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A thought for today

One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well

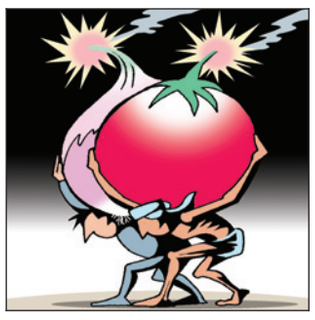
VIRGINIA WOOLF

What Tomatoes Tell

Oscillation between glut and shortage can be avoided by moving to modern market structures

Tomatoes and onions, two staples in food baskets across India, are back in the news. Retail price of tomatoes has risen sharply across 17 major cities and breached the Rs 90 per kg mark. There are signs that household budgets are going to be under more stress as wholesale price of onions at Lasalgaon, Maharashtra, last week hit a 19-month high at Rs 1,300 a quintal. The price of these two items serves as a barometer and recent trends are worrisome.

Price spikes are not uncommon. What makes the current situation unusual is that it comes at a time of normal monsoon and soon after farmers were gutted on account of a post-demonetisation collapse in prices. A cycle where farmers and consumers are stressed by turn is a sign of fundamental problems. At the same time a bird's eye view shows that fruits and vegetables are where farmers are putting more effort on the heels of changing consumption patterns. Consequently, despite two of the last four years having deficient rainfall, production has risen steadily. Even area under cultivation increased and reached 24.92 million hectares last year.



Despite positive trends, if neither farmers nor consumers are satisfied, it is on account of factors under the control of policy makers and some beyond them. Sharp swings in climatic patterns have increased in the recent past, which makes agriculture a riskier proposition. Centre and states worsen this situation with an uncertain policy environment. The cumulative impact is that farmers get garbled price signals, which leads to oscillation between glut and shortage. Fixing this problem has to start with governments letting price become the primary signal for sowing, then keeping the economic environment stable for farmers.

A stable environment has to be complemented with two other steps. A start has been made by linking 455 markets of 13 states through an online marketplace, with more states expected to follow. This is an important step in breaking the hold of wholesale cartels. But it needs follow up in the form of superior infrastructure. Harvest and post-harvest losses in vegetables are estimated to be upto 12.44% of production. India needs to urgently enhance its cold storage infrastructure by providing private sector with better investment incentives. It is entirely possible to end the cycle of gluts and shortages if we get this policy framework right.

Wanted: A Leader

After Nitish's desertion, opposition ranks look shorn of a helmsman for 2019

The turn of events in Bihar leaves a vacuum in opposition ranks. Nitish Kumar was once considered a credible face to counter Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2019. Nitish's emphasis on good governance, stewardship of a backward state, and record as an able administrator made him a rare asset. However, the opposition failed to utilise him effectively. Conscious that he led a party with negligible presence outside Bihar Nitish is believed to have pleaded, without success, to Rahul Gandhi to set an alternative agenda for the opposition.

Since 2014 Rahul's inability to provide strong leadership to a Congress in decline has delayed his assumption of the party president's post. With his own house in disarray, as evidenced most recently in Gujarat, how will Rahul provide cohesion to the opposition? Sonia Gandhi's presence counts for little after ruling herself out as PM aspirant in 2009 and 2014 and conveying the impression that she is making way for Rahul.

Some of the stoutest resistance to Modi has come from Mamata Banerjee and Arvind Kejriwal. But Mamata's appeal outside Bengal is untested, and she has been unsuccessful in attracting industry or even restoring law and order to Bengal. Kejriwal, after defeats in Punjab and Delhi civic polls, is battling for political survival. As a national party Congress must provide leadership but its netas shy away from any purposeful intervention that may surpass Rahul. Every country requires a strong opposition to produce the best results. India is no exception to this rule. Today's scenario is wide open for an opposition leader with ambition and drive to capture this space. In 2013 Modi rose to the occasion and took charge of a listless BJP. The opposition needs to find a Modi for 2019 but its cupboards look bare.

The satta of sattu

From calling for 'Sangh mukt Bharat' to saying 'Sangh sangh chalenge', Biharis lead from the front

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From the Pataliputra of Ashoka and Chanakya to the Patna of Lalu Prasad and Nitish Kumar, it's clear that the Arthashastra, or Chanakya's ancient treatise on statecraft and politics, could only have been written in Bihar. After all, who better understand the shastra of politics than the Biharis who have played the game of thrones for longer than almost anyone else in the subcontinent? Chanakya's famous formula 'saam daam dand bhed' – or charm, pay, threaten or divide – as the mantra of rajniti could only have been written by a son of Bihar. That's why Chanakya or Kautilya is the most famous Bihari from Patna to Pakistan. In Bihar they eat sattu and they know a thing or two about satta.

To win in Bihar politics you have to be a grandmaster of political chess, ready with your pawns, knights and kings. If Lalu is the master of caste arithmetic, able to find theorems which combine Muslims+Yadavs+Musahars minus Koeris then Nitish knows how to checkmate his rivals with Musahars+Mahadalits. Nitish Kumar has shown that when it comes to being chief minister he likes to have his Bihari thali and eat it too. From Left to Right, he's allied and ditched Vajpayee, Lalu, Rahul Gandhi and Narendra Modi showing that his favourite song is not 'yeh dosti hum nahin todenge'.

If you are sworn in again as chief minister within 12 hours of resigning, then you know how to use allies as pawns. Wasn't it only the other day that Nitish Kumar was swearing to create a 'Sangh mukt Bharat'? Today however he is saying 'Sangh sangh chalenge' to the saffron brigade. He once called NaMo Hitler but today SuMo is his deputy, as Nitish has become Modi-fied for new voters. Quipped the internet wag, the secular mahagathbandhan between Lalu and Nitish has been revealed as neither 'maha', nor 'gath' nor a 'bandhan'.

The ostensible reason for the split is the badnami, sorry, benami properties of Lalu's son and former Bihar deputy chief minister Tejashwi Yadav. Tejashwi once played for the Delhi Daredevils, now his entire clan is on a sticky wicket. Watching the Bihar drama in bewildered confusion is the grand old party. Congress and Rahul Gandhi look lost, confronted by Bihar's shatranj ke khiladi. Clean shaven one day, bearded the next, the heir is perpetually having a bad hair day. Perhaps that's why Rahul seems like a babua compared to the Bihari babus.

What Follows Nawaz's Ouster?

He made some overtures to India but never really controlled India policy

Vivek Katju

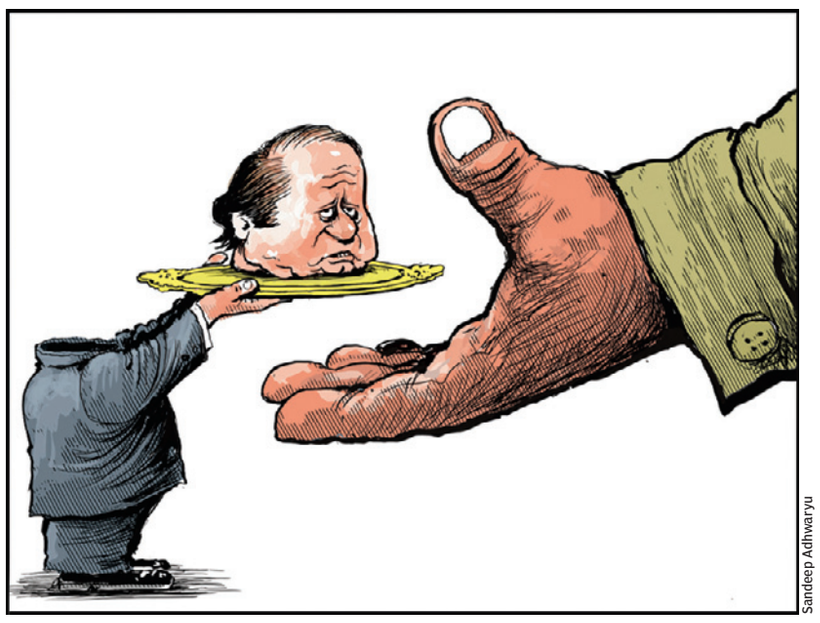
The fall of a well entrenched prime minister in Pakistan may be riveting drama but will not alter the reality of its polity or its institutional structure and balance. The political class only takes care of subordinate governance, for the major issues that confront Pakistan – especially in the security sphere – are the domain of the generals.

Thus Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's removal from office by the Supreme Court last Friday through its extraordinary, if not strange, decision in the Panama Papers case will impact the country's polity. However, it will not influence domestic issues of interest to the army; nor will it have any real consequence on its crucial foreign ties including with India, Afghanistan and China.

The Sharif brothers, Nawaz and Shahbaz – the powerful chief minister of Punjab – currently control Pakistani politics. This is largely because of their firm hold of Punjab, comprehensively the country's most significant province. They manage a powerful and intricate network of biradaris and clans at the tehsil and district levels. While Nawaz provides the mass appeal in Punjab and, to an extent, nationally, it is Shahbaz who astutely handles the day to day affairs of Punjab.

Now with the decision to move Shahbaz to the PM's chair once he is elected as a member of the National Assembly, Nawaz's first challenge will be to ensure that the party, PML(N), does not fray at the margins. Threats will come both from within the party as well as from external political actors especially Imran Khan, the leader of the Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), who is undoubtedly chuffed up because he instituted and vigorously and successfully pursued the Panama Papers case.

National elections are due next year. Nawaz Sharif and his children including Maryam, his chosen political heir, will have to undergo a trial for corruption and fraud which will begin soon in the National Accountability Court. Notwithstanding Nawaz's poignant cry that he was unseated for money he did not take, the accountability case on Sharif properties abroad will give opportunities to opponents within the party, such as Chaudhry Nisar, to strike out on their own and to Imran Khan to poach PML(N) leaders.



Sandeep Adhwaryu

As the accountability trial proceeds the Sharifs may be tempted to go in for the dangerous gamble of going to the polls prematurely, without the possible stigma of a conviction on fraud and corruption. An early election though may be seen as a sign of the family's waning fortune and the party will greatly suffer. This difficult decision will test the Sharifs' political instincts.

Will the generals let Pakistan's polity take its natural course or quietly indicate their preference for the Sharifs to go? The problem for the men in khaki is that they do not fully trust Imran Khan's maturity as a politician. It is one thing to use him to pressure the Sharifs, it is quite another to consider him capable of being a prime minister.

The problem for the men in khaki is that they do not fully trust Imran Khan's maturity as a politician. It is one thing to use him to pressure the Sharifs, it is quite another to consider him capable of being a PM

Besides, Shahbaz who is practical and smart does not evoke the generals' ire as Nawaz does; he is unlikely to encroach on their foreign and security policy turf. An important consideration for the army will be its preference to maintain a minimum of political stability at a time when Pakistan's strategic environment is not in its control and work on the China Pakistan Economic Corridor is underway.

Naturally Imran Khan will seek to ride the Panama Papers victory wave. He will have some attraction in urban Punjab but will confront major ethnic and provincial obstacles. The Mohajir/Pathan contradictions in Sindh, the Baloch resentment of the Pathans as also the anti-Pathan sentiment being fanned in Punjab will come to the surface. The road ahead for him therefore is neither smooth nor straight. But he is a fighter and will trouble a weakened Sharif family.

The Zardaris are confined mainly to Sindh and do not have the leadership or the machinery in Punjab to nibble at the Sharifs. They will remain articulate but will have to be content to watch from the sidelines the flow of moves on the political chessboard. It can be anticipated that religious parties will be held in check by the army not to add to the political flux.

Will these developments impact India-Pakistan ties? Nawaz Sharif dealt directly with six Indian prime ministers. He charmed and convinced many of them including, it seems, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of his sincerity in wanting to establish cooperative relations. He also assured them of his willingness to take on the army in this quest. Therefore he evoked the feeling that he was the best hope for bilateral ties. This was misleading for he was always and effectively constrained by the army even during his second term when he was best placed against them.

The generals could not countenance Nawaz Sharif's unilateral forays with Modi – not when he visited Delhi for the latter's oath taking ceremony, nor in Ufa when they rejected the Modi-Sharif Joint Statement and nor with the concerted December 2015 moves which culminated with Modi's Lahore visit which particularly provoked them.

Through the Pathankot and Uri terrorist attacks the generals conveyed that they were the arbiters of Pakistan's India policy. This reality leads to the inference that Nawaz's departure will not change India-Pakistan relations. In the coming months the army will not want a confrontation with India but its aggressive approach in Kashmir will continue. On Kashmir, Nawaz and the army stood together.

The writer is former Secretary, ministry of external affairs (MEA)

'Old criticisms have no value. Nitish wasn't with BJP then ... what anyone says when he's not with the party doesn't count'

*Senior Bihar BJP leader **Sushil Kumar Modi** is back in his old position as Bihar's deputy chief minister after last week's high voltage political drama which saw chief minister Nitish Kumar breaking the mahagathbandhan with RJD over corruption charges against Lalu Prasad's family and returning to the NDA's fold. He spoke to **Rohit E David** about how the political pendulum swung in Patna, the renewed BJP-JD(U) alliance and its prospective impact on the 2019 general election:*

Q&A

■ Nitish Kumar made several personal comments against PM Narendra Modi in the time when he was not in alliance with BJP. Are all those criticisms by him invalid now?

See, in politics these old criticisms have no value. That is simply because the context is different. Nitish Kumar was not with BJP at that time. So, what anyone says when he is not with the party does not count.

When Yashwant Sinha was in Parliament with Chandra Shekhar, he criticised Ram Janmabhoomi movement. When he came back to BJP, he was defending the movement. Lalu Prasad asked him about the same and Yashwant Sinha said, "Wherever I am, I stay with loyalty."

■ Was this all pre-planned with BJP as the timing of Nitish Kumar's announcement and PM's tweets indicate?

No, I don't know. I came to know about this on Wednesday evening at 7pm. Bihar BJP was not in the loop. We didn't know what was happening. We were in the dark on what was going to take place. I hadn't spoken with Nitish Kumar for the past several months. After Nitish Kumar had left NDA alliance, I had not met him.

■ What does this mean for the 2019 elections?

Now that we have won the vote of confidence in Bihar assembly, we will sit together and discuss the future course of action.

■ How confident are you about the alliance after the vote of confidence?

The governor had given us 48 hours to prove our majority. We said we will prove our majority within 24 hours. It was very easy for Tejashwi Yadav to say before the vote that he had support from JD(U) members.

The fact is that we provided the governor with a letter of support from 132 MLAs. We won with 131 votes. Congress and RJD came together and their number came to 108. Interestingly, earlier, when RJD members had met the governor, no Congress MLA was there. JD(U) and BJP alliance will survive its full term.

■ Beyond the immediate reasons, why do you think JD(U) withdrew from the alliance?

No sensible person can work with Tejashwi and Tej Pratap Yadav. In the last few months no one was talking about development. People were only hearing about benami property.

■ Rahul Gandhi has said that Nitish Kumar was unprincipled and that he had heard about the planning for this split 2-3 months ago. Your comments?

I don't know. I am a very junior person to comment on Rahul Gandhi. What ideology is he propagating? During UPA-2 more than Rs 12 lakh crore worth of scams were exposed. UPA-2 had to go because of all these scams. What was Rahul Gandhi doing at that time?

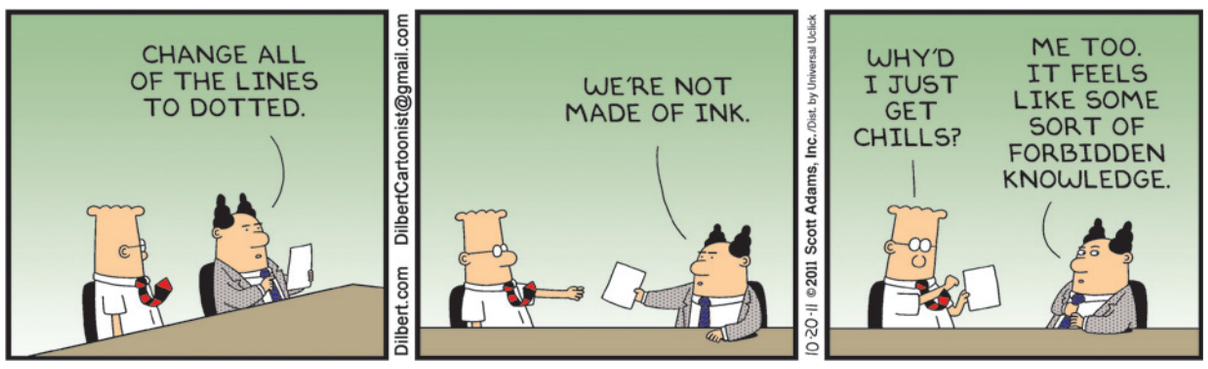
■ Was JD(U) feeling suffocated politically by Lalu Prasad?

Nitish Kumar had said this that he was feeling suffocated with RJD. When JD(U) had their meeting, their members said that the alliance should not continue and JD(U) should form an alliance with BJP. One day before the presidential elections, JD(U) members said that people want JD(U) and BJP should come together. It was a natural urge of the people of Bihar.

■ How do you respond to Tejashwi Yadav's warning to Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar that people are not fools and that the 'vicious greed for power' will spell doom for the new alliance?

People know Lalu Prasad, they know how he made them a fool for 15 years. It is not Nitish Kumar or BJP. Lalu fooled the poor people of Bihar and in return he grabbed so many benami properties.

dilbert



Sacred*space*

Affluenza

The human race has had long experience and a fine tradition in surviving adversity. But we now face a task for which we have little experience, the task of surviving prosperity.

Alan Gregg

Wise Schooling With Enlightened Masters

Swami Tejomayananda

A spiritual teacher plays a significant and indelible role in the life of a human being. If you are privileged enough to have such a teacher, you are assured of success in all spheres – worldly and spiritual.

It is said 'mahat sangha tu durlabho agamyo amoghas cha'– it is extremely rare and difficult to gain the association or company of spiritual people; and even if we come into their orbit, it may not be possible to recognise their greatness and stature. Often, even a person living with such exalted masters, is not aware of their glory.

But one thing is definitely certain: whether one recognises their greatness or not, the influence of such a mahatma is amogha, infallible; to come into contact with such a person, and not be affected, is against the law of nature – it is just not possible. Whether you come in close contact or hear such a mahatma from afar, his influence is unfailing. Perhaps, immediately there may be no visible change, but one can be absolutely sure that, sooner or later, there will be a discernible influence in the life of that person.

Presently, we are living in utter ignorance of our true nature, of the relationship between the individual, the world and the Creator of both. This ignorance creates wrong notions whereby we misinterpret the world, commit various mistakes and consequently suffer from anguish and unhappiness.

Great masters lead us out of the darkness of ignorance into the sunlit field of knowledge; they transform our vision. We start studying the scriptures and discover that there is an Absolute Reality; we understand that God exists. Then, we become acquainted with the characteristics of an enlightened person. We cannot really appreciate the exalted character of such a person unless and until we are fortunate enough to meet such a master and observe his nature at close quarters.

Such sadhgurus show us the way to reach the goal of human birth – moksha. They give authenticity to the scriptures. They raise all actions to heights of divinity; they demonstrate that no karma, in itself, is great or small; it is the motive and attitude behind our actions that makes it so.

the **speaking tree**

There are different types of people who approach a guru. A bhakta (devotee) has love, reverence and devotion. But, all devotees do not become sishyas (disciples). They love, respect and revere the guru, but they also wish to learn Vedanta from him.

There are others who listen, become inspired and offer to volunteer their time as sevak. Service blossoms into devotion – the sevak becomes a bhakta. In due time, the bhakta transforms into student and disciple – he desires to study Vedanta full time.

When a person becomes all three – a devotee steeped in bhatki yoga; a sevak performing selfless actions, karma yoga, and finally a sishya immersed in Vedantic study, jnana yoga – he reaches the ultimate goal; his journey is complete.

A guru's greatness is not only in entrusting the right person to the right job, but, in also, being able to encourage and inspire those who lack adequate capability, enabling them to produce incredible results.

Personally, i have had the good fortune to meet quite a few great mahatmas, but the greatest blessing has been to be with, to live with, serve and learn from one such realised Master – Pujya Gurudev Swami Chinmayananda.

(The writer is an acharya of the Chinmaya Mission.)

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