

PM Modi's Invitation to a Conversation

Step up to give Gol 'constructive criticism'

Communication, as the best of communicators know, is a two-way street. This is something that PM Narendra Modi underlined on Sunday through the medium of his radio address. His invitation to receive 'constructive criticism' of his government's performance over the last three years may seem rhetorical. With a political mandate that can be misconstrued as successful governance in itself, the PM reminded the commentator that the two are different beasts: the former being a means to the latter's end.

True, Modi's welcoming of 'constructive criticism' comes from a position of luxury that the soft cushion of power brings. But what he is seeking — especially in the relative absence of any real political opposition at the Centre — is feedback. Along with the formidable, and comforting, image of the prime minister addressing the nation from a pulpit (or from a Franklin D Roosevelt-style radio fireside chat), a coexisting image of a more democratic conversation is being sought by him. It is exactly because of the political surety that this government possesses that it isn't oversensitive to critique. This is what Modi seemed to highlight — an invitation to be frank, with the corollary: 'Don't worry, we can take flak'.

'Constructive' is the operative word in 'constructive criticism', knee-jerk castigation having had its share of play in the past. But governance itself is a process. This requires issue-based feedback, policy-specific judgements. It is in this context that commentators, more objective than dogmatists on either side of the 'ideological divide', can engage in a conversation that, as Modi emphasised, is good for democracy and, indeed, for government. There are enough reasons to pat this government on its back as it completes three years since it took on its project. The reasons for such applause, like the applause itself, are all too visible. But there are issues that Modi and his team wish to hear honest feedback about and may not have had the opportunity to yet. Some may not be even 'music to the ears'. But it is exactly this plainspeak that the prime minister is asking for. Even as he walks his talk, he also wants to listen.



STATE OF PLAY Gen Bipin Rawat could be the architect of a new working pattern for the army Officer in the Barracks



Pranab Dhal Samanta

There's a discernible churn in the army, and its new chief General Bipin Rawat is at the heart of it. No need to start judging just yet. But it's important to understand the moving pieces. Because if it stays the course, this could mark a significant break from the pattern of working the army has settled itself into in the recent past.

Three decisions of Rawat stand out — rather, set him apart from the routine his predecessors followed.

First, the decision to give a commendation card to Major Leethul Gogoi despite all the outrage, for tying up a Kashmiri stone-pelter to his vehicle as a human shield to bring out stranded polling staff. Second, ending the periodic government-military pay commission stand-off through a new deal despite internal resistance. And third, moving a proposal to end the deployment of combatants as 'sahayaks' in face of continuing internal dissent.

Let us start with Gogoi. He is not the typical upper-crust army officer who joined the army through the National Defence Academy (NDA). In fact, Lt Ummer Fayaz, the slain Kashmiri officer, was in that privileged NDA lot, who usually, due to their early grooming and younger age of commission, have the best chance of making it to the higher rungs of the army hierarchy.

Gogoi, on the other hand, joined the army not as an officer but as a regular

soldier in the Assam Regiment. He, however, took the difficult challenge of clearing exams from within the system and made it through the Army Cadet College (ACC) entry.

The strike rate through this channel is usually low, given the tedious transformation one has to make from the lower ranks to the officer cadre. It's not just a job change but a class transformation in a highly conservative saheb-jawaan hierarchy, which has its roots in the colonial origins of the Indian Army.

By publicly acknowledging Gogoi's actions as correct and giving him a Chief of Army Staff (COAS) Commendation Card, Rawat cut through the army's iron-cast hierarchy to send a strong message of solidarity down to the last rifleman. Gogoi, after all, is one among them, who made it to the officer cadre.

Stand at Ease

Most chiefs, like Rawat, would probably stand by the officer because such seemingly appalling methods are not unusual in the army as long as the larger mission — in this case, the safe exit of polling staff — is accomplished. Except that, as the norm has come to be in such controversial cases in the Valley, the top brass may commend the officer in private while maintaining a public posture of inquiring into the matter.

Rawat broke away from this established norm to institutionally back and honour Gogoi in public. This is a significant shift in the army's approach in Kashmir; a conscious decision to take on the anti-army perception, draw new red lines, and be aggressive in response.

As a result, the army chief has also set the stage for a fresh debate on bringing amendments to the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) to nullify the Supreme Court order in the matter, which includes a leeway to



...and to cap it off

register FIRs on military encounters.

In many ways, Rawat has ripped open a fundamental question of whether or not the time has come to officially frame the Valley as a 'war zone' so as to pre-empt a repeat of the late 1980s, the last turning point when Pakistan-sponsored militancy entrenched itself in the state.

Pay and pension privileges don't usually go with strategy-making in Kashmir. But these are files that may well lie side by side on an army chief's table. Regardless of the government in power, this is an issue on which the three service chiefs have mostly presented a united front, to the extent of being criticised as a 'unionised' front. And the army chief, by the sheer numbers of his force, is very much the fulcrum of this solidarity.

Rawat peeled away a bit, secured and consented on a deal that addressed the concerns of majority soldiers, and ended a stalemate because of which the armed forces were not getting their new salaries. While the officer cadre may not have been fully satisfied, particularly at senior levels, the message was once again sent down the rank and file.

The clearest message of recognis-

ing the army's changing profile at the entry point was Rawat's move to push a proposal to bar combatants from being made sahayaks. He, instead, feels a small cadre of civilians should be hired for this purpose, so that trained combatants don't have to do this job.

March Forward

He is up against internal resistance on this as well. But just like the phone number he has set up for any military personnel to register a grievance directly with the chief, this again is an effort at cutting past traditional military hierarchy.

For someone, who is sort of army blue blood, being a son of a general officer himself, the hierarchical disruption is unlikely to create a class divide in the army. But what's probably clear is the makings of a new Spartanism under the leadership of an army chief, who for all his pedigree, is surprisingly frugal: he pays bills for even official gatherings at home, and till date, makes it a point to mend and clean his own uniform just like the soldier in the barracks.

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the speaking tree

The Golden Mean & Pairs

AKHIL CHANDRA

We live in a world of opposites where gain and loss, good and bad, pleasure and pain, life and death are as inevitable as the two sides of a coin. Yet, there is an underlying unity between the two contrasts.

One of the principal polarities in life is the one between the male and female side of human nature. The sublime union between these two aspects is symbolised by Lord Shiva's depiction as a dynamic unification of the two, as the half-male, half-female Ardhanareeshwar. In real life, too, there is a constant dynamic interplay between the two extremes of opposites and one has to strike a balance between the two. For this, we need to maintain a balance between good and bad, between winning and losing and so on.

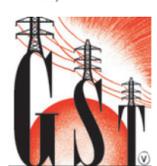
The Bhagavad Gita asks us to lead the unattached life of a self-controlled man, a karma yogi unmoved by pairs of opposites. "The Supreme Spirit is rooted in the knowledge of the self-controlled man whose mind is perfectly serene in the midst of pairs of opposites such as cold and heat, joy and sorrow, and honour and ignominy." Chinese sages called this dynamic interplay of two extremes as Ying and Yang — positive and negative — and have extended this thought extensively to the function of daily life.

One should accommodate widely divergent human experiences in an underlying harmony, bringing newer prospects and ethical views for the exploration and mitigation of human suffering. One cannot always win or lose or be happy or sad — so go on, find the Golden Mean.

Bring Electricity Under GST Soon

One glaring anomaly in the forthcoming rollout of the goods and services tax (GST) is that electricity duty remains outside its purview. While scores of central and state taxes are to be done away with to usher in GST — so as to modernise the indirect tax regime, eschew cascading taxes on inputs, with set-offs provided for taxes already paid in the value chain — an important sector like electricity is to remain outside the GST regime for the foreseeable future.

Such exclusion makes no sense. Electricity duty can be as high as 25-30% in a few states, but the average is about 8% levied on consumers. The tax needs to be made amenable for input tax credit, otherwise it would in effect cascade economy-wide. Keeping something as essential as electricity outside GST would be retrograde, inefficient and perversely deny input tax credits in a vital sector that is undergoing path-breaking and transformative change. Note that the GST Act defines 'work contracts' as services. And the power sector is essentially a mesh of contracts for engineering, procurement, construction (EPC) to generate electricity, boost energy efficiency and shore up renewable power. Yet, input tax credit would not be available on EPC contracts, with electricity outside the GST regime. Further, the Finance Act of 1994, in section 66D, lists transmission and distribution (T&D) of electricity in the negative list of services. So, no input tax credit is possible for T&D activity either. Keeping electricity outside GST is not international practice.



The state governments seem chary of giving up electricity duty as they collect considerable sums on that account, even as they surreptitiously seek to indulge in fiscally reckless giveaways in power. Including electricity in GST would actually boost transparency in the sector.

As a publisher of school textbooks and an owner of a private school, I often find myself in the unique position of observing educational publishing from both ends of the table. So, the latest government decision to make National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) books mandatory for Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE)-affiliated schools took me aback.

There is no law that states that CBSE schools should only use NCERT books. Every five years, the government is supposed to release a National Curriculum Framework (NCF) that broadly highlights the aims, objectives and learning outcomes of the syllabus for students for the next five years. The last NCF released was in 2005. Why has the government not focused on this till date?

And what about government schools? Nobody seems to be much concerned about them. Have enrolments in government schools increased? Can Class 4 students there read and write? Has the proxy attendance of the teachers stopped? Has any month passed by where we don't hear children being admitted in hospitals because of the poor quality of midday meals provided? These are some of the questions that the government should look into instead of shifting attention of the public towards private schools and publishers and the textbooks that must be used for teaching.

The NCERT has not been able to meet its existing demand in the market. Around 2,000 schools had placed orders with the NCERT, which, on its part, has not published all the books in the

'mandatory list' till date. As a result, the session has started but there are no books. Schools, booksellers, parents and, above all, children are suffering because of this. I know about a group of schools in south India specially ordering their books from a bookseller in Delhi simply because there is no bookseller who is able to meet their demands due to local scarcity.

If there is a scarcity of NCERT textbooks even after when there are over 1,000 private publishers in India supplying books to private schools, how does the NCERT plan to supply books to all 18,000 schools? How does it plan to scale up operations? The NCERT provides no real explanation.

In a recent meeting conducted by the CBSE, it was insisted that all school principals use NCERT books. When the issue of scarcity of textbooks was brought up, the response was that these books "are available online". This presupposes that every student possesses — or has the provision of using — a computer for these online books to be downloaded on to. This doesn't even address the question of what the student is to do in a computer-less classroom, never mind issues

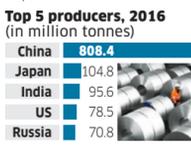
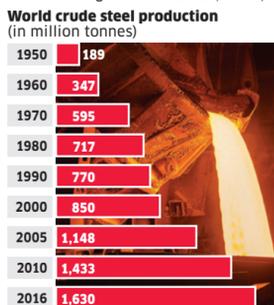


"Guard against the impostures of pretended patriotism."

George Washington Politician

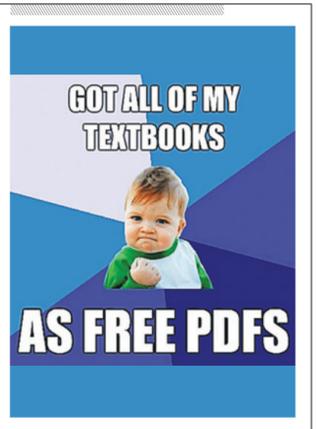
Steel the Show

In 1967, the world produced just less than 500 million tonnes of steel. Fifty years later, global output increased more than three-fold to 1.6 billion tonnes, with most of the growth coming from newly industrialising countries: Brazil, China, India, Iran and Mexico...



*Finished steel products

MEME'S THE WORD



PRIMARY EDUCATION

Play It by the Textbook



Ankit Gupta

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Shouldering another burden

of maintenance.

Do we expect our schoolchildren from Classes 1 to 8 to carry a laptop or a tablet to school? Every parent is not capable of buying a laptop or tablet. And every school is not able to offer a computer, laptop or tablet to each student for free. So, clearly, this is not an idea for the masses and will not solve the problem of paucity of textbooks.

Another way out is photocopying or printing out textbooks that are downloaded. In the market, a black-and-white printout costs ₹1. So, an average 'book' of 150 pages will cost ₹150. This will not be bound and not be coloured. If you were to get colour printouts and have them bound, these books would end up costing you around ₹235. Now, if a private publisher is offering the same thing at an average cost of ₹200, is that really such a bad deal?

One of the reasons why NCERT books are cheap is because of the subsidised paper that the government uses for printing them. This is not the case with private publishers. Paper prices in the last few months have shot up by at least 15%.

Private publishers use a very high quality paper as compared to that used in NCERT textbooks. Paper constitutes a major part of costing. Unless it is subsidised by the government for use in textbooks, there is nothing that can be done to bring down the prices of textbooks.

Let us also not forget that children study from books published by private publishers to prepare for major entrance exams like the IIT-JEE (Indian Institute of Technology-Joint Entrance Examination). A student can never appear for such challenging examinations by studying from NCERT textbooks alone.

My aim is not to prove parents or the government wrong about their agitation over book prices or policies, but to make people aware and appreciate the role of private publishers in providing education material. Making NCERT textbooks the only material available for schools is not the right way forward.

Citings

Product Dynamics

CNNANASAMBANDAM ET AL

Product managers are the glue that bind the many functions that touch a product: engineering, design, customer success, sales, marketing, operations, finance, legal and more. Unlike product managers of the past, who were primarily focused on execution and were measured by the on-time delivery of engineering projects, today's product manager is increasingly the mini-CEO of the product.

They wear many hats, using a broad knowledge base to make trade-off decisions, and bring together cross-functional teams, ensuring alignment between diverse functions. The emergence of the mini-CEO product manager is driven by changes in technology, development methodologies and how consumers purchase...

While software-as-a-service products are becoming simpler for customers, with modular features, they are increasingly complex for product managers. Managers must now oversee multiple bundles, pricing tiers, dynamic pricing, up-sell paths and pricing strategy. Life cycles are also becoming more complex, with expectations of new features, frequent improvements and upgrades after purchase.

Further, the value of the surrounding ecosystem is growing; modern products are increasingly just one element in an ecosystem of related services and businesses. This has led to a shift in responsibilities from business development and marketing to product managers.

From "Product Managers for the Digital World"

Chat Room

Technology is Like Curate's Egg

Apropos 'IT's Alive & Kicking' by N Chandrasekaran (May 29), creation of more jobs by using new technology is confined to industries like IT and healthcare; labour-intensive industries like construction, agriculture and manufacturing suffer contraction. Secondly, technology gives synergic results depending on the economies of scale. Also, nearly half the workforce employed in MSMEs limits the application of technology. Thirdly, such jobs require higher education and, thus, shut the doors for the large number of unemployed. We need cautious planning.

Y G CHOUKSEY Pune

Retrain Older IT Hands Too

This refers to 'IT's Alive & Kicking'. The ground realities show that people who have put in 10 years or more in this sector will find it difficult to shift immediately to emerging skills.

The urgent need for the larger IT companies is to empower this workforce with new, updated skills in fields like data-related technologies and AI. A policy of retaining retrained workforce and regular absorption of fresh talent will contribute towards fast, healthy growth of the IT industry.

A MOHAN Chennai

Institutions for Project Funding

Apropos the Edit, "Target the System, Not Just Individuals" (May 29), why should large projects be financed by banks, all the more when commercial banks are financing these long-term projects out of their short-term resources of deposits? But we have allowed development finance institutions like ICICI and IDBI to become universal banks to tap cheap funds in the market. The solution: start similar exclusive institutions for infrastructure financing, since corporate bonds for such financing are not feasible as the investors are not ready to invest in such a bond market.

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