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Nitish is keeping all options open

This could be because he sees 2019 increasingly as a lost cause

Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar and the Congress are allies in the state, as a part of the Mahagatbandhan. At the national level, the two made efforts to forge a common understanding against the BJP. But over the past two weeks, clear differences emerged. The

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first was on the issue of the presidential candidate, where Nitish Kumar chose to go with Bihar governor Ram Nath Kovind even as the rest of the Opposition put up former Speaker of the Lok Sabha Meira Kumar as a candidate. The Opposition even projected her as 'Bihar ki beti' to put Nitish Kumar in a spot, but he did not budge. Then, even as Congress boycotted the special midnight session to roll out the Goods and Services Tax, Janata Dal (United) sent a representative. This has now been followed by an escalating war of words, with Nitish Kumar himself placing the onus of this Opposition disunity on Congress.

All of this reflects a churning in Opposition ranks, with major implications for 2019. Two threads are clear. The first, as Nitish Kumar correctly pointed out, is Congress' internal weaknesses. While credit is due to Sonia Gandhi for bringing leaders together on a common platform, the party has been unable to display leadership at the right time. If it had nominated the presidential candidate before the BJP came up with Mr Kovind, Nitish Kumar would have had no choice but to back it. If it had indeed nominated Meira Kumar, it would have put BJP on the defensive and Mr Kovind's nomination would have been seen as a response. The Congress repeatedly has allowed BJP to set the agenda; it needs to do more to show leadership and magnanimity with others in the Opposition.

But that is not to say Nitish Kumar's actions have smelled of political honesty. Over the past year, he has given more than enough signals that he is open to rapprochement with the Modi government. His support for demonetisation, his muted criticism of the Centre, his support to Mr Kovind are all examples of a larger political calculation. The Bihar chief minister wants insurance against RJD chief Lalu Prasad. If at any point he begins to see Lalu Prasad as a liability, it seems he wants the option of collaborating with the BJP open. It also appears that he sees 2019 increasingly as lost cause, and thus he wants to ensure that he remains on the right side of the Centre. But he also wants to keep his foot in the Opposition camp - for if an alliance develops and he becomes the pre-2019 face of it, it is an opportunity worth preserving. All of this explains the mixed signals Nitish Kumar is sending. But what it means that the Congress incompetence and Nitish Kumar's calculations are making the prospect of Opposition unity elusive even before it takes shape.

The Maharaja could do without more bad Press

AI 880 should not have been allowed to take off with a faulty air conditioner

On Sunday, Air India 880 took off from Bagdogra for Delhi with an air-conditioning glitch. The video of 168 passengers fanning themselves furiously has since gone viral. Aviation experts say taking off with a non-functional AC system amounts to putting passengers' lives at risk. It is time AI authorities took notice of this and penalised the errant pilot.

The malfunction could not have come at a more inappropriate time. The NDA government has finally decided to privatise the beleaguered national carrier, 17 years after the first such recommendation. The airline is groaning under the burden of a Rs 52,000 crore-debt and barely sustaining itself on a Rs 30,000 crore bailout package extended in 2012 by the UPA government.

According to a ministry of civil aviation report, the reasons for AI's loss-making spree include the adverse impact of exchange rate variation owing to the weakening of the rupee, the mounting interest burden, high fuel prices and the rising competition from low-cost carriers. Plus, bad financial planning and management. Last week, in an attempt to shut the criticism it was receiving from retired employees AI warned them not to talk ill about the airline if they want to retain their retirement benefits. But if the technical faults are repeated, it will have to work doubly hard to thwart bad publicity.

What brings India closer to Israel

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit is a firm step towards maximising the country's own interests



ARUN K SINGH

P rime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Israel from July 4-6 is a significant milestone. It is the first-ever visit of an Indian PM, and takes place as the two countries mark 25 years of establishment of diplomatic relations. President Pranab Mukherjee's visit, in October 2015, had been the first ever visit by an Indian President. The timelines indicate that the reticence on high level visits to Israel is changing. A recognition of the multidimensional depth and history of interactions has often been lost in the clamour of West Asian and domestic politics.

Jewish communities have been in India for more than 2,000 years. Representatives of Indian origin diaspora in Israel and Israeli leaders would often mention to me with gratitude that India was among the few countries where there was no anti-Semitism. During the World War 2, several thousand Jewish refugees, escaping the Holocaust in Europe, were in India for some years before moving on to Israel. Members of the Jewish faith in India acquired acclaim in several fields, including art, films, philanthropy, armed forces etc. when the faith was discriminated against elsewhere. The nearly 80,000 strong

Indian origin diaspora in Israel celebrates its link with India, unlike many other Jewish communities there who sever links with countries from where they felt a compulsion to leave.

Although diplomatic relations were established only in 1992, exchanges and interactions had taken place earlier, with India having recognised the State of Israel in 1950. The Jewish Agency, followed by an Israeli trade office and then an Israeli consulate had operated from Mumbai. Indian diamond traders had been present at the bourse in Tel Aviv. There have been reports in the media of Israel being helpful during the 1971 conflict.

Relations have deepened since 1992. Over-all bilateral trade, which was US\$ 200 million then, has been in the range of \$4-5 billion over the past few years. Starting with trade in diamonds, it has now diversified to pharmaceuticals, agriculture, IT, telecom, homeland security, chemicals, textiles, machinery and transport equipment. During many of my promotional interactions, I would often compare Israel's total population of 7 million with the then more than 7 million per month expansion in India of mobile phone users.

Israeli companies, with their acknowledged strengths in technology and products, would clearly benefit from Indian partnership as they sought to scale up for markets or production. Israeli companies have invested in India in renewable energy, telecom, water technologies, and R&D. Indian companies have invested in Israel in drip irrigation, pharmaceuticals, waste water treatment. Given Israel's strengths in innovation and its



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with his Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu, September 28, 2014, New York

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having, despite its small population, the second largest number of start-ups in the world, Indian companies have also taken stake in such ventures and in R&D. The two governments have worked to finance and promote scientific collaborations, and Indian companies are now beginning to partner with Israeli universities and scientific institutes for commercialisation of technologies. Defence and homeland security have also been among the critical pillars of the relationship. The regular exchanges of senior leadership in this field, the purchase of critical equipment and co-development of technology are a reflection of high-level mutual confidence. Israel is seen as a reliable partner. Despite the history of positive engagement

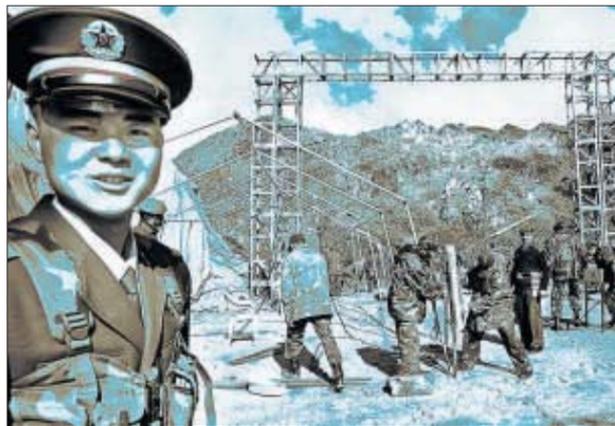
and multifaceted current interactions, India's efforts to develop the Israel relationship have been critically scrutinised by constituencies both in India and outside. This has been on account of nature of India's own struggle for Independence when our leaders supported a multi-religious secular State, and voted at the UN against establishment of Israel on basis of religion.

Facts on ground and UN decision led to our recognising Israel in 1950. Domestic concerns in India, following partition in 1947, slowed down full normalisation, and it was pushed back further when Israel was seen as having joined former colonial powers Britain and France in an attack on Egypt in 1956 aimed at thwarting the nationalisation of the Suez Canal. There has also been principled support in India on the Palestine issue, and India recognised the Palestinian State in 1988. India also has critical interests in the Arab world with the presence of a 7 million strong diaspora, significant energy imports and remittances of foreign exchange.

Every country pursues its foreign policy to maximise its own national interests. Egypt and Jordan have peace treaties with Israel. Qatar had hosted an Israeli trade office for many years. There have been reports of contacts and back channel links between several Arab countries and Israel. The Palestinian leadership, despite disagreements and disappointments, also engages periodically in talks. It is clear, therefore, that India's interests lie, while maintaining its principles, in securing bilateral cooperation for its own interests. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Israel at this stage is another firm step in that direction.

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The views expressed are personal

TRILATERAL POKER



China - having cornered Bhutan in face of an absentee protector - will invariably seek to change territorial facts on the ground as the 'cost' of its détente with that country

Aspiring hegemon must not abandon their allies

If India stands down on Doklam against China, Bhutan will be tempted to open up to China by establishing formal ties



ABHIJNAN REJ

As the standoff between Indian and Chinese troops in the India-China-Bhutan tri-junction continues, it is important to take a step back and look at the problem through the prism of India's larger grand strategy. Both India and China seem to agree that the geographical locus of the dispute lies in a small sliver of land in the Doklam region, claimed both by China and Bhutan. (The settled Sikkim-Tibet border is a red herring.) Faced with Chinese road construction on territory it considers sovereign, the government of Bhutan allowed Indian troops present in the area in the Sikkim sector to resist this encroachment, triggering the ongoing stand-off.

The road through Doklam could allow the Chinese to further run roughshod over a key precept of India's foreign policy - of primacy in the South Asian region. Recent Chinese actions have clearly sought to negate any future Indian move to consolidate its position as South-Asia's pre-eminent power. Whether that be in Nepal, Sri Lanka or Bangladesh, Chinese economic leverage stands to potentially reduce India's clout among its smaller neighbours and circumscribe their foreign-policy preferences.

Enter Bhutan. It does not have formal diplomatic ties with China. Its military is close to non-existent. Through long-standing arrangements, India serves as a virtual security guarantor of Bhutan. Bhutan on its part has allowed Indians unfettered access to its territory which is not the case for, say, Americans. Most importantly, unlike Nepal in the recent years, it has avoided playing its two behemoth neighbours against each other.

One of the key Chinese objectives in initiating the Doklam standoff seems to be testing India's resolve to stand by Bhutan. It should be an Indian imperative to not fold in this trilateral poker, for doing so has two far-reaching consequences. One, should India stand down, Bhutan will receive a message that its policy of relying only on India has not borne fruit. In that event, Bhutan will be tempted to open up to China by establishing formal ties.

China - having cornered Bhutan in face of an absentee protector - will invariably seek to change territorial facts on the ground as the 'cost' of its détente with that country. This, in turn, will change the subtle balance of forces in the India-Bhutan-China tri-junction. Two, if India was to abdicate its responsibilities towards Bhutan, India's other neighbours will, in effect, be told that relying on India as a countervailing force to the Chinese juggernaut is foolish. That surely cannot be good for India's elusive pursuit of regional primacy. Aspiring hegemon do not abandon allies.

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The views are personal

Why India's university ranking system is flawed

In its current format, the Centre's NIRF reinforces the misplaced belief that you get the education you pay for



PRANAB MUKHOPADHYAY

As the new admission season for college entrants continues, finding the 'best' university has become as important as deciding on the 'best' course. The recent ministry of human resource development (MHRD) effort at ranking Indian colleges and universities attempts to answer this but in the process has raised more questions. Is the current National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) exercise going to encourage academia to generate research and teaching?

Interestingly, this ranking exercise is being initiated precisely when spending on education by the government has been falling. Compared to 2013-14, when education got a paltry 4.57% of the budget expenditure, there has been a decline to 3.65% in 2016-17. This makes the ranking exercise even more intriguing, as raising research and teaching quality involves increased expenses. Take, for example, Britain's well-known Research Excellence Framework of 2014 (REF). This officially cost close to 246 million pounds and was carried out over five years. The REF-ranked journals, established publication protocols and set up a regime for research funding and for rewarding research and teaching output. Despite the criticism against the REF, a considerable amount of time and money was spent to create a transparent evaluation system for judging academic performance and outcomes. The NIRF 2017, in contrast, has lasted less than six months with absolutely no information in the public domain on costs and expertise involved.

The NIRF has collated information under five broad heads: Teaching, Learning and Resources, Research and Professional Practice, Graduation Outcomes, Outreach and Inclusivity, and Perception. There are shortcomings in thmethod

OVER 70% OF THE NIRF DATA IS SELF-REPORTED BY THE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES. THIS CAN POTENTIALLY BE CIRCUMSPECT AND NEEDS RIGOROUS VERIFICATION, BUT THAT HAS NOT BEEN DONE

and execution. Over 70% of the NIRF data is self-reported by the colleges and universities which can potentially be circumspect and needs rigorous verification, but has not been done. Even though summary data has been put in the public domain by the NIRF for the top 100 universities, at least a quarter of their own homepages do not corroborate their data for public viewing. There is thus little chance of verification by transparency. Besides the problem of data reliability, there are methodological issues too that need further scrutiny. The ranking, for example, relies on 'perception' in a prominent way. Can such a criterion offer any objective numbers? Or is this just intended to favour universities who advertise and self-promote aggressively. It may encourage universities to game the system by getting higher ranks without necessarily possessing academic quality.

Second, while to its credit the NIRF has relied on Web of Science and Scopus publications, no effort is visible to meaningfully discuss parity of publications in Indian languages. There is an acute need to factor in an innovative weightage system for such disciplines. The NIRF has also been silent on some important aspects involving academic integrity. The framework has no rules to disincentivise wrongful academic practices, it has no protocols for tackling 'predatory journal' publications or plagiarism, and, the debate on management quotas and academic quality remain untouched. Despite these glaring shortcomings, the University Grant Commission's (UGC's) new draft regulations propose to use the NIRF ranking to allocate its scarce public funds.

In the 2017 NIRF list, two-fifths of the top 100 universities are funded by state governments. These state universities currently enrol almost double the number of students than the private colleges and universities. And yet their funding is a lot less. If no proper weightage is given to this important fact then state universities will always be ranked lower. The linking of the NIRF in its present form and the UGC funds could divert scarce public money to private universities and colleges under a range of pretexts. An impression is created that the NIRF helps students to make informed decisions for enrolment and policy-makers to scientifically grant financial privileges.

The NIRF in its current format reinforces the misplaced belief that you get the education you pay-for. It may also lead to further financial disenfranchisement of deserving public universities. The current NIRF framework, therefore, begs an urgent debate.

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The views expressed are personal

innervoice
FOR THE SUCCESSFUL,
LUCK IS JUST ANOTHER
WORD FOR HARD WORK

PP Wangchuk

When we talk of luck, are we referring to something coming our way because of our good karma, hard work and good wishes? Or, does it mean a mere chance occurrence?

Well, the safest answer would be that it could mean any of them or a combination of all of them or some of them! But the positive side of looking at luck would be that the greater your conviction and harder you work, the greater the chances of your being lucky. That is why American 'Founding

Father' Thomas Jefferson had said, "I'm a greater believer in luck, and I find the harder I work, the more I have of it."

That means that 'lady luck' will come your way only if you are determined and hardworking. As they say, your luck has a way of doing a disappearing act if you become totally dependent on it and do nothing.

And then we have people going this far too: "You never know what worse luck your bad luck has saved you from." This is American novelist Cormac McCarthy, in No

Country for Old Men. Of course, we have to dismiss this kind of leaning too much on luck but, at the same time, it is true that not believing in luck could go to our disadvantage in that we won't work hard for success.

But let us remind ourselves that people of strong conviction and believer in hard work have no room for 'lady luck'.

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