

Yet More Quotas Won't Win Glory

Quota politics only works to fritter away energies

The government of Telangana has raised quotas in government jobs and admission to higher education for scheduled tribes and Muslims, raising the total number of reserved positions to 62% of the total. This will encourage groups elsewhere to renew their quota agitations. The politics of quotas and of mobilising people in the name of caste and community ill serves the nation. The only purpose served would be to signal political commitment to the sectional interests of those demanding quotas, alienating other sections in the process.

Quotas are not the best form of affirmative action. They fail two key tests of good policy design: they do not incentivise the pursuit of excellence and they reinforce perceptions of backwardness. The government could design better policies to achieve the goal pursued via quotas. Or, better still, the government could make sure that no one is deprived of quality education. At a time when India was a poor country and lacked the resources to invest enough in education, it made sense to provide for some assured representation of traditionally deprived sections in the limited educational opportunities created for India's youth.

Now, India is a middle-income economy and can afford to spend enough money to meet the aspiration of anyone who seeks higher education and has the minimum revealed aptitude for it. It is a question of eliminating wasteful expenditure and prioritising education and health, the politician's job being to communicate the good sense in trading off merit subsidies for investing in human capability. It also makes sense to raise higher education fees while simultaneously increasing the availability of scholarships, freeships and student loans on easy terms.

The Bharatiya Janata Party opposes quota politics in Telangana, but when it claims that giving statutory status to a commission for backward classes is a sure-shot solution to social and economic backwardness, is it merely trying to replicate the grand success the statutory commissions for scheduled castes and tribes have had in the uplift of these communities?

Open Up Petroleum Marketing As Well

It is welcome that public sector oil retailers plan daily revision of automotive fuel prices in five cities from May 1, with nationwide rollout of the "daily dynamic pricing" policy planned later this year. It would be in line with global practice, and better align the going rates for crude oil imports with retail prices of petroleum products. It is essential to do so, to determine domestic scarcity value, as much of our growing requirement of crude is met by way of imports.

However, in tandem, it is also vital to reform and overhaul market design for retailing petro-products. The continuing policy of ring-fencing retail sales of petro-goods exclusively for oil companies is both anachronistic and incongruous. It is also not as per the best international practice. Worse, it implies a huge national cost. Given the large and fast-growing domestic oil sector — India is now the third-largest importer of crude — the tight effective monopoly in retail sales of petro-products creates scope for padding costs. Abroad, in the mature markets, independent oil retailers account for about half the offtake of oil. We need to speedily integrate oil into the larger retail industry. It would lead to more competitive oil prices, boost convenience and likely improve service quality as well.

In parallel, we also need speedy rationalisation of taxes on oil. We need to drop the perverse tax-on-tax and cascading rates across the value chain in oil. Petroleum products are to stay out of the goods and services tax framework, for now. But the Goods and Services Tax Council needs to firm-up consensus to bring petro-products into the goods and services tax regime at the earliest. However, it would be sensible to duly cap input tax credits for oil products, to factor in externalities like pollution and impact on climate change.

If fungi are talking to bacterium, do we smell a new medium of communication?

Call This a Whiff of a Conversation

It is spooky to contemplate that everything around us is talking. As if it were not bad enough that all the gadgets in our homes and offices probably carry on secret conversations thanks to the Internet of Things — and plants do the same naturally — now microorganisms have been found to be part of this silent cacophony. So much so that a group of scientists avers that the most spoken language in the world is terpene — which it is not a tongue at all but a sort of nose, as the communication is via smell. Communication in this medium is evidently easy as living things of varied dimensions not only "converse" among their own kind in "Terpene", microorganisms go a step further and talk with other motes too. As those scientists have observed a variety of fungus chatting up a type of bacterium, there isn't a scintilla of doubt that there is a chemistry to communication.

Considering these polyglot organisms vastly outnumber human beings, and there are at least 50,000 distinct terpene compounds found in plants and fungi, and many more in microorganisms, the sheer volume of inaudible communication being conducted everywhere is mind-boggling. It gives rise to the thought of whether we should try a new tack altogether when reaching out into space in search of other living beings, as terpenes could be the cosmic Esperanto.

STATE OF PLAY There's a big shift taking place within the BJP. And it's important

The Party, With a Difference



Pranab Dhal Samanta

The BJP is in the middle of the most remarkable transition of a political party in contemporary India. Never before has a party, other than the Congress, commanded such dominating presence across the country. And that's noteworthy since the BJP comes from a diametrically opposite ideological camp of the all-encompassing political philosophy of the Congress.

On the surface, this may appear like an ideological victory, where one way of thinking has stamped out the other. But such an inference completely overlooks wider play of power politics. Because if ideology was all that mattered, then the RSS or, for that matter, even the communist parties at their peak, had more ideologically committed cadres than the Congress. Yet, they could not transform it into national political gains.

Lotus Turns Over a New Leaf

This is where the big BJP shift becomes important. Quite often, we underestimate the tumult and transformation that's happened within the BJP in the last three years, which, in many ways, is central to this massive shift. The BJP as a party has had to reconfigure itself into an efficient and ruthless power machine.

The reinvention of the BJP under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and party president Amit Shah has hap-

pened along three broad contours where flawless party-government coordination has been at the core of the execution strategy. Which is also why the unsettling tendencies of a transformation have either been handled or rendered meaningless by repeated electoral successes.

The first contour of reinvention has been the growing and unmatched popularity of Modi. He is the first right-wing leader with pan-India appeal, which at this point even rivals strong regional leaders. Now, the BJP has never been used to structuring its political strategy around an individual leader's popularity at the national level. This has happened rather effortlessly over the last three years.

When a party seeks votes for a state election in the name of its supreme national leader and succeeds, one must concede that the party's biggest face inspires credibility among a large section of the Indian electorate. It also conveys that there's an absence of challenge that makes it only easier for the BJP.

Internally for the BJP, it's by now clear that there's no better political mantra than the PM's personal popularity. Which means: find a way to tie any campaign to Modi, from the tie-chayat and civil polls to national polls, and the party's chances improve. Already, the recent by-election losses in Karnataka are being seen as fallout of BS Yeddyurappa's deviation from this strategy by turning this into an election of personal prestige.

Development is the other axis on which the new BJP is redefining its presence. Development, 'Sabka saath sabka vikas', does the political trick that secularism may have done for Indira Gandhi. This tagline is the inclusive message that counters the exclusionary import of the right-wing's core ideology. So, regardless of ideolo-



Lotus blooms, soft face tissues

gy, governance will be value-neutral, guided by development priorities.

The government and party leadership work hard to convey this message, which they believe is vital to staying in power. Yogi Adityanath's conduct as Uttar Pradesh chief minister until now shows the effort being made at ensuring that whatever is being done is to strengthen and uphold the rule of law. Adityanath himself is coming across as a different person who has not yet embarked on any large-scale purge of the old administration. While these are still early days, the first flush is always important. By that logic, development as a political option against the comfort and security of secularism is working.

Tech is the New Tonic

The third vital axis in this new BJP paradigm is technology. The party has embraced technology to dissolve divisions of old vote-banks. This is not to say the BJP has given up caste politics. On the contrary, it's quite conscious of this interplay on the ground. But what it has successfully done is enumerate those caste groups that have lost out or suffered from dominance by few.

By using better data analytics, geo-spatial tagging and organising systemic central control, the Modi government has been able to define, locate and target the poor better than any recent government of the past. And, as a result, its interventions have proved more effective, as has its schemes in the rural sector or Ujjwala and many others being constructed around this data.

This has provided a corrective to who will benefit from government schemes. By removing any particular preference, the government has created a new class of supporters for the party that felt left out for lack of political representation and clout. It also works well as anti-appeasement strategy.

In sum, the mix is quite potent: a hugely popular leader; inclusive development logic and use of technology to steer clear of religious and social divisions. But what's instructive is that it's centred on winning and retaining power. In that sense, this means a big adjustment for the old BJP, which is increasingly being forced to stand on the sidelines and applaud the new stars.

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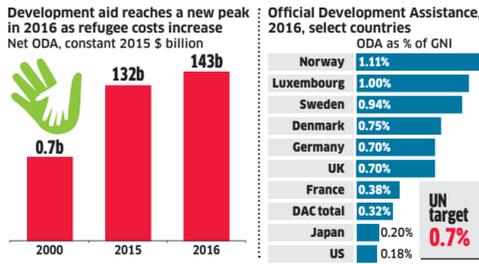
WIT & WISDOM

"In heaven, all the interesting people are missing."

Friedrich Nietzsche
Philosopher

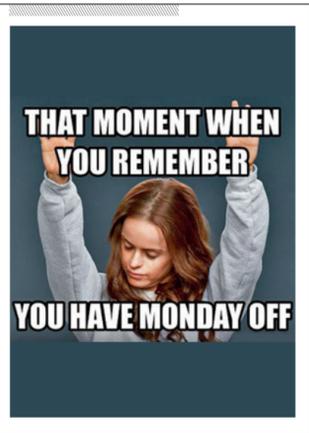
Development Aid

Development aid reached a new peak of \$143 billion in 2016, an increase of 8.9% from 2015 after adjusting for exchange rates and inflation. During the year, Germany joined five other countries — Denmark, Luxembourg, Norway, Sweden and the UK — in meeting a UN target to keep ODA at or above 0.7% of GNI.



But despite this progress, bilateral aid to LDCs fell 3.9% in real terms from 2015, and aid to Africa fell 0.5%

MEME'S THE WORD



RED HERRING

No Way or the Highway



Indrajit Hazra

Sitting here, in an undisclosed location 502 metres away from a National Highway that wishes to remain anonymous, I'm thinking about the Supreme Court order prohibiting the sale of alcohol within 500 metres of national and state highways. The other alternative would be to drink myself blotto while trying to understand, with all the sincerity I can muster on an Easter evening, the significance of having 500 m as the Lakshman rekha for imbibing the unholy stuff.

What happens within this mysterious radius? Or, rather, since this is all about preventing bad stuff from happening, what will now no longer happen within this charmed circle?

The venerable Supreme Court, responding to a petition seeking the ban, has even used the reasoning of doing what the Centre had prepared in a 'policy for alcoholic beverages and alcohol' to dodge the bullet of 'judicial overreach'. But that un-policied policy had mentioned turning spaces within 100 m from a state or national highway into mini-Gujarat-Bihar. And as world record-holders Usain Bolt and David Rudisha know all too well, 500 m and 100 m have a 400-m fark.

The judges passed the order — after much earlier having passed the bar — to ostensibly clamp down on drunken driving and minimise highway accidents, for which suitably numbers, damned numbers and statistics were duly trotted out to make every child sleep in this post-Gabbar world.

I have a brain-movie running through my head that may explain the reason behind the order. Or it may not. A man procuring a bottle of the nasty stuff from a theka 323 m away from a high-

way. Glug-glugging half the bottle and returning to the car that he had been driving stone sober earlier. Now drunk as a raccoon, tyres a-squeal he sets out into the night on some NH, swerving and a potential roadrunner of a criminal driving into a tragedy in the making.

The fact that a person behind a wheel need not have been denied a drink or two or four from a source that isn't a liquor shop near a highway is a possibility. But probably a very distant one, it seems by the court order. Perhaps, having a theka or a bar 500 m away from the car, rather than from a highway, would have been more logical. For, a 500-m walk can, indeed, do wonderful stuff to clear one's head that a 100-m Keshu Mukherjee-inspired jaunt can only dream of. But who's going to raise a glass to logic in these dry humid days.

The earlier court order was modified in a March 31 order that lowered the threshold from 500 m to 220 m for towns



One for the Road

of fewer than 20,000 people. One supposes that there are less people or black buck a drunken driver who is not a Bollywood star can mow down in these places. This also gives a gentle nudge in favour of family planning, I reckon.

But a Patiala peg measure of confusion is poured down my hatch when I hear that the court has exempted Meghalaya and Sikkim from the ban, since that would have meant more than 90% of shops would have to be shut down. The message I am getting in this exemption is that if Pune, with 17 state highways passing through the city, had 1,75,800 liquor permit holders, instead of the 1,757 that it really has, Pune — and who knows, maybe Maharashtra as a whole — would also have been exempted having 'livelihoods at stake'.

Instead of planning to lay off many of their staff, stand-alone hotel and restaurant owners affected by the highway booze ban should actually go on a hiring spree. That would put more livelihoods in jeopardy, and even the cold heart of justice will then hear — as it did from Meghalaya and Sikkim and other places where they can hold their drink next to highways better — plaintive sitar strains that always signify hardship in Hindi movies.

Er, so why does the highway theka or hotel bar or liquor shop get the rap? Call it the majesty of justice akin to banning smoking, because even though the fire was caused by faulty wiring, it's still about wanting you to quit smoking for your own good. A little dodgy logic can be forgiven when the cause is good. So what if this also means the breathalysar industry also taking a hit. And there being no need any longer in many stretches of this land of ours for a policeman to tell you to breathe into his face. Such awkwardness will be now avoided.

Dear god, let me get a drink 501 m away from this highway, which I hope will very soon, inspired by the West Bengal government, be denotified and turned into an 'arterial road'. Cheers.

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Citings

Comfortably Numb

SIDHARTHA MUKHERJEE

I want to talk to you today about desensitisation. In my other life, I am an oncologist. Numbness, you might say, is my occupational hazard... When I had to give this talk to aspiring writers, I had to confront the elephant-in-the-room question: how shall we continue to write in these numbing times?

On April 21, 1890, a 30-year-old doctor-turned-writer named Anton Chekhov travelled to Sakhalin Island, a penal colony, north of Japan. The journey took three months: he had to cross, by train, the windblown steppes of northern Russia and the still-frozen Siberian tundra. He boarded a horse-drawn carriage, then a steamer across the Amur River, and then a trawler across the Okhotsk Sea.

Why did an unusually sensitive and mild-mannered man — delicate of physical and mental constitution — travel to a hostile, faraway island inhabited by thieves, hustlers and murderers? Chekhov's medical training had left him spiritually depleted. He had... matured into an astute diagnostician. But the extraordinary quality of suffering that he had witnessed, and the inscrutable arbitrariness of sickness and death, benumbed him.

It wasn't just disease or death that Chekhov was trying to escape; it was deadliness. "There is a sort of stagnation in my soul," he wrote to a friend. Chekhov was looking to resensitise himself — to un-numb the numbness. He sought a place where he might inoculate himself against the ennui that was slowly destroying his soul.

From "Love in the Time of Numbness; Or Doctor Chekhov, Writer"



More to Life Than Deals

SADHGURU JAGGI VASUDEV

If you really want the best deal in life, stop making deals. Yet, your very demeanour should be such that your client is simply bowled over. This is not a trick. The deal will happen if it's necessary; it won't happen if it's not. It is for the well-being of both parties, so it must be needed by both of you.

Let's say you're in love. If you are not fully involved, you will try to strike a deal. Once a bachelor who had been wooing an attractive woman for long mustered the courage to propose to her, "There are quite a lot of advantages to being bachelor," he began, "but there comes a time when one longs for the companionship of another being. A being who will regard one as perfect, as an idol to be worshipped and treated as one's absolute own, who will be kind and faithful when times are tough and hard who will share one's joys and sorrows."

To his delight, he saw sympathetic gleam in her eyes. She nodded in agreement and said, "I think it's a great idea! Can I help you choose a pup?" So, to get mileage out of a deal, you have to first assess the level of intelligence of the other party. If you just give of yourself and see how both of you can benefit from the deal, then whenever it is possible, it will happen.

However, if your whole life is about making deals, you will be miserable. The devil is always making a deal with somebody. God never made a deal with anybody; God doesn't make deals. Deals will be offered to you in so many ways. In a way, everybody is just a businessman.

Chat Room

Taxi & Telecom, Now Housing?

The introduction of Reliance Jio brought relief to telecom service consumers who now have an alternative to the incumbents who were charging exorbitant tariffs for calls and data. A similar price war is being witnessed between cab aggregators and the traditional black-and-yellow taxis, who have virtually been thrown out of business. The country now needs a similar revolution in the real estate sector where houses have become unaffordable and are beyond the reach of the common man. The government should start encouraging big companies promising transparency to enter the sector and make own house a reality for millions of Indians.

SN KABRA
Mumbai

Yogi's Best Shot for UP Schools

Yogi Adityanath has said that schools in Uttar Pradesh need not be closed on the occasion of birth and death anniversaries of leaders. He has hit the nail on the head. If students have



to remember great leaders, then educational institutions will have to work on their birth and death anniversaries, conduct competitions and activities that can make the students know about them. For education, this is the best stroke the Yogi has played since starting his innings as chief minister.

S RAMAKRISHNASAYEE
Ranipet

On Governance: AAP & Running

Without being partisan, let not the defeat of the AAP in the Rajouri Garden bypoll in Delhi be construed that it is a spent force. Delhi municipalities have done little to make the city beautiful and secure, and it is well-known that municipalities in mega cities are dens of corruption and embezzlement. Condemning AAP's governance of two years for the malfunctioning of the Delhi municipalities is meaningless. AAP has challenged the established system of governance, and one seat's defeat must not make the AAP leadership disillusioned.

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