained of stomach ache and other issues, but was discharged after treatment.

## A THOUSAND WORDS



Memories of war A woman walks past WW II-era artillery guns at the colonnade of the Museum of the Great Patriotic War, Moscow AFP

## BusinessLine TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY

NOVEMBER 1, 1999

### Plan to lure NRI funds for PSUs

The Ministry of Heavy Industry and Public Enterprises has decided to draw up plans to attract equity investments by non-resident Indians (NRIs) in public sector enterprises. The Minister of State for Heavy Industry, Dr. Vallabh Bhai Kathiria, said, "We want to attract NRIs to invest in the public sector as individuals. We would like to create the necessary policy framework wherein they can participate directly in the equity of PSEs as individuals and not necessarily through corporate bodies."

### India seeks early despatch of Bofors papers

India has written to the Swiss Government urging for early despatch of the last set of documents in the Bofors case. In a communication sent recently through diplomatic channels, the Government is believed to have assured the Swiss authorities that the documents being sought would not be used for political purposes and will be used only to prosecute those suspected to be involved in bribery and corruption in the gun deal.

### ISRO blocks US co's satcom patent claim

Indian scientists have blocked the claims made by a US satcom company, Leo One, for obtaining a patent in the area of satellite communication systems. The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) filed a well-documented opposition in January this year to the US company's October 1994 patent claim for a communication system using equatorial and polar orbit relays, which was accepted by the Indian Patent Office for opposition. Following the ISRO opposition, the US company did not furnish any rebuttal within the specified time of six months from the date of notification as per the Indian Patents Act.

## EASY

### ACROSS

01. Rounded stone (6)
04. Get by, being parsimonious (6)
09. Periods of instruction (7)
10. Animal related to giraffe (5)
11. Acknowledge; justify act done (law) (4)
12. Flaccid (4)
13. Before (3)
15. Chant, vocalise (4)
16. Hang as in a balance (4)
19. Stop one speaking (3)
21. In a skilled way (4)
22. Gets older (4)
24. Unaccompanied (5)
25. Moulding round ceiling (7)
26. Lay bare (6)
27. Cuts design with acid (6)

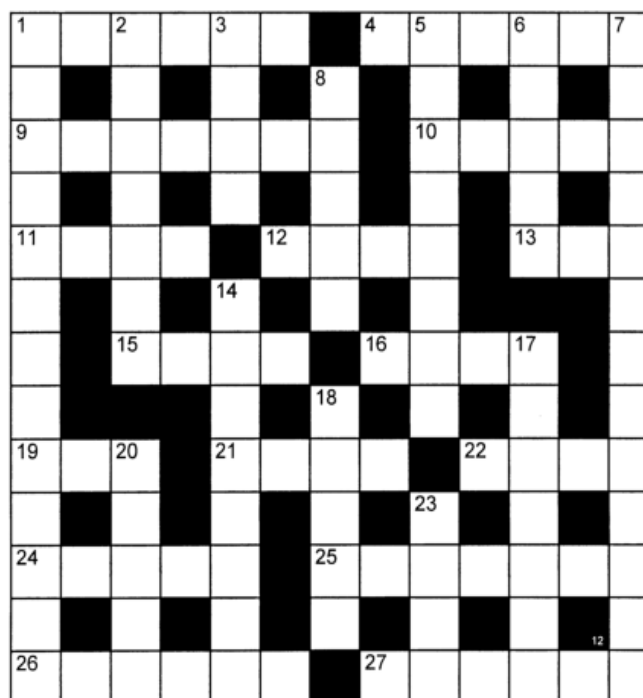
### DOWN

01. Look glum (4,1,4,4)
02. Churchmen, chess pieces (7)
03. Regard (4)
05. Casino employee (8)
06. Senseless, vacuous (5)
07. State of being beyond value (13)
08. Beginning to move after sleep (5)
14. They overrun foreign territory (8)
17. Small species of shark (7)
18. Not taut (5)
20. Small band of instrumentalists (5)
23. Horse's gait (4)

### SOLUTION: BL Two-way Crossword 1476

**ACROSS** 1. Directed 7. Prude 8. Scarlet 9. Errands 10. Gasp 12. Trimmed 14. Evening 17. Game 18. Plunder 21. Dwindle 22. Naive 23. Inferred  
**DOWN** 1. Design 2. Reassure 3. Call 4. Extent 5. Burn 6. Teased 7. Parting 11. Spindle 13. Marauder 14. Expend 15. Garden 16. Depend 19. Unit 20. Mine

## BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 1477



## NOT SO EASY

### ACROSS

01. Small, roundish stone lens (6)
04. Keep one short of credit when among imps cavorting (6)
09. The French boy-children go to school for them (7)
10. Mistook a pig for another animal being held (5)
11. A promise one will acknowledge (4)
12. Drag a leg like one politician following Labour leader (4)
13. Before it enters register, erase it (3)
15. To be an informer, render it in music (4)
16. Softly played finale will be about to happen (4)
19. Funny line may render one speechless (3)
21. Rating to lay, after a loss, in a skilled manner (4)
22. Times leaders are generally edited scrupulously (4)
24. Being solitary, there's no comeback in drink (5)
25. It wasn't hard for Richard once to mould it round ceiling (7)

### DOWN

26. Let the film see the light of sex Poe wrote about (6)
27. Cuts the plate one brings with one, topless (6)
01. Haul along to cafe' somehow and appear dismal (4,1,4,4)
02. They wear aprons as they move along the diagonals (7)
03. Have the appearance of regard (4)
05. Man at the wheel might affect our price (8)
06. Throwing a nine could prove senseless (5)
07. Press licenses it out as being beyond value (13)
08. Just about up to the atmosphere around the street (5)
14. They may be on a raid, as driven wild (8)
17. Shark will faithfully follow one of Pisces (7)
18. Fire about fifty for being inattentive (5)
20. Some players grow up without women (5)
23. Shakespearean crone was one to favour world revolution (4)