



## Continental ties

India begins the heavy-lifting needed to transform economic partnerships in Africa

The African Development Bank's decision to hold its annual general meeting in India this month is a signal of the importance African countries attach to New Delhi's growing role in its development. It was nearly a decade ago, in 2008, that India made a serious attempt for a strategic partnership with all of Africa, instead of just the nations it traded with, at the first India-Africa Forum Summit. At that time, India's efforts seemed minimal, a token attempt at keeping a foothold in a continent that was fast falling into China's sphere of influence. New Delhi had its work cut out, building a place for India as a partner in low-cost technology transfers, a supplier of much-needed, affordable generic pharmaceuticals, and a dependable donor of aid that did not come with strings attached. Over the past few years the outreach to Africa has also been driven by visits of President Pranab Mukherjee, Vice-President Hamid Ansari and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. As Mr. Modi pointed out in his speech to the AfDB in Gandhinagar on Tuesday, every country in Africa has by now been visited by an Indian Minister, highlighting the personal bonds India shares. During the India-Africa summit held in Delhi in 2015, the Centre announced a further \$10 billion export credit and a \$600 million grant which, despite being a fraction of the aid Africa received from China and blocs such as the European Union, was a significant sum for India.

Having established its credentials and commitment over time, the Centre is now taking its partnership beyond dollars and cents to a new strategic level. To begin with, India is working on a maritime outreach to extend its Sagarmala programme to the southern coastal African countries with 'blue economies'; it is also building its International Solar Alliance, which Djibouti, Comoros, Cote d'Ivoire, Somalia and Ghana signed on to on the sidelines of the AfDB project. In its efforts, India has tapped other development partners of Africa, including Japan, which sent a major delegation to the AfDB meeting. It has also turned to the United States, with which it has developed dialogues in fields such as peacekeeping training and agricultural support, to work with African countries. It is significant that during the recent inter-governmental consultations between India and Germany, both countries brought in their Africa experts to discuss possible cooperation in developmental programmes in that continent. It will take more heavy-lifting to elevate India's historical anti-colonial ties with Africa to productive economic partnerships. But it is clear that at a time when China is showcasing its Belt and Road Initiative as the "project of the century" and also bolstering its position as Africa's largest donor, a coalition of like-minded countries such as the one India is putting together could provide an effective way to ensure more equitable and transparent development aid to Africa.

## Maharajah of debt

It is not worth spending more government funds on Air India's revival

The reputation of India's national air carrier for making consecutive losses is closely matched, and also linked, to its operational inefficiencies. The issue of whether the airline has a future has been frequently posed, but the question has a certain edge after the introduction and growth of private airlines. Minister of State for Civil Aviation Jayant Sinha, however, believes the government can still revive the carrier, and grow it into India's own "great global airline" to compete with the likes of Emirates and Lufthansa. In an interview to this newspaper, Mr. Sinha added that the government is working on a plan to improve the airline's financial position, corporate governance, and management. But the main problems that beset Air India are structural, which is why efforts to revive the entity are unlikely to bear fruit. The airline has failed time and again to prove that it can generate sustainable profits. It recorded an operating profit after almost a decade in fiscal 2015-16, thanks mainly to a fall in oil prices, but still ended the year with a net loss. These losses have been mainly owing to a slew of operational inefficiencies, including a bloated workforce. It is doubtful whether these issues can be adequately addressed unless there is a change in ownership. Traditionally, public ownership has left the carrier's management subservient to the interests of the political class, while taxpayers funding the airline's operations have been left holding the short end of the stick.

Years of consecutive losses have also ruined Air India's overall financial position, pushing the airline into a debt trap. In 2011, a consortium of public sector banks that gave working capital loans to Air India was forced to reduce the airline's debt load. A bailout package of over ₹30,000 crore was also extended by the Centre in 2012 to deal with losses. Yet, by the end of 2015-16 Air India still carried a debt load of about ₹46,000 crore; the cost of paying interest on the debt alone was putting huge pressure on earnings. This has of late led many people, including Air India Chairman and Managing Director Ashwani Lohani, to project the airline's problems as having simply to do with its capital structure. Such a conclusion ignores the reality that Air India's debt burden is the product of bureaucratic mismanagement over several years. Any financial bailout that does not address this fundamental problem would mean throwing good money after bad. This would be sinful in an age where profitable private airlines can easily fill any vacuum left in the market by Air India's exit. Private buyers are unlikely to come forward to buy Air India, as its debt load easily eats up any operating profit. In that case the government can either force public sector lenders to incur more losses, or use public funds to pay them out. Either way, the taxpayers will be the losers.

# The GST train chugs along

The ideal of a low, single rate and comprehensive coverage is still far away, but the journey has begun



AJIT RANADE

In about a month, India's new indirect tax system will be rolled out. It has been described as the biggest reform in indirect taxes. India now joins some 160 other countries that already have a Goods and Services Tax (GST). The only large economy exception without a GST is the United States. Most other countries have this consumption tax as a key component of their indirect taxes.

### In a nutshell

Here are the key features of the GST. First, it moves the tax system from production to consumption. It covers the gross domestic product (GDP) more comprehensively. Because the tax base is now a much wider set of transactions, hopefully the per capita tax incidence will be lower. Second, it eliminates a major bane of cascading, i.e. having to pay tax on tax. It will thus increase efficiency of taxation. Third, the GST has interlocking incentives for compliance, because your tax incidence, and refund, depends on production of proof of tax paid by your supplier. The paperwork, or rather the computer records, is interlinked in a chain. No one person in the chain can evade tax because it hurts either his vendor or customer. In that respect, the GST's interlocked incentives look similar to Gramen Bank's joint liability lending in microfinance. Micro loans are given without any collateral, but if one person defaults, the entire group is blacklisted. This ensures an almost 100% repayment rate. Similarly, the GST too has interlinked incentives for the whole value chain. For these three reasons and many



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more, the GST is expected to bring many benefits to the economy. These are higher GDP growth, lower inflation, buoyant tax collections, wider coverage and less tax evasion, and, most importantly, a truly common economic market across the country. Indeed the slogan for promoting the GST was "One Country One Tax".

The roll-out of this historic reform required amending the Constitution, legislative action in Parliament as well as State legislatures, setting up of the GST Council and deciding on the applicable tax rates on more than 1,200 items. Much of this work is already done. Indeed this achievement is itself a heroic example of consensus-building across States and political parties. The implementation will quite likely involve many hiccups, delays, and computer glitches, but the GST train has left the station and is chugging along.

### Some fault lines

Let's examine what the status of the GST is as it takes birth, and how successful it will be able to fulfil the

expectations thrust on it. The origins of the GST go back almost two decades and are also found in the reports of the Kelkar Committee on Tax Reforms, written at the turn of this century. The basic premise of tax reforms then and now is to aim for lower rates, simpler code and eliminate exemptions. On all these three goals we have much distance to travel.

First, with five slabs of 0%, 5%, 12%, 18%, 28% plus cess, we have increased the chance of classification disputes, discretion and litigation. The high rates encourage tax evasion, distort decisions, and promote wasteful resources into tax avoidance. As the GST Task Force of the Thirteenth Finance Commission has said, multiple rate slabs exacerbate the problem of bracket creep and classification disputes. A rational tax system should have very few rates and low rates. Indeed, before the introduction of this GST, the service tax had just one rate, that was 15%, applicable to all services. We now have multiple rates and the chances of disputes and legal battles have increased. Multiple rates are

attractive politically. Items consumed by the poor are taxed at low rates and luxury goods are taxed at higher rates. But this classification itself is problematic especially in a diverse, fast-evolving economy. For instance, perfumed hair oil may be a luxury item in Bihar but not in Tamil Nadu. Rubber slippers are worn by the poor, but also the rich at beach resorts. There is also a quality continuum, and from unbranded to branded. Furthermore, today's poor may be tomorrow's rich, so there is an aspirational class too. It is far too complex to classify goods rigidly as those consumed by the poor and the rich distinctly.

But multiple rates increase cost and complexity. As the task force also pointed out, the cost of auditing the classification of exempt, low rate and high rate slabs across every stage of production, distribution and consumption is very high. Single or few rates are easy to comply with and involve much lower disputes. Multiple rates have been introduced so as to soften the blow of inflation. By keeping most of the goods consumed by the poor (as identified by their consumption basket), the hope is that inflation will be in check.

Which leads us to the second question. Will inflation remain in control? Since almost 60% of India's GDP is from services, and the rate is moving from 15 to higher, it is quite likely that inflation will inch up. This is especially evident in the financial, telecom, hospitality and trade services. Of course, to the extent that service providers will now get input tax credit, which they might pass on to their customers, inflation may not rise by much. Since the IT systems are not fully in place and refunds are not instantaneous, the benefit of tax credit will be delayed. This cost of delay and consequent cost of working capital too introduces an inflationary element.

It was hoped that not many

items would be in the 28% bracket, failing which inflation will be higher. The tax burden on industry is coming down in the GST. This is because currently, excise plus State VAT adds up to more than 25%, which will definitely go down. Since inflation in India is currently moderate – indeed this has been a major achievement of the NDA government – the impact of the GST, even though inflationary, will still be modest. In the longer term, further price moderation is possible due to the supply side-effect of the GST.

### Still untouched

Finally, a large part of the economy is still not covered by the GST. Potable alcohol, crude oil, natural gas, aviation fuel, diesel, petrol, electricity and real estate are currently out, and States will levy their own taxes on these. Taxes paid on these will not be able to be offset against the GST. To that extent it is an inflationary distortion. Hopefully, this lacuna in the GST will be fixed soon.

The high rates and multiple slabs reflect an outcome of a very complicated political compromise achieved in the GST Council. This required assuaging the fear of revenue loss to States which have just surrendered their tax autonomy. It required assuaging the fear of politicians about unleashing inflation.

The ideal of a low, single rate and comprehensive total GDP coverage, with a fully IT-enabled compliance system, is a destination still far away. But as Mr. Kelkar himself has said, the journey of a hundred miles must begin with the first step. To that extent this historic tax reform has come alive. Along the way it will be tweaked and modified a thousand times to eventually hit the right stride, for that is the genius of India's democracy.

Ajit Ranade is an economist

# Forgotten cogs in the wheels of justice

The exploitation of judicial support staff continues to be widespread



PRASHANT BHUSHAN & CHERYL D'SOUZA

The lower cadre of employees working in subordinate courts across the country have aired grievances from time to time which are related to the terms of their employment and deplorable conditions of work.

These employees form the backbone of the justice delivery system, yet the problems they face – primarily related to administration – have led them to raise their voices, often to no avail. While a litigant can approach a court to access justice, these court employees lack an efficient grievance redress mechanism, with none or a rare personal hearing given to them by their senior judicial officers. Written complaints are put aside and the injustices meted out to them often go unreported. If they raise a voice against this victimisation, it

has resulted in notices being issued to them, adverse annual confidential reports, fines, transfers out of the district, departmental inquiries or even suspension.

Reports about the harassment of court employees have been appearing in the media for instance, on the representations sent to the chief justices of High Courts about judges allegedly misusing their powers and harassing lower court staff or of court employees protesting against judges for allegedly making them work in their houses.

The Campaign for Judicial Accountability and Reforms (CJAR) made a representation to the Chief Justice of the Punjab and Haryana High Court, detailing cases where employees had alleged harassment by the misuse of rules that regulate their service and the various issues that needed to be addressed. The main issues raised in this representation concerned the condition of subordinate court staff who are allegedly being made to work as personal servants in the houses of judges and the provision of home peons which has not been implemented. The complaint drew attention to a letter in 1973, from the



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Chief Secretary, Government of Punjab to all judges in the State, issuing instructions against the use of government employees for private work: "In cases where private work is taken from a government employee as a regular whole time domestic servant, without his consent and payment, it should be considered to be a case of serious nature involving wilful dishonesty and dealt with accordingly." This and other orders on the appointment of home peons have not been acted upon till recently.

### Repressive conditions

The important function played by judicial support staff in keeping the judicial machinery afloat cannot be undermined. Yet these employees have been driven to all forms of

protest on how unjustly they are positioned in a system, which far from catering to their welfare needs, unjustly subjugates them with the burden of court work. They work in repressive conditions with long hours, have no leave, face penalties and fines and often unfair arrest warrants, and are overburdened by the sheer volume of file handling and working out of crowded courtrooms. Mounting pendency of court cases results in an increased volume of court files without an increase in judicial staff strength, leading to them being overburdened. Proper care has not been taken to ensure the appointment of qualified staff. Those who are recruited have little or no on-the-job training.

Successive Law Commissions have made suggestions for employee reforms, but little has been done to implement them. The judiciary is uniquely positioned to implement these recommendations through administrative orders. With suggestions on how to enhance 'quality, responsiveness and timeliness of courts', we cannot allow this burden to be borne by the lowest employee. Along with

clearly defined recruitment rules, transfer policies and training guidelines need to be put in place and adhered to. The importance of an effective grievance redress mechanism for this cadre cannot be stressed enough.

Acting on the CJAR representation, the Chief Justice of the Punjab and Haryana High Court has made the first move in directing that all judicial officers in the State appoint home peons by June 30. Further, the order directs that an employee's post be changed every three years and file handling by *ahlmads* be limited to 800 files. This will go a long way in ensuring a more fulfilling and just working environment. This needs to be emulated by other High Courts as well if this widespread and systematic exploitation has to be halted and to boost the morale of this workforce, in the larger interests of justice and equity.

Prashant Bhushan is a Public Interest Advocate and Convenor, Campaign for Judicial Accountability and Reforms, Cheryl D'Souza is an advocate and Secretary, Campaign for Judicial Accountability and Reforms

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

### Countering talaq

The All India Muslim Personal Law Board's resolution that those men who pronounce triple talaq at one go will be socially boycotted will spell relief for women in the Muslim community ("Social boycott for triple talaq", May 23). "Social quarantine" of such men will make them resort to course correction and I am sure that over a period, occurrences of triple talaq will slowly disappear. The AIMPLB also needs to explain how the Muslim community intends reforming itself when the fact is that many women affected by triple talaq continue to approach the judiciary for justice.

K. JAYANTHI, Chennai

### Hasty act

The haste shown by the Army in commending Major Gogoi, whose controversial act of tying a civilian to the front of a military vehicle as a human shield in Budgam district in J&K is still under probe, is inappropriate ("Major Gogoi gets Army chief commendation", May 23). The incident created a rift –

public uproar on both legal and ethical grounds, with some veterans too expressing their unqualified disapproval while the Army justified it on tactical grounds aimed at containing further violence. The Court of Inquiry, by its own admission, is yet to complete its work. Yet the Army chief appears to have taken note of "overall emerging indicators of the Court of Inquiry" among other factors. This by itself is quite puzzling. By his peremptory action, the Army chief has in effect rendered the Col redundant, its findings will lack credibility. It also betrays a lack of sensitivity to people's sentiments when they find an Army officer still under probe being rewarded for his highly questionable professional conduct. Given the volatile situation in the Valley, General Rawat could have been a little more circumspect in the matter.

S.K. CHOUDHURY, Bengaluru

I hope the Army chief realises the damaging influence such a decision would have on the moral

fabric of not just the Army but of the country as a whole. The country gets a message that the Army is not only authorised but also allowed to celebrate the violation of the rights of unarmed people if it helps its cause. We should hang our heads in shame as the Army has used a human shield, did not condemn the act, and then, most shockingly, awarded the soldier who carried out such a barbaric act in public. The President and the Prime Minister need to restrain Army hawks and educate them on what civilised behaviour is all about. It also applies to the armed forces and the way in which they deal with unarmed citizens.

KIRAN GANDHI, Pune

### Animal deaths

The report on the factors responsible for the deaths of endangered animal species on the Indian Institute of Technology campus in Chennai reveals the callousness of the authorities in protecting them (Tamil Nadu, "220 deer, 8 blackbucks die on

campus in 2 years: IIT-M", May 23). Causes such as consumption of plastic materials, noise pollution during the "fests" on campus and attacks by dogs are eminently preventable. As this is a campus occupied by those pursuing a very high academic standard, why is there such dereliction?

V. SUBRAMANIAN, Chennai

### Reusing wastewater

The most palpable reason for the mismanagement of water is indiscriminate usage ("An opportunity being drained away", May 22). With proactive steps, a large amount of wastewater being discharged untreated to the rivers can be used for agriculture. Delhi has even started a "Toilet to Tap" initiative to treat sewage water and make it fit for consumption. NGOs need to begin campaigns on the need to shun water-intensive crops and use sprinkle and drip irrigation. Finally, water needs to be brought under the concurrent list.

GAGAN PRATAP SINGH, Noida, Uttar Pradesh

The emphasis in the well-intentioned Swachh Bharat scheme has been more on the collection of waste rather than in its profitable utilisation and appropriate disposal. I describe a project for the profitable utilisation of waste material. A project has been set up successfully in Canada for the production of methanol – 50,000 tonne per annum – from municipal sewage waste. The construction of a waste-to-methanol plant (90,000 tonne per annum capacity) using synthesis gas generated from residual sewage waste is under development in the Netherlands. India is now a net importer of methanol to the extent of

1.7 million tonne per annum. Methanol is an important and versatile chemical with rapidly increasing application areas. Being largely produced from natural gas, it is susceptible to price fluctuation. Utilisation of sewage water for the production of methanol will solve several problems in one stroke in India. Considering the demand potential for methanol, it would be appropriate to implement at least 20 such methanol projects, each with capacity of 100,000 metric tonne per annum across India.

N.S. VENKATARAMAN, Chennai

MORE LETTERS ONLINE: www.hindu.com/opinion/letters/

### CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

"Big boost for Bheem Army" – said the headline of a story (May 23, 2017) of a protest last week at Jantar Mantar, Delhi. It is actually called the Bhim Army. The misspelling – Bheem – was there at a few places in the text too.

Factual error: "In Mr Ganguli's company" – a Weekend Metro Plus supplement story (May 20, 2017), erroneously described Tomas Aukšas as Pablo Ganguli's Brazilian partner. It should have said Lithuanian creative partner.

It is the policy of The Hindu to correct significant errors as soon as possible. Please specify the edition (place of publication), date and page. The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300 (11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday); Fax: +91-44-28552963; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in; Mail: Readers' Editor, The Hindu, Kasturji Buildings, 859 & 860 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002, India. All communication must carry the full postal address and telephone number. No personal visits. The Terms of Reference for the Readers' Editor are on www.thehindu.com

THE WEDNESDAY INTERVIEW | SARBANANDA SONOWAL

# 'There is a feeling that now the Northeast will grow'

The Assam Chief Minister on a year of leading the first ever BJP-led government in the State

ABDUS SALAM

In a signalling that makes clear the Bharatiya Janata Party-led Central government's intent to focus on the Northeast, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will unveil the three-year celebrations of his government with a rally at the Khanapara ground in Guwahati on May 26. As Assam Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal personally monitors preparations, with roads in the city getting a customary spruce-up, he also marks a milestone of his own – completing one year on Wednesday of helming the BJP government in Assam. He tells *The Hindu* that his larger agenda of governance is driven by four specific points – of achieving a corruption-free, pollution-free, terrorism-free, and foreigner-free Assam. Excerpts from a wide-ranging interview:

You've been a legislator, parliamentarian, Union minister, but you're heading the BJP's first ever government in what is also your first role in State administration. A year into your term, how would you describe the experience?

■ This is a very exciting and learning experience for me because running a State government is the biggest challenge of anyone's political career. Taking people into confidence and taking everybody along... it was my main objective to strive for everybody's equal growth. We are blessed with two valleys, Barak and Brahmaputra, and three hill districts. The people living in these places should have a sense of unity. That's one of the biggest successes of our government – people of every part of the State have developed a sense of belongingness and they have taken ownership of the government. Under the dynamic leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, people in this State and region have developed a feeling that now the Northeast will grow.

The Prime Minister will be kick-starting the three-year celebrations of the Central government from Guwahati on May 26. How has the political alignment of the State with the Centre, with the BJP in power in both, concretely helped?

■ There are two things. Modi ji's decision of addressing the nation on the occasion of three years of his term in power from the State of Assam is the biggest morale boost to the people of the State and a grand recognition that Assam under BJP rule has performed significantly in the past year... Modi ji is the first Prime Minister in the history of independent India to extend everything for the speedy growth of the region. He has given [it] top priority. The question of proper utilisation of schemes and funds was never there during the Congress regime because there was no good governance system. Now there is discipline in the administrative system. From day one we have gone on a drive against corruption, which has resulted in officials and members of the [Assam Public Service] Commission being put behind bars. A new environment is prevailing in the government system, and from the Chief Minister's office to the panchayat office, this message has been communicated.

What would you count as notable achievements of your government in the past one year?

■ The drive against corruption is our notable achievement. If you look at the number of officials who have been caught red-handed and put behind bars, corruption has been rooted out. Transparency has come back to the

system and people have a clear view about the government particularly on recruitment issues. Now, genuine candidates have a chance of getting better justice.

Driving out illegal encroachers from Kaziranga and the various *satras* (Vaishnavite monasteries), which is continuing now, is also another important success of this government. This time, 21.6% revenue growth has been attained. Right from day one, we issued a directive to withdraw all the illegal check-gates on the National Highways. We were able to plug leakages in the revenue collection system and the machinery has become efficient and transparent.

Your government was elected on the back of long-persisting angst about illegal migration. The Central and State governments had promised to fence the entire Bangladesh border. What is the current status?

■ Due to our constant vigilance on the Indo-Bangla border – I went twice myself in the past year – a strong sense of responsibility has been instilled among people living in the border areas.

As a result, the influx numbers have been minimised, as also of cattle and arms smuggling. Identification of illegal migrants has been carried out very actively by the tribunal constituted under the directive of the Supreme Court.

The Government of India has given priority to the sealing of the border and now the process has started with sincerity and commitment. We are hopeful that in the next two years the border will be sealed. The most difficult parts are the riverine parts that go up to 67 km; those parts would be sealed applying the most modern technology.



The National Register of Citizens' update for Assam has been vexed by repeated extensions. How will it put a lid on things, considering there is no agreed mechanism with Bangladesh to deport illegal migrants?

■ The earlier government took up the matter very casually. It is a very important constitutional responsibility we have to carry out. We are verifying every document very carefully so that no illegal migrant's name can be enlisted in the NRC. This document will protect the identity and sanctity of the people of the State. It is a national agenda, commitment and duty. By December 31, 2017, the draft roll will be published. The deportation issue is different. We have to handle the part that deals with bona fide Indian citizens living in Assam. That is our mandate. The rest would be taken up by the Government of India with the government of Bangladesh.

It is a question of the identity of the people of Assam. Clause 6 of the Assam Accord promises constitutional safeguards to the indigenous

The Government of India has given priority to the sealing of the border and now the process has started with sincerity and commitment

people of Assam. The Government of India has recently concluded tripartite talks on the issue that included the All Assam Students Union and it was decided to revive the committee to study the issue of constitutional safeguards.

Has it been a smooth alliance with your former party, the Asom Gana Parishad? It is opposed to issues such as the extension of citizenship to Hindu immigrants from Bangladesh, as is the All Assam Students Association, of which you are a former president.

■ Look, this citizenship thing is not a secret, it was very much there before the election too. We declared this point very clearly before the people of Assam before contesting the election, and the people of Assam have voted

us into power. This is our party's stand. Minorities facing persecution in neighbouring countries... that is a national decision. The burden will be shared by the whole nation, not a single State like Assam.

What is the Centre's rationale in continuing to extend the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act across the State since 1990, the latest coming in the first week of May? Isn't Assam Police capable of handling the declining levels of violence?

■ Our State police are capable of handling all kinds of situations, but this particular Act is for the entire region. It allows the Indian Army to move into neighbouring States, which our State police cannot do. Most cases in Assam, the State police handle with efficiency.

Your government organised the Namami Brahmaputra festival which received wide press. But the larger problem of floods remains recurring in the State...

■ Namami Brahmaputra was mainly organised to connect Assam with the rest of the world through the Brahmaputra river. This was the most viable waterway during the British regime, Brahmaputra to Padma and the Bay of Bengal. Our finished products could find a global market. For 70 years, this has been stopped. We want to reopen that route for speedy growth.

Exposure is highly essential for Assam in the 21st century. The festival's grand success has given a tremendous boost to the people of Assam and the Northeast that this part of the country can develop connectivity with the rest of the world and also grow like the most developed States.

As for floods, the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways had an MoU with us in which it was promised that the Brahmaputra would be dredged to develop a central stream so that navigation becomes possible. Steamers containing heavy cargo of 10,000-20,000 metric tonnes can then be moved from the Bay of Bengal to different destinations in Assam. The silt and sand dredged will be used to develop a Brahmaputra express highway on both sides of the river, which will also protect us from erosion. With dredging, the riverbed will have adequate depth which will minimise the flood problem in the State.

Roads have been renamed in Guwahati, there is talk of a dress code being implemented in government offices... is there a cultural agenda your government espouses?

■ This [dress code] has been spontaneous... it's not an order, it's an appeal. Whoever is interested can come in the traditional dress once a month. I have seen in the last

two weeks that most of the staff come in traditional dress and it has created a lovely environment throughout the State. Traditional culture is always a matter to be seriously observed.

The government announced compulsory Sanskrit in schools, but subsequently the move was reversed...

■ It has not been made mandatory... Sanskrit is the origin of all the languages and the most scientific of languages. The Cabinet took a view and this was put to the public domain for comments and suggestions.

It is a democracy, you cannot unilaterally impose something. People's choice would be taken into consideration.

Given a substantial section of the population is made up by the minorities, how are you taking them on board? Do you think Assam's minorities are different from elsewhere in the country?

■ As I have said at the beginning, I am taking everybody along... *sabka saath, sabka vikas* has been the principle. You cannot violate it. You have to bring everybody closer to each other. Let them work as Team Assam. How can you segregate the majority and minority? Let us grow together, work together. It's a question of unity of existence and living.

What are the focus areas in the next four years?

■ Agricultural growth and doubling of farm income... Right from the beginning, we have set our agenda very clearly. There are four specific points. The State will be made corruption-free, pollution-free, terrorism-free, and foreigner-free.

SINGLE FILE

## A Kshatriya superhero

'Baahubali' seeks to unite a putative Hindu community divided by caste

G. SAMPATH



The box office exploits of *Baahubali 2: The Conclusion* have attracted much comment. Many have wondered how a south Indian film with not a single star known to north Indian audiences could connect so well with viewers in the cow belt.

There are several reasons why the *Baahubali* diptych has been wildly popular. The most obvious one is that it exemplifies storytelling at its captivating best. Director S.S. Rajamouli's singular achievement has been to translate the fabulistic world of Amar Chitra Katha into a three-hour, immersive reality experience. In the process, he has managed to accomplish something that no film-maker has done before on a scale and with the conviction that he has: fabricate an Indian superhero.

Let us unpack the cultural content of this Indian superhero. First of all, he is, quite categorically, a Hindu. He is a Hindu defined by his caste identity, a Kshatriya. And finally, by showing the Kshatriya superhero leading a Hindu army that vanquishes an invading swarm of barbarians, the two *Baahubali* films together represent a powerfully imagined narrative of the Hindus as a martial race. If a Hindutva advocate had wanted a propaganda film showcasing the splendours of ancient India, he could not have asked for anything better. But this is not to impute such a motive to the producers, who may well have been unconscious of their project's subtext.

Some may argue that the religious and caste identity of the warrior hero in *Baahubali* are incidental to the story. Not really. His character and world view are defined by the Kshatriya ethic. The Hindu ethos of the characters and the kingdom of Mahishmati, where the action is set, is reinforced right through the film. The dialogues, landscape, costumes, and even subplots are steeped in Hindu edicts, iconography, and symbolism – from giant elephants and *lingams* to ubiquitous Brahmin priests performing *vajnas*, chanting *shlokas*, and offering astrological counsel at crucial moments. Interestingly, the film depicts the barbarians who attack Mahishmati as a dark-skinned, aboriginal race. Given that Mahishmati is located in the Indian subcontinent, the story, in effect, communicates that the warriors of an ancient Hindu kingdom led by fair-skinned, Aryan-like, Kshatriya superheroes successfully subjugated an army of the casteless/ Adivasis that was much bigger in numbers but short on acumen.

### Rallying around the perfect Hindu

Beneath the expertly paced plot and glossy production values, the subtext of *Baahubali* glorifies the caste order. It seeks to unite a putative Hindu community divided by caste, not by picturing the elimination of caste divisions, but by exhorting people to rally around the perfect Hindu as embodied by the Kshatriya warrior. Even as it presents the Kshatriya code of honour as an aspirational ideal for all Hindus, it leaves no doubt that the *dharma* of the lower-caste Hindu enjoins him to recognise the Kshatriya's right to rule, and to obey his commands.

Superheroes are cultural tropes by which a people relate to their world, to others, and to themselves. The *Baahubali* films, coming at a time when Hindu nationalistic sentiments are at a fever pitch, constitute a significant cultural intervention.



## CONCEPTUAL Public choice POLITICAL ECONOMY

Public choice theory employs the tools of economics to explain real-world political behaviour. In particular, it seeks to examine politicians as individuals guided by their own selfish interests – rather than as benevolent promoters of the common good – to better design public policy. Nobel laureate James M. Buchanan, a co-founder of the theory with Gordon Tullock, defined it as "politics without romance". Tullock applied the theory to electoral politics to often arrive at controversial conclusions – including why voting is a waste of time, and why voters have no incentive to make informed decisions.

### MORE ON THE WEB

Terror attacks in Europe – a timeline  
<http://bit.ly/EuropeTerrorAttacks>

## NOTEBOOK

### When voters are made victims

Bihar's Musahars, who had voted for Nitish Kumar, were the worst-hit by his prohibition law

ANURADHA RAMAN

Now what kind of a ruler is he who could break the backs of the very subjects who voted him to power and earn their wrath for all time to come? In the hot month of August last year, fellow traveller Amarnath Tewary and I hit the roads of Bihar to find out why Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, who had ushered in a liquor revolution a few years ago, had taken the extreme decision of banishing spirits from his State. The jails were brimming with offenders. The State cops were on the verge of revolt as they felt overworked and 'di-spirited'. August was a month of despair.

An exception, we found, were the women who quietly cheered the CM's decision, but vocally extended support to their menfolk who had been rounded up for violating the recently enacted law against drinking. The worst sufferers, we found, were

the Dalits and the Mahadalits like the Musahars. And they were making some measly money by selling local brew. Many of them were put behind bars due to the draconian provisions of the Bihar Excise (Amendment) Act, 2016.

### A gloomy scenario

Drinking at home was forbidden and the police were under instructions to impound vessels if they were found containing jaggery (crucial to brewing local liquor). Arrests without warrant were added as provisions in the law. But there were no clear answers to what prompted Mr. Kumar to impose a blanket ban on liquor. Even his powerful principal secretary at Bihar's Registration, Excise and Prohibition Department at the time, K.K. Pathak, who granted us an appointment, could not come up with a satisfactory answer. He regaled us with tales on how one should never stop wielding the

stick. Gently, he added. The hotels wore a deserted look. The odd residents who had flown in for work said they were driving to the salubrious environs of Jharkhand just across for a drink.

But the Musahars really had nowhere to go. Just on the outskirts of the capital Patna, they were huddled in their sad shanties and looked morose. They did not want to speak to us. It was beyond their comprehension as to why a man they had voted for had turned against them and we were not certainly helping them find an alternative vocation.

After all these months, the law is still in place but the stories of men and women in jails have disappeared from the pages of newspapers. Mr. Pathak has been transferred after he made the grievous mistake of ordering the arrest of a very important person from the CM's constituency.

## FROM THE HINDU ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO MAY 24, 1967

### Nasser blocks Gulf of Aqaba

The United Arab Republic to-day [May 23] sealed off the strategic Gulf of Aqaba and challenged any Israeli vessel to sail through the four-mile-wide strait separating Sinai from Saudi Arabia. Speaking to airmen at an advanced Air Force headquarters in Sinai, President Nasser said he had closed the gulf to Israeli shipping and banned its use to ships of other nations carrying strategic goods to Israel. "The Israeli flag will not pass through Aqaba gulf and our sovereignty over the gulf entrance is not negotiable. If Israel wants to threaten us with war they are welcome", he said.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MAY 24, 1917

### Charge against coolies

Mr. C.E. Somes, Deputy Commissioner of Tezpur in Assam, on Monday took up the case in which 8 coolies were charged with assaulting Mr. Bret, Engineer, of Majlingher Tea Estate. The complainant Mr. Brett in his evidence said that on the 6th May a coolie Lamed Sukunia was creating disturbance and exciting other coolies. Complainant took away the lathi from Sukunia and by order of the manager kept him in the Godown. Later on, as he with Mr. Grey was going in a motor car the accused and other coolies attacked him and severely assaulted him with lathies. Four prosecution witnesses corroborated the complainant's statement and identified the accused. The case was adjourned.

## DATA POINT

### The spike in suicide attacks

5,391 suicide attacks were carried out in 53 countries between 1989 and 2016, with increasing frequency since 2003. 72% of those attacks were in three countries – Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan



SOURCE: CHICAGO PROJECT ON SECURITY AND TERRORISM