

The two Indias



TICKER
MIHIR S SHARMA

Party (BJP) since 2013?

Today, it looks like he has found one. He might still lose, but in his choice lies the future of Indian politics — and it's one that, however inevitable, should worry us. On June 6, the Karnataka government set up a committee "to examine the feasibility and legal issues around the demand", as *The Indian Express* put it. In case you're wondering, that's a couple of weeks before the Siddaramaiah government made an issue out of Hindi signage in the Bengaluru Metro.

There is a certain dire inevitability about the growth of the Two Indias story. The BJP has conquered every single other narrative. It pretends to be less corrupt than everyone, more efficient than everyone, more "pro-poor" than everyone, more pro-"development" than everyone, more nationalist than everyone. But it cannot pretend to be anything other than what it is: A party with roots in the north and the west, and one which is now ruled firmly from its two centres of power in Delhi and Nagpur.

Every narrative has been taken; only sub-nationalism remains. And the BJP has, if nothing else, played into the Opposition's hands. It may have picked a South Indian for vice-president — but the same man had declared, just weeks earlier, that the nation could not progress without Hindi. The nationwide cattle trading Rules — the de facto "beef ban" — could not but be seen as an imposition of northern values on beef-eating states in the south and east. It was the BJP itself that made an issue of the Karnataka flag as an insult to the nation — forced by its ideological foot soldiers to highlight issues that will only hurt its own prospects.

And even more substantive changes are afoot: Tamil Nadu has long complained that the goods and services tax is unfair to it, as a major production centre. Uttar Pradesh farmers are being given a loan waiver that, according to the state's Budget, will be paid for largely out of national taxes. But Tamil farmers agitate in Delhi for similar benefits in vain. (Siddaramaiah has already issued a ₹8,000-crore loan waiver.)

It is extraordinary, in some sense, that these states' sense of ill-usage at an increasingly north-dominated country has not flared up long before this. The very stability of their politics may have had something to do with it — as well as the fact that the BJP, in Karnataka, was very much a regional party when B S Yeddyurappa ran the state. But the BJP's attempts to extend its national narratives to places that are deeply unfit for it created the grounds for a backlash. The Jallikattu protests in Chennai were just the beginning. Andhra Pradesh politics is organising itself around the demand for a "special package" from the Centre. Meanwhile, the Telangana chief minister is discovering the political pressures that come with seeking to coexist with a BJP that many of his own workers see as a distant, north Indian party — and one that is, furthermore, determined to expand into territory the Telangana Rashtra Samithi claims as its own.

As for the east, the BJP in Assam is running into one bit of trouble after another. The big dispute this Bihu was over whether Hindi songs should be sung; and the government had to deny that non-vegetarian food was banned from its Namami Brahmaputra festival. And everyone knows that West Bengal only occasionally remembers that the rest of India exists.

I can't imagine that this surprises Modi, at least; he won three elections in Gujarat by declaring he was their champion against the insults being levelled at the state and its "asmita" by the rest of the country. He insists he believes in cooperative federalism; he organises big meetings for chief ministers and calls them "Team India". But the truth is that he, himself, is limited by his party's straitjacketing ideology. Ask yourself: Why has he chosen to represent a northern constituency in Parliament? Doesn't the message go out that even the strongest state leaders must bow to the power of the Gangetic Plain?

If Siddaramaiah is rediscovering sub-nationalism in his state, it's an inevitable consequence of the BJP's successes — and its failures. Nor will Siddaramaiah be the only one to do so. Sub-nationalism may be the only route for the survival of the Opposition, including Siddaramaiah's Congress. The BJP beat the Congress by becoming a coalition of regional satraps; the Congress will have to do the same. Still, *The New Indian Express* reported that instructions have come down from Delhi to Siddaramaiah to go easy on the flag stuff. If true, that's idiotic even by Congress standards. Perhaps the party doesn't want to survive. But if they don't, I expect that some other inclusive grouping that defines itself against Hindi-Hindu-Hindustan will.

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A schoolmaster like no other

The passing of three-time CM of Sikkim Nar Bahadur Bhandari marks the end of an era



WHERE MONEY TALKS
SUNANDA K DATTA-RAY

In another world at another time, Nar Bahadur Bhandari, three-time chief minister of Sikkim, who died in a Delhi hospital last Sunday, would have been hailed as a freedom fighter. Denied that accolade, he might still be remembered for saying famously, "Sikkim has merged but will not be submerged."

He was referring to suggestions that Darjeeling, now gripped by Gorkhaland frenzy, should be restored to Sikkim. The British pressured the kingdom to part with the district in the 1830s; independent India ignored Gangtok's memorandum in 1947 asking for its

return. Bhandari knew there was no going back in time. Darjeeling had evolved differently from Sikkim, and he didn't want West Bengal's highly politicised Nepalese to swamp the simple Sikkimese. Politics being the art of the possible, he had to make bigger compromises in respect of Sikkim's status and its dethroned and dispossessed king, Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal.

When we first met in 1973, Bhandari was a good-looking young schoolmaster with a winning smile who said little. Lal Bahadur Basnet, a French-speaking former NCO who became Speaker of the Sikkim Assembly, had invited us to lunch. Bhandari had worked his way to pay school fees and buy books, collecting firewood for his schoolmaster in a West Sikkim village. I got to know him well, and remember the excitement at my baby son's rice-eating ceremony in 1979 when he turned up unexpectedly at our bungalow in Calcutta carrying a bouquet of flowers. He was already chief minister.

Complaining the Chogyal didn't help his poorer Nepalese subjects, Bhandari was initially drawn towards Kazi Lendhup Dorji and his Joint Action Committee (JAC). But his illusions lasted four weeks. An eloquent and passionate orator, he was soon advising crowds to

take a hard look at the JAC's members, motives and methods. If Sikkim's Nepalese, Bhutiyas and Lepchas quarrelled, he warned, outsiders would exploit their differences and that would be the end of their country. Even he did not guess then how prophetic his words were.

It angered him when Bipin Bihari Lal, Sikkim's all-powerful ICS chief executive and governor after the kingdom became an Indian state, dragged out and presented all the Chogyal's old development schemes, which New Delhi had vetoed, as his own. It was not to encourage growth since no one bothered with execution, but as an excuse to distribute money. Many of Kazi's 32 Assembly members — the Batisey Chor, Bhandari called them — waxed rich.

The government refused to register the party he formed after severing links with Kazi. Sitting in the drawing room of the chief minister's official residence five years later, Bhandari told me an amusing sequel. Apparently, outraged Sikkimese smashed 60 radio sets when AIR broadcast that his party had been trounced in the 1974 polls. But only one radio was destroyed after the 1979 election when Bhandari emerged victorious and Kazi's party didn't get a single seat. "It was in this very room" he chuckled, "and it was kicked to

LUNCH WITH BS ► B S YEDDYURAPPA, PRESIDENT OF KARNATAKA BJP

Waiting for Act II

If he becomes chief minister of Karnataka in 2018, Yeddyurappa tells Aditi Phadnis, he will develop tourism and roll out the red carpet for potential investors

Bookanakere Siddalingappa Yeddyurappa (who changed the spelling of his last name on astrological advice) is the envy of many of his party colleagues. None of them was named chief ministerial candidate more than a year ahead of the election. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) President Amit Shah announced several months ago that when (not if) the BJP gets a majority in Karnataka, it is Yeddyurappa who will be chief minister. BSY, as he is known, is now conscious that he has to put in place a strategy to achieve that objective — and also demolish those who come in the way.

He lives in a modest home (going by the standards of the residential accommodation of some of his colleagues, very modest) in a suburb of Bengaluru. The thing about him is: What you see is what you get. He looks you in the eye, contradicts you sharply if he feels you are wrong and doesn't hide his feelings.

He walks in after his trusted assistant Anand has briefed about the dos and don'ts: You need to speak a little louder than normal and factor in BSY's unfamiliarity with English. He settles into a chair that is covered with a white towel. He is also dressed in blinding white, from head to toe. It is all very, well, white. I wonder what psychologist C G Jung (who has something to say on colour and the human personality) would have made of it.

There are a few swamijis dressed in saffron, waiting in the anteroom. I get a glimpse of his puja room where silver seems to dominate. This is not unexpected. In the very first Budget he presented as Karnataka chief minister, BSY included a grant for a Lingayat mutt, proudly owning his caste as well as his religion.

He offers me coffee, which I decline politely — when visiting Bengaluru, you tend to swim in coffee. It is too late for lunch, so he presses dry fruit on me.

He is just back from a gruelling tour of the interiors of the state — a routine he has been following for close to two months now. A typical day begins with breakfast with a group of Dalit families. On one occasion,

news reports said he elected to order food from a hotel rather than eat with them. He explains that the family, which had invited him, had expected 50 people; 250 turned up. Obviously, food ran out and the host, rather than be inhospitable, ordered food from outside.

He waves the controversy away. "What is worrying is that funds meant for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe welfare are lapsing because this government is not using them optimally. I am not saying this, madam. In Siddaramaiah's own party, there are people who are unhappy. They are the ones who are giving this information," he says. He says that in four years, the central government has given more than ₹1 lakh crore to the state. But the Karnataka deficit has crossed ₹1.15 lakh crore. "So where is the money going?"

He answers his own question: "This is the only big state the Congress is ruling... The state government is managing everything for the Congress, all over India."

I ask him about his views on the minorities in Karnataka. "They are with us," he answers instantly. I expect him to quote "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas". But then he says: "Madam, we don't need anyone else. We have the support of the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes and the Other Backward Classes.

The Lingayats are with us. Some Vokkaligas are with Deve Gowda (H D Deve Gowda, the most important Vokkaliga leader in the state). But most communities have left the Congress."

He explains that he spends every morning in a Dalit colony, meeting thousands of people and trying to understand their problems. I wonder how it is then that the BJP lost two important Assembly by-elections (Gundlupet and Nanjangud) earlier this year.

"We got 43 per cent of the vote in Gundlupet and 46 per cent in Nanjangud," he retorts. This much is true: The BJP has never been strong in south Karnataka where the two constituencies are located. Interestingly, that is the region that he belongs to — Shikaripura in Shimoga is



his adopted home. He was born and brought up in Hassan, in a modest family where he used to help his father sell lemons in a small shop. He joined the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and adopted the

pieces by Kazini herself!" As chief minister, he forced Lal to eat humble pie in his first inaugural address to the Assembly, proclaiming that the 1979 legislature was "constituted after a free and fair election held in Sikkim for the first time under the auspices of the election commissioner in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution".

Thanks to him, the wedding of Chogyal's daughter in 1979 was almost a state occasion. Bhandari attended the ceremony and presented a *khada* to the Chogyal whom he called "the First Gentleman of Sikkim". Seeing him walking at the First Gentleman's funeral, I remembered Bhandari telling me about the injuries he had suffered when he intervened in a Gangtok students' protest. "They were beating the students like anything," he said. He, too, was badly beaten up by 500 policemen, who threatened to kill him unless he wrote a letter supporting Kazi. "When I became unconscious they took me to the Thutob Namgyal hospital." Fearing Lal's wrath, they turned him out when he regained consciousness the following afternoon. He suffered chest pains to the end of his days as a result of the thrashing. "I can't easily walk uphill. I need regular hot packs and massages."

Yet, he waved away his official jeep to follow the funeral cortege on foot as it slowly climbed the windswept heights of Lukshyama. It took four hours to cover six steep boulder-strewn miles to the last resting place of the chogyals. Bhandari's death also marked the passing of an age.

karyalaya (office) as his home.

I tell him my feedback is that the communities that propelled the Congress to victory are still substantially with the ruling party. If the BJP comes within striking distance of attaining power but falls just short, will he take Deve Gowda's help to form the government? His response is vehement. "Never" he says. "The Janata Dal-Secular (JD-S) and the Congress can come together. But even together they will not be able to form a government." After a moment's reflection, he adds, "You can't believe Deve Gowda and his sons."

The hurt is evident. In 2006, the JDS and the BJP joined hands to each serve 20 months in power. Deve Gowda's son H D Kumaraswamy became chief minister. But when it was Yeddyurappa's turn to be CM, Kumaraswamy reneged on the agreement. "In this house, we finalised the arrangement. I asked for nothing (when he was CM). But he began dictating terms when my turn came. Some of our own people collaborated with the JD-S. They, along with Kumaraswamy, cheated us."

He repeats: "Our own people cheated us." He names two top BJP leaders: Jagadish Shettar, fellow Lingayat; and D V Sadananda Gowda, who succeeded Yeddyurappa when he was asked to quit on charges of corruption.

"What was the darkest period of your life," I ask him. "I had to go to jail," he says bitterly, almost whispering. "I was there only for 29 days — because I could not get bail. (When I finally got bail, the judge said this [denial of bail] doesn't happen even in Pakistan.")

"What did you do in jail," I ask curiously. "I used to read the *Gita*, read books and newspapers," he says.

I ask him about the chief minister and the Congress government. "Arrogance, madam. Too much arrogance. They are removed from the people. Ministers don't want to bother about the pain of the poor, they are only interested in how they can get contracts, make money. Karnataka has seen three years of severe drought. You need to wipe the tears of farmers, console families where the head of the family has committed suicide because he could not pay his debts. Instead, these people are enjoying life."

What will he do if he becomes chief minister? "Develop tourism," he says instantly. "Investors want to come to Karnataka. But there is no encouragement for them. I was the one who set up the Global Investors Meet. That encouraged so many industries to come up in Karnataka. This is what I am saying to people — that with Narendra Modi in charge at the Centre, you need a person here who will translate his ideas of self-respect and employment in the state."

"So the next time we meet, will it be with you as chief minister," I ask artlessly. He beams and goes off to meet the swamijis.

Unlettered but not ignorant



PEOPLE LIKE THEM
GEETANJALI KRISHNA

On Wednesday, the media went to town reporting the agitation by Tamil Nadu farmers at Jantar Mantar. On one of the far too many 24x7 news channels on TV today, an "expert" said that farmers across India need to be educated so that they can farm using scientific methods. The spread of literacy, he said, would provide a safety net for them when their crops failed. This got me thinking about a mistake that development theorists commonly make, when they equate illiteracy with ignorance. When we define literacy within the narrow parameters of conventional schooling, we're doing a grave injustice to the Indians who are skilled, and more importantly, capable of imparting their skills to students. Here are some of the many cases that illustrate this point.

The first is of a rice farmer I once met near Dehradun. For the last decade, he had patiently collected the seeds of his best plants and propagated them in the next sowing season till he created a paddy crop that was high-yielding, pest-resistant and yet, desi. He said nobody ever had to teach him farming. He had just learned it by watching his father in the field. Will it be accurate to call him illiterate just because he hasn't been to school?

The second case in point is Daili Devi, the charismatic animal healer I met in Sadri, Rajasthan. Belonging to the Raika, an animal herding nomadic tribe of Rajasthan, her animal-healing techniques, using herbs and roots foraged from the desert scrub, were legendary. She introduced me to her cow, whom she had found abandoned in the desert, left there to die with a fractured and infected leg. Daili Devi applied a poultice on the fracture with potter's clay and some herbs. Using bamboo canes as splints, she tied them around the cow's leg with her own hair. Modern veterinary medicine would scoff at treating a fracture with herbs, clay and human hair, but her treatment worked like a charm and the cow is now a grandmother. Can we call her illiterate simply because she hasn't been to school?

Case number three doesn't refer to a single individual. All of us have used the services of plumbers, electricians, masons and

carpenters, most of whom haven't been to school but have trained under masters, colloquially known as ustadhs. Recently, a reader, Yuvaraj Galada, sent me a thought-provoking essay in which he states that instead of wasting time and resources to classify and "educate" people who haven't been to school — perhaps, it would be useful to recognise their unique skill sets and understand how best to realise their invisible potential. Instead of labelling them illiterate, what if we could empower them as teachers with valuable skill sets they could pass on?

Unfortunately, since we as a society don't recognise and value the skills of the illiterate enough, many end up not even passing them on to their own children. In fact, many of them don't even realise the wealth of knowledge that resides in them. Daili Devi has sent her young daughter to school instead of teaching her the art of animal healing. The rice farmer's son has long migrated to a city where he works as a clerk. "This life is all right for an illiterate farmer like me," he told me as we walked in his lush paddy field. "But my son has been to school... he deserves more."

Perhaps, the time has come for us to discard the one-size-fits-all definition of education for a more inclusive interpretation of what it means to educate and be educated. Else, a wealth of folk wisdom and vocational knowledge would be drowned in a flood of modern education.

'Kidnapping' plants for their 'best'



PEOPLE LIKE US
KISHORE SINGH

Reports about the rain providing the perfect foil for a stranger in the neighbourhood behaving oddly in the colony have been doing the rounds in recent weeks. She appears mysteriously, dressed sometimes in a gown-like garb, and a raincoat in others, and abhors human company. Sudden appearances have been known to cause her to bolt, leaving a trail of vegetation in her wake that leads suspiciously towards our house. She's known to change her appearance regularly, so spotters are hard put to identify her. Last week, she appeared at home, having grown an impressive bosom that she removed to reveal bags of lemons purloined from a neighbour's garden. A few days later, she had the nerve to send a jar of lemon mar-

malade to the same neighbour.

If the popular saying that stolen plants thrive best has any merit, the rain lily blooms in our balcony should make my wife blush with shame — but she's made of sterner stuff. This morning, she's potting a pink frangipani, a handsome-leafed monstera, and some shoots she can't even recall the names of. The blue wisteria she purloined from our hotel in the Himalayas, but the red amaranth owes its existence to the Jains in the cul-de-sac, the Sharmas need to be thanked for the heliconias and anthuriums, and if anyone's missing a pot of jade, you know where to find it.

My wife's frequent walks are accompanied by an impressive arsenal of gardening shears. There's a knife and even a hammer to bludgeon obstinate branches. Her pockets are full of pouches containing strange powders and stranger unguents. These are her healing potions for shoots and roots parted traumatically from the mother plant, or soil. Ever since she joined sundry kitchen garden societies, she has become proficient in vegetation witchery, a nursery quack who heals plants through the simple premise of kidnapping them "for their own health". She'll apply cinnamon powder on one and insecticide on another. They're dipped in solutions that heal as well as help them grow. They arrive like babies, their ends swaddled in rags.

Nor are plants the only things being pinched. She sends her minions to construction sites to beg for empty cement sacks. She rifles through disposed garbage searching for pruned leaves and dead flowers, bringing the spoils home. They are chopped up and placed in bottles and vats with water, the dioxides being released regularly and water topped up, to create enzyme tonic for her plants. The rows of bottles resemble a rogue scientist's laboratory, but the plants don't seem to mind and flourish as a result of these ministrations.

Her gardener is her partner in crime on most forays. As someone employed in the homes for where plants have been inexplicably disappearing, he points out to her the particular foliage missing from her own garden. To help her further, he places pots in a place where a furtive nip with nimble fingers and a handy pair of scissors might make quick work of such thievery. Generously, she is happy to share the multiplied spoils with the gardener to let him take back to the original owners — to assuage her guilt, and his. As for the hundreds of pots created as a result of these efforts, they're handy gifts for friends, there being only so many plants she can keep in her balcony. If that makes them complicit in a crime they are, of course, unaware of, perhaps it's time to upturn the saying about not looking a gift horse in the mouth.

Trump's history lessons

ROGER COHEN

In December 2015, Steve Bannon, now the president's chief strategist, told Donald Trump, "You're a student of military history." Flattery will get you everywhere with Mr Trump, but that was a stretch. In a recent interview with this newspaper, we learn from Mr Trump the reason for the collapse of Napoleon Bonaparte's Russian campaign of 1812: "And his one problem is he didn't go to Russia that night because he had extracurricular activities, and they froze to death."

In psychoanalytic parlance, this is known as projection. Surely Napoleon could not go to Moscow without enjoying a bit on the side — especially since they didn't have cameras back then. Now, Napoleon was not averse to the extracurricular, but the calamitous six-month Russian campaign was scarce the moment. The general had other things on his mind, like the battle of Borodino. Napoleon had other talents, President Trump explains. He quotes President Emmanuel Macron of France as saying that Napoleon "designed Paris. The street grid, the way they work, you know, the spokes." This appears to be a reference to Haussmann's grid of broad avenues cut through crowded airless neighbourhoods under Napoleon III, who was Bonaparte's nephew.

Close, but no cigar. Evidently on a historical roll, Mr Trump fast-forwards to Hitler's invasion of Russia 129 years later. "Same thing happened to Hitler," President Trump declares. "Not for that reason, though." With a 1,000-year Reich to build, there's apparently limited time for the extracurricular.

History, for Mr Trump, is principally a vast murky backdrop against which to declare his every act and utterance the greatest since time began. That is what history's for. The president made a speech in Poland this month and, he suggested, "Enemies of mine are saying it was the greatest speech ever made on foreign soil by a president." (His friends are presumably saying it was the greatest in the history of the universe.)

Greatest ever? Well, there was President John F. Kennedy's speech in Berlin in 1963 when he declared in the then-divided city: "All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin, and therefore, as a free man, I take pride in the words, *Ich bin ein Berliner*." Kennedy also said: "Freedom is indivisible, and when one man is enslaved, all are not free. When all are free, then we can look forward to that day when this city will be joined as one and this country and this great continent of Europe in a peaceful and hopeful globe." Such ideas in the mouth of a president, like Mr Trump, who delights in the company of autocrats, would be little short of grotesque. There is a difference between knowledge of history — the sense of the sweep of time and the power of the American idea that enabled Kennedy to make that prediction about a unified Berlin and a unified European continent — and mouthing about history.

Mr Trump, of course, has also addressed American history, suggesting that Andrew Jackson was alive at the time of the Civil War (he'd been dead for 16 years). Turning to Asia, he declared that "Korea actually used to be a part of China," a wild distortion that infuriated an ally, South Korea. Far from a student of history, Mr Trump is an ahistorical president at a time of historical geostrategic shifts. This is a problem. He cannot gauge our times because his only gauge is his own self-exaltation. As William Burns said in May: "A nasty brew of mercantilism, unilateralism and unreconstructed nationalism" has bubbled to the surface under Mr Trump.

Napoleon and Hitler stumbled into disastrous campaigns in Russia. Before the United States stumbles into a disastrous war with Iran, the president might read some history: About the CIA-assisted coup of 1953 that deposed Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh, about the brutal Savak secret police of the American-backed shah, about Western support for Saddam Hussein and his use of chemical weapons in the Iran-Iraq war, about the American shooting-down of an Iran Air civilian flight with the loss of 290 lives. History is no joke. It's on the curriculum because it is only through it that the psyches of other nations can be understood and wars averted.

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Weekend Ruminations will resume next week

ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA



The jugular as the Achilles' heel

China reminds us of internal vulnerabilities close to Doklam. Most can be fixed if BJP puts national interest above politics

The past three weeks have exposed us to an unknown strategic reality: The Chinese media. Through this ongoing tussle in Doklam, it has continued to raise the alert levels to deeper shades of pink, now near-red. Friday morning's editorial in *Global Times* is intemperate, calling India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj a liar and threatening war at many points across the frontier. It says however well-prepared India may be, in the end China will win because it spends four times as much on defence (an understatement) and has five times the economy.

Nobody in India is quaking at these fulminations. My first instinct would have been to laugh. My first reaction was also to ask why the Government of India was still keeping its own "North Korean channels" (Arun Shourie's priceless description) in the barracks? Just like the Chinese, our media is ready for the fight too, so unleash them. That would teach them a lesson.

The reason I wouldn't do so is simple. Our warrior media is privately-owned. It merely takes the cue from the establishment and launches fake, politically loaded wars on enemies, internal (mostly imaginary) or external. It does so because empty jingoism equals ratings and it's good to have a powerful government on your side. This Indian media does not speak for the government, which has plenty of room to manoeuvre on policy. The Chinese media, on the other hand, is state-owned. Beijing speaks through it. That's why you have to take notice of it. You must never let it intimidate you, but you can't toss it with a laugh and switch channels.

For decades, China-watchers in Beijing, their old hangout Hong Kong and now across world capitals have micro-analysed commentaries in Chinese state media. If you dissect Friday morning's *Global Times*

editorial line-by-line and separate the blustery chaff from substantive grain, a few things stand out. One, that Doklam is a symbol but the Chinese fulmination is over a larger, strategic issue. They resent India continuing to pretend to be an Asian power and the only major country in the world to openly oppose and boycott its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) when even the US, Japan and Australia, members of the quadrilateral with India, participated in deliberations over it. Second, they are rising openly for proxy

Pakistan. Third, they are conveying a more arrogant message: You declare yourselves a big power too soon. You aren't in our league yet. Because, besides a much smaller economy and military, you also have many chronic weaknesses you've failed to address.



NATIONAL INTEREST

SHEKHAR GUPTA

China's irritation with the strengthening Japan-US-India axis is understandable, coming as it does in the week of the trilateral exercise Malabar. India is delusional to count on Japanese and US help in the case of conflict, it says, because this help is "illusory". But, to my mind, the most important line of the statement comes next: "If India fancies the idea that it has a strategic card to play in the Indian Ocean, it could not be even more naïve. China does hold a lot of cards and can hit India's Achilles' heel, but India has no leverage at all to have a strategic showdown with China."

Given how seriously the Chinese state media is taken for its diplomatic and strategic messaging, it is adept at weighing its words carefully. But arrogance makes you slip up and give away what's on your mind. The reference to India's Achilles' heel is an example of this. It's strategic messaging in anger and an alert India should wake up. Does this mean China is threatening to get the Pakistanis to light up the LoC and the Valley? Some of that has already started. Does it mean creating

fresh anxieties across India's other borders, especially Nepal? The Chinese can do so at will, given how messed up India's Nepal policy currently is. Does it mean more Chinese submarines bobbing in Chittagong, Sri Lanka and Pakistani ports? Does it mean getting insurgencies in east-central India (Maoists) and northeast, especially Nagaland and eastern Arunachal/Assam, activated again? Could it be all of the above?

Or more? Which should call for some introspection. Right next to Sikkim, where the current trouble is located, Darjeeling has been burning for weeks now. West Bengal, the state which governs Darjeeling, is in communal turmoil. It is more exaggerated than real, but situations like these can easily go out of control — in fact they usually do. The Army, notably, had to be called out in recent weeks in Darjeeling.

In the middle of this, the Nagaland government has fallen and a new (more BJP-friendly) one has just been installed with the help of a friendly governor and defectors, upsetting a delicate inter-tribal balance of power and destabilising the ongoing — but stalling — peace negotiations as hostile groups gather strength. Just this week, another front has opened up in the same region, with a group of Tripura tribals demanding a separate state and blocking the national highway. If the nub of India's sensitivity over the Chinese presence in Doklam is the enhanced threat to the Siliguri Corridor, a vital link to the northeast, does it serve the national purpose to have the districts along it, and then much of the tribal northeast, in turmoil?

The Chinese have some leverage with the east-central Maoists but they are much weakened already. Pakistani allies can continue escalating Kashmir. But these may not be what they are calling our Achilles' heel. It is closer to Doklam, in a wide semi-arc going deep north into Bengal districts abutting the Siliguri Corridor and eastwards into the fragile border states of the northeast. How do you describe a situation where your Achilles' heel is actually your delicately placed jugular? It's a strategic nightmare and that is what the Chinese have unwittingly reminded us of.

There are limits to what India can do to calm Kashmir and the LoC in the short run. Sizable Indian forces, including several mountain divisions, will remain pinned down on the Pakistan frontiers. Maoists can only be a nuisance but too far and marginal to be a strategic liability. West Bengal and the Northeast are different, particularly because the multiple ongoing crisis there are unnecessary and self-inflicted, a direct result of the BJP's relentless ambition to finally conquer the region.

It's a tap the BJP opened, and it can tighten it shut. Politics will never go out of our lives, and a leader with the strength and authority of Prime Minister Narendra Modi can wait. He should firmly order a break in hostilities on these internal fronts. Political instability in Nagaland now, the Darjeeling agitation and this utter shocker of a tribal uprising in Tripura — by far the most peaceful state in the region, only one with AFSPA withdrawn from all districts — all have his party's political fingerprints. He must tether his interventionist governors, and RSS commandos and special forces should be called back to the barracks, for now. There is a much stronger enemy at the gates. It has even alerted you to vulnerabilities of your own creation. Take advantage of that arrogant indiscretion and put your own house in order. The party's conquest of the Northeast can be resumed later.

The writer is founder and editor-in-chief of *ThePrint*

A disproportionate imbalance



VIEWPOINT

DEVANGSHU DATTA

Who would win if Dumbledore took on Gandalf in a magical duel? Some Youtube channels promote fantasy fights like this. Someone dreams up the contest, puts down relevant data — for example, Dumbledore uses a wand while Gandalf uses a staff — and asks viewers to pick a winner.

It might be interesting to try this format, for India versus China. Start with the history. Circa 1962, the two nations were at approximately the same level of development. Per capita income and GDP were much the same. At that time, India spent less on defence than China,

both in nominal terms and in terms of percentage of GDP.

Neither nation manufactured its own weapons. Neither had nuclear weapons. There was little infrastructure in Tibet. Hence, China couldn't bring airpower or armour to bear in 1962. India chose not to use airpower in an offensive role.

In diplomatic terms, the USA helped India materially and seemed prepared to do more. The Soviet Union remained officially neutral. However, the USSR is said to have cautioned the Chinese in private, and by the end of 1962, the USSR was making public statements supporting India.

This was the first time the USSR did not wholeheartedly support its ideological brethren in a conflict. By the late 1960s, the USSR and China had fought an undeclared war. From then on, until 1991, India could count on Soviet support against China.

The Chinese won a comprehensive victory, took large chunks of territory, and imposed a unilateral ceasefire when they had achieved their ends. The 1962 defeat set off shockwaves. Defence allocations in the Budget were doubled. India raised new mountain divisions and reviewed military doctrine. Lt. General

Thomas Brian Henderson-Brooks and Brigadier (later Lt. Gen) Preminder Singh Bhagat were commissioned to analyse the conflict.

That report has never officially been declassified. But lessons were learnt. In 1967, in clashes on the Sikkim-Tibet border, the Indians, by all accounts, gave as good as they got. The Chinese pulled back and there was no escalation.

Fast Forward to 2017. Both sides have nuclear weapons. China has far more nukes. It also has missiles and nuclear-armed submarines, which could hit Kochi or Port Blair. Both sides have massive standing armies. The Indian army has seen much more action. But China has the larger force.

China also has a larger air force, which is indigenous. This means that it does not have issues about sourcing spares in a conflict. It has built excellent infrastructure in Tibet. This means it can easily transport troops, heavy artillery, and armour. It also has airfields in Tibet though India has better air force infrastructure close to the border.

India makes some of its weapons and equipment but also needs to import stuff, including spares and ammo, on a large scale. China makes all its own

weapons, equipment, and ammunition, and exports quite a lot.

Circa 2017, China's GDP and per capita are almost five times those of India. The trade balance is actually an embarrassing imbalance. In 2016-17, China imported \$10 billion from India and exported \$61 billion to India. India's defence allocation of \$53.5 billion equivalent in 2017-18 amounts to about 1.6 per cent of GDP and this is about the same as it was in 1962, in percentage terms. China will spend over \$150 billion officially on defence this year and analysts claim that it may actually spend quite a lot more concealed under other items. Oh Yes! China also has a full time defence minister in General Chang Wanquan.

In theory, India could interdict key shipping routes from West Asia to China and, thus, impede China's crude oil and gas imports. In practice, it's unlikely that any serious conflict will last long enough for this to matter. In diplomatic terms, the USA could do nothing much really. The Russians don't have a great deal of influence on either nation. Nor would they want to get involved.

Confucius or Chanakya?

Twitter: @devangshudatta

One out of four is not a good score



LINE AND LENGTH

T C A SRINIVASA-RAGHAVAN

Within this, there are two other categories: The small initiatives that all governments undertake to clean up governance and administration and the big initiatives they undertake to alter the prevailing paradigms.

The Modi government has not been an exception to this general rule. It keeps talking about how it has improved the administrative and governance systems.

This is probably true because Mr Modi has untiringly focused on improving public administration and some of that effort is bound to be paying off. But the success of small initiatives is only one side of the coin.

The other side is the bigger initiatives. These have been terrible in three of the four categories mentioned above: Politics, economy, foreign policy, and social policies.

It is only in politics that Mr Modi has been outstandingly successful. This is because he is absolutely determined to get his party re-elected in 2019. But that, given the weak opposition, is the easy part.

The hard part is to once again win an absolute majority. The BJP has to lose only 11 seats in the next Lok Sabha for it to lose its pre-eminence.

And on current reckoning, that seems a certainty.

Triple snafu

If, to use Jean Dreze's accurate description, demonetisation shot out the front tyres of the economy, the way the goods and services tax (GST) has been designed and implemented is letting out the air slowly from the rear tyres. If the former knocked out demand, the latter has knocked out supply.

The result can be seen in the general deflation. Jobs, wages, prices, and foreign trade, all four are down and out.

Mr Modi, even if he can blame the states for the GST mess, has no one but himself to blame for demonetisation. It was wholly unnecessary and has become wholly counterproductive.

A similar outcome can be seen in foreign policy also. A foreign policy is good when a country is getting along well, primarily with

its neighbours, and secondarily with the large countries.

By this yardstick, Mr Modi has failed spectacularly. China is almost threatening war and Pakistan has never been bolder in Kashmir than now. Both smell a huge opportunity to dismember India.

The US, meanwhile, despite massive orders for its producers, is not reciprocating in any meaningful way. Russia is irritated and Europe has made itself irrelevant. Japan is neither here nor there.

Finally, there are the social policies of this government. They are making people feel unsafe and uncomfortable. There is aggression in the air everywhere, which is sparing no one. Who will be lynched next?

True, this happens when the economy does badly. But the exaggerated emphasis on a peculiar brand of nationalism also has had the same effect. That is the atmosphere which this government, unintentionally perhaps, has succeeded in creating.

Desh Seva is all very well. But can it come at the cost of *Jan Seva*?

Intellect and attitude

Mr Modi is still very popular.

That is not such a bad thing, as the lumen intelligentsia would have us believe.

Countries need popular leaders even if they have severe limitations of intellect and attitude. Only Jawaharlal Nehru scores well on both counts.

The rest of our prime ministers failed comprehensively on one of the two counts. Some failed on both.

But from all accounts, Mr Modi appears to have a third negative attribute as well. Although he hears everyone out, he seems to listen to a very few and often the wrong ones.

Therefore, he ends up making avoidable mistakes, some of them enormous. If it's not this failing, it's his tendency to decide before fully working out the non-political implications. Remember that Christmas visit to Pakistan?

That is why the big question now is whether, in the next six months, Mr Modi can take corrective action so that his popularity rests on firmer grounds than just a lot of oratorical promises at the individual and collective levels.

Otherwise, the current weak political pushback could become a very strong one and cost the BJP its majority.

It's time for a period of change at workplace

EYE CULTURE

SHIGORIKA SINGH

A digital entertainment company in Mumbai called Culture Machine put their money where their mouth is. As an employer of 75 women, they decided to give First Day Of Period (FOP) leave. Men, and certain women, all over social media collectively lost it.

Most women I know already take leave on the first day of their period. But then we have no medical leaves left in case something more dire than Aunt Flo happens to us. The effort to take this unorganised practice and make it more visible in the work place is an indication to working women everywhere: We see you and you matter.

It is sad (only because it is long overdue) that having menstrual leave policy is being considered "progressive" when quite a lot of offices offer gym facilities, foosball tables, and pool tables for their employees to unwind. The fact that most of these cater to male interests and

you mostly see men hogging such tables is a different issue of *male visibility at the work place*. They have been around in offices longer and so, have fought for their work-life balance, while women have to run from pillar to post to take care of "women" things (get your eyebrows done if you have to appear in video content) before or after work hours. Finally when we are talking about female concerns at the workplace some men are crying foul about this being differential treatment.

The answer to fitting into workplaces that are already tilted towards a patriarchal mindset is not to shed your femininity and become male for all intents and purposes

John Guillebaud, professor of reproductive health at University College London, is of the opinion that period pain is comparable to that of a heart attack. Many general practitioners (and women writers looking for validation from the male peer group) dismiss period pain because there is a lack of understanding about it.

"Nobody thinks of menstrual cramps as a public health issue... men don't have it so it hasn't been given the centrality it should have", says Mr Guillebaud.

There is plenty of funding for research on how men's sex lives are affected by being in a relationship with women suffering endometriosis (pelvic pain associated with menstruation), but not enough for research on endometriosis itself! For all those crying "science" and asking women to quantify their pain between normal periods (as if there is such a thing), dysmenorrhoea (painful menstruation) and endometriosis, in a country where most of the time endometriosis is misdiagnosed, just shows what reality we inhabit.

There is clear discrimination at the workplace, forget war zones. All things being equal, a man will still be preferred for the job over a woman contender just by virtue of his gender. This can be negated by women bringing up women, by HR policies being inclusive and recognising that the way of doing things till now is not the only way of doing things effectively. Contemporary policy should reflect contemporary reality, whether it is removing the "luxury" tag on sanitary napkins or providing first day of period leave. Biology is inherently

different but only policy can be unequal. By claiming women may be "better than that" some commentators such as Barkha Dutt perpetuate the myth that women have to be twice as good to get half the opportunities. Ms Dutt and many other women may be better, but they shouldn't have to. This is not what equality looks like; instead, this is

homogenisation. While it shall not be mandatory leave we need to caution women to stop propagating the sacrificial practice of will-slog-through-the-work-day-but-will-not-take-an-off. This is office work, not war. An employee is more productive if they are not in pain.

The notion that since the previous generation of women fought and suffered through this pain so why can't the younger lot, is just an excuse to never evolve. I would urge men and women to sign the petition on change.org and bring it to the attention of HR in your respective offices. Represent female concerns in the workplace, and while we are at it can we increase the temperature on the air conditioning please: I am freezing in the summer.

Every week, *Eye Culture* features writers with an entertaining critical take on art, music, dance, film and sport