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Bonding over a common enemy

Stand on terror and China keep the India-US friendship going

India First meets America First and agree Pakistan is third-rate. The most tangible consequence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's maiden summit with US president Donald Trump has been the blacklisting of the Hizbul Mujahideen leader, Syed Salahuddin, and an agreement that both countries should go after terrorist safe havens. But the main Indian accomplishment from the visit was to reassure itself that the India-US strategic partnership will survive an unpredictable White House resident. For the most part, that has been accomplished. The governments found common ground on terrorism. But they also agreed that they faced a common Chinese challenge on the maritime front.

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What New Delhi could only paper over were the sources of friction in the economic sphere. Mr Trump, reflecting his curious mercantilist view on economics, expressed displeasure over India's small trade surplus with the US. He was on firmer ground when it came to criticising India's high barriers to manufactured goods. However, the two governments agreed to handle these and other trade and investment problems through dialogue rather than confrontation. Nonetheless, while the US will maintain continuity on the strategic side, India should expect little leeway on trade and immigration issues. This should not come as a surprise: Mr Trump has been consistent when it comes to fulfilling the baser economic and cultural concerns of his white working class support base. Mr Modi may see a faint echo of his own government's actions here in this. No one expects him to reverse his moves to restrict the activities of US-based charities in India. His base requires that of him.

India's foreign policy establishment can take some reassurance from the fact that the bilateral relationship seems set to weather what was seen as its sternest test. The administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama were largely on the same page when it came to India. Mr Trump, both in terms of his personality and the manner of his election, was a wild card. But he has chosen an establishment foreign policy team and even at a personal level seems to see Mr Modi as a kindred political figure. India should not expect that everything will be smooth sailing after this. The US continues to be patchy in its response to China. It remains to be seen how much stomach it has for a renewed military commitment to Afghanistan. India will go its own way on climate change. These, however, are in the realm of normal differences and not evidence of Trumpist whimsy.

Muslims are not the only minority group in India

The VHP's demand for scrapping the minorities' panel is ridiculous

The VHP rabid dislike for Muslims is well-known. So it's not surprising to read about their latest 'demand': On Sunday, the group demanded the scrapping of the National Commission for Minorities (NCM) and the Union ministry of minority affairs. It also criticised the NCM's decision to "start a helpline number for Muslims", adding that "this makes one feel that the atrocities against the Muslim community have reached such proportions that the extreme step of opening a helpline for the Muslims had to be taken up".

The demand is wrong on many counts. First, the organisation is making a mistake of equating the NCM with only Muslims. The NCM was set up in 1992 and five communities — Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Zoroastrians — were notified as minority communities. In 2014, Jains were added to the list. So by abolishing the NCM and the ministry, the VHP will also be denying other communities a platform to raise their grievances. Second, the NCM was not set up just after Independence; it was envisaged in 1978 and came up in 1992. So the MPs did feel the need for such a panel. Third, it is well known that minorities face challenges and so need a dedicated platform to address them. This has been mentioned in many credible government reports. Last but not the least, if the VHP wants to scrap the NCM, how would it then justify Article 29 and 30 of the Constitution, which guarantee rights of minorities?

The VHP should realise that the panel can be useful to keep tabs on the sources of minority discontent. Those who believe in the country's secular ethos, however, will agree that India needs the NCM now more than ever before.

India's TV channels are abysmal

Too much dependence on advertising revenue is leading to a lack of ambition and creativity



ASHOK MALIK

Recently, a news channel had camerapersons running behind Indian cricketers to ask why they hadn't worn black armbands during the Champions' Trophy final against Pakistan, in sympathy with soldiers killed in the Kashmir Valley. As a test of patriotism and as a news item, it was ridiculous. Yet, this has come to be expected of Indian news television, now increasingly part of the entertainment economy rather than the information ecosystem.

Why are Indian news channels so astonishingly disappointing? They oscillate between over-the-top studio debates and relatively sober studio debates. There is rarely deep reportage. Documentaries are practically unheard of. Spending on editorial and news gathering scares managements. Preference is given to paying some talking head a few thousand rupees to scream for 30 minutes.

What is at the root of this? Is it the fault of a few anchors? Is there something wrong with us as a society? Are we incapable of producing and appreciating sensible news pro-

gramming? Actually, the phenomenon has much to do with the business model of television in India.

In the early television age, there was the belief that as access technology for viewers became more organised — with a consolidation of cable networks, and introduction of DTH and then digital platforms — a market would be created for high-quality, niche news channels. These channels would spend generously on editorial content and raise revenue through subscriptions.

Some 15 years ago, however, India decided to impose price caps on various types of channels. Incredibly, this task devolved on the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI).

As per the TRAI tariff order of 2016, the price ceiling for a news channel is ₹5 per month. In contrast the price ceiling for a general entertainment channel is ₹12 per month.

Consider what this means. In theory, the general entertainment channel could be re-running old soaps (cost of content: zero). The news channel would be required to constantly generate fresh content. Even so, the former is allowed to charge more than double what the latter is able to. Besides a general entertainment channel is always likely to get more subscribers. So it is a double hit for anybody seeking to build a serious news channel.

Over time news channel owners have simply given up, and decided to take the route of reality TV. Today, with the sheer volume of free — occasionally dubious and sometimes



Thanks to shrinking budgets, Indian news channels rarely spend on deep reportage. HT

outright fake — content available online, one wonders if the news business can ever be rescued in India.

The price cap trap has hurt more than just news. Children's channels in India are packed with re-runs of 20-30 year old Japanese cartoons. The motivation to spend money on quality Indian animation or children's programming, using graphics and special effects that — ironically — Indian backend companies generate for Hollywood, is absent. After all there is a price cap of ₹7 a month for children's channels — irrespective of whether they telecast a dazzling and expensively produced series on Indian history or Doraemon, an ancient Japanese series, on a loop.

This explains why there is such little educational and knowledge-based programming

and so few documentaries on television. Despite India's rich heritage, a National Geographic type network, in any language, English or regional, is not feasible. Even general interest channels suffer from the problem. In the developed world — the so-called "mature media markets" — news and entertainment channels earn about 70% of revenue from subscription.

In India, only 36% comes from subscription. The rest is sacrificed to the advertiser, the mad race for TRPs and the lowest common denominator.

Hence, you have prime-time wars, re-runs of Japanese cartoons, vacuous reality shows and hysterically outlandish soap operas cloning themselves on channel after channel, depending on the genre. India has killed television by legislating the subscription model to death. This is leading to a serious lack of ambition and a curbing of creative juices, since recovering investments is impossible.

Take an example. An episode of House of Cards costs the equivalent of ₹30 crore to produce. In contrast an episode of Big Boss costs a measly ₹4 crore. Even accounting for the price differentials in the United States and India, that comparison is telling. The equivalent for news programming is as sharp.

What is the solution? Should regulators and government departments be pricing creativity and what a consumer should be paying for a quality news show — or should the market?

Ask yourself that at 9 pm this evening.

Ashok Malik is distinguished fellow, Observer Research Foundation
The views expressed are personal

VICIOUS CIRCLE



The GST on Braille typewriters and papers, carriages for the disabled and wheelchairs and other assistive devices have been fixed at rates varying between 5 to 18% HT

Why the disabled are not enthusiastic about GST

Unlike Australia and Canada, India has decided to impose a steep tax on health care and mobility aids



NIPUN MALHOTRA

On September 8, 2016, President Pranab Mukherjee gave his assent to the landmark Goods and Services Tax bill, a major step towards rolling out the new indirect tax regime. The GST will come into effect from July 1. Just like everyone else, I was excited at the prospect of one indirect tax for the whole nation. But all my hopes were dashed to the ground, when the GST rates on categories of goods were released on May 18. Here's why: The GST on Braille typewriters and papers, carriages for the disabled and wheelchairs and other assistive devices have been fixed at rates varying between 5 to 18%.

I was saddened to see the government charge GST on these necessary mobility devices because these were originally exempt from customs and other supporting duties. By doing so, India missed an opportunity to replicate Australia and Canada, which exempted health care and mobility aids while introducing GST. Incidentally, in the 2016 budget finance minister Arun Jaitley had exempted imported Braille paper from any kind of taxation.

The latest government decision shows insensitivity, ignorance and a lack of under-

standing of the needs of Persons with Disabilities (PWD). This should not have been the case because today the disability movement worldwide is starting to look at disability as a social problem rather than as a medical problem. In other words, disability is not impairment. It is caused by barriers that exist in society preventing the PWD to enjoy their rights.

The government has taken several initiatives for PWD: Ten years after India signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, India today has a new disability law. It has also launched the Accessible India Campaign and the Inclusive India campaign for those with intellectual disabilities that stresses on inclusive education, employment and community life. But this new tax on a wheelchair or on Braille typewriters and papers, which is equivalent to a tax on walking or seeing, is a huge setback for us.

According to the 2011 census, 2.21% of India's population is disabled. It is time India starts looking at the disabled as a resource. Let's not drain this resource by making the mobility aids unaffordable. Instead, let's nurture this resource by giving PwDs opportunities to avail the best education and health care and provide them jobs. An income-tax paying disabled person could add substantially to India's GDP. Only by ensuring this, can Prime Minister Narendra Modi fulfil his 'Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas' dream.

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The views expressed are personal

Overreliance on one crop has cost MP farmers dear

Only a comprehensive set of polycentric reforms can mitigate the distress of the Indian agriculturists



MIHIR SHAH

Whenever flashpoints are reached, such as the current farmers' agitation, there is a clamour for immediate palliatives. But what we must not overlook are the profound possibilities of reform that such crises open up.

Take Madhya Pradesh (MP), the epicentre of the agitation. Over the last decade, MP has been India's leading state in agricultural production. Paradoxically, this has set the scene for the crisis. It is clearly not enough to increase production without a concomitant emphasis on reducing costs, ensuring sustainability, providing a secure market and moving farmers up the value chain.

As any player in the stock market knows, portfolio diversification is the best hedge against market risk. In farming, it is also the safest guarantee of sustainable returns, more so in the present context of climate change. Over the last three decades, soybean has emerged as the single most important crop in MP. This over-reliance on a single crop has cost MP farmers dear. What they face today is a crisis of "over-production". Farmers want a rise in incomes, not just production. This depends critically on both costs of production and being able to sell what they produce at a reasonable price. Soy farmers have got squeezed at both ends. The major demand for soybean has been from companies that export soybean, which accounted for almost 80% of output. But over the last seven years, Indian soybean exports have crashed thanks to a 150% increase in global soybean output. Argentina and Brazil produce almost 50% of world soybean at lower costs and higher productivity. The Indian market has been flooded with cheaper soybean and edible oil, with India being outpriced by as much as \$150/tonne in the global soybean market.

DIVERSIFICATION MEANS SUPPORT FOR THE LIVESTOCK SECTOR, THE FASTEST GROWING SEGMENT. RECENT POLICY CHANGES, WHICH COULD JEOPARDISE THIS POTENTIAL, SHOULD BE RECONSIDERED

In many ways, therefore, this was a crisis just waiting to happen, as we have steadfastly refused to reform agriculture in India. The first need is to diversify and never revert to this over-dependence on one crop. India is a land of great agro-ecological diversity. Through monocropping we have converted this into our biggest weakness, hugely magnifying the risks of farming. There are many parts of the country facing a massive water crisis. But by procuring only rice and wheat, we continue to incentivise farmers to grow these crops, which take up nearly 50% of our water.

Until we diversify procurement operations to include millets and pulses, farmers will not have the incentive to cultivate these crops, which are much more suited to soil and water conditions in large parts of India. We must include these crops in the mid-day meal schemes so that our children eat more nutritious food, while providing farmers a steady demand for these crops.

We also need to lower costs of cultivation by reducing dependence of farmers on chemical fertilisers and pesticides, prices of which have soared and whose impact has been declining. They also cause immeasurable damage to soil and water, further lowering productivity and increasing costs. The good news is that all over India, farmers are blazing the trail with non-chemical agriculture. However, these attempts need strong government support. The huge and misdirected fertiliser subsidy needs to be increasingly focused on non-chemical options.

Diversification also means support for India's livestock sector, the fastest growing segment of the rural economy. Recent policy changes, which could jeopardise this potential, should be reconsidered. As for the perishable segment of fruits and vegetables, they will have no future without massive investment in agro-processing, cold chains etc, so that farmers can move up the value chain. Unfortunately, investment in agriculture is declining at 0.8% per year (at constant prices) over the past seven years.

The farmers' most fundamental predicament is about water. Groundwater, the backbone of our economy, is facing a grave crisis of sustainability. We need to give momentum to watershed management, recast MGNREGA on watershed lines, enact a new groundwater law and effectively implement the National Aquifer Management Programme. Only this comprehensive set of polycentric reforms can mitigate the distress of the Indian farmer.

Mihir Shah is a former member of the erstwhile Planning Commission
The views expressed are personal

innervoice
RELATIONSHIPS HAVE THE POTENTIAL TO ADD MEANING TO ONE'S LIFE

Anitha Suresh

Ever imagined about a world without relationships? Come to think of it, life is a relationship. Its strengthening and weakening is in our hands. Depending upon what and how you give prominence to, your relationships will thrive and prosper.

Constantly seeking attention and getting dejected when you are not loved can affect your relationships. Instead, try focusing on what we can give to each other and in the long run, win much love through

it. Piling up past sorrows and brooding over them will never let one build up good connections. A forgiving heart can heal relationships and help one to see the brighter side. Each and every individual differs in character, behavioural patterns and choices. We, as human beings, should be open-minded to accept the differences and not judge them on the basis of their choices.

Relationships become bitter when there is no mutual acceptance and when there is a constant effort to change the other. We all

have our qualities and frailties, but when we start accepting people for what they are, happiness is achieved automatically. Learn to acknowledge others and their efforts; this will make you a lovable person and will add meaning to your relationships as well as your life.

(Innervoice comprises contributions from our readers.)
The views expressed are personal
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