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India must walk the extra mile

Strengthening Sheikh Hasina's hand will pay dividends for New Delhi in the long run

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will be expecting India to walk the extra mile when she arrives in New Delhi for an official visit on Friday. And rightly so. Under Ms Hasina, Bangladesh has proved a steadfast ally of India and reports suggest the two sides are set to ink nearly 40 agreements during her visit. For the Indian side, the focus has been on two defence-related MoUs that are expected to cover stepped up collaboration to counter terror and extremism. There is also talk of a \$500 million line of credit for the purchase of military hardware as part of a larger multi-billion dollar economic aid package encompassing everything from connectivity to energy.

But there is no getting around the fact that the issue dominating the discourse on the Bangladeshi side has been the agreement on sharing the waters of the Teesta river that has been stalled since 2011. Bangladeshi officials have referred to the Teesta issue as a "litmus test", suggesting a breakthrough could pave the way for the shared management of 54 trans-border rivers. It is unlikely an agreement on the Teesta will be hammered out during Ms Hasina's four-day visit, even though she is expected to meet West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee — widely perceived as the person holding up the pact — at events hosted by the President and Prime Minister. However, there has been talk of the two sides coming up with a draft document that could pave the way for a final agreement. With Bangladesh set to go to the polls by early 2019, Ms Hasina cannot afford to be seen in any way as bowing to India on key issues. This is a charge that has, anyway, been repeatedly hurled at her by the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party, which has already begun raising questions about the need for a defence deal with India. It is, therefore, imperative for India to strengthen the hands of an ally who has adopted a common stance on issues that are crucial for New Delhi, such as terrorism and regional diplomacy. For Ms Hasina, it will be important to send out a message to her countrymen that she is engaging India on an equal footing, and in this New Delhi can help by going the extra mile to address her concerns. After its recent electoral victories, the ruling BJP surely is in a position to do so. Both sides should focus on the big picture — a stronger, stable and prosperous Bangladesh is in India's long-term interests. Ms Hasina has shown on more than one occasion that she is willing to work towards this same big picture.

Falling through the cracks

The Indian Railways is right in setting ambitious targets but it must first deal with major legacy issues

The NDA government's "infrastructure push" for the Indian Railways is a welcome step but it alone will not solve the many problems that the railways face today. In the last 69 years, freight loading has grown by 1,344% and passenger traffic has increased by 1,642%, while the route kilometres of the network has grown by a mere 23%. About 60% of the goods and passenger traffic continue to remain concentrated along 16% of what are called the Grand Trunk Lines. Last fiscal, the railways logged construction of 2,855km of new lines (up from the UPA-I average of 1,477 km) and has set for itself a stiffer target for the commissioning of 3,500km of new lines in 2017-18.

But, the emerging question is this: Is the rail reform story falling through the cracks at various points? Consider these: The railways is pitching for partnerships to develop capital intensive 'Maglev' or Magnetic Levitation and ultra high speed trains that can run at speeds in excess of 500km per hour, but has not been able to ensure the punctuality and safety of 12,000 passenger, mail and express trains that still trundle along at leisurely average speeds of 54km per hour, and 95% of passengers continue to be herded like cattle into jam-packed train compartments. On board entertainment solutions are being offered, but the railways have continued to top the official list of being the most corrupt government organisation, year after year. Reams of official material proclaiming the "transformation" brought about during NDA rule have been released, but the transporter's operating ratio (paisa spent against every rupee earned) has been going up.

The Indian Railways suffers from several "legacy issues". To his credit, the Railway Minister Suresh Prabhu has taken a realistic shot at tackling some of these — and achieved meaningful changes as well. But he needs to ensure that policies stay centered to the needs of a common Indian passenger and improving existing infrastructure first before framing more ambitious targets.

You win some, you lose some

Political parties should not make casual allegations about EVMs. The machines have been successful all along, writes MS GILL

The Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) has a long and often chequered history in India. It was in 1977 that the government asked the Electronics Corporation of India (ECIL) to develop this machine. Later, Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) was also involved in this effort. About 750 million rupees worth of machines were manufactured to this design but no serious effort was made to introduce Indian voters to this.

An effort was made in Kerala in 1982 in a few polling booths, but this was blocked by legal challenges. Another small effort was made in Sikkim, but that too faded away. The CAG criticised the Election Commission for this waste of money, but I thought such criticism was not acceptable. We examined the problem and decided to go ahead with EVMs in select constituencies in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Delhi.

A Union minister advised against the use of EVMs in villages as illiterate people would not be able to use them. People living in cities have such prejudices about rural folk. Nevertheless, we used EVMs in that historic 1997 election in these three states. It was a great success.

Political parties suddenly began to see the miracle of this little machine in a country with poor literacy in large parts. With the EVMs no ballot boxes were to be stolen, no ink poured into the boxes, no spoilt votes, nor were there attempts to change the boxes. Thanks to the EVMs, the results were known by noon on counting day. This was the miracle of this new technology. When ballot papers were used, often the results were contested.

The use of EVMs was rapidly expanded covering the whole state and subsequently polls in many states were

IN THE UTTAR PRADESH ELECTIONS OF 2007 AND 2012, DIFFERENT PARTIES WON HANDSOMELY. IN DELHI, AAP WON A MASSIVE MAJORITY TWO YEARS AGO. NO ONE RAISED ANY QUESTIONS THEN. TODAY TOO IF ANY CREDIBLE DOUBTS ARE BROUGHT TO THE EC, IT WILL EXAMINE THEM

held on a single day.

It is natural for parties that have lost the election to cast doubts and challenge the results. Before introducing the EVMs, I held meetings with all the 52 recognised political parties, accepting their suggestions and ideas. Some wanted EVMs in their constituencies. I was happy to oblige. But, when these worthies lost, they complained. The complaints were on two counts.

First was that the technology could be tampered with. The CMDs and engineers of the ECIL and BEL were invited to clear the doubts of the complainants. The second invariably was a legal challenge. The late J Jayalitha challenged the EC at the Madras High Court. After a long and full hearing the challenge was dismissed.

For the past two decades the EVMs have been successfully used across India and while many continue to challenge its use, all have lost their arguments against the EVMs. The courts have gone to great lengths to ensure that the Indian voter is not cheated by the EVMs.

The system has settled down and has become the envy of the world. As CEC, I was shown a Canadian machine, but it



Thanks to the EVMs, results are known by noon on counting day. This was the miracle of this new technology. When ballot papers were used, often the results were contested. This meant that counting continued for days

was not only too expensive but also too complicated to use. The Indian machine is inexpensive, simple to use and robust. It has never failed us and the world knows it, as they watch our elections closely.

India has more than 800 million voters and more than 1.2 million EVMs are used for our elections. The world admires India for this achievement. When United States President Bill Clinton came to Delhi, at a dinner at the Rashtrapati Bhavan, he pointed at me sitting across the table and said that they envied the EC's success.

To all critics of the EVM I would say: Don't knock this perfect little Indian robot. When you win, the machine seems fine. It is attacked when you lose.

In these two decades since it was first used, we have held many elections, and while parties have won and lost, the habit of casting a doubt on the reliability of the EVMs had almost disappeared until the current controversy. In the Uttar Pradesh elections of 2007 and 2012, different parties won handsomely. In Delhi, the ruling party won a massive majority two years ago. No one raised any questions then.

I am surprised at the current broad and vague accusations. I think accusations against this remarkable national improvement in conducting elections should not be casually and lightly made.

The EC cannot exist without the confidence of its 800 million voters. In August 2009, the EC had carried out a week long examination of all complaints. Today too if any credible doubts are brought to the EC, it will examine them, and furnish answers. This has always been the policy and practice of the EC.

MS Gill is former chief election commissioner
The views expressed are personal

newsmaker

THE DALAI LAMA

INDIA HAS NEVER USED ME AGAINST CHINA...THERE ARE MANY IN CHINA WHO LOVE INDIA. IT IS ONLY SOME NARROW-MINDED POLITICIANS WHO SEE INDIA IN A DIFFERENT WAY JUST LIKE THE WAY THEY SEE ME AS A DEMON. I AM NOT A DEMON...



Illustration: SIDHDHANT JUMDE

THINK IT OVER »

WE MUST BE A BEACON OF HOPE, BECAUSE IF YOU TELL PEOPLE THERE'S NOTHING THEY CAN DO, THEY WILL DO WORSE THAN NOTHING.

MARGARET ATWOOD

I don't watch the IPL because I love cricket

Kunal Pradhan

Ten years ago, on a mild April evening in Bangalore, I sat on the press bleachers at the Chinnaswamy Stadium, watching a fireworks display of Olympic proportions. It was the opening ceremony of the inaugural Indian Premier League (IPL). Nothing would ever be the same again.

The IPL was sold as a "marriage between cricket and entertainment". Over the years, it married a lot of different things: an NBA-style draft with a Christie's auction, a cricket administrator with an Interpol notice, slogged sixes with batting skill, and huckstering with commentary.

The IPL now invades our lives with theme music that guarantees Pavlovian cheers. It is proof that hard-selling marketers and dubious analysts have converted us from a people who cherished sport to a generation who only consume it. Though I was right in the thick of it when it all started, I can't bear to watch the IPL — I love cricket too much.

This is not a philosophical argument

about the Old and the New; my aversion stems neither from nostalgia nor resistance to change. Here's what the IPL really is: a side dish masquerading as the main course; and, since the promoters of the IPL love to compare it with the NBA and the EPL, an all-star weekend pretending to be the playoffs, a five-a-side kick around trotted out as a title clash.

No one goes regularly to the Staples Centre in Los Angeles for the cheerleaders, or takes the train from central London to Wimbledon because Cliff Richard might sing a few oldies if it's raining. These may be welcome bonuses, but the reason one makes these trips is for a chance to witness the pinnacle of sport.

That's why the fan-following for these tournaments has grown organically over the decades. That's why these events attract the world's best talent, not for the lure of money but the pursuit of excellence.

The true joy of cricket is far removed from what the IPL venerates. This is a sport about dexterity and endurance, about character.

In a single innings, it lets you get up after taking a blow to the head, and score a century while surrounded by four slips, a gully, a point, and a short-leg. It asks you to tease a weakness through probing spells of accurate bowling. It urges you to choose the long road over the shortcut, the book over the movie. It teaches you that slowness is not a flaw, and steadfastness can win the race.

The impact of the IPL on a new generation of cricketers is as damaging as it is on cricket watchers. We are in the middle of a general lowering of standards because the IPL is so lucrative, and demands so much less effort. More money for a four-over spell than for 90 overs in the sun, or for a 25-ball 40 than for a gruelling three-session century: why wouldn't players want that? Is it a surprise then that the Ranji Trophy, the real second tier tournament, is rudely ignored?

So answer this: Is a flurry of sixes really more exciting than a pitched battle between bat and ball? Watch it if you must, but spare me another IPL season.

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world health day

We must talk about depression more openly

Remove the stigma around mental illness and promote knowledge and skills in the community on self-care

Vikram Patel

My mother, who passed away in September last year, was one of the estimated 40 million Indians who experience depression each year. That number comes from the National Mental Health Survey, the largest ever head-count of mental disorders in this country, published by the Ministry of Health in October. The Survey also reported that the majority of these individuals, up to 90% or more, received no treatment for their illness. My mother was no exception, for much of her life.

Despite being an illness as old as mankind, depression remains poorly understood. A particular challenge lies in the fact that it is hard to distinguish the understandable misery which is so very normal in everyday life from a 'clinical condition'. There is, for example, no blood test or X-ray which can reliably 'diagnose' depression.

Despite this knowledge, though, the

vast majority of people with depression go without any treatment.

The landmark Mental Health Care Bill recently passed by our parliament now entitles people with depression to receive the kind of community-based care which can transform lives. Today, we celebrate World Health Day and the focus is on depression and suicide. The campaign slogan is 'let's talk', emphasising the central role not only of the power of talking therapies, but of disclosure "as a vital component of recovery" by targeting the stigma surrounding mental illness which acts as a barrier to people with depression seeking help.

Significantly, the WHO campaign recommends that talking can involve a wide range of potential listeners, from family and friends to professionals, as well as encouraging open discussions about this condition in settings such as schools, the workplace and in the media "ultimately leading to more people seeking help".

It is becoming increasingly commonplace to talk about depression not least due to the growing number of celebrities, from Bruce Springsteen to Deepika Padukone, disclosing their personal experiences of struggle and recovery. However, to move this discourse beyond celebrities to the general population, we need to encourage and support people to talk openly about depression and to promote knowledge and skills in the community on self-care.

It is in this context that the website ItsOktoTalk (www.itsoktotalk.in), launched tomorrow in New Delhi, which offers a space for young people to share their accounts of struggle and recovery, is timely. There is no doubt whatsoever that we must talk about depression more openly, but we must ensure that people experiencing depressive symptoms are always at the heart of the conversation.

Vikram Patel works with the Public Health Foundation of India and Harvard University.
The views expressed are personal

innervoice

Life doesn't always go according to the plan in our heads

Ishtmit Oberoi

Today, while watching one of my favourite shows, I came across a wonderful quote spoken by one of the characters. It goes, "I have always seen life like a series of doors. Sometimes you get to choose the door you go through, and sometimes you don't. But you still have to walk through it. Either you go through kicking and screaming or walk through with your head held high."

I had a rough day, and this quote caught my attention and made me feel better. I like when life goes according to plan. We often hold these plans close to our hearts, an interior blueprint that we can refer to while building our lives. Often life doesn't go according to plan. But can we do anything about it?

No. Then what is the use of feeling bad about it? So what if we have not achieved the desired goal; we can still be happy about what our struggles have taught us in our journey towards the goal. We should remember that life always gives us something. Sometimes it is not what we want and sometimes it is what we desire. So we are never left empty handed.

That is what I learnt from this quote. It gave me courage to push through the hard times. We all know that our life is in God's hands. Our life will not always be perfect, and when it has not been the best day, the point is to still hold our head high and trust God. Life is full of hard, beautiful, broken things; and wars we fight within ourselves. May we learn to see it as a great adventure, especially when things don't go according to the plan.

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The views expressed are personal
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