



A thought for today

In a democracy, someone who fails to get elected to office can always console himself with the thought that there was something not quite fair about it

THUCYDIDES

Gujarati Odds

VVPATS are ready for 100% rollout, Congress is floundering, BJP is in pole position

The Gujarat assembly election slated for December will likely see a 100% rollout of VVPATs and mandatory counting of paper trail slips in a fixed percentage of polling stations across all constituencies. This is against the backdrop where political parties like BSP and AAP have alleged that manipulation of EVMs gave BJP its landslide win in Uttar Pradesh. EVMs with a voter verified paper audit trail should help put such charges to rest while ushering in greater transparency.

Election Commission foresees the possibility of tension between supporters of rival parties at counting centres, given that counting of paper slips will delay results. Congress of course has more than just EVM related problems at hand in Gujarat. It has the onerous task of putting its house in order. The party high command has dithered on taking a final call in the feud between two heavyweights: former chief minister and senior leader Shankarsinh Vaghela and state Congress chief Bharatsinh Solanki. Rahul Gandhi's indecisiveness on the issue has left party workers in disarray. Arvind Kejriwal's AAP also seems to be floundering here after a string of losses in Goa, Punjab and MCD elections.



In clear pole position is the party that has won every assembly election here since 1995. But it is taking no chances. Last Friday BJP president Amit Shah addressed the first of a series of meetings with party workers responsible for reaching out to voters in Gujarat. While flogging of Dalits in Una last July had led to widespread protests and also to Anandiben Patel quitting as chief minister, since then Vijay Rupani seems to have regained lost ground for BJP. He's shown deft handling of contentious issues from the Patel agitation to demonetisation. BJP also came up trumps in the local body elections in November. Now Shah has set an ambitious target of 150 out of 182 assembly seats for BJP in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state. BJP had won 115 seats in 2012.

At the same time the state has seen the emergence of youth leaders like Alpesh Thakor, Hardik Patel and Jignesh Mevani who are leading protests on various issues like farm loan waiver, reservation and Dalit rights respectively. In this context the bigger challenge for BJP is creating employment opportunities, resolving the issue of caste reservations and ensuring inclusive growth in Gujarat.

After Mosul

Despite military setbacks, Islamic State remains a grave threat

Iraq's Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi on Sunday visited Mosul and announced the city has been "liberated" from the clutches of Islamic State. Although IS still holds some territory in western Iraq, the liberation of Mosul is very significant both militarily and symbolically. It was in Mosul, seized by IS in June 2014, that the self-proclaimed caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi made his first sermon. Still, military setbacks to IS should not make anyone underestimate the threat it continues to pose.

The IS threat stems primarily from its ideology. As a proponent of jihadi Salafism, it has created a global network of followers, adeptly using social media to spread its brand of terror. If western nations such as France and UK are threatened by lone wolf attacks, armed groups pledging allegiance to IS have taken over parts of Marawi, Philippines. India too has not been immune to its influence as young men inspired by its ideology have set off to fight in Syria. And the threat emanating from this ideology is unlikely to abate with IS's military losses in Iraq and Syria.

India's policy makers and security apparatus should find it particularly bothersome that IS seems to have drawn in educated youth in relatively prosperous states such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu. India needs to combat this threat at two levels. One, the intelligence establishment has to measure up to the challenge of dealing with the contemporary trend of self-radicalisation through social media. Two, we should live up to the Constitution's ideals which offer a view that is the polar opposite of IS's sectarianism. All Indians need to believe they have a stake in India which is what the Constitution guarantees. It is our best defence against sectarianism.

Who invited this peasant?

Fish knives, mineral water and other foolish fripperies

Bikram Vohra



Went for a rarefied dinner the other day and the people on the table were spooning their soup upwards to come in, like rowers in a boat caught on a tide and for sheer affectation having soup this way in this day and age is hard to beat. Oh, just shove it in.

Then you have that fish knife with its absurd shape. There is fish and there is a knife that will cut the fish into reasonable pieces so you don't look like an oaf but there is nothing that a fish knife will do that a normal knife will not and it is so pretentious to upstage the less initiated by taking that ugly piece of cutlery and brandishing it like a sword of honour.

Then you have stewards in those fancy restaurant who swish that serviette (not napkin, you bumpkin) on your lap like you were going to have a haircut and make you so deeply obligated for this grand gesture that you say thanks a dozen times, after which they ask you what sort of water you want.

Still or sparkling? Carbonated or aerated? Spring or distilled? Room temperature or chilled? Domestic or imported? Mineral or Fortified? And people around the table are making thoughtful assessments as if this was a summit meeting to save the world, it's just a glass of water, knock that grin off the steward by saying, normal table water please and then watch everyone cringe in shame, who invited this peasant?

Now you get the designer food and it is two prawns balanced on each other with some red goo in little circles like a child's crayon drawing and a piece of cucumber dressed up in its Sunday best and one carrot shredded to look like a spray with something au gratin because if you say cheese they'll know you are not to the manner born.

And then there is the piece de resistance. The red and the white. And that supercilious way in which they present the bottle and you nod wisely as if you were Socrates discovering a new scroll and then with a flourish he opens it (not Socrates, the steward) and pours an inch of the stuff into your glass and you swirl it and taste it and then look profound, after which you dispatch your acceptance that yes the wonderful full-bodied flavour of blueberries mixed with a whiff of liquorice (yes, sure, you caught that) and a hint of honey with an aftertaste of chocolate are all in order and we can now drink the stuff.

What a lot of playacting. Just order the house plonk, no one will know the difference and you can save yourself a load of money.

Berth Too High, Platform Too Far

It's time to refashion Indian Railways into a disabled friendly network

Sarabjit Arjan Singh



Life for persons with disabilities is not easy in any case. It becomes even more difficult when the environment is unsympathetic to their needs. Recent cases of wheelchair-bound para-athlete Suvarna Raj and 100% blind Vaibhav Shukla bring this out very vividly.

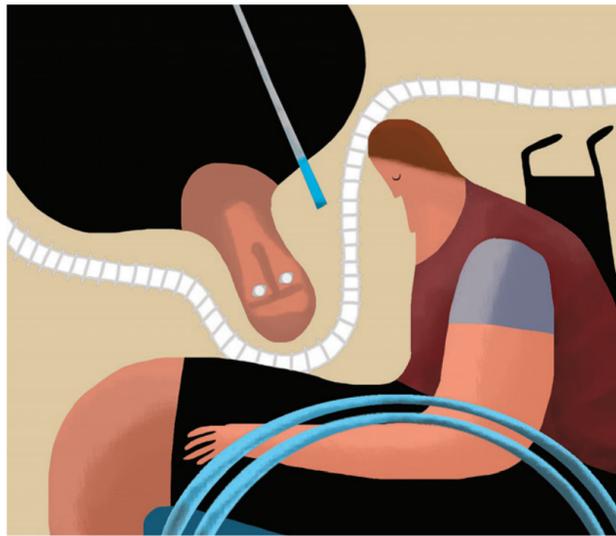
If Indian Railways (IR) had made a sincere effort to provide equal access to persons with disability as they are required to do by the 22-year-old Disabilities Act then Suvarna would not have had to sleep on the floor of the compartment and Vaibhav would not have missed his entrance examination at Delhi University.

IR could not provide Suvarna with a lower berth leaving her with no option but to sleep on the floor of the compartment and Vaibhav had to miss his train because no one would open the door of the compartment reserved for persons with disabilities.

Union railway minister Suresh Prabhu has made the customary refrain of ordering an enquiry into the occurrence. But the way IR functions it will in all likelihood limit the enquiry to the sequence of events that led to the incident, leaving the organisational factors and systemic failures that created the incident unrecognised and thus unaddressed.

On the 3rd of December 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the Accessible India Campaign (Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan.) This campaign begins with the statement that for persons with disabilities universal accessibility is critical to gain equal opportunity and live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life in an inclusive society.

Targets were set for each sector. But even though the Disabilities Act 1995 and the recently enacted legislation which replaces it mandate that IR should make passenger compartments and stations disabled friendly the IR targets only focus on railway station accessibility. The key issue of accessibility of passenger coaches on an equal basis, in particular for wheelchair users, was ignored.



Railways did not provide wheelchair-bound athlete Suvarna Raj with a lower berth, leaving her to sleep on the floor. And 100% blind Vaibhav Shukla missed his train and university exam because no one would open the compartment reserved for persons with disabilities

With such an attitude it is unlikely anyone will see a disabled friendly, barrier free IR in the foreseeable future unless the railway minister takes it upon himself to bring about a change in the thinking, culture and the manner of everyday decision-making so it keeps the need of persons with disability in view.

Even though IR appears a monolithic organisation, in practice decision-making is spread over numerous departments so the responsibility for building various links of the disability chain is also distributed, which makes creating a barrier free environment the responsibility of everyone and no one in particular.

Further, most of the railway stations and other infrastructure were built in the 19th or early 20th centuries, which makes it difficult to render them disabled friendly without substantial rebuilding, at great cost. To emphasise, moving from one platform to the other is also an issue as is accessibility to the compartments.

These are not problems peculiar to

ex-railwayman and as someone who is also a wheelchair user who travelled extensively by train for performing his duties. The proposed solution has three components. The first component is availability of assistance at embarking and destination stations very similar to what airlines provide.

The second component is that those assigned to assist including the coach attendants are adequately trained in handling wheelchairs and transferring a person with disability into an aisle chair, without injury. They also have to be capable of lifting the person into the compartment and settling him or her into the allotted chair or berth.

The last component is the ability of persons with disability to indicate their needs for assistance at the time of booking and an institutional mechanism that ensures that the asked-for assistance is provided when the passenger reports to the assistance desk.

Once this is put in place it has to be built upon by providing ramps and lifts that will enable persons with disabilities get to other platforms with ease. There is also a need for compartments with wider doors and accessible toilets and chairlifts for getting into compartments. Handlers will still be required but handling will become easier for them and safer for the persons with disabilities.

All this can only come about if the railway minister makes it his personal mission. For example he can make it clear that he will not inaugurate any facility or train that does not cater to the needs of persons with disabilities. For this he will need a disability adviser who acts as his ears and eyes, for assessing different facilities for compliance with disability requirements, before the minister accepts any invitation for inauguration.

The disabilities cell in his office will monitor the various projects for making infrastructure and coaches disabled friendly and for training station staff and coach attendants to handle wheelchairs, and also monitor the associated information systems and the institutional mechanisms for implementing the proposed three component system.

The writer is a wheelchair user and former general manager of Indian Railways

Malabar exercise helps ensure that India, Japan, US are ready to protect shared interests in the Indo-Pacific

MaryKay Carlson



Billions of dollars' worth of commerce and millions of tons of cargo move through the Bay of Bengal each year, but this week the Bay is especially active as vessels from the US Navy, Indian Navy, and the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force are in Chennai for the 21st iteration of combined naval exercise Malabar.

We are honoured that India is welcoming thousands of US sailors who will build upon our countries' strong relationship and forge new friendships. This year's Malabar exercise will be the largest and most complex in years.

The aircraft carrier USS Nimitz and her strike group will participate, as will, for the first time, the Indian Navy aircraft carrier INS Vikramaditya and the helicopter destroyer JS Izumo, the largest ship in the Japanese fleet. Malabar 2017 will involve over 7,000 US personnel on board four surface ships carrying close to a 100 aircraft.

Starting July 10 and going until July 17, Indian, Japanese and US naval forces will come together to sharpen their skills. Experts will exchange best practices and crews will practise communication, search and rescue, antisubmarine operations, boarding tactics, and more.

By spending a week working and training side by side, participants from all three countries will learn from each other, build interoperability, and make sure we are prepared to work

The week of exercises will be dramatic, with ships from three great seafaring nations assembling in the waters off Chennai and their aircraft crossing the skies

together in any future mission. Onshore, American sailors will experience Chennai's history and culture by visiting schools, seeing the sights, and playing sports with local teams.

Exercises such as Malabar play a critical role in ensuring



that those of us who operate in the Indo-Pacific region are ready to protect our shared interests, whether we are responding to the threat from piracy or to humanitarian disasters.

This June, ships from the US and Indian navies rushed to Sri Lanka to assist with medical and disaster relief when floods gripped the island nation. Our navies are often the first responders when crisis strikes. Building maritime partnerships, enhancing interoperability, and increasing joint capacity help foster security

and stability in the region. Two weeks ago when he met with President Donald Trump in Washington, Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlighted the Malabar exercise and the importance of freedom of navigation, overflight, and commerce. President Trump noted that our militaries are working every day to enhance cooperation, and both leaders encouraged more maritime security cooperation.

The United States welcomes India's growing defence capabilities and its commitment to a common set of principles for

the region, according to which sovereignty and international law are respected.

The week of exercises and exchanges will be dramatic, with ships from three great seafaring nations assembling in the waters off Chennai and their aircraft crossing the skies. But as impressive as it is, Malabar is only a small part of the growing US-India partnership.

Whether we are talking about our joint efforts to stabilise Afghanistan, the campaign to defeat international terrorism, the work of our scientists to combat emerging health threats, or efforts to spur global entrepreneurship, our two nations – and the world – benefit when India and the United States work side by side for common purpose.

Once again, thank you to our hosts – the Indian Navy and the city of Chennai – for everything you have done to make Malabar 2017 a success, and allow me to join you in welcoming the sailors of the US Navy and the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force to India. Forward together!

The writer is the Chargé d'Affaires at the US Embassy in New Delhi

dilbert



Amarnath Pilgrimage Prompts Deep Reflection

Ashok Parimoo

I was on my way to the Amarnath cave in the upper reaches of Sonamarg. At a secluded spot, I stopped for a while to enjoy the beauty all around. The winds, tall and green pines, the silvery peaks and the soft murmur of the Amravati river below, cattle grazing – it was exhilarating. Why can't we experience this blissful feeling everyday?

Krishna talks about the immutable Ashvatta Tree whose roots are in the air and branches touch the ground, symbolising the subtle truth that the world we observe is an inversion of the real. We know that a reflection is always false, only the object is real. So, reality and perception are two different things.

Reality has been described as one without a second birth; changeless, immutable, ageless and deathless. However, we perceive the world of births and deaths to be real. Are there two worlds, one real and the other

a reflection?

At midnight, some drunkards started rowing a boat. The boat, however, was anchored. They rowed the whole night. In the morning, they realised that they had not moved even an inch. Similarly, in life, our boat is anchored to our ego, name, fame, home, family, and above all, to an unending desire. Human desire is a bottomless pit. We do make pilgrimages to holy spots. We perform sacred rituals and give to charity – but still, our mind is restless.

We need to have a positive desire to concentrate fully on the Godhead, sublimating our mind and controlling our senses.

To be able to enjoy the bliss of the sacred is a difficult task. Once, a man asked Sri Ramakrishna, "Have you seen God?" "Yes," the sage replied, "just as I see you." "Can you show me?" asked

the seeker. Paramhansa asked for a bucketful of water, and told the aspirant to keep his head in water. After a minute, he pulled his head out, gasping for breath. Later, Paramhansa asked him what his experience in water was.

"Sir, I was breathless and was about to die. In that state of helplessness, I applied all my physical and mental strength to save myself." Paramhansa said, "The way you applied all your senses, mind and nerves for a breath, will you apply all those powers to see God? If you do, the next minute, God will come running to you with a ton-load of bliss."

We tend to pray to God only for our worldly needs, which are much more than our requirements. Krishna says in the Gita, "Four types of devotees seeking me: the distressed ones, those seeking knowledge, those seeking wealth and

others seeking wisdom. Of all such devotees, the one who seeks wisdom is dearest to me."

Shrishti or creation means projection and expansion coming out of One. We do remember the sacred One when we are in distress, and this is how the English saying goes: "Man's calamities and God's opportunities." We must never forget God. He is always concerned about us but our worship lacks concentration and devotion. Unfortunately, we remember Him in sorrow for our selfish ends and not in moments of joy.

Once we experience the sacred, the secret of bliss will emerge within us and all joy experienced through the senses will get overtaken by intense spiritual joy.

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