



A thought for today

I am extraordinarily patient, provided that I get my own way in the end

MARGARET THATCHER

Three Years On

BJP aims for complete political dominance, but regional parties remain its biggest hurdle

As the NDA government approaches three years in power, available evidence suggests it is popular across large parts of the country. But BJP is known to be in permanent campaign mode and would like to leave nothing to chance before 2019 Lok Sabha elections. Thus party president Amit Shah reiterated at BJP's national executive meet last month his ambition of dominating all possible political space from panchayat to Parliament and breaking into opposition bastions.

After the UP election victory, foremost among BJP's ambitions must be breaking the mahagathbandhan in Bihar, which halted its advance in the country's Hindi-speaking regions. In that political context come income tax raids and CBI investigations of prominent opposition leaders and their kin, not fortuitously according to the



latter. Among these have been raids against entities associated with RJD chief Lalu Prasad Yadav, with Lalu's daughter Misa and sons Tej Pratap and Tejashwi – the latter two being ministers in Bihar's cabinet – accused of involvement in corrupt land deals worth Rs 1,000 crore.

BJP has been taunting Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar, who came to power on the back of his clean image as an administrator, about inaction against RJD leaders even as Kumar's decision not to support Lalu in public has not gone down well with RJD. While BJP must clearly be hoping to drive a wedge between Lalu and image-conscious Nitish and thus break the mahagathbandhan, Lalu will not be a pushover. As a shrewd politician in feudal Bihar, he could turn the situation around politically and garner sympathy by portraying himself as a victim.

BJP has plans for Bengal and Odisha as well where regional parties rule the roost. Its Mission Bengal received a jolt when Trinamool Congress became the first mainstream party to snatch Mirik municipality from BJP ally Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) in Darjeeling Hills in three decades. TMC won four of seven municipalities that went to the polls on Sunday. In Odisha BJP was impressive in recently concluded zila panchayat elections, winning 297 seats up from 36 it won in 2012. But in terms of assembly seats, this puts BJP ahead in only 41 of the 147 assembly seats. Repeating what BJP did in UP in southern and eastern states will certainly be an uphill task.

Protect Rivers

A bottom-up approach is key to conservation and cleaning efforts

Even as the Uttarakhand high court recently declared Ganga and Yamuna rivers as living entities, bestowing on them legal rights of a person, an RTI query has revealed that the waters of the Ganga along Haridwar are not even fit for bathing. Tests were conducted at 11 locations in Uttarakhand over a distance of 294km along the river, taking into account four main indicators of river water quality – temperature, dissolved oxygen, biological oxygen demand and coliform (bacteria). On most of these indicators the Ganga failed to meet acceptable standards, showing high levels of bio-pollutants and toxic materials.

There's no denying that rivers in India are highly revered. Considered as sources of life in a largely agrarian country, rivers have cultural, spiritual and religious connotations. However, it is also a fact that physical protection of rivers in India is very poor. With greater industrialisation and urbanisation, rivers have increasingly become depositories of urban waste and industrial effluents. The Ganga Action Plan (GAP) has seen more than Rs 1,800 crore spent over three decades on cleaning the Ganga with little improvement. The current government intends to spend around Rs 20,000 crore over five years on the Namami Gange Project. But apart from minor variations on GAP, the new project offers more of the old focus on sewage treatment plants.

The problem with this top-down approach is that it fails to account for the lack of coordination among the various states through which rivers flow. In fact, coordination on this score is often mired in Centre-state and state-to-state politics. Given this scenario, it would be far better to push a bottom-up approach where people living along rivers become primary agents of change. This is best exemplified by the case of a village panchayat in Kerala's Alappuzha district reviving the Kuttemperoor channel of the Pamba and Achankovil rivers. It's time to translate our reverence for rivers into actual conservation efforts.



Ellora = Achha

There's one speech habit that Indians and Italians have in common

Jug Suraiya



We were in Modica, in Sicily, a lovely old city of cobbled streets which suddenly turn into steps as they plunge precipitously up and down the shoulders of steep hills.

Modica is actually not one but two cities. There is Modica Bassa, or Lower Modica, at the base of the rocky hills, and Modica Alta, or Upper Modica which is perched on the crest.

We were staying in Modica Alta. But everywhere we went in Modica, Alta or Bassa, everyone seemed to be talking about India. Or, more precisely, about a certain location in India, the world famous Ellora caves near Aurangabad.

The word Ellora was on everyone's lips almost all the time. Why this sudden interest in an archaeological Indian site which dates back to between the 6th century and the 9th century and which is said to have derived its name from the Sanskrit Ellupara?

Everyone mentioned Ellora – shopkeepers when asked the price of anything, bus drivers when an enquiry was made as to whether this particular vehicle was going to Syracuse, people of whom we asked directions to get to the church of San Teresa.

Almost any question prompted the response. It dawned on us that Ellora ("Then" in Italian) wasn't a reference to the Indian cave temples but a portmanteau word that could mean many things.

Ellora is the Italian equivalent of the Hindustani Achha, which has a variety of connotations. Achha can mean something is fine or good. It can denote agreement.

Depending on the tone of voice, the single word Achha can convey defiance, or confrontation, as in 'Really? We'll see about that'.

Ellora is the Italian way of saying Achha. It can mean almost anything the speaker and/or the listener want to mean.

Like Indians, Italians love talking. When you like talking a lot you develop speech habits which allow you to say a lot with a minimum use of words. Why use a whole sentence when one word will do the trick?

It's like a time-and-motion thing. Or rather a time-and-mention thing. Get it? Achha? Ellora!

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Let's Talk About Sex

Not engaging the elephant in the room tips society's balance from liberation to slavery

Avani Bansal



A Hindu legend goes that Brahma, the 'Originator' first created Saraswati – the Goddess of Wisdom, who by relation became his daughter but he got so infatuated by her that he stopped at nothing less than marrying her. From there the world grew. There are different versions of this story but it marks an interesting role of sexual desires in the most immortal of beings including the Originator himself.

The reference to sex continues in different Hindu mythological stories in apparent and yet subtle ways. So Lord Ganesh is born without sex between Shiva and Parvati. Lord Krishna's wives have to deal with a thousand and more gopis. And Draupadi, the heroine of Mahabharata, had five husbands.

These stories make a fascinating read and have a great weight of spiritual messages encoded in them. Yet, without anyone ever explaining these messages, young girls and boys grow up with a twisted notion of sex and how our history deals with it.

We find ourselves in a society of teeming millions, unprecedented increase in sexual violence against women, a media and advertising industry full of sexual innuendoes, and yet living in a society that refuses to discuss sex in a healthy and open way. We hear about sex scandals, rape, the threat of HIV but nothing on the need to explore one's sexuality. We either treat sex as a topic that's too frivolous, or dangerous and against our culture.

A girl who lives in my neighbourhood, and is in class 8th came to me one day and asked softly, taking me to a corner. "Didi" she said, "would I get pregnant if a guy touched me." I stood there, not knowing how to respond to her. She said, "but my mother told me that I would get pregnant if any boy just touched me." I couldn't have told her that her mother has completely misinformed her. I also appreciated why her mother would have told her that. But we can't let



Libby Deak

our girls and boys grow up in a society, knowing so little about this whole thing called sex.

UK has made sex education compulsory in secondary schools. Different states in US have different policies on sex education for children. While misconceptions on 'sex education' continue to thrive in India, the HRD ministry was wary of even using the word 'sex' in the National Education Policy.

When our children are young we don't talk to them about sex, but leave it for their ill-advised friends, popular media, internet websites amongst others to educate them on the subject. When they grow up and come face to face with their sexuality, once again there is no platform where youngsters in India can talk about sex in a healthy and safe environment.

Yet, marriage is our favourite topic. Advice, suggestions, even marriage partners are bandied about in every possible family and social gathering.

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Whether a couple is sexually compatible, is not part of the checklist for finalising the suitable bride or groom. Similarly, whether lack of sex is part of the breakdown of a marriage is not a suitable topic to discuss with one's family. Even during marriage, it is not okay to ask if a married couple's sex life is okay. If they have kids, it is presumed to be okay.

'Best if an Indian company builds Colombo port's east terminal ... Colombo fully aware of India's strategic sensitivities'

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to Sri Lanka to celebrate the Buddhist Vesak Day celebrations underscored how Sri Lanka is a crucial test case for India's neighbourhood first policy. Admiral Jayanath Colombage, former Sri Lanka navy chief and director of Colombo's Centre for Indo-Lanka Initiatives, spoke to Nalin Mehta on how the Delhi-Colombo equation is changing and the China factor.

■ PM Modi has been to Sri Lanka twice now. After a China tilt under the previous Sri Lankan government, do you think the Delhi-Colombo relationship has turned a page?

At the leadership level, the India-Sri Lanka relationship hasn't been better ever. PM Modi's neighbourhood first policy is working in favour of Sri Lanka and he can be a driver of economic development in the region. We have not had this kind of a good equation with India since the 1970s between Indira Gandhi and Sirimavo Bandaranaike. The challenge is to translate this from the leadership level to action.

■ What do you make of the recent protests by union workers in Sri Lanka against the proposed strategic tie-up with India for Trincomalee port?

The spirit of what the leaders have spoken on this issue has not been understood by people. Protesters thought that somehow we were talking of giving Trincomalee to India. It was seen by a section of the polity as a betrayal.

The fact is that there are 98 oil tanks

in Trincomalee since the 1940s. They were used as a strategic reserve by the British between 1940-1945 when the British East Indies shipping headquarters was shifted to Sri Lanka. In 1987, Indian Oil came in and they are using some 15 of these oil tanks. We have not been using the remaining tanks so far and what is wrong with using them in a tie-up with India?

Q&A

It makes economic sense. Trincomalee is an unexploited gold mine and can be an energy hub.

■ What is your response to Indian concerns about China's growing imprint in Sri Lanka?

Colombo is fully aware of India's strategic sensitivities. Sri Lanka is pretty much part of overall Indian security umbrella, especially in the maritime domain because you can cross over in half an hour by sea and by air in seconds.

We won't do anything detrimental to the interest of India but is that enough for us to develop? China has been a friend, supporting our military by providing equipment when we had an official

arms embargo. China came to Sri Lanka in 2009 in a big way for infrastructure. We understand the concern that geo-economic ventures can also have geo-strategic intentions so we have to be very careful in how we look after the security aspects. We must be careful not to allow any Chinese military interest as a forward staging point aimed at India.

■ Colombo recently refused permission to a Chinese submarine to dock in its harbour but it raised Indian concerns in 2014 when such permission was given in 2014. Your comments?

Between 2009 to 2017, 355 warships came to Sri Lanka. Of these, the highest number was of Indian warships (71), then Japan (64) and 26 were Chinese vessels, including two submarines.

We are not a military base for anyone. We are basically a service provider.

■ What about the proposal for Indian companies to build the eastern terminal of Colombo harbour after China built your international container terminal?



dilbert



Aspire For The State Beyond Happiness

BK Brijmohan

Happiness is increasingly considered the proper measure of human progress and the goal of public policy. Consequently, many governments are beginning to acknowledge that people's well-being, and not just economic growth, ought to be the focus of their efforts.

Almost everything we do in life is motivated by the desire to be happy. For most people, however, the experience of happiness is temporary. This is because their joy is based on external factors that may not be in their control.

The Bhagwad Gita says happiness derived from the senses and objects ultimately leads to sorrow. Since the sources of such happiness, be they objects, senses, other people or circumstances, are impermanent, the joy they provide cannot last forever.

There is a state beyond happiness in which one does not feel any need for plea-

sure. One who has attained that blissful state is neither perturbed by sorrow, nor hankers after happiness. He simply is in bliss, says the Gita.

This state is attained by gaining full control over one's emotions and intellect and by meditating on the Supreme. The peace of mind attained therefrom is a pre-requisite to lasting happiness.

To attain mental serenity, the Gita advises renouncing the fruit of all action, taking success and failure in one's stride, and remaining detached while living in this world.

Spiritual knowledge about the soul, the Supreme Soul, and the law of karma, helps one to maintain equanimity in loss or gain, success or failure.

When we realise that we are immortal souls playing our role in this world, and that we create our destiny with our ac-

tions, we cease to see ourselves as victims of circumstances, and understand that our present is the result of our past, and we can build a better future for ourselves.

Our experiences are the consequences of actions in present and past lives, which are all recorded in the soul and which determine the quality of our future.

When we assume responsibility for our experiences, adversity no longer causes sorrow, as we recognise it to be the fruit of past actions, and feel happy that our karmic burden is becoming lighter.

Similarly, we are not swept off our feet by good fortune. Instead, it motivates us to keep doing good as that is the surest way to ensure a happy future for oneself. This kind of mental stability helps one become a detached observer of life.

Being detached means not being men-

Lack of a healthy atmosphere to talk about sex affects both men and women. If a man makes a move, he may be judged of poor character. The 'manliness' to pleasure a woman may be too strong a burden for men, especially since the Indian woman is portrayed as a passive taker of whatever 'love' comes her way. Given the patriarchal mindset that we inhabit, the scales are often tilted against women. It may be almost taboo for a woman to be so forthright that 'she wants it'.

From Sita to Jaya (lalithaa), Indian society can never stop guessing about a woman's sex life. Whether a woman is leading a normal, homely life or she is a leading lady in her field, she remains vulnerable to questions on her character. You don't like a female politician, actor, diplomat, or media person – call her a prostitute, a whore or a slut. Easy, right? I wonder how many of us know or have heard the male equivalents of these words being used for male politicians, actors, diplomats and media persons that we absolutely detest.

So why is it important to talk about sex, you may ask. Sex is at the core of human relations. It can be a source of liberation or slavery. Indian culture has always treated sex as a spiritual subject, adorned the walls of temples with meditative sexual poses, but over time we exalted it so much that we don't talk about it anymore.

Sex and sexual energy is going to remain a core feature of our lives, whether we like it or not. It is important that we don't let an atmosphere of silence pollute the ever flowing pure energy around it. We need to create platforms and an environment of freedom, where girls and boys, women and men can talk about and discuss sex in a positive way. This requires us, first, to open our eyes and see the elephant in the room – our refusal to talk about and engage with the topic of sex. There are repercussions to letting this elephant out in free open space, yet we must do it.

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Sacredspace

Easy To Disbelieve

Why is it easier to disbelieve than believe? It is easier to disbelieve than to believe because disbelief is an act of descent, whereas belief is an act of ascent. Descending is easier than ascending.

Sri Chinmoy



the speaking tree