



Welcome assurance

Help in tackling the backlog of cases could radically improve executive-judiciary relations

The importance of cooperation between the executive and the judiciary in dealing with the unacceptably high number of pending cases in the country cannot be overemphasised. For over a year, there were indications of an impasse over judicial appointments between the two branches of the state, mainly after the Supreme Court struck down legislation to establish a National Judicial Appointments Commission. That phase appears to be coming to an end. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's assurance to the Chief Justice of India, J.S. Khehar, that his government would contribute its share in reducing the judiciary's burden is a positive gesture that will be welcomed by the legal fraternity. Speaking at a function to mark the 150th anniversary of the Allahabad High Court, Mr. Modi gave the assurance after observing the pain behind the words of Justice Khehar over the increasing backlog of cases. Justice Khehar's "dil ki baat (talk from the heart)" on the problem underscored an institutional anguish that has gripped the judiciary over time. Successive Chief Justices have brought to the government's notice the state of affairs with regard to both the alarming docket situation and the chronic shortage of judicial hands in the superior and subordinate judiciary. The previous Chief Justice of India, T.S. Thakur, had highlighted the point in public functions as well as during judicial hearings, once even wondering if the government wanted to bring the judiciary to a grinding halt by its reluctance to fill up vacancies. If the Prime Minister's latest remarks represent a fresh resolve not to let such an impression gain ground, it will surely represent a new beginning in the executive-judiciary relationship.

Mr. Modi did not spell out whether his assurance to contribute to the process meant his government would expedite the process of appointing judges, but there is no doubt that this will be the most significant contribution as well as the government's responsibility. Official figures show there are as many as 437 vacancies in the High Courts alone as of March 1, 2017. It is incontestable that any effort to liquidate the arrears of cases would involve a significant increase in the speed at which judicial appointments are processed. Mr. Modi also spoke of the use of technology and digitalisation in the judicial system, a point that is of undoubted relevance when one considers the magnitude of the task of reducing the backlog. There is much that the use of technology can do in both liquidating arrears and expediting processes such as filing of documents and serving of notices. Meanwhile, reports suggest that the government and the Supreme Court Collegium may be close to agreeing on a new Memorandum of Procedure for judicial appointments. If differences that caused a prolonged stand-off are eliminated and a new procedure agreed upon, there cannot be better tidings for the institution.

Climbdown in Caracas

Venezuela's top court reverses a shocking order to take over the legislature's functions

The decision by Venezuela's highest court on Saturday to reverse its earlier move of nullifying the elected legislature, the Congress, brings some respite from the relentless attack on democratic institutions under President Nicolás Maduro. And the fact that last week the judges initiated the process to strip the legislature of all law-making powers, indicating contempt for the will of the people in pursuit of Mr. Maduro's interests, also puts in sharp focus the severe erosion of the judiciary's independence. The attempted takeover marked the nadir in the months-long confrontation between the legislature and the courts, which are packed with loyalists of Mr. Maduro. A notable voice of dissent that seems to have forced the Supreme Court to rescind the decision came from the attorney general, who characterised the initial move as a "rupture in the constitutional order". The information minister may have described the subsequent reversal on Saturday as the court's way of correcting a mistake, but the battle between the government and opposition is far from settled. The opposition had won a two-thirds majority in the national assembly in the 2015 elections. Such a large majority was always going to prove contentious, as it empowers Congress to amend the constitution and to appoint judges. Soon after its inauguration, the new legislature had challenged the economic emergency that Mr. Maduro enforced in January 2016, giving him overall control on expenditure.

Meanwhile, the severe shortages of rations of essential commodities have led to a grave humanitarian crisis. The social and political unrest that accompanied the plummeting value of the Bolivar, resulting from triple-digit inflation, was met with more repression and the arbitrary detention of leading opposition figures. The most notorious such incident was the torture and killing of innocent youth at the military's hands in the rural province of Barlovento last October, which drew strong condemnation even from government investigators. However, the opposition seems to have exhausted all manoeuvres to exploit political and constitutional avenues to challenge the government. Its effort to mobilise popular support for a recall referendum against the President, with a petition endorsed by millions, was rejected by the electoral commission in October. It is obvious that the crisis engulfing the country can hardly be addressed by an autocrat who refuses to be held to account. But the fact that the court was forced to reverse the decision to nullify the legislature is a signal of hope that there are some limits to the Maduro regime's flagrant excesses. International pressure is another check on the regime. Recently, Venezuela was declared ineligible to exercise its vote in the UN General Assembly for failing to pay dues to the tune of millions of dollars. This kind of embarrassment is something that Mr. Maduro can do without at this juncture.

Finally, action on bad loans?

Empowering managements and strengthening governance at public banks can resolve the bad loan problem



T.T. RAM MOHAN

After nearly three years of dithering on the part of the National Democratic Alliance government, there is hope now that we will see action in respect of Indian banks' bad loans. The Finance Ministry and the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) have recently sent out signals to the effect that they are determined to take the bull by its horns. If they follow through, it will brighten the prospects of India's growth rate moving to 8% in the medium term.

Bad loans – or non-performing assets (NPAs) – were 9% of total loans of all Indian banks in September 2016. At public sector banks (PSBs), bad loans were 12% of all advances. Another 3% of loans in the aggregate (and 4% at PSBs) have been restructured. The *Economic Survey* (2016-17) quotes market analysts as saying that 4-5% of loans are bad loans that have not been recognised as such. Thus, total stressed assets – NPAs, restructured loans and unrecognised bad loans – would amount to a staggering 16% of all loans and nearly 20% of loans at PSBs.

The lending boom

Today's bad loan problem has arisen from the lending boom that India's banks embarked on in the period 2004-08, a period that saw economic growth reach the 9-10% range. However, that by itself did not create a problem of the current magnitude. NPAs, which are 9% of all loans today, were only half that level a year before. It is the failure to resolve the bad loan problem over the past several years that has exacerbated the problem.

Why has the bad loan problem remained unresolved for so long? Put it down to bad luck and serious policy errors.



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The best solution to a bad loan problem is to simply grow your way out of it. This can happen in two ways. One, banks keep financing projects that are not making repayments in full and would qualify as NPAs. They do so in the hope that, once growth revives, cash flows in the projects will improve. Two, banks grow their loan portfolio at a brisk rate. As the denominator in the ratio of bad loans to total loans grows, the bad loan problem automatically diminishes in significance.

That's how India's banking sector came out of the bad loan problem in the early 2000s. Rapid growth in the world economy and the Indian economy provided a painless solution. This time around, however, luck has not favoured the Indian banking system. The global economy has been in a prolonged slump consequent to the financial crisis of 2007-08. The "financing" strategy of continuing to make loans to unviable projects has come unstuck.

Serious policy errors have compounded the problem. The big policy error was the belief among policymakers that bad governance, bad management and even corruption at PSBs were primarily responsible for the problem. A committee appointed by the RBI and headed by P.J. Nayak argued as much in a report it submit-

ted in late 2014.

The committee seemed to think that majority government ownership of PSBs was the root cause of the bad loan problem as it meant political and bureaucratic interference with commercial decisions. Such an inference, which has been duly echoed by the media, is patently incorrect. As the *Economic Survey* of 2016-17 point out, the bad loan problem is "an economic problem, not a morality play... the vast bulk of the problem has been caused by unexpected changes in the economic environment: timetables, exchange rates, and growth rate assumptions going wrong." In other words, factors extraneous to bank management and governance are primarily responsible for the problem.

Plodding towards a solution

How the bad loan problem is understood has crucial implications for policy. If you believe that majority ownership by the government is the primary cause, you would focus on reducing government ownership in banks to below 50%. You would seek to distance the government from making appointments to PSBs, as proposed by the Nayak committee. You would decide that some PSBs were hopelessly weak and seek to merge them with healthier ones. You would judge that PSBs were incapable of resolv-

ing bad loans on their own and set up a "bad bank" to which bad loans would be moved.

These proposals are all politically difficult to handle, time-consuming or (as in the case of a "bad bank") make impossible demands on financial and human resources. The NDA government seemed to have bought the faulty diagnosis but could not act on most of the prescriptions that followed. It chose to muddle along.

The government appointed a Bank Board Bureau (BBB) as suggested by the Nayak committee and tasked it with appointing Chairmen and Managing Directors of PSBs. The BBB was also assigned the role of advising banks on restructuring and raising capital.

The BBB has made little headway. Very few top appointments have happened. The bad loan problem and recapitalisation of PSBs remain unaddressed. This was only to be expected. The government cannot distance itself from key decisions on PSBs while being accountable for their performance. Creating the BBB has only added another layer to decision-making and slowed it down.

Had the view now propagated by the *Economic Survey* (and articulated much earlier by the writer) prevailed, the government might have acted swiftly to resolve bad loans, provide the necessary capital to PSBs and strengthen governance at PSBs by revamping their boards. It would have judged that corrections must be made within the existing framework, not by overturning it.

Realisation that the bad loan problem is not the result of some special villainy at PSBs but a matter of factors extraneous to management has finally dawned, if somewhat late in the day. The initiative has moved away from the BBB and back to the Finance Ministry and the RBI where it rightly belongs.

Empowerment and oversight

There is clarity now that banks must be empowered to resolve the relatively small number of bad loans that account for a big chunk

of the total in terms of value. In many cases, this would mean that banks write off a portion of the loans owed to them.

Managements at PSBs have been reluctant to do so for fear of inviting action from the Chief Vigilance Commissioner, the Comptroller and Auditor General, the Central Bureau of Investigation and other bodies. To stiffen their spine, we need to put in place an authority that will vet loan settlement proposals put up to it. The BBB has constituted a two-person oversight committee but reports suggest that the committee will not take a view on write-offs. This is not helpful at all.

We need a larger oversight committee or, as the Finance Ministry has proposed, multiple oversight committees to speedily vet loan write-offs. It makes sense to constitute a Loan Resolution Authority by an Act of Parliament.

This must be complemented with other measures. Banks must develop the discipline of keeping thorough minutes of the proceedings related to resolution of bad loans. The rationale for particular decisions along with the pros and cons must be properly articulated. This will serve to give bank management a measure of protection.

The government must provide adequate capital to the banks to cover write-offs and also facilitate fresh loan growth. It must end the delays in appointing Chairmen and Managing Directors of various PSBs. It must also revamp the boards of PSBs by bringing in independent directors of high quality.

The solutions should have been clear enough long back. It is the misplaced condemnation of PSBs that has held up resolution of the bad loan problem. Doing away with majority ownership of government, mergers, creation of a bad bank – all these are non-starters. The way forward is to empower management and strengthen governance at PSBs.

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Ethnic pressures and a fragile peace

It's a tangled web of problems that faces the new government in Manipur

SUDIPTA DATTA

Even before the news on the fast-paced, controversial developments on the Manipur Assembly election verdict and its outcome – the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) forming the government after winning only 21 seats in a 60-member House – could sink in, the crippling blockade of two highways leading to the State, called by the United Naga Council (UNC) last November, ended. The BJP's national leaders camping in Imphal had promised to lift the blockade within 48 hours of coming to power. As the development on the ground largely followed the script, the new State government, run by an old Congress hand, N. Biren Singh, brought some relief. But for how long? The wheels-within-wheels nature of the government formation itself is an indication that administering the State could be anything but easy for Mr. Singh.

The Naga question

How is he going to resolve the Naga issue? Four MLAs of the Naga People's Front have joined the BJP-led government, with the winner from Mao (Losii Dikho) made a minister, and the rest given posts of parliamentary secretaries with minister of state rank. A rollback of the

creation of new districts will obviously appease the Nagas in the hills, but not the Kukis, the other major tribal group living in the hill districts, who have got a new district, Kangpokpi (culled out from areas of Naga-dominated Senapati district, and a fact which hasn't gone down well with the Nagas). There's Kuki representation in the Cabinet.

The Nagas too are in wait-and-watch mode. The UNC operates under the patronage of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah) with which the Centre signed a "framework agreement" in 2015 to solve the decades-old Naga insurgency. Though the "agreement" is shrouded in secrecy, the Nagas have never kept their demands secret. They want all Naga-inhabited territories in Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland to come under "Greater Nagalim" which all States barring Nagaland vehemently oppose. On March 22, addressing his cadres, NSCN(IM) general secretary T. Muivah said the framework agreement "recognises the unique history, the identity, the sovereignty, the territories of the Nagas. It also recognises the legitimate right of the Nagas to integration of all Naga territories." But in the same breath, giving a breather to the Centre, he



talked about "co-existence" of "two entities" and shared sovereignty.

With Naga partners in the coalition, Mr. Singh will have to tread cautiously to keep the peace. Or, since the BJP rules both the Centre and the State, does it become the Centre's headache?

In Delhi, after the UNC signed a tripartite agreement with the Union and State governments to call off the blockade, a Home Ministry official admitted that "there are many stakeholders," while saying, "at the moment there is nothing like a rollback".

Even if the Naga issue is resolved with the help of Delhi, the "shared sovereignty" condition won't please the Meiteis in the valley who

comprise roughly 60% of the population but live in a tenth of the area of Manipur. The hill tribes are roughly 40% of the population and they live in hill districts which are spread over 90% of Manipur's total area.

On the Inner Line permit issue too, Mr. Singh has to walk the tightrope. It's a Meitei demand, that outsiders be allowed access to the State only by using Inner Line permits, and since they, despite being in a majority, already feel constricted in their own State, their voice has to be heard. On the other hand, the Nagas and Kukis, who have long complained that the administration is leaning towards Meiteis, are uneasy about it, and there have been widespread protests for and against it. Even if the problem with the NSCN(IM) is sorted out, there's the NSCN (Khaplang) faction, which broke the ceasefire with the Centre, to contend with – and a host of other insurgent groups each fighting their own cause including the valley-based People's Liberation Army.

Mr. Singh will be under pressure to get the Centre to repeal the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, which has been in place in the State since 1980, and against which Irom Sharmila recently ended a 16-year

hunger strike.

Manipur may be craving for peace, but the problems are too many and too tangled to be sorted out easily, which the BJP is about to find out.

BJP's growing ambitions

What worked for Manipur may not necessarily work in the other States of the region, each with their sets of tribes, different cultures, eating habits and social mores. The BJP's homogenous social systems are unlikely to work in this disparate region.

While both Assam and Manipur have a sizeable Hindu/Vaishnav population, Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya are predominantly Christian States, and will be wary of the BJP's brand of politics. The people and the Church must have taken note of two developments with unease: the Modi government's announcement that December 25 will be observed as Good Governance Day and the Assam government's recent notice planning to make Sanskrit compulsory till Class VIII, even if that means the State will have to hire teachers from elsewhere.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Fake notes worry

The report, "Counterfeiting of new notes worries agencies" (April 3), only confirms the new worry most Indians have – whether the new notes they have are valid tender or not. At the same time, one also needs to ask whether the online mode of transaction is safe. As a research scholar in the field of computing, I predict that the day when transactions will be closely monitored by a robot is not far off. Encryption algorithms used by some websites are no longer safe. An option would be for the RBI to replace the security features of higher denominations every third year. But if this method is followed, are we in for another round of demonetisation?

AMBARISH APPAT, Palakkad

■ What we have reaped from the erroneously sown

exercise of demonetisation is deplorable and the lack of security measures has only aggravated the situation. The absence of security alterations could open the floodgates to what demonetisation tried to obstruct: corruption. Ceasing to comply with global standards in security features might lead to undesirable complications. The government needs to make a statement on the situation.

MANICKAM VALLIAPPAN, Coimbatore

■ If 11 out of 17 security features have been duplicated, it implies that we are just about 35% safe. It would be time-consuming to expect verification of all the security features in day-to-day transactions. If counterfeiting is not dealt with with an iron hand, history will record demonetisation as nothing more than an overambitious

and poorly planned and managed circus with political motives. The common man will only continue to suffer.

SRIHARSHA S., Chennai

Highway liquor ban

Though the liquor ban is for the right cause – to prevent drunken driving and road accidents from happening – going about it by setting limits for shops does not seem to be a well-thought-out idea (Editorial - "Wine and whimper", April 3). Banning liquor shops on National and State highways and alongside many urban roads is unjustified as these are the roads which are generally "sufficiently" protected by local police. Rather, such a ban is required in the interiors of cities and districts, where illegal liquor sale is quite rampant. These areas are also less patrolled by the police.

There is a need to focus more on the illegal trade of liquor. Bar coding and holograms on alcohol bottles to check illegal sale, increase in tax, and time limits in pubs can be considered.

PANKAJ SHARMA, Chandigarh

■ If someone is determined to get a drink before setting off on a drive, half a kilometre is not going to be a deterrent. Those who are drunk and who stagger out of a party are untouched by the ban, as are those who treat a bottle as a driving accessory. Of course, the order will go some way in reducing accidents, but strict implementation of traffic rules and transportation norms still remains the key. Officials must also be held responsible for accidents for yet another reason: unsafe road conditions. Every year, lakhs are injured

or die due to dangerous or careless driving. The Centre and States must come up with a solution rather than leave it to the judiciary to come up with piecemeal solutions.

J. AKSHOBHYA, Mysuru

Rising mercury

Advance information on extreme weather conditions can help one cope with them (Editorial - "Coping with summer", April 3). The pertinent issue is the availability of water, and the best time to prepare and plan for water conservation is before the monsoon sets in. Rainwater harvesting has been successful but only to a limited extent because of a lack of preparation and implementation.

BALASUBRAMANIAM PAVANI, Secunderabad

■ Environmentalists have been struggling to point out that dwindling green cover

and shrinking waterbodies are issues within our control. Rampant real estate development and concretisation are also why we are faced with such a miserable condition. Studies have shown that buildings, roads and other hard surfaces absorb and store heat whereas vegetation reflects heat. China has realised rather late in the day that it needs vertical forests – buildings that are designed to incorporate lush greenery along their facades, with trees and hedging sprouting from external gardens – to tackle its deadly smog and pollution.

Why shouldn't Van Mahotsav, which was started in 1950, get the same hype and importance that the Swachh Bharat mission has?

V. NAGARAJAN, Chennai

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Back to the Bahujan model?

To retain relevance, the BSP will have to return to the early investments in constructing a Bahujan ideology and organisation that it lost along the way



KANCHAN CHANDRA

With only 19 seats in the U.P. Assembly in 2017, and repeated losses in parliamentary and Assembly elections in the last 10 years, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) is fighting for its life. The plunge in seats is not accompanied by a similar plunge in votes. But in a 'first past the post' electoral system, minor shifts in votes can cause massive shifts in seats.

The BSP's survival crisis is about something more than the party: it is about the nature of identity-based politics that the BSP represents. To understand why, consider the way in which the two main alternatives, the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), appeal to Dalits.

Appeals to Dalits

The Congress appeals to Dalits by promising assimilation into a national mainstream. Its most prominent Dalit leader, Meira Kumar, personifies this promise. The soft-spoken Ms. Kumar, who rose to become India's first woman Speaker, has opposed a caste census on the grounds that it would deepen caste divisions. "We must mainstream them," she says of Dalits in her election speeches. In referring to Dalits as "them" rather than "us", she distances herself not just from some attributes associated with a Dalit identity, but from the identity itself. Moreover, this statement implies that the mainstream is already defined, and that Dalits are passive subjects who must be "brought into" it by more autonomous others.

The BJP appeals to Dalits by promising immersion in a Hindu mainstream. This does not imply passivity as the Congress model does. It calls for self-transformation on the part of all members of the emergent Hindu nation. But in the past, self-transformation has for many Dalits in the BJP taken the form of self-sanitisation. As one BJP regional leader previously told me: "I am neat and clean, not dirty like many other SCs. We are the caste that is nearest to Savarna (upper caste) Hindus. We do clean work." He had, in his many years in the Bharatiya Jana Sangh and BJP, internalised stereotypes about both Dalits and upper castes, and come to accept that the model Hindu was an upper caste Hindu.

The BSP's form of identity-based as-



Losing ground: "The BSP's crisis is about something more than the party: it is about the nature of identity-based politics that the BSP represents." Party supporters assemble in Lucknow to offer tribute to Kanshi Ram on his 10th death anniversary. *RAJEEV BHATT

sertion, by contrast, is based on pride in Dalit identity as it exists in the present, not on the promise of assimilation or transformation in the future. The contrast was spelt out by Mayawati in her 1985 by-election campaign against Ms. Kumar when she declared flatly, "*Main Chamar ki beti hoon* (I am the daughter of a Chamar)." This has been a recurring refrain in her election campaigns although she sometimes switches to calling herself a "*Dalit ki beti* (daughter of a Dalit)".

There is no transformation required to claim this identity. The only transformation that she and Kanshi Ram called for is for Dalits to become more vigilant in the defence of their interests. When I once asked her if she had ever experienced discrimination herself, she said no: "*Main to hoshiaar thi* (I was vigilant)." The implication was clear. In order to be treated better, fellow Dalits must become vigilant too. This did not require them to alter something fundamental about their identity. In fact, many Dalits who attended BSP meetings in the early years told me about the thrill of self-recognition that they experienced in these meetings. They did not have to become someone else in order to take pride in themselves.

The BSP is not the first to articulate

this form of Dalit assertion – it has been voiced earlier, and more consistently, by social reform movements, in a large body of Dalit literature, and by parties and organisations including the Republican Party of India and the Dalit Panthers. But because the BSP repeatedly won control of government, it has had a deeper and wider impact in challenging discrimination against Dalits and in reshaping public discourse.

Altering the public discourse

When the BSP first came to power, Dalits in most parts of India were called Harijans. The BSP focused attention on the patronising assumptions hidden behind the use of that word, popularising the term "Dalit", once restricted to Maharashtra and parts of the south, nationwide. When the BSP first came to power, B.R. Ambedkar was still portrayed primarily as a Dalit leader. The BSP stimulated a rewriting of history that recognised him as a national, and not only Dalit, icon. When the BSP first came to power, the practice of naming thousands of roads and bridges and airports and buildings and government schemes after a single family – the Nehru-Gandhis – had become so routine as to be unremarkable. But when the BSP began erecting statues to

Kanshi Ram and Ms. Mayawati, any criticism of this as a self-aggrandising move had to acknowledge also the older forms of self-aggrandisement that had become acceptable in democratic politics. When the BSP came to power there were only the beginnings of awareness about the upper caste bias in the English-language media. But when the BSP began to ignore the English media altogether – and to win elections despite that – it brought the question of media bias front and centre. The BSP's form of Dalit assertion, in other words, changed the mainstream discourse rather than simply "being brought into it".

So why did the BSP lose, especially when its healthy vote share suggests that it likely retained much of its core, predominantly Dalit, vote base? The answer lies in its failure and the BJP's success, in crafting the right caste-based combinations.

For the BSP, the winning of elections has always depended on what its workers call the "plus" factor. In every constituency, it counted on the votes of Dalits plus some section of others (backward castes and Muslims initially, and upper castes eventually). For the BJP, it has depended on what could be called the "minus" factor. As one party worker in U.P. said to me: "*Hum Muslims*

ko minus karke chaltein hain (We proceed by subtracting Muslims)." The BJP aimed to build a winning vote by cobbling together the support of Hindu upper castes, backward castes and Dalits – everyone but the Muslims. This is an old strategy for the BJP, taken to a new, more systematic, level in 2017.

But a substantial difference has emerged over time in the terms in which both parties construct these combinations.

Weakened infrastructure

In the beginning, the BSP sought to construct these combinations through painstaking ideological mobilisation. Under Kanshi Ram's leadership, the BSP held regular cadre camps, study sessions and political rallies in which it propagated a vision of the Bahujan Samaj as a rainbow coalition of subaltern groups. The BSP's cultural pantheon has from its inception included important figures from across these groups: in addition to Ambedkar, it includes Jyotiba Phule, Narayana Guru, Chhatrapati Sahuji Maharaj, and Periyar. It also built a second- and third-line leadership from among backward castes and other Bahujan categories through the allocation of posts in the party organisation.

Electoral arithmetic – alliances and tickets – was always an important part of this effort. In fact, Kanshi Ram chose the name "Bahujan", or "majority", for his new party, not only because of its association with non-Brahmin social movements but also because the name signalled that this party had the numbers to be a viable winner. The arithmetic was backed by an ideological and organisational infrastructure. Over the years, the BSP stopped investing in this infrastructure, relying on the promise of power to compensate. But a party that depends only on winning cannot withstand repeated losses and that is why the party is now in such dire straits.

BJP outreach, Modi resonance

The BJP and the Sangh Parivar, by contrast, back their appeal to Dalits and backward castes by a strong ideological and organisational infrastructure. This infrastructure has become stronger and more innovative at a time when the BSP's infrastructure has weakened. The Sangh Parivar has also begun to re-define the model Hindu in a way that incorporates Dalit and backward caste cultural symbols. In 1983, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh created the Samajik Samrasta Manch (Social Assimilation Platform), with the goal of har-

monising "the Phule-Ambedkar thought with the Hindutva philosophy". In 1989, the Vishva Hindu Parishad ensured that it was a Dalit who laid the first brick for the Ram temple at Ayodhya. The Sangh Parivar also has a large network of service organisations for Dalits and other subaltern groups. The BJP also has a strong organisation which has produced a credible second- and third-line leadership from these groups.

And then there is Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has become a transformative figure in the knitting together of these coalitions. Mr. Modi claims his backward caste identity proudly. "The next decade," he has said repeatedly, "will belong to the Dalits and the backwards." This is a remarkable statement for the leader of India's largest upper caste-dominated party to make. It is responsible in no small measure for the BJP's success in crafting coalitions between subaltern castes and upper castes that would have been unthinkable 20 years ago.

At the same time, Mr. Modi's public persona reinvents the notion of self-transformation embedded in BJP ideology. He acknowledges his caste identity without being defined by it, illustrating by example a way to transcend caste without denial or distancing. Further, the narrative of his own transformation from a tea seller's son to Prime Minister suggests that it need not mean self-sanitisation, or a disowning of identity, but self-realisation: an honouring of the deepest aspirations associated with that identity. It is a powerful appeal especially in the new economy. And Ms. Mayawati's persona does not have the same power against it that it did against Ms. Kumar in the pre-liberalisation India of 1985.

If the BSP is not to become just another blip in the political landscape, it will have to return to the early investments in constructing a Bahujan ideology and organisation that it lost along the way. What is more, it will also have to adapt its ideology in the face of a new political opponent. This is difficult, maybe unlikely. But, given the small shift in votes required for a large shift in seats, it is not impossible. If the BSP preserves a space in the political arena, the gainer will be not just the BSP but a healthy democratic discourse. If it does not, the loser will also be not just the BSP, but that discourse and all of the rest of us.

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SINGLE FILE

Audiences without films

Small budget films are denied the minimum opportunity to cater to an audience they already have

KUNAL RAY



A quick Google search for shows of the highly applauded Swara Bhaskar-starrer *Anaarkali of Aarah* in Pune threw up only one multiplex that is screening the film. The timing of the show and location of the multiplex didn't help either. Do you recall the

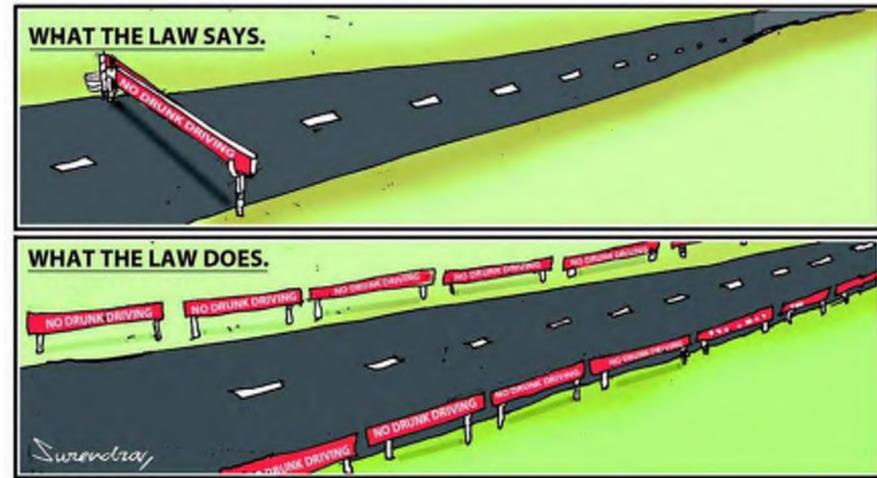
last time you saw a character from Aarah on screen? I don't. A lot has been written about Bhaskar's preparation for the film. I am relieved by her selection; what a respite it is to not see a "star", say, a Katrina Kaif or a Jacqueline Fernandez, essay the role while trying to "get into the skin of the character"! But I also wonder if Kaif, say, could have attracted more attention to the film, resulting in more screening slots. Which brings us to the question: is cinema all about stargazing? Perhaps yes, which is why I feel increasingly distraught when films like *Anaarkali* are systematically denied an audience. This seems like an organised cohort to muzzle independent, small films. We experienced this with *Ship of Theseus* and *Masaan*. At least they had the support of Kiran Rao and Anurag Kashyap, both power centres of alternative filmmaking. Even Gurvinder Singh's *Chauthi Koot* had to struggle for decent slots.

Give them a chance

This bespeaks of a denial of opportunity to many of us who want to see these films in a movie hall. Before we even begin to discuss market figures and cite lack of an audience as a possible reason, I know many people who feel this is a denial of access; an undemocratic move. It is in the stillness of the movie hall where a silent dialogue between the image and the viewer transpires; DVD viewing is at most an intrepid exercise in comparison. Small budget films like *Anaarkali* pick up by word of mouth. They are also often dubbed as "sleeper hits", a term I find difficult to comprehend. Needless to say they lack the advertising mettle of, say, a Karan Johar film, which, even if mediocre, will obtain the lion's share of screening slots for its star power and clout in the film market. On the other hand, small budget films like *Anaarkali* are denied the minimum opportunity to cater to an audience they already have.

How do I watch the film then? Wait for a pirated download or a TV premiere? Or is this film denied to us because 'woman-centric' films don't set the cash registers ringing unless backed by a mega star like Amitabh Bachchan (*Pink*)? And what is a woman-centric film anyway? Did we call *Sultan* or *Raees* 'men-centric'? Of course the market/business are important, but how do we arrive at these decisions without even giving the film a fair chance to engage with an audience? What if the audience likes the film and chooses to tell their friends, thus mentoring a new audience altogether for such experiments? Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie once said: "Stories matter, many stories matter." Similarly, films matter, many films matter. Audiences should be granted an opportunity to watch a film before embracing or discarding it. Is that too much to ask for?

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CONCEPTUAL Schrödinger's Cat

QUANTUM MECHANICS

To highlight the flaws of the "Copenhagen interpretation" of quantum mechanics, which states that a particle exists in all states at once until observed, Erwin Schrödinger came up with a hypothetical experiment. In this, a cat is placed in a sealed box along with a radioactive sample, a Geiger counter, and a bottle of poison. If the radioactive material decays, the Geiger counter will detect it and the bottle of poison will be smashed and the cat killed. If the radioactive material does not decay and the cat is still alive, the Geiger counter will not detect it and the bottle of poison will not be smashed and the cat will be alive. This is the Schrödinger's Cat paradox.

MORE ON THE WEB

To escape into a movie, escape from the movies <http://bit.ly/loveformovies>

ABSTRACT

The magic sieve

A method to efficiently get potable water from seawater

R. PRASAD

Producing potable water through desalination may become more efficient and less energy-intensive if researchers at the University of Manchester are able to successfully use graphene oxide (GO) membranes to filter common salts in seawater on a commercial scale.

The use of GO as a molecular sieve to filter common salts from seawater while allowing water to pass through it is already known. But GO membranes have a tendency to slightly swell when immersed in water and this results in increased spacing between successive sheets (akin to increasing the pore size of a sieve). The increased spacing allows smaller salts to flow through the membrane along with water without being filtered.

A team led by Professor Rahul Raveendran Nair from the National Graphene Institute, Uni-

versity of Manchester, has addressed this problem by developing GO membranes that do not swell when immersed in water and are able to sieve common salts. In a paper titled "Tunable sieving of ions using graphene oxide membranes" published on April 3 in *Nature Nanotechnology*, the researchers write that they were able to achieve a certain interlayer spacing by storing the membranes in high humidity and then physically restraining them from swelling by embedding them in epoxy. This altered the rate at which water permeated through the membranes.

The researchers also tried an alternative technique of adding graphene flakes to GO to prevent the membranes from swelling. Though the epoxy coating gives better control over swelling, large area membrane fabrication may be difficult and time-consuming. Producing scalable membranes

for desalination application will be possible by adding graphene flakes to GO instead.

The water molecules that get strongly bound to common salts increase the diameter of salt ions and are hence unable to pass through the tiny space between the sheets; water molecules with weak hydrogen bonding are easily able to pass through the membrane. The membranes developed by the team can be used for waste water treatment even when no energy is supplied.

Preliminary experiments by the team found clogging of the membranes with salt was negligible and the membrane can be recovered to the original state by a simple washing process. They do not anticipate any significant fouling due to the inertness of graphene surface. More studies are needed before the membranes can be commercialised.

FROM The Hindu ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO APRIL 4, 1967

U.S. authorises non-project loan

The U.S. Government has authorised a loan of \$132 million (Rs. 99 crores) to the Government of India to finance the import of commodities, machinery and spare parts needed to further stimulate agricultural and industrial production. The loan was announced to-day [April 3] by the U.S. Ambassador, Mr. Chester Bowles, in New Delhi and in Washington before the U.S. Agency for International Development. This is the third non-project loan extended to India by the U.S. during the past 12 months.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO APRIL 4, 1917

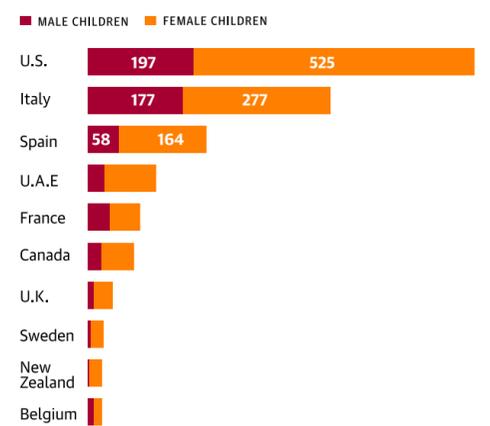
A Palghat sensation

A branch of the Anti-Indenture League was started here [Palghat] in February last under very good auspices. It is notorious that Palghat and its neighbourhood has been the exploiting ground of many an unscrupulous recruiter, so much so that nearly one thousand to two thousand coolies are made to migrate from here to the Colonies. The scandal has become so great that some of our public spirited young men took time by the forelock and started the League when the wave of enthusiasm against indenture was at its height in the country and as a necessary corollary, active campaign began. Preachers went into the countryside, took advantage of the presence of the masses during festivals and lectured to them on the evils of the notorious indentured system.

DATA POINT

Girl preference

Of the 1,998 children legally adopted in India by foreigners in the last four years (April 2013 to March 27, 2017), more than two-thirds (1,402) were girl children. Graph shows the top 10 countries from where the inter-country adoptions were done



SOURCE: CENTRAL ADOPTION RESOURCE AUTHORITY