

ACROSS THE AISLE



P CHIDAMBARAM

Mr Modi should embrace new ideas irrespective of who has proposed them. The Direct Taxes Code is a big reform idea. Likewise, the recommendations of the Financial Sector Legislative Reforms Commission contain bold ideas. Reconstructing the delivery systems of education and health care will be a big reform. Throwing open higher education to world class universities will be a revolutionary idea

Behind the celebrations: no jobs, no peace

IN A democracy, people vote a party (or parties) into government so that their 'lives will be better'. That phrase, of course, is more complex than it seems. What makes life in the case of one person 'better' may not be true in the case of another person.

Under normal circumstances, an election is fought and won/lost on *roti, kapda* and *makan* issues. Other issues may intrude on the consciousness of the voter as she enters the polling station but, in normal circumstances, she will vote for more food, more job opportunities, more wages/income, better water and sanitation, better schools, better health care, better roads, better transport and so on. She will also vote for better security and a life without fear, without violence and without oppression.

In a multi-party democracy, a 31 per cent vote share undoubtedly qualifies as a clear mandate for the winner — the BJP led by Mr Narendra Modi — in the 2014 election. What resonated through the length and breadth of the country was 'sabka saath, sabka vikas' and the promise of 'achhe din'.

COUNTING THE REFORMS

At the end of three years, it is natural to make an assessment of the government's performance. I have already written on internal security and Kashmir (May 7, 2017) and on the rise of intolerance and the damage it is doing to the constitutional fabric of the country (May

14, 2017). While those concerns are important, the more important concern is the state of the economy — and its impact on the promise of a 'better life'.

Achhe din or a better life is possible only through radical and structural economic reforms, the kind that were first done in 1991-92. Against that benchmark, I am able to identify three measures done or attempted by the Modi government that would qualify as economic reforms:

- The passing of the GST laws (with all their flaws).
- The passing of the Bankruptcy and Insolvency Code.
- The constitution of the Monetary Policy Committee and the setting of an inflation target for the RBI.

All three are works in progress, but I place my hope in the success of these measures.

Besides, the government has effected some incremental changes that any government would have done. These include liberalising the FDI limits in various sectors, allowing self-attestation of documents, and auctioning of natural resources consequent upon the judgments of the Supreme Court (although the economic costs of the State extracting a huge rent upfront have yet to be calculated).

MORE HYPE, LESS ACTION

At the end of three years, the economic report card of a party-government that has an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha has a rather modest score.

Moreover, the reforms attempted so far have not powered the engines of economic growth. As I had pointed out in the last column (May 21, 2017), the government has not been able to revive investment (as a percentage of GDP) or boost bank credit or create jobs. Add to this agrarian distress, the structural problems in the delivery of education and health care, and the lamentable state of water supply, sanitation and electricity distribution, the picture is one of a largely un-reformed economy.

Unfortunately, the energies of the government are dissipated in useless exercises. After making 'planning' a bad word, the government created a toothless NITI Aayog. The result: there is no body to rein in the soaring deficits of state governments and misallocations in state budgets; no body to draw up perspective plans for the medium term; and no one to present an alternative point of view at cabinet meetings. Another disastrous exercise was demonetisation. The post-demonetisation amnesty scheme netted a princely tax revenue of Rs 2,300 crore, bribes are being paid and taken in the new currency notes, and fake Rs 2,000 notes have already appeared. The only detail shrouded in secrecy is how much of the demonetised notes have come back to the RBI (which is still counting them)!

Other initiatives are mere slogans or acronyms. Clean India (Swachh Bharat), Make in India, Start up India, Digital India etc have made little difference to the economic system. Some ideas sit ill alongside the reality. A few Smart Cities (a still-

born idea after JNNURM was junked) cannot co-exist with urban blight and urban decay in almost all cities and towns. A 100,000-crore rupees bullet train cannot co-exist with ageing railway tracks and obsolete rolling stock.

HERE IS AN AGENDA

Mr Narendra Modi has a burning desire for greatness, but his government does not have big reform ideas. As a result, the government ends up doing big things in a bad way (e.g. GST) or bad things in a big way (e.g. demonetisation). Mr Modi should embrace new ideas irrespective of who has proposed them. The Direct Taxes Code is a big reform idea. Likewise, the recommendations of the Financial Sector Legislative Reforms Commission contain bold ideas. Reconstructing the dilapidated delivery systems of education and health care will be a big reform. Deconstructing the bureaucracy is another bold and necessary reform. Throwing open higher education to world class universities will be a revolutionary idea.

The Central government has still two full years of its term. Mr Narendra Modi should stay at the wheel until the last day and not give room to hubris (like the Vajpayee government did). The third anniversary celebrations will indicate the direction in which Mr Modi and his government are likely to go.

Website: pchidambaram.in @Pchidambaram_IN

FIFTH COLUMN



TAVLEEN SINGH

Bad times ahead?

SO THREE years of Modi Raj and India still India. Remember the prophecies of doom in our newspapers the day after that hot, white afternoon when Narendra Modi was sworn in as Prime Minister in the forecourt of Rashtrapati Bhavan on May 26, 2014? Remember the pontifications of political pundits who warned ominously that the ascent of the 'fascist' from Gujarat signalled the end of India? Remember Dr Manmohan Singh's prophecy that Modi's ascent to the job he then held would be a 'disaster'? And how can anyone forget that Congress party campaign video in which Sonia Gandhi so dramatically announced that if Modi became Prime Minister, only 'God can save India'.

Famous commentators remain even today who say, every chance they get, that there is an 'undeclared Emergency' in India and that goons have been given permission to take the law into their hands. Cow vigilantes roaming highways in search of Muslims and Dalits to hunt and kill help make the case that India has indeed slipped beyond the pale. But as a political commentator who remembers much worse times, I feel obliged this week to point out that there has been much less violence in the past three years than in 'secular' days of yore.

Nothing in the past three years compares with the violence that happened in the wake of Operation Blue Star. For more than a decade Punjab became a killing ground. Then, after Indira Gandhi's assassination, Delhi's streets were littered with the bodies of Sikhs, and apocalyptic visions once more rose. And, nothing that has happened in the past three years compares with the terrible communal violence that L K Advani's rath yatra to Ayodhya left in its wake. So many Muslims were killed then that we lost count of the number of dead and the number of riots. So although the despicable, cowardly cow vigilantes remain unchecked, their barbarism (videotaped on cellphones) does not compare with that annual bloodletting that took the form of major communal riots in earlier times. Even in Kashmir, which is today Modi's biggest political problem, there have been worse times. Much, much worse times.

So why does Modi remain a 'fascist' monster in the eyes of such a large, vocal group of Indians? Why do respectable foreign correspondents continue to repeat the lie that Gujarat in 2002 saw the worst communal violence in India since 1947? The simple answer is that Modi continues to be hated by Indian journalists of liberal persuasion, and liberals are articulate and convincing. It does not help that the Prime Minister has not held a single press conference in the past three years and it does not help that he chooses to stay so far away from the media that to actually get to meet him has become a privilege rather than the right that it should be.

Donald Trump despises the media but has given more press conferences and interviews in the past six months than Modi has in three years. This has damaged Modi more than it has the media. No amount of 'good news' on the Modi app and no amount of monologues on *Mann ki Baat* make up for the absence of real conversations with journalists, even those who hate him, and even those who ask difficult questions. What the Prime Minister seems not to have noticed is that his disdain for the media deprives him of vital feedback. It also deprives him of the chance to speak of his government's achievements. So the successes of Swachh Bharat, and there have been many, remain unsung as does the speed with which rural roads are being built and other things that indicate real 'parivartan'.

India remains India despite Modi, but there are signs of trouble ahead unless the Prime Minister finds his voice and discovers how important it is for him to lead more resolutely. Last week's horrible jihadi attack in Manchester comes as a reminder that India with the second largest Muslim population in the world has been relatively free from jihadi terrorism in the past three years. But there are ominous signs that Muslim communities across the country are beginning to feel that cow vigilantism has the sanction of the Prime Minister personally. They perhaps never believed the slogan of 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas' but they believe it less every time Muslim cattle traders and dairy farmers are attacked and killed on our highways.

In a recent conversation with ordinary Muslims in a mosque in eastern Uttar Pradesh I heard a sensible, middle-aged man say, "Yes in the old days there used to be terrible communal riots. We remember them. But, what is happening now is more insidious. It is as if they want us to accept that in India our status is now of second-class citizens." Only the Prime Minister can change this dangerous perception.

Follow Tavleen Singh on Twitter @tavleen_singh

INSIDE TRACK



COOMI KAPOOR

DUBIOUS AGE

It was a testimony to businessman MP Subhash Chandra's clout that both Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Pranab Mukherjee attended the 90th anniversary of the Essel Group along with several prominent politicians, sadhus, and Subrata Roy of the Sahara group, who is out on bail. However, halfway through the show, the PM and President left. After that, the programme became increasingly raunchy — leggy girls in revealing outfits bumping and grinding, and youth with their shirts unbuttoned twirling around, lifting the crooner. Incidentally, the claim of the Essel Group to be 90 years old is a trifle suspect. It is based on the date from which Chandra's grandfather Jagannath Goenka started his food grain trading shop in Mandi Adampur, Haryana, which later went bust. Chandra bought Essel packaging only in 1982. Before that he made his fortunes exporting inexpensive 'parmal' as costly Basmati rice to the Soviets, at the instance of known yoga guru Dharendra Brahmachari.

WILL THEY ACT?

A well-documented and revealing book, *The False Spy* by Major Nirmal Ajwani is to be released next month. It is not about Kulbhushan Jadhav — held by the Pakistan army — but the story of 67 Indian Army officers and jawans, including Major Ajwani, falsely accused and court-martialed in the mid-Seventies by our own Army. They were victims of the Samba spy hoax. A few criminally callous Indian military intelligence officers cooked up the spy story to advance their own careers. Many were tortured, jailed and disgraced. The key prosecution witness has since publicly confessed that he was coerced to give false statements in return for his own freedom. Over the years, much evidence has surfaced of the flawed prosecution case. The Delhi High Court exonerated two of the accused when the matter finally came up before a civilian court, paving the way for the other cases. But thanks to an intransigent Army headquarters, which did not want the system challenged, and a Supreme Court which refused to act proactively on technical grounds, the grave injustice has not been rectified even after four decades. Today, many of those who took up the cause of the victims of a fake plot are in key posi-

OUT OF MY MIND



MEGHNAD DESAI

THE AMERICAN media did not expect Donald Trump to win. But win he did. So they have been subjecting him to the utmost scrutiny any President has had. Whatever he does, the media have convinced themselves that he is no good. He should never have been elected. They now have built themselves a fantasy scenario in which Trump gets impeached by Congress

tions. Arun Jaitley, who was defence lawyer in the high court, is now Defence Minister. Attorney General Mukul Rohatgi and Additional Solicitor General Maninder Singh were also part of the defence team. NSA Ajit Doval, when he was in the Intelligence Bureau, fought to undo the wrong. His former boss V K Kaul had put it on record that he was convinced of their innocence. Will the Modi government finally rectify this grave injustice?

HIGH-FLYING PRABHU

A Gujarati pilgrim to Gangotri was impressed when he saw Railway Minister Suresh Prabhu standing in the queue just like everyone else. But what was not so impressive was Prabhu's decision to fly to Gangotri by a special chopper of the Uttarakhand government. Originally he was scheduled to take a commercial flight to Dehradun and from there board a helicopter. The minister felt that two trips would be cumbersome. So a chopper was flown from Dehradun to Delhi to pick him up and fly him directly to Gangotri. The cost for the round trip: Rs 16 lakh.

NURSING A GRUDGE

All the important leaders of Rajasthan attended the first annual Bhairon Singh Shekhawat lecture by President Pranab Mukherjee in Jaipur last week. Governor of Punjab V P Singh Badnore suggested that Jaipur's Sanganer airport be re-named after Shekhawat, who was thrice chief minister of Rajasthan. Since both Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje and former CM Ashok Gehlot were present at the function, Badnore pointed out that a joint resolution to this effect could be introduced in the state Assembly. The audience broke into wild applause. Gehlot nodded his head, but Raje sat stiffly without acknowledging the suggestion. She has not forgotten that Shekhawat and she were once in opposite camps in state BJP politics.

NOWHERE TO GO

Leader of the Opposition in the Gujarat Assembly Shankersinh Vaghela has made his unhappiness clear to his party. The Congress is unwilling to declare him as the party chief ministerial candidate before the coming Assembly elections, even though he commands the loyalty of a majority of the Congress MLAs. Vaghela may sulk, but he has nowhere to go. PM Modi is unwilling to forgive his old rival in the BJP. Vaghela is believed to have leaked the news of Modi's child marriage to the media. Vaghela has reportedly been told by the BJP that it is willing to accept his son Mahendrasinh Vaghela, an MLA, but not him. Even his son's admission is dependent on Vaghela followers defecting as well. Though the party may not be averse to making Vaghela a governor.

Why we must talk of Hashimpura

GAINED IN TRANSLATION



VIBHUTI NARAIN RAI
विभूति नारायण राय

You are subject to some experiences that stick with you through life. They haunt you like a nightmare and, at times, are like debts on your shoulders. Thirty years ago, on the night of May 22, 1987, I was exposed to one such nightmarish experience. Standing on the bank of the muddy and slow moving Gang canal, I was witness to the worst custodial killing in independent India. I spent many hours in the wild undergrowth along a stream, flowing through Makanpur village on the Delhi-Ghaziabad border, looking for any living soul among the bloodied dead bodies under the dim light of my torch — much of it is still engraved in my memory like a horror movie.

As events unfolded, we would find out that the PAC, the armed wing of the Uttar Pradesh Police, had picked up dozens of Muslims from Hashimpura, a locality in the adjoining city of Meerut, and killed them in cold blood at two places on the Gang canal. In the midst of all the din and confusion, blood and flesh, emotions and prejudices, the writer beneath my uniform knew that one day I would write on this gory experience. That may be the only way to repay the debt which I owe because of the violence unleashed by my fellow khaki brethren.

There is an old saying that language is a very poor substitute for thought. I would realise it fully only when I eventually got down to writing this book. I discovered how difficult it is to capture the pain and the wails of the victims and their families. The writer in me never faced such a challenge before.

I am essentially a fiction writer, and sometimes, I draw certain characters from real-life experiences. They become my own once entrapped in my plot, and I play with them as per my creative requirement. But the characters of Hashimpura, both the living and the dead, refused to be subservient to me. In fact, I submitted myself to them. They would walk, sleep and live with me and didn't allow me any liberties. The monstrosity of the incident was so overpowering that it laid a virtual siege on me, and writing on it often left me

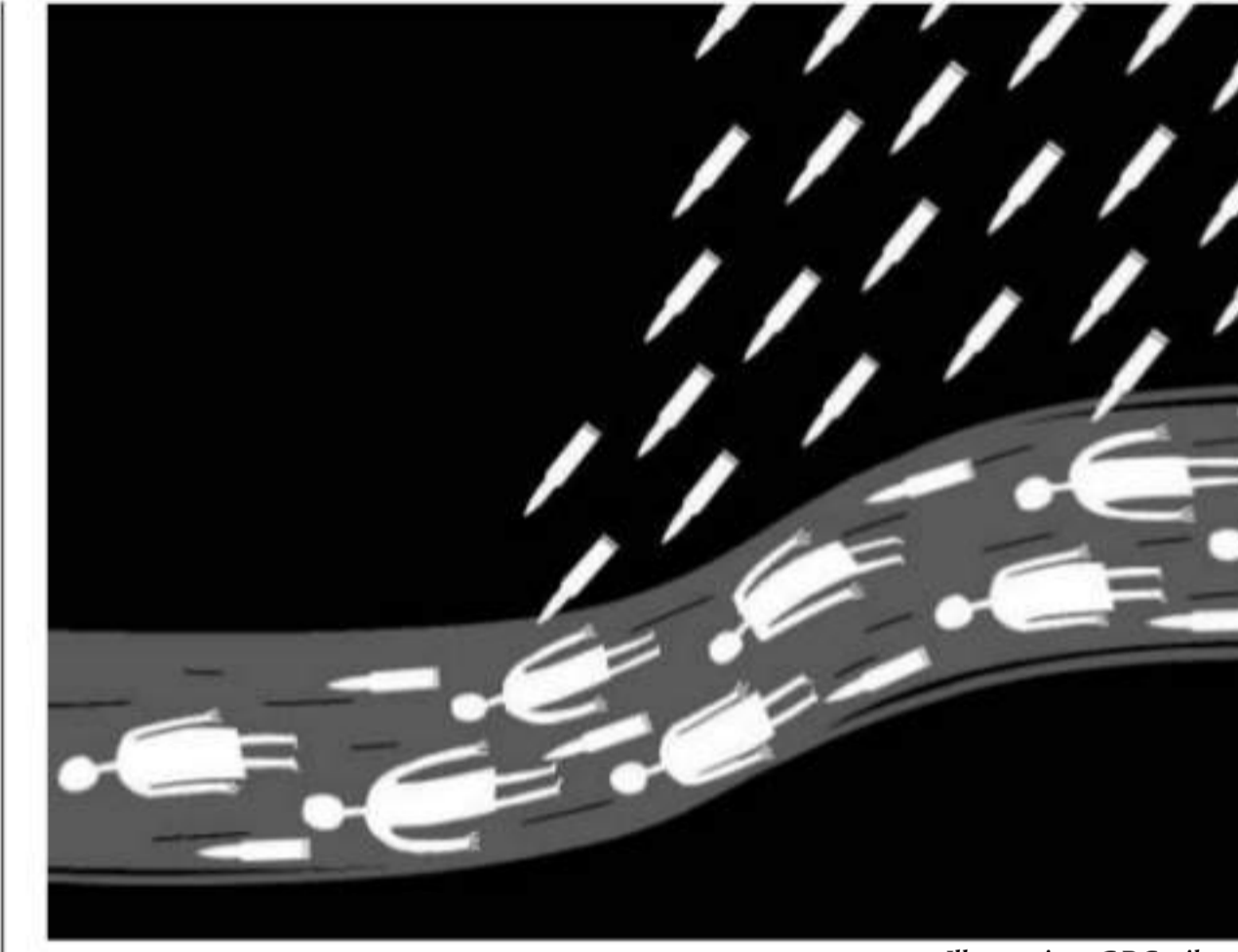


Illustration: CR Sasikumara

scrounging for the right words. I was often so depleted of energy that it slowed me down like never before — one could never wrap up even a small chapter in one sitting. By the time the words could size them up, the ghosts would have stretched themselves taller and wider. As though the apologetic paucity of words was looking for a new bound. Now, how will you bind in words the predicament of Jaibunnisa, who delivered a lovely baby girl on May 22, 1987, just around the time her husband succumbed to a rain of bullets that blew him up into smithereens at the Gang canal.

It was often that I postponed writing for weeks and months on end, and at one point in time, threw my hands up in despair — enough, I told myself. But was it easier said than done? In fact, it was difficult to say and more impossible to do. Every time, the living and the dead of Hashimpura would be breathing down my neck and I would realise my writer would never attain nirvana if I left their story untold — worse still, half-told. It took me over a decade to complete this not very voluminous book.

Twenty-eight years later, the persons facing trial for the cold-blooded murder of the hapless victims were acquitted by the court. I realised that all stakeholders of the Indian State — the political leadership, bureaucracy and police, media and judiciary — had failed. Hashimpura should not be viewed in isolation. In spite of a lofty and well-meaning Constitution, the institutions created by it have miserably failed to arrest the growth of communalisation in society. Specially during the 1980s and 1990s, when the violent agitation for Ram Janmabhoomi ensured unprecedented communalisation of the Hindu middle-class. The enthusiasts of

self-appointed vigilante groups killing humans for cows or male chauvinists trying to enforce dress codes for women are only symptoms of the great malaise.

When I was working on this book, many colleagues, friends and activists tried to convince me that Hashimpura should be forgotten as an aberration and writing on it would rustle up wounds and not let them heal with time. But I feel that the very fact that Hashimpura happened and that all the accused were subsequently acquitted is of vital consequence for Indian society to understand and analyse. It has a direct connect with the secular structure of the country and needs a deeper discourse. In this sense, Hashimpura remains a screaming instance of merciless and barbaric use of brute State force and a spineless politically expedient government lying prostrate before its own men, the killers. I don't want the wounds to wear out. It is necessary to pin-prick the eyes of the Indian State that it did not bother to do what it was supposed to, rather did everything that our painstakingly created Constitution does not allow them to. If we choose to forget one Hashimpura, many more will happen. The present scenario of the country and UP requires more and more discourses on Hashimpura.

Hashimpura 22 May was written in Hindi but it is very interesting that English and Tamil translations are out and the original Hindi version is still waiting to see the light of the day.

The author, a retired IPS officer, is best known for his Hindi novel *Shahar Mein Curfew* (*Curfew in the City*). His work, *Hashimpura 22 May, a Chronicle of the 1987 custodial killings* was published in English in 2016

Living with Trump

and is ejected half-way through his four-year term. This has to do with the belief that Russia hacked into American election contest to help Trump win. There is also the idea that Trump's campaign colluded with Russia. In the meantime, Trump has sacked the FBI Director who he had inherited.

Indian readers will see a similarity with the way Narendra Modi was treated. There was the constant hope that somewhere, some court would declare Modi responsible for the 2002 riots. Whatever he did well was glossed over or ignored. Every mistake by anyone in the BJP/ NDA was laid at his door. His defeats were celebrated — Delhi, Bihar. His triumphs were credited as a result of his divisive i.e. com-

munist policies. When he was campaigning, and even in the first few weeks in office, Trump was critical of the NATO and the US allies. He felt they were free riding by not fulfilling their commitment to spend 2 per cent of GDP on defence. He was slagging off China but more as a trading counterpart than as a foreign policy issue. By saying America First, he made it look as if he was an isolationist.

We now know better. Trump was swift in retaliating when he saw that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad had used chemical weapons on his own people, killing children. When four years ago chemical weapons had been spotted in Syria, Barack

Obama refused to move, and sheltered behind the reluctance of Congress to back him. He did not have to ask Congress. But he did. Trump was quick. He also ordered the largest non-nuclear bomb to be used on ISIS bunkers in Afghanistan.

Trump is not an isolationist. He is a unilateralist. He can act in foreign affairs much more on his own than in domestic matters. This is why he has taken up the issue of North Korea early on. Obama had practised strategic patience but it did not move Kim Jong-un from his purpose. Trump struck up a friendly relation with President Xi Jinping, despite his reservations about the trade issues. China could broker a treaty with North Korea which is needed

to provide security for Japan and South Korea. Trump sees a deal he could make.

Last week we saw Trump in his first visit abroad take up a firm stance against terrorism. He spoke to the Gulf countries and Saudi Arabia about separating Islam from jihadism. He singled out Iran, as being a State which supports terrorism. So it looks like there may be a coalition of Israel with the Arab countries in an anti-terrorist, anti-Iran front. This could also be the key to tackling the Israel-Palestine problem. If Trump could get that deal done, he would guarantee his place in history.

Trump has reshaped American foreign policy within a hundred and fifty days. Not bad going, despite the media.