



Polarised state of union

There is more at stake in American politics for people world over than ever before

The politics of the United States has rarely, if ever, been as contentious, and riven by partisan hostility, as it is at the present juncture. U.S. President Donald Trump’s State of the Union address exemplified the multiple fractures in the consciousness of the American collective psyche in this regard. His speech before both Houses of the U.S. Congress, minus some Democrat lawmakers who boycotted it, went on for more than an hour, yet there was no mention of arguably the most intensely polarising issue on Capitol Hill: impeachment. On the day before his likely acquittal by the Republican-majority Senate, the President showed restraint – possibly holding out for a victory lap after being cleared by the Upper House. This contrasted with his periodic Twitter outbursts attacking the impeachment process. However, there could be little doubt about how frosty cross-party relations are – he appeared to snub House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s attempt to shake his hand before the speech, and Ms. Pelosi ripped up a copy of the speech after it had ended, saying later that it was a “manifesto of mistruths”. Nevertheless, substantively, Mr. Trump’s annual address focused on claiming credit for a “great American comeback” on the back of a healthy economy – including historically low levels of unemployment, rising median income and unprecedented cuts in “job-killing” regulations – even though the economic recovery after the 2008 downturn began under his predecessor, Barack Obama.

However, that all is not well with the state of the American union is evident from the tenor of the ongoing Democratic nomination race. Democrats of several hues, from the more centrist, including former Vice-President Joe Biden, to the more leftist, such as Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders and Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren, have focused their political attacks on Mr. Trump and less so on internal differences within their camp. Presently, the Iowa caucus, the first of a season of caucuses and primaries that will decide the ultimate nominee to take on Mr. Trump in the November 2020 election, has given Democrats renewed purpose. Yet the microcosm of the Democratic campaign process mirrors their biggest handicap on the national stage – too many aspirants jockeying for power and visibility, leading inevitably to fragmentation of their overall prospects against Mr. Trump’s incumbency advantage. Unless they quickly rally behind one tall leader – if such a person exists in their midst – they stand a slim chance of mounting a serious challenge to the 45th President. Yet, given the vastly divergent views across party lines on core issues such as the economy and climate change, there could not be more at stake for Democrats, and indeed those who, despite residing beyond America’s shores, are weary of trade wars and the relentless undermining of multilateralism.

Purifying water

The effort must be to ensure

BIS-standard water at the consumer’s end

The Environment Ministry’s draft notification to regulate the use of membrane-based water purification systems primarily concerns the manufacturers of reverse osmosis (RO) water filters but effectively bars domestic users from installing RO systems. The notification is the culmination of a legal dispute before the National Green Tribunal, which had banned RO water filter use in Delhi as the purification process wastes water. The association of water filter manufacturers challenged this order and the litigation led to this pan-India notification, where the intent is to conserve water and cut waste. In RO, the total dissolved solids (TDS) in water – which covers trace chemicals, certain viruses, bacteria and salts – can be reduced, to meet potable water standards. Home filters waste nearly 80% of the water during treatment. Second, some research has shown that the process can cut the levels of calcium and magnesium, which are vital nutrients. The resort to prohibition (to restrict home filters) may cause consumer apprehension but it is unlikely that they will be taken to task for using such water filters. For one, the notification implies, these filters are only prohibited if the home gets water supply that conforms to Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) for Drinking Water. Although several State and city water boards claim BIS standards, the water at homes falls short of the test parameters.

The BIS, last year, ranked several cities on official water supply quality. Delhi was last and only Mumbai met all the standards. In the 28 test parameters, Delhi failed 19, Chennai 9, and Kolkata 10. The BIS norms are voluntary for public agencies which supply piped water but are mandatory for bottled water producers. Moreover, most of the country does not have the luxury of piped water. The Composite Water Management Index (CWMI) of NITI Aayog says that 70% of water supply is contaminated. India is ranked 120th among 122 countries in an NGO, WaterAid’s quality index. The case for restricting people’s choices on the means they employ to ensure potable water is thus weak. The notification mainly deals with rules for commercial suppliers and for integration of systems that inform consumers about TDS levels – a major determinant of water quality. This is envisaged both before water enters filtration systems and after it has been filtered. The aim is also to ensure that after 2022, no more than 25% of water being treated is wasted, and for residential complexes to reuse the residual waste water for other activities, including gardening. When implemented, the notification’s primary aim should be to persuade authorities to upgrade and supply BIS-standard water at the consumer’s end. This should be done without additional costs, particularly on millions who now lack access to protected supply.

Fashioning the framework of a New India

A major solution to the present economic crisis is to go in for inclusive growth; it also means shared prosperity



INDIRA HIRWAY

The Indian economy is going through a severe crisis: a slowdown as well as a structural crisis. In the words of the former Chief Economic Adviser, Arvind Subramanian, it is headed towards the ICU. Almost all sectors of the economy are in decline: the rate of growth of the national GDP has declined to 5.0%, and may go down further; the construction sector, one of the fastest growing sectors so far, is growing at 3.3% this year; agriculture is growing at 2.1% while the auto sector is declining continuously in absolute terms.

The Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) sector too has declined, in turn raising the burden of non-performing assets of the banking sector as well as non-banking financial institutions. Also, exports have been declining in recent years, raising the crisis of current account deficit. Credit from banking and non-banking sectors has been declining in the last few years; the Financial Stability Report of the Reserve Bank of India (2019) says that it is unlikely to increase in the next nine months.

Impacting the poor

These developments have had an adverse impact on the bottom 30%-40% of the population. The incidence of absolute poverty, which has been falling since 1972-73, has increased to 30% (4% jump). As the Human Development Report (2019) has shown, more than 44% of the Indian population is under the multi-dimensional poverty line. The poorest 50% population at present owns

only 4.1% of the national wealth, while the richest 10% people own 73% of the total wealth in India (Suisse Credit 2019). India has 15.2% population malnourished (women 15%) as against 9.3% in China. And 50% of the malnourished children in the world are in India. India’s global hunger rank has gone up to 112 while Brazil is 18, China is 25 and South Africa, 59. In the field of education as per a UN report (2015), overall literacy in India is 74.04% (more than the 25% are totally illiterate) against 94.3% in South Africa, 96.6% in China and 92.6% in Brazil. Almost 40-45% population is either illiterate or has studied up to standard 4. Given the quality of education in India, the overall population is very poorly educated, with the share of ‘educated unemployment’ rising by leaps and bounds.

It needs to be realised that when exports are declining, the economy will have to depend on domestic demand for growth. It is no more feasible for the top 20-25% population to continue growing without depending on the demand from the bottom 40-45% population. There is thus a strong reason now for the economy to increase effective demand of this bottom 40-45% population at least to continue growing – to reach a \$5-trillion economy by 2024.

Sub-optimal use of labour

However, this crisis needs to be viewed differently: a major reason for the crisis is that the growth process has marginalised the bottom 40-plus% of the population in the sense that they do not get a fair share of the economic growth, and are more or less deprived of productive employment with a decent income. These people have been treated as beneficiaries to whom some cash/kind grants are thrown at, but they have not been used as active participants in the growth process. Their potential has not been promoted.



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Though the bottom population depends on the government for basic health and elementary education (and also for access to higher educational opportunities), the government spends just 1.4% of GDP on health (against the norm of 4-6% of GDP) and 3% of GDP on education (against the norm of 6-8% of GDP). As a result, these people are left hardly literate and sick, with poor nutrition and high morbidity. They are incapable of acquiring any meaningful skills or participating actively when new technology is spreading in the rest of the economy. This sub-optimal use of the labour force in the economy is not likely to enable India to achieve optimal growth with proper use of the national resources – the labour force.

All-encompassing growth

One important lesson for policymakers is this: a major solution to the present crisis is to go in for inclusive growth. Here, inclusive growth does not mean only including all sections of the population in the growth process as producers and beneficiaries; it also means “shared prosperity”. Since India has already committed to sustainable and inclusive growth at the UN General Assembly, India is definitely obliged to implement inclusive growth. This should be our “New India”.

Under the “New India” the main requirements are as follows: To start with, to improve the capabilities of the masses as well as their well-being by expanding productive employment opportuni-

ties for them. The main steps to expand productive employment for all in the economy should be made up of: a process of inclusion – expanding quality of basic health for all and ensuring quality education to all, which will by itself generate large-scale employment in the government; having a well-educated and healthy labour force will ensure high employability; such people will be able to participate actively in the development process; having a well-educated labour force will help start-ups and MSMEs, in turn triggering a cycle of more productive employment in the economy.

This will also improve the global competitiveness of our production units. Employment guarantee schemes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) will also increase employment. Following the economic logic of R. Nurkse and A.O. Hirschman, assets generated under MGNREGA will expand capital formation in the economy, thereby raising the labour-absorbing capacity of the mainstream economy.

Such a strategy has multiple advantages: First, it will raise incomes and the well-being of those who need it most urgently. Second, it will raise effective demand rapidly, which is so badly needed in the economy today to raise economic growth. Third, growth will be equitable and sustainable.

The discussion had important implications for the Union Budget: need to raise expenditure on health to at least 5% of GDP and expenditure on education to at least 6% of GDP; to push up infrastructural development to enhance capabilities and opportunities of the masses and not just to promote corporate units; to promote agriculture by raising investment in agriculture and not just cash transfer (cash transfer provides relief to them no doubt, and does not raise productivity of agricul-

ture which needs large public investment); and to facilitate credit flow particularly continuous working capital, to labour intensive sectors. Unfortunately, these steps are missing in the recent national Budget.

Public investments

Finally, how does one raise resources to increase new public investments in the selected sectors mentioned above, especially when public revenue is declining and the claims on public resources are rising? One major strategy is to raise direct taxes, both capital tax and wealth tax. Our experience in the past has shown by following crony capitalism, i.e. providing tax cuts and extra incentives and concessions to the corporate sector, exports increased and also our national GDP no doubt. But this growth does not much percolate to the poor. This is because during the growth process due to special treatment to corporate sector, the political economy radically changed in favour of the rich who are never willing to be taxed to raise government revenue to a level that it is enough to promote the capabilities and the well-being of the marginalised and the excluded.

On the other hand, the unholy alliance between the government and the corporate sector also does not allow them to worry about the poor. Consequently, taxing the rich has to be a major strategy to raise government revenue. Second, if the public expenditure on raising capabilities is treated as social investment rather than social welfare, policymakers will be willing to spend on this capital formation. And, finally, there was no sound economic reason to control fiscal deficit ratio. Sound macroeconomics never supports this.

Indira Hirway is Director and Prof of Economics, Centre For Development Alternatives, Ahmedabad

Course correction for the Speaker’s office

Given how India’s electoral system and political conventions shadow the office, a major revamp is necessary



ANMOLAM & FARHEEN AHMAD

Recently, the Supreme Court of India while adjudicating upon the matter relating to the disqualification of MLAs in the Manipur Legislative Assembly under the Tenth Schedule in *Keisham Meghachandra Singh vs. the Hon’ble Speaker Manipur Legislative Assembly & Ors.* made a significant suggestion. It recommended that Parliament should rethink as to whether disqualification petitions ought to be entrusted to a Speaker as a quasi-judicial authority when such a Speaker continues to belong to a particular political party either *de jure* or *de facto*.

It was of the opinion that Parliament may seriously consider a Constitutional amendment to substitute the Speaker of the Lok Sabha and Legislative Assemblies with a ‘permanent’ Tribunal headed by a retired Supreme Court judge or a retired Chief Justice of a High Court, or some other outside independent mechanism. This is to ensure that such disputes are decided both swiftly and impartially, thus giving teeth to the provisions contained in the Tenth Schedule, which are so vital in the proper functioning of India’s democracy’, according to a media report. More

than such advice, what is interesting is the underlying reasoning which revolves around the nature of functions exercised by the Speaker.

Range of functions; a symbol

The nature of duties of the Speaker, technically as an “arbiter” or a “quasi-judicial body” should not be limited exclusively to matters under the Tenth Schedule; rather, it extends to a range of its functions. While facilitating the business of the House and to maintain decorum in the House, the Speaker has ‘extensive functions to perform in matters regulatory, administrative and judicial, falling under her domain. She enjoys vast authority under the Constitution and the Rules, as well as inherently’.

She is the ‘ultimate interpreter and arbiter of those provisions which relate to the functioning of the House. Her decisions are final and binding and ordinarily cannot be easily challenged. She decides the duration of debates, can discipline members and even override decisions by committees. She represents the collective voice of the House and is the sole representative of the House in the international arena’.

Jawaharlal Nehru, one of the chief architects of India’s freedom and a moving force behind its Constitution, describes the position as: “The Speaker represents the House. She represents the dignity of the House, the freedom of the



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House and because the House represents the nation, in a particular way, the Speaker becomes a symbol of the nation’s freedom and liberty. Therefore, that should be an honoured position, a free position and should be occupied always by persons of outstanding ability and impartiality.”

However, on several occasions, the Speaker’s role has been questioned on the allegation of bias. The office has been criticised for being an agent of pernicious partisan politics. Notably, the Supreme Court has observed in *Jagjit Singh versus State of Haryana* as “...Without meaning any disrespect for any particular Speaker in the country, but only going by some events of the recent past, certain questions have been raised about the confidence in the matter of impartiality on some issues having political overtones which are decided by the Speaker in his capacity as a Tribunal.” The reasons behind the counterproductive machinations of the Speaker are not too far to seek. As a minority view, Justice J.S. Verma in *Kihoto Hollohan vs Zachillhu And Others* observed: “The Speaker being an authority within the House and his tenure being dependent on the

will of the majority therein, likelihood of suspicion of bias could not be ruled out.” Currently, the extent of the Speaker’s political commitment often depends on the personality and character of the person holding the office. However desirable the proposition of neutrality may be, in the present circumstances, it would be unrealistic to expect a Speaker to completely abjure all party considerations while functioning as there are structural issues regarding the manner of appointment of the Speaker and her tenure in office.

Since the electoral system and conventions in India have ‘not developed to ensure protection to the office, there are cogent reasons for Speakers to retain party membership. A member is appointed to the office of the Speaker if a motion nominating her is carried in the House. Elections are not always by consensus and there have been cases when different parties have fielded their own candidates. All political parties campaign in the constituency of the Speaker. Even if the Speaker is re-elected to the House, the office of the Speaker in India is still open for elections’, according to a paper published by The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy. Therefore, what is required is not merely incidental changes in the powers of the Speaker; rather a major revamp in the structure of the office itself is necessary. It is suggested that a scheme should be brought wherein Speakers should

renounce all political affiliations, membership and activity once they have been elected, both within the Assembly and in the country as a whole.

Upholding neutrality

Reference can be sought from the United Kingdom where the ‘main characteristic of the Speaker of the House of Commons is neutrality. In practice, once elected, the Speaker gives up all-partisan affiliation, as in other Parliaments of British tradition, but remains in office until retirement, even though the majority may change. She does not express any political views during debates and is an election candidate without any ticket’, says an IPU report. Impartiality, fairness and autonomy in decision-making are the hallmarks of a robust institution. It is the freedom from interference and pressures which provide the necessary atmosphere where one can work with absolute commitment to the cause of neutrality as a constitutional value.

At a time when India’s fall in ranks in the latest Democracy Index has evoked concern, it is expected that Parliament will pay heed to the reasoning of the Supreme Court and take steps to strengthen the institution of the Speaker.

Anmolam is a lawyer running a non-profit organisation, BDLA.AAW. Farheen Ahmad is a research scholar at the South Asian University, New Delhi

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.

Bidar case

First, with reference to the action taken by the police against the school in Bidar, Karnataka, there was no reason for the police to dramatise the issue as there was no violence either within or outside the campus (Editorial, “Punish the police” and “More Bidar school students questioned”, both February 5). Second, this being India, a school crawling with police personnel might affect its credibility and reputation in the public eye. Third, it is a mystery how the right-wing activist came to know about the school programme, unless he himself is a parent. If so, why could he have not protested in the first

instance with the school authorities? Equally, it is injudicious on the part of the school authorities to have thought of involving young children to enact something as serious a national issue as the Citizenship (Amendment) Act. Police personnel in India need exposure and training about the freedom of speech and personal liberty.

E.S. CHANDRASEKARAN, Chennai

■ Every time when we conclude that we have seen the nadir of intolerance by an authoritarian regime, we are proved wrong. The police “excesses” in Bidar are an example of the absolute mockery and abuse of the

law. The name of the school might have caused the authorities to have a closer look at its activities. The infringement on the right of expression and speech has breached new lows in Karnataka, but with a certain party in power, it does not spring a surprise.

G.B. SIVANANDAM, Coimbatore

■ The framing of sedition charges against a parent and teacher is disproportionate application of a law that was meant to remove threats against public order. The action of the police fails on two counts: reasonableness of restriction and proportionate action. The schoolchildren concerned might fear to express their thoughts and opinions freely

in the future as a result of the trauma they are sure to have undergone. Their ability to think critically could be limited due to this. The case is also symptomatic of a larger issue. There seems to be a gradual erosion of secular and democratic values from institutions that should be democratic and secular.

NIRMAL A.P., Thalivilil, Kannur, Kerala

■ The play only reflected contemporary reality – ongoing protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act across the country. It is a laughable contention that it posed a threat to the security of the state; it is irrelevant to use a colonial-era law against primary schoolchildren enacting a play on current

affairs. The police have disrupted the lives of the children, their parents and teachers.

S.S.PAUL, Chakdaha, Nadia, West Bengal

No public exams

Thank heavens for extinguishing hell-fire (Page 1, “Govt. withdraws plan to hold public exams for Classes 5, 8”, February 5). Nature has given children the gift of inquisitiveness. Playing through learning or learning through playing should be the norm in every school curriculum on various subjects. Unfortunately, the cut-throat competitive spirit now prevalent appears to be affecting children too.

VICTOR FRANK A., Chennai

Big Three

It comes as news to me that Novak Djokovic’s story is one of rags to riches (‘Sport’ page, “‘Greatest’ tag there for the taking” and “Novak has put Serbia on the map”, both February 4). I feel that as of now, there is no big three. Only the big two, Novak and Rafael Nadal. Federer, my favourite, appears to be losing steam if one judges his serves and strokes. He is still good enough to reach the quarters, but thereafter, it becomes the familiar thus far and no further. But all three are great because of their persona off court. All are polite, non-controversial, and philanthropic.

A.R. RAMANARAYANAN, Chennai

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A time for solidarity, not stigma

The response of health workers to the nCoV outbreak is being undermined by rumour-mongering



JAMES CHAU

The World Health Organization (WHO) has declared the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) a public health emergency of international concern – the sixth time since this alert mechanism was introduced after the SARS epidemic. That said, we need to be measured in our response. It is not a vote of no confidence in China’s capacity to control the spread, but an acknowledgement that countries with weaker health systems may be ill-prepared for this outbreak, says WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

The international repercussions are expanding fast. India is joining the U.S. in evacuating its nationals from Wuhan, the epicentre of the outbreak. Air India, British Airways, and Lufthansa have suspended flights to and from mainland China. As of February 4, according to the WHO, nine countries have recorded 27 cases of human-to-human transmissions.

Rumours, fear and racism

The impact is being felt deepest in China itself. Anecdotal evidence is emerging of Wuhan families being “rejected and even hunted”. In rural areas surrounding Hubei province where Wuhan is located, vigilantes, some of them armed, are stopping ‘outsiders’ from entering their villages. In some cases, they are going door to door looking for suspected cases, and daubing homes with language that will encourage stigma.

Infections have spread through China to every province, municipality, and autonomous region. The number of confirmed cases on the mainland exceeds the global total in the 2003 SARS epidemic. For different reasons, SARS, a different coronavirus of zoonotic origin that was also traced to China, is a public benchmark by which the scale and severity of the Wuhan outbreak is being measured in the media. But convenient side-by-side comparisons are not always accurate, nor are they safe.

I experienced this as a journalist,



"It is more important now than ever to remain calm." A medical staff member shows samples from a patient suspected of having 2019-nCoV, in Wuhan. ■ AFP

when during SARS I saw first-hand how rumour and misinformation replaced evidence and honesty. It triggered panic and dismantled the response effort led by health workers and health authorities. This is what I fear again for the Wuhan outbreak – compounded in a digital age, where the tools we have to communicate are greater and more immediate.

Videos on social media show chaotic and distressing scenes at hospitals, patients apparently collapsed on floors, and agitated people shouting for treatment. Some of these people may be ill, but others may be drawn in by public anxiety, overwhelming exhausted health workers and putting themselves and the people around them at risk.

We can’t assume that these videos are related to the Wuhan outbreak. Many of them are posted without a date, location or source. One journalist admitted on Twitter that the footage she shared was “unverified”, a disclaimer which doesn’t prevent it from being re-uploaded as fact. Other videos showing alleged consumption of exotic wildlife have also been widely posted, suggesting a link to some reports that the novel coronavirus may have originated at an unregulated food market in Wuhan. A viral video of a woman appearing to eat bat soup in China was debunked by an article published in *Foreign Policy* (the woman was identified as the host of an adventurer-style travel show and the video was filmed in a different country). Words like “dirty”, “diseased”, and “virus infected” are being used to describe Chinese

people. I am deeply concerned, not only because I am of ethnic Chinese descent myself, but because it evokes the painful stigma and discrimination that continues to attack people living with HIV. It is shaming and humiliating, barring them from accessing treatment, and in the case of the AIDS epidemic, contributing to significant loss of lives. This is not confined to one group – we are all interchangeable as the targets of bullies.

But there is an opportunity to turn this around. Twitter now provides a pop-up message in regions like Hong Kong and countries including Australia, which when you search for ‘coronavirus’ invites you to “know the facts” and opt for verified information provided by local sources and the WHO. The commitment to engage in accurate and meaningful information surely must be driven by everyone. As consumers of content, we can shape our knowledge by investing in health stories that go beyond the miracle cure or the current outbreak. Will Wuhan become ‘yesterday’s news’, like Ebola and the Australian bushfires before it?

The reality is that Wuhan is about the hundreds who have died, the thousands who have been infected, and the millions who continue to be impacted. It is also about the families who live in lockdown, who fear the unknown, and the health workers who risk their lives by moving to the frontlines of this outbreak. But there is reason for hope: this week, China admitted patients to two new emergency hospitals built and equipped in around 10 days. Together, they can

accommodate at least 2,600 beds. Many more beds are to be made available in the sports halls and conference centres currently being converted for temporary medical use. This means Wuhan can better handle the current outbreak, and be properly prepared should it worsen.

Funding public health systems

I will finish with a memory from last September. As heads of state and government gathered at the UN General Assembly in New York, I moderated a small gathering of eminent leaders including Dr. Tedros. Together, they spoke in support of the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board, an independent body that tracks progress in anticipating the next health emergency, and identifies gaps in reaching that critical point.

They warned us that the world is extremely vulnerable to disease epidemics and pandemics that will not only cause loss of human life, but will destruct our economies and create social chaos. It is not a question of “if” but “when”. What unites their recommendations is a serious commitment to ensure that public health systems are adequately funded. This would ensure that we don’t react to each new outbreak as it happens, but strengthen and support systems even in the absence of epidemics or pandemics.

The Board will no doubt agree that the outbreak in Wuhan is a timely reminder that many of its recommendations must be urgently taken up at the highest levels: commitment and investment by heads of government, strengthening of coordination mechanisms by the UN, increase in funding for preparedness by development partners, and linking preparedness with economic risk planning by major financial institutions. Wuhan is also a reminder that we need vaccines and that vaccines work.

It is more important now than ever to remain calm, and allow our health workers and authorities to do exactly what they are trained to do at this time. As Dr. Tedros said: “This is a time for facts, not fear. This is the time for science, not rumours. This is the time for solidarity, not stigma.”

James Chau is the host of *The China Current* with James Chau, and a Goodwill Ambassador for the WHO and UNAIDS. Views are personal

A litmus test for AAP

Defeat in the Delhi Assembly election could prove to be a big challenge to the party’s survival



SHAIKH MUJIBUR REHMAN

The Delhi Assembly election will determine not only which party will govern Delhi, but also the Aam Aadmi Party’s future. Will the AAP survive as a Delhi-based party or renew its ambition to emerge as a national party?

A party like any other?

Born in 2012 out of a high profile anti-corruption movement, the AAP captured the political imagination of people of all ideological shades. But between 2013 and 2020, the party has deviated from many of its founding principles. Some would argue that it is becoming like any other political party. This is apparent, for instance, in the AAP’s list of 70 candidates for this Assembly election, which includes turncoats and tainted candidates.

The end of dynasty politics was a lofty ideal that the AAP said it stood for. It is worth recalling that after making an impressive debut in 2013 in Delhi, it was the AAP’s Manish Sisodia who said at the victory rally in Jantar Mantar that party member Kumar Vishwas could contest the Lok Sabha election against Congress leader Rahul Gandhi. Though Mr. Vishwas launched the anti-Gandhi campaign in Amethi in 2014, it was the BJP’s Smriti Irani who defeated Mr. Gandhi in the 2019 general election. By 2019, neither Mr. Vishwas nor the AAP was seen anywhere in Amethi.

In post-Mandal India, Arvind Kejriwal emerged as the poster boy of political protests. But now, when students, women and other citizens are taking to the streets of Delhi in protest against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, the proposed National Register of Citizens and the attacks on universities, Mr. Kejriwal is nowhere to be seen in protest sites. His muted solidarity is shown only in a few tweets and statements.

With many of the AAP’s founding members such as Yogendra Yadav and Prashant Bhushan no longer a part of the party, internal democracy, another ideal, seems to have changed. For all practical purposes, the party is now controlled by Mr. Kejriwal and Mr. Sisodia, similar to how the BJP is controlled by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah. This development is worrying as the absence of internal democracy paves the way not only for a coterie who could tighten their control over the party, its agenda and resources, but also for dynasty politics.

Despite these shortcomings, however, the

AAP can claim to have done some good in Delhi, especially by improving school education and providing inexpensive electricity. While it may not be able to repeat its 2015 election performance, trends suggest that AAP is not affected by anti-incumbency. This makes it a potential contender for power. But this is easier said than done in a three-cornered contest, especially since the BJP won all the seven parliamentary seats in the 2019 general election.

Also, by announcing its list of candidates ahead of other parties, the AAP showed greater preparedness compared to the other parties. Both the Congress, which continues to be a house in disarray, and the BJP do not have leaders at the State level who can match Mr. Kejriwal’s stature.

Challenges ahead

But the AAP cannot take anything for granted. The BJP is using its ultimate weapon, Mr. Modi, to secure votes and playing its politics of polarisation ruthlessly. Delhi has been the bastion of the Hindu Right since the early days of the Republic. It was the Bharatiya Jana Sangh that kept alive the flames of the Hindu Right. L.K. Advani made his career in Delhi and reshaped the BJP in the late 1980s nationally. Therefore, issues such as the CAA could resonate with many of its traditional voters who may have voted for AAP in 2015.

The AAP may also be losing some voters from the Muslim community. The Congress faces an enormous challenge in revival after the demise of former Chief Minister Sheila Dixit, but looking at an analysis of vote distribution in the 2019 election, there are signs of Muslims voters returning to its fold. The Shaheen Bagh protests presented a golden opportunity for Mr. Kejriwal to cement the AAP’s connection with Muslim voters, many of whom have looked up to him ever since he took on Mr. Modi in Varanasi in 2014. But by refusing to seize this opportunity, the AAP has in some ways closed its doors to the possibility of national expansion. Its ambivalence towards secular causes is similar to the Congress’s ambivalence, and may create more space for the BJP to expand.

In 2014-2015, the AAP appeared to be emerging as a national party, but internal power struggles and the exit of prominent leaders downgraded it to a Delhi-based party. Even if it returns to power now, the AAP is unlikely to re-ignite its national dream. But if it fails to win this Assembly election, and if it loses to the BJP, the AAP might face severe challenges in survival.

Shaikh Mujibur Rehman teaches at Jamia Millia Islamia and is the editor of *Rise of Saffron Power: Reflections on Indian Politics*

The public school possibility

In Delhi, AAP has managed to combine excellence with equity in government schools

PULAPRE BALAKRISHNAN

In a passage in the biography of C. Rajagopalachari by Rajmohan Gandhi, as the end of colonial rule approaches, the civil servant B.K. Nehru proposes to the veteran freedom fighter that the government of independent India set up quality schools for talented children. And the latter replies: “You want young man a new Brahmanism. This country will not take it. It wants equality, not excellence.” What was being expressed was very likely a view held by the emerging governing class, that nurturing talent is a form of elitism. In fact, the reverse could turn out to be true for, as depicted in the life of Ekalavya, nature does not favour the rich and the powerful when it comes to distributing talent. Innocent of this, a public policy obsessed with avoiding differentiation has avoided excellence in schooling. This has hurt the historically disadvantaged of this country.

Not an elitist aspiration

There is nothing that points to the inevitability of inequality when aiming at excellence in our schools. In fact, quite to the contrary, excellent public schools, which are accessible to all, can ensure that historic inequalities are levelled-off to a large extent.

Schooling is the formative stage in the life of an individual with respect to development of capabilities, gaining awareness of rights and responsibilities and moulding attitudes that matter in civic engagement. If India desires to be a successful democracy it is necessary to invest in a schooling that takes every child to the highest level in these three areas. School children must be imbued with the spirit of wanting to excel in everything they will do in the future, from their careers to their performance as citizens.

The idea that pursuing excellence in education reflects an elitist aspiration is not a view shared by the poor. Poor parents work exceptionally hard to send their children to fee-paying private schools so that they stand a better chance in life. Surveys by the educational foundation Pratham show learning outcomes in these schools to be barely ahead of those in

government ones. Yet, the poor must work that much harder and tighten their belts that much more to afford them, for they consider even this slight advantage as helpful to their children.

Encouraging signs

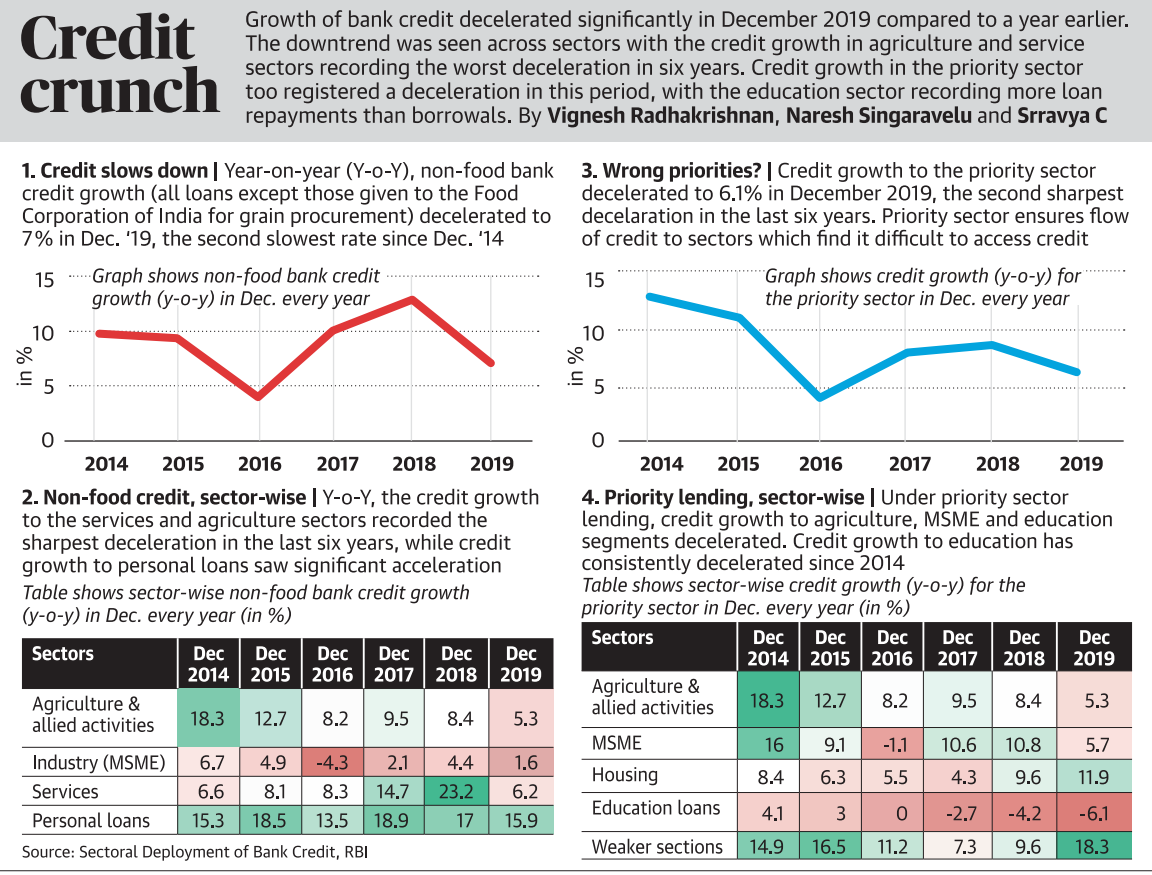
In one part of this country, however, the wait for an improved public school system may be beginning to come to an end. Along with an emphasis on primary health care the government of Delhi has, by all accounts, initiated the transformation of its schools. Only a detailed study can establish how far it has progressed and how deep are its roots but the signs yet seen are encouraging. First, the physical infrastructure has improved. The chosen schools have classrooms with good furniture and are smart, not only in terms of their appearance, but also in terms of IT-enabled teaching aids. There are clean playgrounds and functioning toilets, the absence of which has long meant a declining school attendance by girls across the country. Selected teachers have been given training overseas. Interviews reveal that they feel supported in their tasks by the government, which is perhaps more important for efficacy than funds. Most important, some of the government schools have recorded better Board exam results than private ones, triggering a once unimaginable reverse migration! However, innovation has gone beyond what it takes to achieve superior exam performance, important as it is. There is also an effort to spur cognitive development, essential for a child to make sense of the world. This marks a shift from the emphasis on memorising content, for long the bane of schooling in India.

It is too early to make resounding claims about the success of the schools programme of the Aam Aadmi Party. But it has demonstrated that it is possible to combine excellence with equity in India’s schools, the site where achieving excellence will yield the highest pay-off for its society.

Pulapre Balakrishnan is Professor, Ashoka University, Sonapat and Senior Fellow, IIM Kozhikode



DATA POINT



The **Hindu.**
FROM THE ARCHIVES
FIFTY YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 6, 1970
U.S. plane drops bomb by error

A U.S. Air Force B 52 Stratofortress accidentally dropped 60,000 pounds of bombs on Monday [February 2] near a village in north-east Thailand, the U.S. Embassy said to-day [February 5]. Two Thai women were injured one seriously. Three buildings were “slightly damaged.” The giant four-engined bomber had taken off from its base at Utapao on a mission over Viet Nam. The mishap occurred 265 kilometres north-east of Bangkok. A U.S. Embassy spokesman said the cause of the mishap was not known. But it was believed to have been the result of a mechanical or electrical fault. The spokesman said “it was not due to any error on the part of the crew of the aircraft.” The plane dropped 108 bombs, comprising eighty-four 500-pound bombs and 24750 pounders. The bombs landed in a sparsely inhabited area midway between two small villages.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO FEB. 6, 1920.
Sir P. S. Sivaswami Aiyer Insulted.

Rangoon, February 5. - The Rangoon Mail to-day published details of the insult offered to Sir Sivaswamy Aiyer before he left for the Straits last Friday by Captain Childers, Burma Military Police. On the morning of January twenty fifth, Sir Sivaswamy was travelling from Pagaon to Mandalay in a first class compartment in the train in one berth, the other berth being vacant. As it was still dark Sir Sivaswami was sleeping at the time Captain Childers walked into the compartment, woke him up and peremptorily told him to vacate it saying that he wanted the whole compartment for himself and his wife. On Sir Sivaswamy refusing Captain Childers called him, “you are a dammed brute. It is disgraceful. I have never heard such a thing in my life, a refusal to oblige a lady.” When Sir Sivaswamy said that he had no business to talk to him in that way, Capt Childers said: “Shut up. I want to... if you will.” When Sir Sivaswamy said he did not quite follow him Capt Childers asked him, “You understand English.” This unfortunate contretemps in an otherwise pleasant tour of Sir Sivaswamy... has caused the greatest indignation among the Indian community. The incident is being enquired into by the Lt. Governor. The Rangoon Mail says that Englishmen should realise that they are here as servants of the people, but in their bumptious insolence they forget their position and assume superior airs which they want to maintain by brute force and by bad manners.(By Wire.)