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REFLECTIONS

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## THE OPPOSITION MUST RECAST ITS VISION

**W**ith a decisive NDA victory in the presidential elections, and Ram Nath Kovind in Rashtrapati Bhavan, it is time to look back and look ahead at the state of opposition politics in India.

Remember the Opposition had made this poll a test of its unity, and a moment to challenge what they called the BJP's subversion of constitutional values. The result was a foregone conclusion. But their failure to put up a respectable fight, or even keeping the broad Opposition united, reveals the challenge at hand.

Nitish Kumar played a key role in encouraging the idea of a united opposition candidate to take on the NDA's one. Indeed, ever since the success of the Mahagatbandhan in the Bihar elections in 2015, Mr Kumar has been pushing the other parties to come together. This, he believes, is the only way to take on the BJP.

But in a twist, Mr Kumar was the first to move away and support Mr Kovind, who had served as the governor of Bihar for the past two years. Given Mr Kumar's support to demonetisation, his muted criticism of the Modi government on a range of issues and the increasing gulf with ally Lalu Prasad, this was seen as yet another instance of softening towards the BJP.

Mr Kumar's party insisted that the fault lay with the Congress, which delayed taking a decision on the candidate, and if Gopal Krishna Gandhi — who the Opposition had earlier considered — was picked, the JD(U) would have backed him. Mr Kumar also made a larger critique of the Opposition, and urged the Congress to find a new narrative and lead the Opposition.

Contrast the Opposition's late and reactive decision-making process and the Congress-Nitish fracture with BJP's smart political selection of a Dalit candidate, and its energy in mustering up as big a victory for Mr Kovind as possible. It's no surprise that the Narendra Modi-Amit Shah combine have been increasing its political dominance by the day.

But does this mean it is the end of any prospect of Opposition unity, and its ability to pose a challenge to the BJP? No, not necessarily. But for that, they need to learn the lessons from the recent debacle.

First, the Opposition needs to set the agenda. The entire discourse is being set by the BJP — from the narrative of vikas to cow protection, from the narrative of India taking on adversaries to Modi rising on the world stage, from reaching out to subaltern elements within the Hindu fold to portraying the Opposition as weak and anti-national.

The merits of all these claims can be contest-



Illustration: SUDHIR SHETTY

ed. But that is not the point. What is true is that the BJP, its affiliates, and a section of the media trigger the conversation, and the rest react to it.

What is thus needed is for the Opposition to find a set of slogans, a set of key issues, a political-economic agenda that goes beyond the 'remove Modi' plank and then set the national conversation around it. From being reactive to becoming proactive, from whining about the loss of control over the narrative to becoming hyper communicative and pushing its own message, the Opposition has its task cut out.

Second, find the right balance between the Congress and non-Congress parties if the Opposition is to challenge the BJP.

There can be no national opposition front without the Congress. Even at its weakest, it has a national organisation; it polled over 100 million votes in the 2014 election; and in many states, it is in direct contest with the BJP. At the same time, it is also true that never has the Congress been weaker — its leadership is unable to inspire trust, its political instincts seem rusted, it is playing second fiddle in almost all states where there is the BJP and a regional rival, and the days of its hegemony are long gone. Now, the battle is for survival.

This grey political landscape requires the rest of the Opposition to understand the value of the Congress, but it also requires the Con-

gress to recognise that in the balance of power, it may have to cede space to regional leaders who have a better track record of taking on the BJP — be it Mr Kumar or Mamata Banerjee. It is in this context that the Opposition has to hone in on a leader. Taking on Modi in 2019, while remaining a faceless clutch of disparate parties, could well mean that the battle is lost before it begins.

Third, the Opposition must focus on arithmetic. The BJP has carefully made caste calculations in each state. It is now in a position where even without Muslims, and a dominant caste like Yadav, voting for it in Uttar Pradesh or Marathas in Maharashtra or Jats in Haryana, the party is able to win by consolidating all other sections. In each state, the Congress and the regional party concerned need to go back to the drawing board, understand the socio-economic matrix, target social groups, cater specifically to newer constituencies like women and youth who are emerging as independent voting blocs, and get their arithmetic right.

Any democracy needs a good Opposition. The BJP may appear hegemonic but has its own vulnerabilities. In a society as complex as India, there are always ground level contradictions and discontent to be capitalised upon.

But India's Opposition can only do this if it reinvents itself, if it finds a new agenda, if the Congress reconciles to a new role and regional parties reconcile to the Congress' importance, and if they are able to weave together old caste calculations with newer voter aspirations. The presidential election has shown the Opposition has a long way to go, and can learn some political skills from its principal rival, the BJP which is notching up one success after another.

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KARAN THAPAR

## MODI CAN SPEAK A LITTLE MORE TO INDIAN MEDIA

**S**ome journalists have all the luck! Adam Roberts, the former South Asia bureau chief of The Economist, reveals in his recent book Superfast Primetime Ultimate Nation that he had multiple interviews with Narendra Modi during the five years he spent in India. Some were recorded when Modi was chief minister of Gujarat but several after he became prime minister, including one the night before Modi left for his much-anticipated China visit. Along with Roberts' other research, the book presents fresh insights into the PM's childhood, interests, views and politics.

Quoting Modi's childhood friends, Roberts says the young Narendra played kho kho and swam in a nearby lake. He also enjoyed cooking and theatre and won prizes for acting. But one his friends, Dasharathbhai Patel adds: "Modi would always be the Captain ...

we were his underlings."

Kamuben Modi, a next door neighbour in those early days, says the Modi family "had no attic, no proper roof, just a tin roof." Of Modi himself she says: "I remember he would never get beaten by other children, he would beat the others." She adds: "He did not work, not regularly on the tea stall. The mother wanted him to help, but he didn't."

In his interviews, Modi reveals a fascination with America, a country Roberts says he visited multiple times as a young man. On one occasion "he joined a 'young diplomat' course for a month". Many visits were done like a backpacker. "You could buy a ticket for \$500 that lasted a month and allowed you to take as many trips as you like..." Modi explained. "I used to book long journeys to travel at night, so I could sleep on the plane and avoid the cost of hotels ... I travelled and



Prime Minister Narendra Modi at Parliament House, New Delhi

travelled. I explored America. I visited 29 states."

Roberts reveals that Modi and Obama "exchanged anecdotes about standing outside the White House, neither dreaming that each would find his way inside."

China is another country Modi has visited often. Roberts says he "spoke of his affection for China." Of his first visit, Modi said: "That was a spiritual journey which will leave an indelible mark on not only this life but also on

my next." Not surprisingly, Modi is less fulsome about Pakistan. But in the summer of 2015 he told Roberts: "I keep trying to find new pathways, new avenues, to reach out to Pakistan."

Modi is particularly proud of his government's economic achievements: "Look at any aspect of economic growth, we have taken so many steps, all vigorously implemented ... we have reclaimed the position of 'I' in the BRICS, in terms of being an engine of economic growth." However, Roberts adds all this "must be taken with a deep slurp of salty lime juice".

Finally, Roberts has got a response from the PM to the criticism he's silent on so many worrying issues: "I do speak quite a lot on these issues. Maybe not in the exact words that people want to hear it in, but I am absolutely committed to the integrity of the country, to the harmonious relations in society". Once again, Roberts own comment is telling: "it is extremely rare for the Prime Minister speak up for freedom of expression or support diversity of opinion."

Now, if Modi can speak so often, on so many subjects and frequently engagingly, to the lucky Roberts, why can't he speak just a little bit more to Indian journalists?

The views expressed are personal

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LALITA PANICKER

## SAFER ABORTIONS: IT'S A WOMAN'S RIGHT

**T**he figures are chilling — 10 women die every day from unsafe abortions making this the third leading cause of maternal mortality in India. Clearly, these are the result of back alley procedures owing to the fact, in part, that at least 80% of women don't know that abortion is legal in India. And unfortunately, many doctors still tend to associate abortions with gender-based sex selection under the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act, 1994, which is illegal. The very word abortion raises the hackles of the conservatives whether in Trump's America or right here. It is somehow seen as encouraging promiscuity and in the Indian context sex selection.

The Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act as it stands is a liberal one, but it could do with a lot of finessing to make it more accessible and safe for women. Let us look at some of the provisions of the Act as it stands. A licensed practitioner can terminate a pregnancy within the first 20 weeks. But this can only be done if its continuation poses a substantial risk to the woman's life or if the child might have serious handicaps. But if this is discovered after 20 weeks, the woman has to seek legal recourse. This is why a 10-year-old who is a rape victim will have to carry her pregnancy to term after the court recently refused her an abortion since she is now 26 weeks pregnant. This sort of judicial hit-and-miss means that many may just go in for an illegal abortion. The judicial process is so slow that often the victim's pregnancy crosses the legal limit and she is unable to get an abortion.

The law is not clear on unmarried women, this puts a very large cohort at risk of going to quacks. This also smacks of a misplaced morality as if to question the right of any woman to her sexuality and reproductive rights. The complications from a botched abortion

are too well known to bear repeating. I am going through all this to highlight that the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (Amendment) Bill 2014 had actually proposed to deal with some of these problems.

The permissible period for abortion was to have gone up to 24 weeks. And this would not have applied if the unborn child had serious abnormalities. The word married was to go opening the possibility for all women to avail of safe abortion services. Anyone could say that it was contraceptive failure that resulted in an unwanted pregnancy and get an abortion. But for some inexplicable reason, I find that the PMO sent the bill back to the ministry of health and family welfare asking it to strengthen the existing Act which as I mentioned has several gaps.

This is all the more puzzling since the apex court has weighed in on the side of women's rights asking that the MTP be made more meaningful. One problem seems a prevalent confusion about the role of abortion in selective sex selection which is covered under the PCPNDT Act. But the two are totally different. Doctors conducting safe abortions should not be mistaken for those engaged in sex selection through the elimination of the unborn girl child.

The fear of the law is actually making many doctors hesitant to offer legitimate abortion services to women who need them. Given the fact that the basket of contraceptives that should be available to couples is not always accessible, abortion is one way a woman has control over her body and can deal with an unwanted pregnancy. A strengthened MTP Act will really make a difference to reproductive rights in that it empowers women even more than the present one does. This can only be good for women's health and give them control over their lives. No one can quarrel with that, can they?

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deepcut



RAJESH MAHAPATRA

## INDIA NEEDS EDUCATION, NOT JUST SCHOOLS

**I**t was June 2008, when news broke one fine morning that 38 people had been killed in a deadly Maoist attack on a boat carrying greyhound commandos from Andhra Pradesh through a water reservoir along its border with Odisha. It caught my attention instantly, because the scene of the attack — Chittrakonda — was where I had spent much of my childhood in the 1970s. My father, an engineer, was posted there for the construction of what Jawaharlal Nehru used to call "the temples of modern India" — a dam and a hydroelectric power plant.

Chittrakonda was etched in my memory for the rich forests and spectacular mountains that surrounded it and for its simple and beautiful tribal people. How could such a place of peace and tranquillity turn into a Maoist den? In search of an answer, I travelled there a few months later to find what was once a story of hope had indeed turned into a

story of despair.

Electricity and irrigation generated from the project benefited farmers and industries in neighbouring Andhra Pradesh, not the local people who were displaced twice to make way for the reservoir and the dam. Economic opportunities had shrunk following the project's completion, leaving behind widespread unemployment in the area and pushing its people into the Maoist fold. In several villages, families had turned to illegal farming and trading of opium, for which they got protection from the Maoists and the local police.

I wondered if the story of Chittrakonda could have been different if its children had access to the same education that I received, growing up there.

They have access to the same school, where I spent my primary years, but not the education I got. Because, education requires a robust curriculum, classrooms and teachers who are qual-

## THOSE LACKING MEANINGFUL EDUCATION ARE LIKELY TO BE LEFT POWERLESS AND, THEREFORE, BECOME VICTIMS IN ANY SOCIETY BASED ON INFORMED DECISION-MAKING

ified and trained. All of these had gone missing. In the years after the completion of the project, when engineers and the staff brought in from outside packed up, the authorities stopped caring about the school. At the time of my visit in early 2009, it had just four full-time teachers compared to the dozen-plus that we had. The classrooms no longer had chairs and tables; black boards were blank; teacher attendance was sporadic; and the most important entry on the school's daily itinerary was the distribution of mid-day meals.

In all these years, Chittrakonda's children have been going to school, but not getting educated. They have been growing up to join the ranks of unemployed youth, turn violent and take to socially disruptive practices.

The reason why I have chosen to write about Chittrakonda and the ruinous decline of my school is to highlight the risk aspirational India faces in allowing a steady and systemic deterioration of its school education system. As we speak, Parliament is debating changes to the Right to Education Act

(RTE) and a high-powered government panel is finalising a new education policy for the country.

In bringing these twin processes to an early closure, primacy must be assigned to building a time-bound plan to enhance public spending on education from 2.7% of GDP to 6% of GDP. This target, first set in 1966, remains elusive. A significant and sustained spike in public spending is critical to overcoming everything else — from lack of qualified teachers to well-equipped classrooms and monitoring learning outcomes — that is hurting school education in this country.

Our legislators and policy makers would also do well to bear in mind three most desirable outcomes from a good schooling system: citizenship training, enhancing economic productivity and social mobility. An educated populace, in essence, reduces a range of transaction costs by being able to raise the quality of a nation's cultural and social spheres. This is, however, not to suggest that the poorly educated and the illiterate are undesirable as humans. Rather, it is important to acknowledge that those lacking meaningful education are most likely to be left powerless and, therefore, become victims in any society that is based on choice and informed decision-making.

(For a longer version of the column, visit [www.hindustantimes.com/columns/rajeshmahapatra](http://www.hindustantimes.com/columns/rajeshmahapatra))

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### PICTURE OF THE WEEK

**JULY 27:** Jhuggi dwellers demonstrating outside Old Secretariat, Delhi, on Wednesday. They burnt an effigy of the Lt. Governor.



### NEWS OF THE WEEK

#### INDIA

#### DESAI MOVES FINANCE BILL

**JULY 25:** A relief in indirect taxation to the extent of Rs 15.38 crores in a full year was announced by Finance Minister Morarji Desai when he introduced the Finance Bill in the Lok Sabha today (July 24).

#### WORLD

#### DETROIT RACIAL RIOTS TOLL MOUNTS TO 33

**JULY 27:** The official death toll in the three days of racial rioting in this automobile city soared to 33 today (July 26) — only two short of the record toll of 35 in Watts, the Negro ghetto of Los Angeles, during the race riots there in 1965.

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