

Wrong Call, Telcos: Forget Floor Rates

They should seek removal of unjustified levies

Telecom operators have reportedly asked the sector regulator, Trai, to set a floor price for voice and data tariffs to ostensibly tackle competition. This is a bad idea, and plans against consumer interests. Marginal costs have fallen sharply: calls that use data packets have become ultra-cheap, as has data transmission itself. A floor price will deprive consumers of the benefit. The sector regulator has a policy of forbearance towards tariffs, giving telcos freedom to fix their own tariffs except in the case of national roaming, fixed rural telephony and leased lines. A reversal of the hands-off policy would be retrograde. Let the market set tariffs. But telcos have a case demanding sharp reduction in government levies.

About 35-40% of the capital expenditure of telcos is on building the network, the bulk is on buying spectrum from the government. Yet, after buying spectrum at eye-watering prices, telcos are still required to part with a large share of the revenue as licence fee and another chunk of revenue as spectrum usage charge. Various levies

— license fee, spectrum usage charge and universal service obligation fund — and taxes account for over 30% of the industry's revenues, which the industry claims is the highest in the world. Spectrum fees are now determined through competitive auctions. Revenue share as licence fee made sense

when spectrum was made available as part of the licence without any significant upfront payments. Now companies bid for and buy spectrum at fancy prices. The telecom business, like any other business, should pay corporate tax on profits. The only other levy that is warranted is a small fee to cover the cost of regulation. It is appalling that 4G speeds in India are ridiculously low, compared to Singapore, South Korea, Japan and even Pakistan. Companies must be left with more of their revenue, so that they can invest in their networks.

If there is anti-competitive conduct in the industry, the right remedy is to let the Competition Commission of India fix it. A floor price for tariffs is against all economic sense and the dynamics of an industry where technological change is driving costs down relentlessly.

Admission of Being Alienated From People

The Congress, reportedly, will get civil society groups to draw up a charter of demands for incorporation into its manifesto in poll-bound states. Some rootless wonders put in charge of party units in these states might consider this a smart ploy to rally a group disgruntled with the BJP because of the restrictions the central government has placed on the flow of foreign funds to non-government organisations (NGOs). But, on the whole, there could be no better advertisement of the party's alienation from the people than having to depend on civil society intermediaries to identify what troubles the people whom the party seeks to represent.

A political party is, by definition, a voluntary organisation that seeks to gain control of state power. What distinguishes one party from another is its vision of how it seeks to gain power and what it seeks to achieve with state power. If a party has popular support, it would be because it engages with the people on a regular basis, in the course of mediating between the people and the state,

whether the party is in power or not. It is only when a party fails to engage with the people on a daily basis and emerges out of the woodwork only to seek people's votes, come elections, does it need other voluntary organisations to tell it what troubles the citizenry. Sonia Gandhi made a cardinal mistake in setting up the National Advisory Council, when the UPA was in power. Her job as party president was to make the party come alive as a conduit of popular aspirations and demands, to respond to which would be the job of the government.

The party leadership should learn from past failure to energise the party organisation, not persist with the mistake of focusing on power politics and outsourcing engagement with the people to NGOs.

But Cambridge University is doing just that by ascribing gender to brilliance

English Should Not Become Like Hindi

A hindrance to Hindi — as any non-native speaker will readily vouchsafe — is the fact that practically every word, inexplicably and often illogically, has a gender. It is impossible to formulate a correct sentence without knowing instinctively whether the subject and object are male or female, as there is no neuter gender in Hindi. In Hindi, feminine, for instance, but a swan is masculine. A dink, regardless of the actual sex of the birds. English, so far, did not have that obstacle to confound users, but Cambridge University seems bent on giving a gender bias to even those words that have none. It is one thing to insist on a neutral word for some descriptions and designations such as actor, chairperson or even human-kind, but for a university that has a dictionary to its name to tell its teachers not to use "genius", "flair" or "brilliance" because they "carry assumptions of gender inequality" is an unnecessary step in the direction of Hindi.

Brilliance may be suddenly perceived to be a "guy thing" now because more men than women get first-class degrees at Cambridge. But its political correctness advisers should note that even though India's IITs have an overwhelming number of male students, the gender of the Hindi word for brilliance and genius — "pratibha" — remains feminine. And that clearly does not demoralise men.

Like in past presidential elections, next month's will also test the skills of the ruling dispensation

Consensus and Sensibility



Arati R Jerath

The president of India is the titular head of the nation with a largely ceremonial role. And yet, the process of electing him or her can generate as much political heat as the choice of the prime minister. History tells us that there are many twists and turns, even skulduggery, before the first citizen is installed in Rashtrapati Bhavan.

It is unfortunate that the election to a post that should remain outside the realm of controversy often gets dragged into the rough and tumble of our noisy politics. But the upcoming presidential election next month will, like elections in the past, signal the state of play within the Narendra Modi government, the NDA and the Opposition. While the NDA on paper is well placed to elect its own candidate, its numbers fall slightly short of the halfway mark in the electoral college. The college is made up of all the state legislatures and the two Houses of Parliament. Currently, the NDA has 48.5% of the votes.

But there are dissensions in the NDA with the Shiv Sena acting up. And despite his dominant political position after the victories in the recent state polls, Modi cannot ignore

pressures from within and without. He may have to consider a 'more ideologically neutral' candidate to keep his NDA allies on board, and break up a united opposition front that hopes to cut its teeth on the presidential poll.

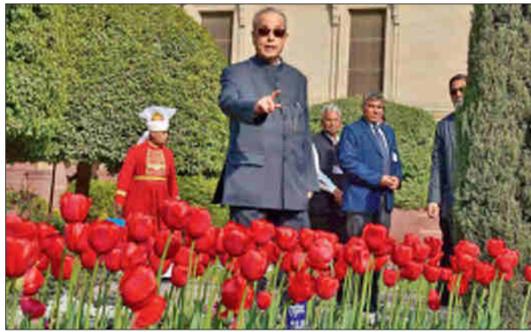
The magic word 'consensus' is back in the discourse with BJP president Amit Shah setting up a three-member committee of ministers to talk to NDA allies as well as the Opposition. However, historically, consensus has amounted to a test of the political skills of the ruling dispensation.

It was Indira Gandhi who changed the nature of what used to be a tame affair. After a series of run-ins with the old guard in the Congress, she decided to use the 1969 presidential poll for a bold political gamble to assert her authority. She struck a deal with a faction of the Congress and sections of the Opposition to put up V V Giri against the official nominee N Sanjeeva Reddy. Amazingly, Giri won and thus began a period of major political turmoil, leading to a split in the Congress and, ultimately, an early general election from which Indira Gandhi emerged victorious.

More Prezing Issues

Eight years later, when the Janata Party ousted her after the Emergency, the Morarji Desai government extracted vengeance through the presidential election in 1977. It ensured a unanimous victory for Sanjeeva Reddy, which Indira Gandhi in defeat was powerless to stop.

By 1982, when the next election for President rolled around, Indira Gandhi was back as PM and she ruthlessly used the opportunity to rub the crum-



No plucking after I'm gone now!

bling Janata Party's nose in the mud and push in an unabashed loyalist like Zail Singh as the first Sikh in Rashtrapati Bhavan. The perception was reinforced after Singh was famously reported as saying, "If my leader had said I should pick up a broom and be a sweeper, I would have done that. She chose me to be president."

The games over the choice of president have only continued despite efforts to paper over behind-the-scenes political bargaining with the fig leaf of consensus. Increasingly, a presidential poll has come to represent a show of strength by the government of the day and stop a joint opposition nominee from sneaking in through the cracks in a fragmented polity.

The election of A P J Abdul Kalam was a classic example of this. He was voted in unanimously as the first non-political president in 2002 during the tenure of the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government, but not before some extended negotiations and a tough process of elimination. The names on the table at that time included then Maharashtra governor P C Alexander and then vice-president Krishan Kant.

Both lost out to the politics of the day. It was then that Kalam's name was pulled out of a hat, reportedly at Mulayam Singh Yadav's suggestion. The Vajpayee government turned it into an advantage by promoting Kalam's credentials as a Muslim and father of India's nuclear bomb.

House for Mr Mukherjee

The election of the present incumbent Pranab Mukherjee had its own share of drama too. He was reportedly not Sonia Gandhi's first choice and his election reflects on her poor political skills. Nevertheless, the Congress quickly moved to take credit for the choice when it saw constituents of the NDA, namely the Shiv Sena and the JD(U), break ranks to support Mukherjee. With the BJP on the back foot, Mukherjee's election came as a badly needed boost for a scandal-hit Congress.

All eyes are now on Modi for the choice of the next president. Like in the past, the process of nominating the new occupant of Rashtrapati Bhavan will tell us a thing or two about today's political currents.

While the NDA on paper is well placed to elect its own candidate, its numbers fall slightly short of the halfway mark in the electoral college

GENDER & TECHNOLOGY

Man, Machine & Man's Machine



Vidisha Mishra & Samir Saran

A recent article in The Guardian (goo.gl/UajcTp) estimated that the sex tech industry, which is less than a decade old, is already worth \$30 billion. This estimate is expected to grow exponentially as industry gears up to unveil hyper-realistic female sex robots customised for men. This has two main implications: first, considerable money, time and effort are dedicated towards modelling machine behaviour to cater to male preferences by objectifying the female form. Second, the technology needed to drive these innovations are designed in most cases by male coders.

The gender equation is reinforced in another manner. While lines of code are written by men, artificial intelligence (AI) is often female. The fact that Siri, Alexa, Amelia, Amy and Cortana are all designed as hyper-intelligent yet servile female chatbots is not coincidental.

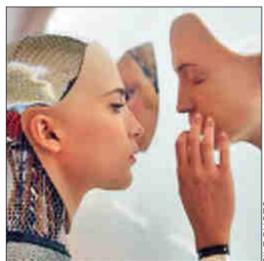
On the other hand, women's participation (and, therefore, data sets from women) in certain media fora is high-

ly under-represented. A 2015 paper by the Observer Research Foundation's Sydney Anderson ('India's Gender Digital Divide: Women and Politics on Twitter', goo.gl/bovMGp) found women's voices to be "significantly under-represented" in online political conversations.

So, it is not surprising then that when Microsoft released the 'millennial' chatbot Tay in March 2016, she quickly adapted to her male-dominated ecosystem and started using racist slurs and sexually offensive language on Twitter. As coders and consumers of technology are largely male, they are crafting algorithms that absorb existing gender and racial prejudices.

AI is replicating the same conceptions of gender roles that are being removed in the real world. For instance, Apple's Siri, Microsoft's Cortana and Amazon's Alexa are essentially modelled after efficient and subservient secretaries. This seemingly innocuous assignment of female characteristics to AI personalities has dangerous implications. These chatbots reportedly receive sexually-charged messages on a regular basis. More damaging still is the fact that they are programmed to respond deferentially or even play along with such suggestions. Essentially, sexual harassment that has now been made illegal in physical workplaces is normalised by AI.

Voices of disembodied, supportive



Deus sexist machina

AI tend to be female as both men and women find them less threatening. This comfort in issuing orders to a female voice is inherently problematic that tech companies have now acknowledged. Not only are companies investing in developing male bots and genderless bots, reportedly when someone asks Cortana, "Are you a girl?" she replies, "No. But I'm awesome like a girl." Similarly, Alexa has been described as a 'self-identified feminist'.

While feminist female chatbots are encouraging, they can hardly solve the inbuilt sexism by design of AI. In 2015, Carnegie Mellon University researchers found that the Google search engine was less likely to show ads of highly paid jobs to women as compared to men. A 2016 study discovered that data-mining algorithms associa-

ted words like philosopher, captain, warrior and boss with maleness, while top results for 'she' were homemaker, nurse and receptionist.

As AI grows in influence and gender biases continue seeping through algorithms, existing inequalities will be exacerbated. In India, for instance, the legal sector is gradually embracing AI, which is expected to improve speed and efficiency by automating tasks such as document drafting, undertaking legal research and due diligence. Similarly, news-writing bots are now functioning in the world of journalism.

In both cases, AI will autonomously generate output by identifying story angles based on algorithms with 'built-in' criteria. When cases involving sexual violence and their portrayal in traditional news media are already under scrutiny, it's important to question how male-hegemonic data sets will impact future news stories and court coverage of sexual assault and other topics requiring greater gender sensitivity. Since only 29% of internet users and 28% of mobile phone owners in India are women, improving access to basic information and communication technology services and infrastructure remains critical.

There is nothing inherently empowering or sexist about technology. It just reflects the values of its creators.

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MODI'S US TRIP

Will He Corner a Trump Spot?



Seema Sirohi

Ahead of US President Donald Trump's first foreign trip, a senior White House official offered two 'overarching' foreign policy goals to help understand the administration's dealings with other countries: making peace and making money. "One, [we] want to get as much peace as possible in the world... and as many wars and conflicts. The second one is [to] create as much global trade, because the more global trade, the more people have opportunity," the official explained.

The Trump confidante went on to list the areas of turmoil — West Asia, Syria, Afghanistan-Pakistan and North Korea — as key points of focus but said that other conflicts could demand attention down the line, raising speculation that making peace could stretch to Kashmir in the future. Trump and his UN Ambassador Nikki Haley have certainly talked about it. The briefing is a good pointer as Prime Minister Narendra Modi prepares for his June 26 visit to the White House. The two leaders will get a measure of each other when they meet one-on-one for a frank discussion. If rapport is established, it would send

a message to the principals to move ahead on the India relationship and away from the holding pattern. Tensions around H-1B visas, trade deficit and climate change can then be better managed.

First impressions are important, especially for Trump. He can erase the past if the present seems promising and the future begets a deal. He went from accusing China of "trapping" the US economy during the campaign to effusively praising Xi Jinping as a "great" leader after the Mar-a-Lago summit.

One can only hope what Trump said during the campaign about India — that he "loves" the country — would still hold true after he meets Modi.

But he needs little victories he can flaunt. Can India offer Trump anything on trade and economic issues he can sell his political base in exchange for, say, technology transfer?

The statement from the White House announcing Modi's visit was appropriately sweeping. The two leaders will "look to outline a common vision for the US-India partnership that is worthy of their 1.6 billion citizens". It listed three "common priorities": fighting terrorism, promoting economic growth and reforms, and expanding security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region.

The Indian statement said the discussions would provide a "new direction for deeper bilateral engagement" and "consolidation of a multi-dimensional strategic partnership." All good. But New Delhi must secure the gains already made in the strategic partnership before moving in a 'new' direction.

Trump's top cabinet officials have said all the right things. But often, their declarations are undermined by the president himself. US defence secretary James Mattis recently tried to reassure allies at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore that the US was committed to a rule-based order. He called out China for disregarding international law, militarising the South China Sea and showing "contempt" for other countries' interests. But when faced with probing questions, he fell on repeating the British refrain — attributed to Winston Church-

ill — that America will do the right thing after exhausting all other possibilities. It was no balm for wary allies and friends. Mattis also quoted Modi on "respecting freedom of navigation and adhering to international norms".

"We recognise India, the most populous democracy in the world, as a major defence partner. We did so, in part, out of respect for India's indispensable role in maintaining stability in the Indian Ocean region," Mattis said. This is as clear an articulation as any on the Indo-US strategic partnership from Trump's defence secretary, a man who enjoys enormous respect.

But Modi still needs to hold him from Trump and find a way to tell him it because of the gap between stated policies and the president's unsettling interventions. India under Modi consciously moved India closer to the US, for which he got grief from some quarters.

The White House briefer also stated the Trump administration is "very open-minded" on how it achieves its foreign policy goals because the president is a "pragmatist" and believes in "building strong relationships and keeping conversations private".

Trump's real thoughts on India remain a mystery, one that Modi will have to solve. If the visit doesn't deliver on the basics — a firm commitment to the partnership and the way forward — the PM could have a problem on his hands.



The Price of Leadership

S LEE LAVATHI

Leadership is a powerful construct. A leader is envied for the position and authority he enjoys. He receives adulation and is celebrated as a champion and deliverer. Little wonder, then, a leader is often emulated; even envied.

This is what the Cadillac Motor Car Co succinctly chose to call "The Penalty of Leadership" in a historic ad, "The leader is assailed because he is a leader, and the effort to equal him is merely added proof of that leadership. Failing to equal or to excel, the follower seeks to depreciate and to destroy — but only confirms once more the superiority of that which he strives to supplant. There is nothing new in this. It is as old as the world and as old as the human passions: envy, fear, greed, ambition and the desire to surpass. And it all avails nothing. If the leader truly leads, he remains — the leader..."

A homespun story often related to little children in Indian homes sums up the concept of "leadership as poison" in very simple terms: the palace maid was bone-tired, cleaning out the Queen's chamber. The royal bed looked so inviting that the maid lay down to rest before resuming her chores. When the Queen saw her, all hell broke loose. The "culprit" was shouted at, warned of dire consequences and punished.

Before being dragged away by the guards, the maid exclaimed to the Queen, "I slept on your bed for barely five minutes and I've had to endure so much torture and humiliation. You lie on this bed every day, for the last so many years — how much more pain must you be suffering?"

Citings

Our Political Enterprise

MILAN VAISHNAV

In 2003, the Supreme Court ruled that anybody who stands for elected office in India must, at the time of submitting their nomination papers, also submit a judicial affidavit, in which they detail their criminal record and their financial details. So, we now have a window into this universe of crime and politics.

What the data shows is that as of 2014, 34% of members of Parliament face ongoing criminal cases, which means there are judicial proceedings underway to prosecute cases against them. Some 21%, or roughly one in five MPs, face what is known as a "serious case". So, if there were to be a conviction, it would merit hard jail time — leaving aside what we might consider to be minor transgressions, things like defamation or libel, unlawful assembly. Focus instead on things like attempted murder, dacoity, banditry, kidnapping extortion — these are serious crimes.

What's interesting to note is that if you look at the last three general election cycles — 2004, 2009, 2014 — the proportions are going up rather than going down. If you go down to the state and local levels, you find very similar patterns. One in three state legislators in India today is also under criminal scrutiny. This is a significant number.

If you were to plot this against a map of India, it's happening in virtually all four corners of the country... It's a failure of institutions to deliver.

From "Does Democracy Encourage Criminal Politicians?"

Chat Room

Right Changes in Fuel Prices

Daily changes in fuel prices is a good move by the government. Through the new mechanism, the consumer can now share the benefit or burden, whatever the case, of petrol and diesel prices undergoing changes every day in accordance with the global prices of oil and the changes in the rupee-dollar exchange. Not revising oil prices due to political considerations on the eve of elections places heavy burden on the oil marketing companies once the election is over. The new practice delinks fuel pricing from political considerations. Not to forget the benefit of fall in prices immediately passing to the consumer.

K V SEETHARAMAIAH Hassan