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comment

Don't humiliate the poor further

The idea of branding homes is insulting and undemocratic

It betrays a staggering lack of imagination and insensitivity that the Rajasthan government could think of no better way than to paint 'I am poor' or 'I am extremely poor' outside the homes of BPL families as a prerequisite to them availing of subsidised foodgrain. This has been done ostensibly to separate them from well-to-do families. There could have been better ways to differentiate the better-off from the poor than this humiliating exercise in order to give eligible people what is their entitlement.

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The Vasundhara Raje government has not covered itself in glory in recent times with the lynchings in the state and this adds to its ignominy. The state government surely has a more refined and humane way of identifying those eligible for subsidised grain. What this shows is a complete disconnect from the people and disregard for their sentiments. The poor do not need their noses rubbed in the dirt about their status. This is not the first time the Rajasthan government has done this. Last year, it thought it fit to paint yellow patches on BPL homes in Bhilwara to which it added the beneficiary's name and identification number. Madhya Pradesh had done something similar on BPL homes in 2012. The government seems to think that the poor will be grateful to receive its largesse even if it means this is at the cost of their self-respect. This idea of branding homes is undemocratic and insulting.

Other state governments too have displayed insensitivity to the underprivileged. In tribal areas, it is not unknown for district officials to withhold money people are entitled to under social schemes on the grounds that it would be squandered on drink. Writing a person's economic status on his walls could discourage people from availing of benefits from sheer embarrassment. This is a violation of human rights. The Centre should tell the state government in no uncertain terms that this is unacceptable in a civilised society. Those who came up with the idea should be penalised. If an identification number can be painted on a wall, surely it is there in the records as proof of economic status. Then it is inexplicable why this uniquely cruel practice was instituted.

Social media rules can be a double-edged sword

The guidelines, which the government intends to set, must be unambiguous

Last week the Press Trust of India reported that the government was finalising a social media policy to stop its misuse. Representatives from various security agencies discussed the way ahead. This move comes at a time when there are reports of social media platforms being used by terrorists for anti-India activities. There has also been a spat in the number of arrests for 'offensive' social media posts. At the moment there is only a list of 'do's and don'ts' which the government intends to convert into guidelines — and this is a delicate area.

There is a need to contain the abuse of social media for terror-related activities, but, the test is to make sure that such measures do not create an authoritarian State. The fact is that it is hard to censor social media in a healthy way. One of the problems of setting guidelines is that if they are not clearly defined it could result in abuse — it could be misused to settle personal scores. The more vague the guidelines the more susceptible to abuse they will be. The recent cases of people being arrested for celebrating Pakistan's victory over India at the Champions Trophy finals is an example of this grey area. Guidelines in themselves are not bad, the problem is when these are used to police users. In such a scenario, guidelines would lead to abuse. This further gets complicated because India holds on to old censorship practices, like the sedition law, or indistinct provisions where a person can be arrested for 'offending the sensibilities of a community' or 'inciting violence and disturbing communal harmony'.

Government intervention in monitoring social media can have both negative and positive outcomes. It can play a positive role to dispel false rumours and fake news. It would be negative if the guidelines set out to override existing freedoms. The government's intention to check the misuse of social media platforms is right, but it would do more harm than good if the guidelines are vague and open to misinterpretation.

straightforward

SHASHI SHEKHAR



Kovind must speak for the deprived

Every party would think twice before opposing him, since they don't want to be called anti-Dalit

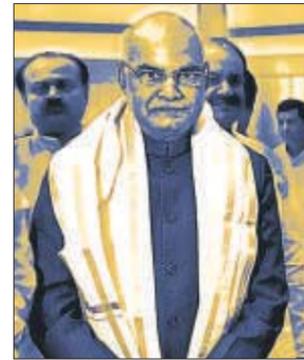
At Patna's Gandhi Maidan, we were waiting for the governor to arrive at the book fair's cavernous pandal. He arrived two minutes before time. As soon as the door of the car opened, I welcomed him with my introduction. Shaking my hand with warmth, he said: "You don't need any introduction."

Generally, modern-day politicians say this to mock the people they meet. Arrogance has become the signature of most Indian politicians these days. He appeared the opposite to these traits: matured, polite and graceful. On the dais, I discovered that the governor had already read my book. The portions that he had underlined to quote were the ones that I had also selected for my speech. Does he think on the same lines as me? The question sprang to my mind.

In my speech, I invoked Nigerian Nobel laureate Chinua Achebe. Achebe has written: "Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter." After the speech, he whispered in my ear: Your views are extremely convincing in the Indian context! His speech was succinct and rich with content. Before he bid goodbye, his polite nature, intellectual

depth, social commitment and graceful retorts had left an imprint on everybody.

By now you would have understood that I am speaking about Ram Nath Kovind. His educational background, his views and his personality make him suitable for the President's post. His candidature did take many with surprise, because he always done his work keeping a low profile. But this is Narendra Modi and Amit Shah's style. The duo has made a smart political move. Let us begin with the politics behind it. Kovind was born in a Dalit household. Every political party would have to think twice before opposing him since they don't want to earn the stamp of being anti-Dalit. The opposition had faced a similar dilemma when the Congress put forward KR Narayanan's name. The record of his victory is still intact. The compulsions of a similar brand of politics compelled the Opposition to nominate Meira Kumar as their candidate. Kumar is the daughter of renowned Dalit leader Jagjivan Ram and has held a number of high posts including speaker of the Lok Sabha. For the first time, two extremely qualified Dalit candidates are pitted against each other for the President's post. The Congress hopes that by fielding Kumar, it will be able to keep some of its



NDA presidential nominee Ram Nath Kovind, New Delhi, June 23

remaining Dalit support base intact. The BJP's leadership realises it will never get the Muslim votes. So, they want to draw away the Dalits from the Congress. Even before Kovind's candidature, the Bhim app, the razzmatazz around the Ambedkar anniversary and Amit Shah having lunch with a Dalit family were indicators of this. Kovind hails from the Koli community. Being a native of Uttar Pradesh, not only will he influence voters in the state, the BJP will also gain in Bihar, his karmabhoomi. The support

of the Janata Dal (United) is a sign of this. Apart from the entire NDA, the JD (U) and a faction of the AIADMK have come out in Kovind's support. These elections could prove to be a trial by fire for the Opposition because people are seeing it as a rehearsal for 2019. The assessment till now makes it clear that Kovind's victory is a certainty and the Opposition is only in the fray since it doesn't want to give the NDA a walkover.

Kovind's critics may say that he has never won an election despite getting the opportunity twice. The buzz is he didn't get a Lok Sabha ticket in 2014 because of this. The jealousy may allege he has always preferred the backdoor to assume office. Without getting into an argument, I would politely like to remember Abraham Lincoln here. He, too, lost many elections, went bankrupt and even suffered from gangrene, but he won the election for an office considered to be the most powerful in the world. As the president of the United States, he abolished the system of slavery. While it is true that the Indian President has his constraints, but after reaching the office of the President Ram Nath Kovind can do a lot of things that are required.

Even today the nation doesn't want to hear the voices of the Dalits and the dispossessed. A person who has risen from among them will have to take this initiative. Will he keep Achebe's saying in mind? History is looking at Ram Nath Kovind with anticipation.

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KEEPING COUNT



India will have to create millions of jobs over the next few years

ASHOK KARANJIT

Why our policy makers should plan for 1.7 billion

As India prepares to become the most populous in the world by 2050, the country faces a number of challenges



LEELA VISARIA

The rate of growth of India's population has begun to decline in the last two decades, but its population will continue to grow in the next four or five decades. From 1.21 billion people in 2011, it will increase to 1.5 billion by 2025 and to 1.7 billion by 2050. In just a decade from now India will replace China as the most populous country in the world. India's policy makers need to start planning for population of 1.7 billion while keeping in focus the changes that will take place in the age structure, composition and distribution of population in the years to come.

In absolute terms, the working age population of 750 million today will be close to a billion by 2025. The number of old more than 60 will also increase from about 96 million in 2011 to 165 million by 2025 because of falling mortality and increase in longevity.

The decreasing share of young dependents in population and increasing share of those in workforce, viewed as a window of opportunity or known as demographic dividend, lasts about 30-40 years. But the demographic dividend is not automatic and does not by itself trigger processes that would help exploit its benefits. We have to seize the

opportunity created by the reduction in child dependency. For reaping the benefits, there is an urgent need to invest in providing quality education at all levels to our children who will become the future work force, and designing and imparting meaningful skills to them while taking advantage of technological innovations.

To fully employ this segment of population gainfully and productively, India will have to create millions of jobs over the next few years. Given the limited education and other skills, labour-intensive manufacturing would need to grow to absorb India's growing labour force at reasonably high productivity levels. It is expected that with the reduction in the number of children women have, a positive climate is created for them to enter the world of work. While greater female labour force participation can boost economic growth, the absorption of women will continue to be a thorny issue for years to come.

India will also have to reckon with the increase in the number of the aged. With continuous fertility decline in India, there will be fewer children to look after elderly parents in future. In such a situation, the State will have to step in through provision of social pension. Healthcare facilities to treat chronic ailments the elderly suffer from like dementia, Parkinson's disease and mental health problems will have to be increased.

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R SUKUMAR



For the State, waivers are the easy way out

This monsoon season, the debts of farmers, businesses and telecom companies are dominating the headlines

If this monsoon season has a theme in India, it has to be debt.

The Reserve Bank of India is flexing its new powers and has initiated action against 12 companies under the new Bankruptcy Code. These companies account for around a fourth of the gross non-performing assets of the banking system. That works out to around Rs 2 lakh crore or Rs 2 trillion (or \$31 billion).

Farmers across India are protesting, demanding waiver of their loans and better prices for their crops. Bank of America Merrill Lynch estimates that by the time the next parliamentary elections come around, in 2019, Indian states would have waived farm loans worth \$40 billion. That's around Rs 2.6 trillion.

Meanwhile, a bunch of telecom companies — in fact, all but one — is lobbying the government for a bail-out. The telcos were carrying debt of around Rs 4.85 trillion on their books as of 31 December 2016. In addition, they owe the government close to Rs 3 trillion for spectrum they have already bought. The numbers work out to around \$75 billion and \$46 billion, respectively.

Together, that works out to around \$146 billion of debt which explains why the theme is dominating the headlines.

Let's look at the three cases in ascending order of complexity.

The non-performing asset problem is, believe it or not, the easiest to solve. Sure, bankruptcy proceedings could be long-drawn, and the discretion required to write down loans isn't easily found in a banking system dominated by state-owned banks — not in an environment where investigative agencies can ask why loans are being written down — but at the heart of most non-performing assets is an asset. This could be a steel factory, a power plant, a stretch of road, even part ownership of an airport. All are assets that a growing economy needs and which, if run properly, or when the commodity cycle turns (or both), could be

ALL GOVERNMENTS HAVE STEERED CLEAR OF PUSHING THROUGH THE KIND OF AGRICULTURAL REFORM AND BUILDING THE INFRASTRUCTURE REQUIRED TO MAKE FARMING A VIABLE BUSINESS

viable, even profitable. With the right regulatory regime, some hard calls, and the courage to take write-downs, this could happen.

The debt on the books of the telcos poses a more difficult problem. This is debt that has been built up because the government insisted on transparency and a market-driven approach above all else. The newsroom I work for, Mint, believes in free markets so it is difficult for me to argue with this approach. This is debt that has been built up because the government has sought to do the right thing from the perspective of technology, and by customers. Again, it is difficult to find fault with this approach although, over the years, this has benefited only three companies — the two Reliance entities in telecommunications, and Tata Teleservices. And this is debt that has been built up because most telcos have adopted the debt-based model of growth (over bringing in equity). It is difficult to blame this model too. Together, these three approaches have benefited the government, through higher revenue, and customers, through lower tariffs. But the industry is in distress now, and crying for a bail-out. The government should wait for market forces to play out and watch the ensuing consolidation (this has already begun, with the second and third largest telcos, Vodafone India and Idea Cellular announcing a merger), but it should also push for these companies to bring in more equity, agree to take a haircut on some spectrum payments, make mergers easier, ensure that the telecom regulator and the anti-trust body stay sharp and fair, and promise not to meddle with policy anymore (at least for a few years).

Farm loans pose the most difficult problem, not because they can't be waived — they can be, as various state governments have shown — but because they are a symptom of the larger malaise in Indian agriculture. Despite assorted claims, all governments have largely steered clear of pushing through the kind of agricultural reform and building the agricultural infrastructure required to make farming a viable business. The order of investments required is huge; the changes required, complex and, in some cases, politically inconvenient; and the time horizon for outcomes, long. Waivers are the easy way out.

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innervoice

CELEBRATE THE FESTIVAL OF EID WITH COMPASSION AND GRATITUDE



Eman Sakina

In Islam, two kinds of Eids are celebrated. The first is called Eid-ul-Fitr which falls on the first day of Shawwal, the tenth month of the lunar year, that is followed by Ramzan, the month in which the Holy Quran was revealed on Prophet Mohammad.

During this month, Muslims devote themselves to the memory of God and strive to guard themselves against evil. The second Eid, Eid-ul-Azha falls on the tenth day

of Zil-Hijjah, the last month of the lunar year. On Eid-ul-Fitr, people who have completed the month-long fasting express their gratitude to the almighty by offering morning prayers.

In a spiritual congregation, a Muslim would feel ashamed if he is holding any enmity towards fellow human beings. Along with that, they remember their deceased relatives and friends in prayers. After the prayers, they meet ailing people to share their cheerfulness. They meet the des-

tute, giving alms in the form of money, clothes and eatables. They exchange gifts and invite friends for feasts after a month-long fasting. However, in true sense, the mirthful day may not exactly be marked by eating and distributing sweets. In fact, it comes through the transformation towards piety achieved during the Ramzan month.

(Innervoice comprises contributions from our readers.)

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