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comment

Quitting the RS won't matter

Mayawati will have to hit the streets to regain her votebank

The politics of symbolism has its limitations. By resigning from the Rajya Sabha on the burning issue of Dalit atrocities in Uttar Pradesh, BSP national president Mayawati can, at best, score a political point. But she cannot be sure how far her resignation — which has yet to be accepted — will help in the resurrection of the 33-year-old Bahujan Samaj Party that touched its lowest ebb in 2017; just like the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) may not make any major gains from the election of a Dalit President.

The politics of symbolism and populism fails when it is not padded with concrete plans to fulfil the aspirations of the masses. Mayawati has failed on this count. Her slogan of 'swabhimaan' (self-dignity) started losing appeal when her politics moved from the 'bahujan samaj' to 'sarvjan samaj' before the 2007 UP assembly elections. She formed a majority government albeit at the cost of alienating Dalits, who could not accept the BSP's new slogan — 'Haathi nahi Ganesh hai, Brahma Vishnu Mahesh hai' replacing 'Tilak tarazu aur talwar, inko maaro joote chaar' as they continued to suffer appalling forms of discrimination.

Thus, while the country was weighing the pros and cons of her resignation, seen as a countermove to the BJP naming a Dalit for the post of president, her voters and supporters were watching the return of a pre-2007 firebrand Mayawati who never minced words in attacking her opponents. It is a well-known fact that Dalits prefer 'fighters' as their leaders. Mayawati will now have to hit the streets as her mentor and founder president of the BSP Kanshi Ram did, irrespective of political gains and losses. He often used to say: "We contest first election to lose, second to defeat and the third to win". As Mayawati rebuilds the party from the scratch, she will have to adopt Kanshi Ram's style and social agenda to survive in UP politics. Mayawati says she is working on a strategy. Dalits may ask for what? It's mission or power? In this renewed political war, her membership of the Rajya Sabha is far too trivial an issue for her constituency.

The rot in the BCCI is getting deeper

Despite proposals for transparency in its functioning, there's been no real change

With head-coach Ravi Shastri getting the personnel he wanted, the suspense surrounding the appointment of the Indian team's coach and support staff appears to have ended. The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) has ignored the recommendations of the advisory committee of Sourav Ganguly, Sachin Tendulkar and VVS Laxman which wanted to hire Zaheer Khan and Rahul Dravid as bowling coach and overseas batting consultant respectively. It also added a few riders that are likely to make Khan and Dravid reluctant to take up the assignment. The two won't be travelling with the team for overseas tours. How much value can a consultant ostensibly hired to give you tips on batting in alien conditions impart on India's infamous flat wickets is anybody's guess.

One year after a Supreme Court bench headed by the Chief Justice of India asked the Lodha Committee's proposals — seeking greater transparency in its functioning in the wake of corruption charges and match-fixing scandals — to be implemented within six months, there is little movement on the ground.

The Lodha Panel had recommended drastically altering the power structure in the board. It sought to change the BCCI's electorate to one association per state. Earlier, in its attempts to reform the country's richest sporting body, the Supreme Court had decided that a new set of administrators supersede the BCCI office-bearers and even removed board chief Anurag Thakur. The apex court put in place a four-member panel headed by former comptroller and auditor general of India Vinod Rai. Still, as the mismanagement in the appointment of coaches shows, the Committee of Administrators and the cricket advisory committee appear to be working at cross-purposes. The rot in India's cricket board only appears to be deepening. And so is its opaque nature of administration. Whether it is efficiency, transparency, or ethics, the BCCI is on a shaky wicket.

It all hinges on the grand alliance

Cracks in it will weaken the Opposition's chances to take on the Modi-led BJP in 2019



NEERAJ CHOWDHURY

The Opposition misses the presence of a personality like the late CPI(M) leader Harkishan Singh Surjeet who would have by now got Lalu Prasad and Nitish Kumar to sit across the table and find a way out of the impasse that is developing in Bihar, threatening the Mahagathbandhan (grand alliance) government which was crafted by the two foes-turned-friends in 2015. And it was this that stopped the otherwise unstoppable Modi juggernaut in its tracks.

Though Sharad Yadav met Sonia Gandhi last week, urging her to mediate, and the JD(U) leaders have urged the Left leaders to use their good offices with Lalu, so far it has yielded little.

With neither side ready to give way, the situation is becoming graver by the day. Lalu has ruled out the resignation by his younger son Tejashwi Prasad, who is deputy chief minister of Bihar, after serious allegations have surfaced against the RJD chief and his family for holding huge benami properties. On Tuesday, Nitish had a meeting with Tejashwi at the old secretariat in Patna, where the deputy chief minister clar-

ified on the charges against him.

For Nitish who had earlier sent three of his ministers packing, when faced with similar charges, including former chief minister Jitan Ram Manjhi, it is becoming a do or die battle. For if he accepts the situation as it is, he will lose his unique selling point which distinguishes him from other regional leaders like Mayawati, Mulayam Singh Yadav, or Lalu.

The others have also stood for backward/Dalit consolidation and for the advocacy of secularism, but Nitish has stood apart because of his clean image and his track record in governance. That is why, in 2014, the people of Bihar voted for Narendra Modi in the general elections, but turned to Nitish during the state polls a year later. And, it was his coalition with Lalu's RJD that won the polls.

Yet, Nitish knows only too well that whenever he has contested on his own, he has come a cropper. He has won only when in an alliance, either with the BJP or with Lalu; and he is too much of a realist not to realise this ground reality.

But the Bihar chief minister also knows that if he has to compromise on his USP (anti-corruption, clean image) to stay in power, he and Lalu will both be devoured by Modi in the 2019 general elections and in the 2020 state assembly polls.

Thus, breaking with Lalu and turning to the BJP for help is an option — though after initially signalling its readiness to extend outside support to Nitish, if his alliance with



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the RJD fell apart, the BJP has suddenly turned cold. With outside support Nitish would remain CM, but he realises that under a Modi dispensation things would not be the same as it was during the Vajpayee-Advani era when he had enjoyed a functioning autonomy in his alliance with the BJP. There is also no reason why a resurgent BJP should hand Nitish the post of the chief minister in 2020, when it can have a leader of its own.

Given the mood in India today, clearly, it

will have to be someone with a clean image who can take on Modi in 2019. Backward and secular politics by itself, or politics of entitlement, where 'social justice' parties (be it the SP, RJD, INLD, or for that matter the Congress) depend on a single family, will not be enough of a draw for an India that is becoming increasingly young and aspirational. Gone also are the days when amassing wealth was passé in the name of secular politics.

Just as the continuation of the Mahagathbandhan is a better option for Nitish, so is it for Lalu. Out of power, the situation will become even more untenable for Lalu and his family.

In this situation, the best case scenario is for Tejashwi to resign in the larger interest of the Mahagathbandhan, and make a virtue out of a necessity. He is young with a future ahead of him and quitting at this stage, in the larger interest, will only enhance his stature. Nitish has not asked him to quit, but only to go to the people and tell his side of the story. What is more, if he decides to go back to the people, and contest again for his assembly seat, even resigning as MLA (as suggested by some), he might just win and that would be a political endorsement of his stand. Lalu knows only too well that he will have to fight politically to counter the charges that have been levelled against him and his family.

If the Bihar Mahagathbandhan cracks, the Opposition can forget about its chances in the 2019 polls. So, all the Opposition parties that want to craft an alternative to the BJP have a stake in what happens in Bihar in the coming days.

Neeraj Chowdhury is a senior journalist
The views expressed are personal

TALKING TERMS



The movie Indu Sarkar gained a degree of fame because an event related to its launch was disrupted by some members of the Congress party

Here's why the freedom of expression is important

There is no need for Congress workers to be agitated over Madhur Bhandarkar's upcoming movie



SALMAN ANEES SOZ

The last week was eventful for those keeping track of the debate on freedom of expression in India. The movie Indu Sarkar gained a degree of fame because an event related to its launch was disrupted, apparently by some members of the Congress party, of which I am a part. Before that, the Mumbai police filed a case of defamation and obscenity against the comedy group All India Bakchod (AIB) for applying a Snapchat dog filter to a photo of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Unsurprisingly, many who were furious with AIB for its portrayal of PM Modi were vociferously supportive of the freedom of expression of Madhur Bhandarkar, the filmmaker behind Indu Sarkar. Many who supported AIB's freedom of expression were relatively subdued in speaking up for Bhandarkar. I am unsurprised because we have seen this movie before. In India, freedom of expression is mostly about whose freedom is being violated. Selective outrage is the norm.

In India, as in most countries, freedom of expression is not unfettered. However, beyond legal restrictions, we conspire to further restrict each other's freedoms. Surely, a book or a painting about religious figures is not going to doom the great religions of the

world. I am reasonably confident that the legacy of one of India's greatest leaders is not about to be fundamentally undermined by a movie that most people would have likely ignored in the absence of its recent publicity. This should not mean that people can't protest what they don't like. Of course they can. It is their democratic right. But we must encourage peaceful dissent and stand against threats, intimidation and violence.

I personally prefer a maximalist position on free expression with rare restrictions such as for incitement to violence. However, I do recognise that at this time most Indians may not agree to such a standard. A Pew Survey from 2015 clubbed India with countries like Russia, Turkey and Pakistan as being "less supportive" of free expression. But, what we must watch for is the trajectory of free expression in India. Will we have more of it or less?

I believe there is much scope for progressively removing restrictions on free expression. Freedom of expression is not just about protecting offensive speech. It is about the free flow of ideas, debates and inquiry that leads to inventions, discovery and progress. Crucially, it is also about protecting us from those in government who may want to restrict our freedoms. So, if citizens restrict each other's freedom of expression, we are in effect weakening our democracy and paving the way for authoritarianism. Who wants that?

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The views expressed are personal

Don't uproot the positive parts of organic farming

The draft law for chemical-free foods has several flaws. If it is cleared, small farmers will be adversely affected



CHANDRA BHUSHAN

The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) recently announced the Draft Food and Standards (Organic Food) Regulations, 2017, aimed at curbing sale of fake organic products. This regulation will require products sold in the market as "organic" to be certified by either the National Programme for Organic Production (NPOP) or the Participatory Guarantee Scheme (PGS).

The NPOP was designed for the export market and involves third-party companies, which verify organic status, while in PGS, a collective of farmers guarantee that everyone in the group is practicing organic farming. On the face of it, this looks like an excellent regulation, with a promise of protecting consumers' rights. But our analysis shows that it cannot curb sales of fake organic products, and it might do more harm than good to the organic farming movement in India.

The demand for a regulation on organics itself is suspect, as it is led by the Crop Care Federation of India (CCFI), which represents pesticide companies. In December 2014, CCFI released a report, prepared by the Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI), on pesticides in organic vegetables from Delhi. Interestingly, IARI has not made this report public.

The institute tested 150 vegetable samples from one organic store in Delhi and found traces in 50; in 10 of these, the levels were above the maximum residue limit (MRL). The store identified a certified farm in Sonapat as the source of the vegetables. The farm was certified by one of the largest NPOP certifiers.

To begin with, sampling from one store from one city is scientifically untenable. Second, finding small traces of pesticides in organic vegetables is not surprising

THE ORGANIC MOVEMENT IN INDIA IS WITNESSING AN UPSWING. INSTEAD OF TARGETING THE SECTOR, SHOULDN'T THE STATE GO FOR LABELLING OF FOODS GROWN WITH PESTICIDES OR GMOS?

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because pesticides are present in water and air, and will find their way into a produce even if the farmer is practicing organic farming. Third, the 10 samples in which levels exceeded the MRL were sourced from a certified farm — which means certification cannot be an answer to the problem.

Let us accept that fake organic products do exist. But the scale is difficult to ascertain till we have a pan-India study on it. Second, a fake organic product is not a safety concern; it is an issue of 'misbranding' or 'misleading advertisement'. So the question is: Is certification required to tackle misbranding? The FSSAI has a definition of and penalty for misbranding of food and misleading advertisements. The food safety act does not specify that to prevent misbranding or misleading advertisement, a product has to have a certification. Why, then, are organic products being singled out? To understand how this new regulation impact farmers, one must examine the certification itself. First, both NPOP and PGS are process-based certification systems. Their main concern is processes and practices of farming and food-processing, not testing food for pesticide residues. The former (NPOP) being more expensive than PGS, is preferred by big farmers, companies and exporters.

Under NPOP, only the produce of a NPOP-certified farm can be processed by a NPOP-certified processor and sold as 'organic'. The NPOP processor cannot take fresh produce from a PGS farmer, process it and sell it as 'organic'. Under PGS, only the food processed by the PGS group of farmers can be labelled as 'organic'. The problem: PGS groups, run by small farmers, are not capable of processing organic produce. They sell their produce to other processors for value addition.

The draft regulation will make it difficult for small farmers to sell their produce for value addition. They will be forced to sell fresh produce directly to consumers or get NPOP certification. If a small farmer gets NPOP certification, it makes his product more expensive and so uncompetitive. If he sells only fresh produce, his value addition is low. So the draft regulation will dissuade small farmers from doing organic farming. The FSSAI's regulation threatens to stem the Indian organic farming movement's growth. Instead of making laws that require mandatory labelling of foods grown with pesticides, why is the FSSAI targeting the positive attribute of 'organic'? If it is so anxious about fake products, it should set standards and penalise under its 'misbranding' provision.

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A SIMPLE ACT OF KINDNESS HAS THE POWER TO INSPIRE MANY BENEVOLENT ACTS

Kajal Chatterjee

What is the real identity of a person? Is it her physical appearance, her salary or her property? Can these identities enable us to recognise the person and her innate characteristics?

The other day, I reached the railway station on my way to office. The trains were not running on schedule. After much delay, a train entered the station. As the train was about to stop, I saw a blind beggar who tripped and dropped his bowl, scatter-

ing all his coins on the platform. The man knelt down on platform and was searching for the coins frantically.

My heart urged me to rush to the spot, pick up the coins, and hand them to him. But my head said, "Don't stop. If you do, you will miss your train and will be marked absent in office."

Amidst this dilemma, I noticed a man running to the spot, picking up the coins and depositing them in his bowl. That man was also on the platform to board the same train as me to reach his destination. Yet, he

wasn't the least hesitant to respond to the call of humanity.

I do not know whether he managed to board the train after helping the blind beggar or not. I don't even know if this incident defines his character or not. But, this act has definitely inspired me and I will remember him as a person whose compassion, morality and warmth touched me.

Inner Voice comprises contributions from our readers. The views expressed are personal
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