

Voting is our right, not a duty

Use technology to increase participation in elections

In a response to a 2015 petition filed by one Satyaprakash, who wanted mandatory voting to be enforced in India, the Centre told the Supreme Court last week that exercising one's franchise is the fundamental right of every citizen but not a duty. The government relied on the 255th Law Commission Report, which says "electoral right" of the voter includes the right to "vote or refrain from voting at an election." The Representation of People Act, 1951, too talks of "right to vote rather than a duty to vote". The idea of compulsory voting in India has been rejected time and again on the grounds of practical difficulties. However, the issue of compulsory voting is bigger than being just a legal issue: There are political reasons to keep away from the notion of compulsory voting. Political scientists say democracies need to accommodate dissent and diversity of views. This includes the option of disengagement, rights to abstain from participating, if people believe voting is erroneous, undesirable, unnecessary or immoral.

It has often been argued that compulsory voting will improve political participation. But empirical evidence and experience of countries with compulsory voting suggest otherwise. The Australian experience with compulsory voting has revealed the notion of "donkey voting" — where when voters were forced to vote — they voted for the candidate whose name was on the top of the candidates' list. An Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance Study reveals that the difference in voter turnouts between the 28 countries with compulsory voting provisions in their statute books and the 171 countries without such provisions is 7.37%. So, increased participation does not guarantee quality participation or does not make a democracy with compulsory voting more vibrant. There is also a real fear that compulsory voting may lead to more vote buying by candidates especially in a country like India, where we have seen instances of cash-for-vote scams. Making voting compulsory also kills the option of not voting as a protest. Instead of taking the compulsory route for wider participation of people in the election process — technology can be harnessed to achieve this end.

Thanks to US, multilateral diplomacy is under strain

Its stand at G20 on the Paris climate deal is unbecoming of its superpower status

The Group of Twenty (G20) major economies failed, for the first time, to have a full consensus on their joint statement. The United States put in a note of dissent regarding support for the Paris agreement on climate change. This was path breaking in a negative sense for two reasons. One, the G20 was created by Washington and the US' willingness to undermine the credibility of this multilateral forum does not bode well for the body's future. Two, the need to tackle climate change was one of the bedrock international understandings of recent times. Fortunately, Washington's scepticism has at least led the other member-states to strengthen their commitment to Paris.

It is not the first time the US or some other major power has decided to set itself apart from the rest. But it is rare for them to do so on something as important as climate change. More worrying is that US President Donald Trump seems willing to sacrifice his country's long-term credibility influence in return to keep his voter base pleased. This almost the opposite of what strategy means and how a superpower is supposed to act. It also says something that the Paris accord is likely to go ahead without US involvement and if local governments in the US put up enough resistance, Mr Trump's defiance may not make much difference.

The future of multilateralism itself is now unclear. Talk of a German-Chinese axis or some other combination of middle powers taking a global leadership role proved overblown. Temporary coalitions around specific issues were formed but often the same countries found themselves on opposite sides in regard to some other global problem. India supported Paris but was happy at the US-inspired clause in support of clean fossil fuel technology. Germany, Japan and China were on the same side on free trade but not much else. If the US continues to regress in multilateral diplomacy, this may be the future of international cooperation and governments like India should adjust accordingly.

Malabar 2017 isn't aimed at China

Its geopolitical significance is about joint stewardship of the Indian Ocean region



C UDAY BHASKAR

Malabar 2017, the trilateral joint naval exercise, which began on Monday and brings together the navies of India, Japan and the United States, was tentatively mooted in 1992 on Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao's watch. The first exercise took place in 1994 as a bilateral with the US Navy.

At the time it created political ripples for the two 'estranged' democracies were engaging in a joint military exercise, albeit at a modest scale.

Domestically, the political opposition to this move came because of the negative symbolism associated with the US, especially the US Navy. The coercive role played by US Navy's seventh fleet, led by anti-aircraft carrier USS Enterprise, in the Bay of Bengal, during the 1971 Bangladesh war was still fresh on India's mind.

Since 1994, the Malabar exercise has been institutionalised in a progressively robust manner and both nations see a certain value addition in sustaining this engagement.

In 2007, the scope of Malabar was enhanced and the high-point was a five-nation multilateral naval exercise that brought on board three other nations — Japan, Australia and Singapore.

However this display of multilateral naval

cooperation off Okinawa heightened China's anxiety index and more problems were created wherein Beijing issued demarches to the nations concerned. Both India and the US sought to assuage Chinese concerns and the Malabar exercise was cut short.

In January 2015, India and the US upgraded Malabar formally to include Japan.

The geopolitical subtext of the Malabar exercise is complex and multi-layered. At one level, it denotes the growing level of interoperability between the navies of the United States and India, and this is distinctive for India has steadfastly refrained from joining any formal military alliance.

The Indian Navy — despite its diminutive Cinderella status (in relation to the other two services) came onto the global radar in 1988 when its ships were the first to respond to an attempted coup in the Maldives. Anecdotal recall has it that then US President Ronald Reagan, when apprised of this development was supposed to have asked: "India has such a capable navy?" The subsequent 'Cactus' mop up by the Indian Army and Air Force drew accolades globally.

It took the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union for India to review and reset its relationship with the US. An astute Narasimha Rao encouraged a hesitant bureaucracy that had been nurtured in an anti-American ecosystem to engage with Washington.

The naval component of the Kicklighter proposals, which suggested comprehensive military-to-military cooperation became the Malabar joint exercises and signalled an intent on both sides to sustain a professional



Vessels of the Indian Navy and US Navy in the Indian Ocean during the 2017 Malabar naval exercise
ASSOCIATED PRESS

level of interaction despite their asymmetry in capability.

One could make a case that the Malabar exercise represented the gradual security outlook liberalisation of the Indian octopus and that Rao in an unobtrusive manner provided the trigger pulse not just for economic liberalisation, but also for a strategic re-orientation of the insular Indian world view.

The resilience of the Malabar exercise is reflected in the fact that though India-US relations plummeted as far south as is possible after the May 1998 nuclear tests, the two sides picked up the naval thread after 9/11 and India provided escorts for US ships in the Indian Ocean at the time.

The deeper geopolitical salience of the exercise is about joint stewardship of the maritime domain — the traditional global commons. It is instructive to note that the concept of a 'global common' has now been extended to include the cyber and space domains and in many ways the Malabar exercise is a symbol of the depth of such collective endeavour.

The US with its qualitative technological profile is the lead global navy — and there is no other nation in the next 10 places. China is seeking to bridge the naval gap with relation to the US with a heightened sense of urgency and anxiety, and this is often reflected in its reaction to the Malabar exercise. Hence its irate response in 2007 and subsequently signals have been conveyed by China to both Australia and Singapore to desist from donning the Malabar hat.

The current stand-off in the Doklam plateau is one strand of the troubled India-China relationship. But for now it is evident that Delhi is not seeking to play the Malabar card and stoke China's imagined anxieties about a democratic naval/maritime coalition that will bring alive the Malacca dilemma first outlined by then Chinese President Hu Jintao in 2003.

Malabar 2017 will have three carriers participating — the US Navy's Nimitz (the world's largest carrier), the INS Vikramaditya, and a Japanese helo-carrier and a nuclear submarine. While interoperability is at the core of such exercises, Malabar will burnish India's credibility in the maritime domain and punctuate the Indian Ocean region in a manner that prioritises collective effort to secure the first of the three global commons.

Whether this can be extended to other maritime domains remains to be seen.

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The views expressed are personal

CHOICE MATTERS



Creating awareness on modern reversible contraceptive choices among low-income women benefits the government because it saves more money
HINDUSTAN TIMES

Why education of women helps in family planning

Since 70% Indians stay in rural areas, it is imperative that population control is embraced by villagers as well



NIRANJANA SAGGURTI
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Who hasn't dreamt of a utopian world, where the potentialities that slumber in its population are realised and every individual empowered? As population growth reaches exponential proportions, there is increasing focus on family planning globally. Family planning programmes across nations have demonstrated a far-reaching impact on gender equality, women's empowerment, maternal and child health and economic growth. With 70% of Indian population residing in villages and growing urbanisation, it is imperative that the praxis of family planning is embraced by the rural community as well as the urban.

The praxis itself is not complicated, with a basket of contraceptive choices going a long way in regulating population growth. Despite the availability of options, female sterilisation still accounts for two-thirds of contraceptive use in India. Creating awareness on modern reversible contraceptive choices among low-income women benefits the government by maximising cost savings, reducing the disparities in access to family planning services, thereby decreasing the incidence of abortion. UNFPA studies conducted in more than 40

developing countries show that birth rates fall as women gain equality. In rural areas, education allows women to be in control of their lives not just financially but also reproductively. African countries like Rwanda and Ethiopia, despite the late advent of family planning, have enjoyed a rapid increase in their use in recent years. Their political champions view family planning as a central aspect of their national priorities on gender, women's empowerment, rural development and education. Whether it is India, China or Sri Lanka, with female education and family planning, greater prosperity has followed.

The recently released National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4) shows these investments in communities have begun to show dividends. Districts with higher modern contraceptive prevalence rate (mCPR) are also the districts with significant reduction in child marriage, adolescent pregnancies, physical violence and an increase in women's literacy. Educated women conscious of family planning are, therefore, the fulcrum of an empowered society.

Globally the concern and support for family planning are resurgent and there is a need to streamline policies and strategies to achieve universal access to family planning and address the unmet need. After all, a finite world can only support a finite population.

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For JNU's future, reset the Right-Left relations

An open meeting in which all parties can freely participate will be a good beginning



CSR MURTHY

The prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) has witnessed unceasing confrontation between the Vice-Chancellor (VC) and sections of students and teachers ever since the February 2016 incident. There was no relief from the fact that the campus developments were entangled with wider rival political interests. A section of the media grabbed every opportunity to condemn JNU as the hub of anti-national and ultra-Left elements. Equally disturbing is the new trend of student-teacher relations turning increasingly adversarial. No wonder, all this has hampered the normal functioning of the university.

Problems that could have been addressed within the university spilled outside and became part of partisan national political contest. One side viewed JNU as a torch bearer of anti-Modi government mobilisation while the others were determined to stifle this shining embodiment of the Nehruvian approach to national and international problems. In turn, the escalation overpowered moderation.

Those who have academically thrived in JNU believe that it is time to reset the relationships for healthy and harmonious partnership, failing which the university's future might be damaged beyond repair. Contrary to the much hyped propaganda that JNU is anti-national, the university is known for tolerance of diverse viewpoints. A bulk of the students and faculty belong to neither Right nor Left.

Unfortunately these independent members' advice for de-escalation was ignored by both the Left and the Right, while the administrators too sadly refused to seize the middle path. Just as sections of teachers and students refused to recognise that the new VC needed time to settle down in his job, the latter and his team stubbornly avoided engaging teachers and student unions in productive dialogue. It badly affected normal func-

UNIONS OF STUDENTS AND TEACHERS SHOULD BE FULLY HEARD, AND EVERY EFFORT SHOULD BE MADE TO MAKE THEM FEEL AS PARTNERS IN FINDING REALISTIC SOLUTION

tioning of the university as evident from frequent disruption of classes and high-decibel disagreements in disorderly meetings of the academic council (AC), where adjournments or announcement of decisions without proper discussion became the new normal.

At the AC, teachers and students of opposite sides resorted to thumping of desks, shouting matches, and wild allegations. The situation could have been controlled if prior consultations with wider constituents were held. Instead, the administration first tried to exhaust trouble-makers by collecting views from everyone present on contentious issues, which only yielded opinion unfavourable to its preference. In the process, even the procedural item of confirmation of the minutes of previous meetings consumed long hours. It is in one of those unruly moments that the most problematic UGC 2016 regulation on admission to M.Phil and PhD programmes was declared adopted without discussion.

The latest AC meeting in June 2017 witnessed a switch from the earlier strategy of tiring out members. Agenda was rushed through by disallowing the selected members from speaking. This only further vitiated the atmosphere for reconciliation. As an external member rightly noted, members desirous of speaking should have been allowed to have their say.

Unlike in the AC, the experience of this writer in the Executive Council (EC) as an elected member was not so disheartening. There were certainly many occasions calling for expression of disagreements and formal dissent. One does not know whether such an atmosphere of give and take continues to prevail now in the EC.

The lesson that could be drawn from the contrasting experiences in both the councils is that calm deliberations in a committee setting with limited, but relevant, participation may be fruitful for decision-making by consensus in the bigger statutory bodies finally. On such issues of grave importance as the conduct of admissions in the light of the latest UGC regulation, constitution of representative committees could resolve policy and managerial differences. Unions of students and teachers should be fully heard, and all efforts should be made to make them feel as partners in finding realistic solution. An open meeting where participation by all shades could freely participate may be a good beginning. In sum, humiliating the opposite side may not yield lasting results; patiently working in harmony is really the need of the hour.

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The views expressed are personal

innervoice

ONLY THOSE WHO VIEW ADVERSITY AS A GATEWAY CAN HOPE TO SUCCEED

PP Wangchuk

Reading great people like Stephen Hawking can be greatly inspiring. Hawking's books like A Brief History of Time and The Grand Design stand for his exemplary courage despite a debilitating motor neuron disease he is suffering from. During his childhood, when the disease was diagnosed, his doctors had given him only two years.

His strong will power helped him overcome his disability and he celebrated his 75th

birthday recently. He told a huge audience: "Remember to look up at the stars and not down at your feet." That means whatever difficulty one may face, there is always something or the other one can try and succeed.

If one takes up the difficulties of life as challenges, one not only gets a chance to fight out to victory, but also enjoy the process immensely. And, as they say, there is no education higher than adversity, and it is adversity that makes you look for all the possibilities to success.

Soichiro Honda, the founder of the Honda group, had said success is 99 per cent failure. In other words, failure is the gateway to success. We must hang around, determinedly, until our destiny comes our way.

Normally, success comes when you are about to quit; and those who stay determined to make one more bid are the winners.

(Innervoice comprises contributions from our readers.)
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