

When news media talks to itself

If Indian news media has to even begin acknowledging its problems, we need more such forums as Talk Journalism



MEDIA SCOPE

VANITA KOHLI-KHANDEKAR

Pratik Sinha is a diffident sort of techie who co-founded *altnews.in* earlier this year. The website attempts to debunk fake news, videos, pictures and propaganda. It has arguably been one of the big slayers of

fake news online in the last few months.

When I bumped into him at Talk Journalism in Jaipur, I grabbed the chance to know more about him and his work. And we sat down for an impromptu cup of tea in the lobby of the Fairmont, the venue for the event. It was, however, impossible to have a proper conversation. In about 30 minutes we were interrupted over a dozen times by senior journalists, online editors, writers and even business guys, many of them speakers, some just the audience or the organisers. Each of them would recognise Sinha, grab his hand and say what a great job he was doing. The only other time I have been interrupted so often is while interviewing film stars or big directors in hotel lobbies. Clearly, Sinha is the journalistic community's rock star.

After the first three interruptions I gave up on having a proper conversation and just sat back and observed the way people were reacting to him. Fake news is clearly a huge worry for journalism, democracy and India. And this was just regular people or journalism professionals expressing relief that someone was doing something about it. His session the next day with two other fake news busters — Jency Jacob of Boom and Pankaj Jain of SM HoaxSlayer — saw a packed hall where most of us had no place to sit. The big takeaway? Watch out for some of the markers of fake news — something that evokes extreme emotion through video or pictures (usually false), is badly written, has bad advertising (say, porn), where the website doesn't have a proper "About Us" section and there are

no source references or citations.

Talk Journalism then has hit upon the right issues to talk about. And it did that for three days. There were journalists from the Northeast of India, from Hindi, Marathi and Urdu media, from online and offline media, TV and print. And the topics were all the things that we worry about and grapple with as professionals — deepening confusion in media, polarisation, the regional divide and fighting defamation among other things.

Besides fake news, one of my favourite talks was a gentle but insightful one on the life of an Urdu reporter by Shakeel Hasan Shamsi, editor (North) of *Daily Inquilab*. He spoke of the perils of associating a language with a religion and how that changes the way people read, write and use that language — something that has happened to Urdu.

What I missed? The presence of more offline news media, of news TV and newspaper owners and how they think of developing journalists. And more on solutions to the problems ailing journalism. For instance, training a gaping hole that is showing up in the qual-

ity of journalism in India. News channels are more guilty of this — you see some of the most ill-reported, opinionated and badly done journalism anywhere on Indian news channels. But newspapers have also been terrible about spending enough money on training reporters, editors and other staffers. In my 24 years as a print journalist, every bit of training or every fellowship I applied for was my initiative. None of the papers or magazines I have worked for have suggested or invested in training me or any of my colleagues. So a workshop that offers practical tools for working journalists — on data, technology, writing, editing or any of the things that a journalistic organisation does — would have been nice.

But Talk Journalism forces the news industry to talk to itself and examine itself. There need to be more such forums if Indian news media has to work better and provide the right fodder to feed the discourse for a healthy democracy.

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CHINESE WHISPERS

NOTA hurdle for Ahmed Patel?

Opposition parties on Tuesday protested in the Rajya Sabha an Election Commission notification that provides for the "None of the Above" (NOTA) option for legislators of state Assemblies in the vote for elections to the Upper House. Protests by members, led by those of the Congress, forced adjournments on the issue. The issue has come into the spotlight at a time when there is a high-profile electoral battle for three Rajya Sabha seats from Gujarat. In the fray are Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) chief Amit Shah, Union minister Smriti Irani and senior Congress leader Ahmed Patel. The Congress fears the NOTA option might be "misused" in the elections to ensure Patel's defeat, with the BJP influencing Congress legislators to exercise the option. Patel is the political advisor to Congress chief Sonia Gandhi and his defeat would be perceived as her defeat. Election Commission sources pointed out that the NOTA option in the Rajya Sabha polls came into force in 2014, when the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance was in power for its second term.

Snubbing and embarrassment

The government on Tuesday was left embarrassed in the Rajya Sabha when the Chair passed strictures against it for not inviting Vice-president M Hamid Ansari for the inauguration of an annexe complex of Parliament by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The Opposition slammed the government for "insulting" the Upper House by ignoring its presiding officer, who is also the vice-president of India, and Rajya Sabha members at an official function on Monday. "I think the hon'ble chairman should have been invited," said Rajya Sabha Deputy Chairman P J Kurien. Kurien said the Rajya Sabha Secretariat had "already written to the Lok Sabha Secretariat regarding the impropriety of not inviting the chairman".



Shah lashes out at absentee BJP MPs

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) President Amit Shah (pictured) had taken a serious view of party members not attending the Rajya Sabha despite a whip and would seek a written explanation from the absentees, said party leaders on Tuesday. Shah gave a tongue-lashing to BJP members of Parliament (MP) at the party's parliamentary party meeting on Tuesday, a day after the government faced an embarrassing situation in the Upper House with a united Opposition pushing some changes to the Constitution Amendment Bill on Backward Classes. The BJP chief has asked party MPs to be present in both Houses during the session and warned them "not to repeat" (such conduct), said Parliamentary Affairs Minister Ananth Kumar. Several Union ministers were among the MPs absent from the Rajya Sabha on Monday.

Industry 4.0: Multi-layered skilling is key

The ability to think beyond sets of machines and move towards a true 'systems thinking' is essential



GANESH NATARAJAN

The need for a transformation in India's manufacturing sector has never been stronger than today. With the goods and services tax law passed and a new phase of demand emerging across India, efficient and highly productive manufacturing enterprises will fuel the demand that a surging economy can be expected to generate. Transformation of manufacturing industry mindsets and capabilities to create factories of the future will ensure that India is able to meet its aspiration of manufacturing becoming at least a quarter of future gross domestic product (GDP) and building high quality jobs of the future as Indian firms mount an assault on global market share.

The opportunity for Industry 4.0 is emerging not just because of emerging robust demand but also due to the rapid sweep of digital technologies, customer and supply-side analytics and new tools like augmented reality, robotics, 3D printing and Internet of Things (IoT) that are enabling seamless vertical connectivity through the customer and order fulfilment processes of manufacturing enterprises and horizontal integration of value chain partners across the industry in which each firm operates. A study on the importance of 4.0 for BRICS nations by Ficci and Roland Berger has thrown light on the fact that more than 220 million people are employed in manufacturing in the BRICS countries, which is

more than the entire population of the world's fifth-largest nation, Brazil. The surge in robotics, artificial intelligence and other automation technologies could result in the movement of jobs back to the developed world and the elimination of lowly skilled jobs in emerging economies, which is yet another imperative for reskilling of the large workforce in India and other BRICS countries.

In India, the impact of Industry 4.0 on the small and medium-size enterprises sector, which drives more than 38 per cent of GDP and provides employment to 110 million people, is another dimension to be considered and any large-scale reskilling agenda needs to be as relevant for the small factories as it is for large industrial enterprises. And with small and medium companies increasingly serving as integral parts of the global supply chains of some of the country's and the world's leading manufacturing conglomerates, no manufacturing firm can be left behind in the country's march towards Industry 4.0.

As a detailed study by PwC points out, products, systems and services will be increasingly redesigned and customised to fit customer needs and firms will become participants in large industrial platforms. As with all paradigm shifts, first movers will tend to corner large parts of the new opportunity share and with millennial customers beginning to dominate the demand conversations in many industries, every process and every person engaged in the entire manufacturing demand and supply chain will have to be totally customer-driven for the firm to succeed and stay relevant in the digital era.

Companies such as Siemens and GE are already putting up platforms to offer comprehensive digital offerings, with cloud-based systems for connecting machines and IoT sensors and



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

devising and partnering and co-creating ideas with customers, collecting and analysing data at every touch point in the value chain and re-engineering operations and logistics processes to serve stated and latent customer needs better. The emerging industrial digital ecosystems will call for new mindsets, new capabilities and new skills across the board.

What are the families of skills that engineers of tomorrow will have to be armed with and manufacturing practitioners reskilled in to face the challenges of the future? The first and foremost is the ability to think beyond sets of machines or even blocks of data and move towards true "systems thinking" for customer-product journeys and customer-led value chains. The California Manufacturing Technology Consulting group defines a term called Smart Manufacturing as the unity of data, technology, environment perspectives and economic growth focus and people leading manufacturing

enterprises will have to understand the nuances of making this happen in real time.

Digital will be the cutting edge for all factories of the future and from a deep understanding of digital platforms that a customer can participate in or employees use for continuous learning, comfort with using such platforms enabled by artificial intelligence and machine learning will be essential for every manager and engineer in the organisation. New digital production line skills will be needed in operations planning and control, production and maintenance processes, materials planning and warehousing, with the use of 3D printing and robotics coexisting with manual operators. Virtual reality will enable higher productivity in tasks like picking parts in a warehouse and augmented reality will make the training of shop floor engineers and fault diagnostics much simpler.

Even at the workman level, capabilities to deal with extensive automa-

tion and work with robotic processes, automated manufacturing execution systems and self-healing machinery will be skills that become essential. Learning and development focus in busy factories will have to move from traditional TPM, 5S and Six Sigma to embrace newer and newer digital capabilities that will emerge every month, calling for quick assimilation and integration.

Manufacturing enterprises of the future will also have to deal with large data volumes to analyse, with sensor-generated IoT data from the shop floor coexisting with information churned out by ERP systems. It's an exciting time for the factory of the future and the focus on skills needs to be paramount so that no individual is left behind and Indian firms are able to seize the opportunity and take the lead.

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BUSINESS LIFE

As other US companies flee China, Starbucks marches in

It has found a way into the country's culture as well as the good graces of the govt

ANDREW ROSS SORKIN

Google does very little business there. McDonald's has agreed to sell its business and license its name there. Coca-Cola, after investing heavily, sold its bottling unit there. Where is "there"? China, of course.

At a time when many United States companies have been beating a path away from China, worried about censorship as well as political and economic volatility, one company has been quietly going the other direction: Starbucks.

Amid last week's busy news cycle — filled with company earnings reports and chaos in Washington — Starbucks made a momentous deal that was largely overshadowed. It bought out its long-time partner in its Chinese operation (making it the sole owner) and detailed its huge expansion plans for China.

Consider this mind-boggling statistic that I culled from the company's statement last week about its Chinese ambitions: Starbucks is opening more than 500 stores a year there — which amounts to more than one new store a day. Starbucks is creating some 10,000 jobs in China annually. In Shanghai alone, there are already 600 stores. To put that in perspective, New York City has about half as many stores as Shanghai.

"When people ask me how much can you really grow in China, I don't really know what the answer is, but I do believe it's going to be larger than the US," Howard Schultz, Starbucks's chairman, told me on Monday by phone.

Schultz was headed to China that afternoon, preparing for a series of meetings in Shanghai. That's where



Starbucks is opening more than 500 stores a year in China, which amounts to more than one new store a day

PHOTO: ISTOCK

the company is planning to open a 30,000-square-foot coffee emporium in December, one that Schultz believes "will have a larger consumer impact than the opening of Shanghai Disney".

The story of Starbucks in China is a nearly 20-year journey that may be a case study for US companies that have struggled to do business there.

Starbucks has found a way into the culture of China — as well as the good graces of the Chinese government — by investing heavily there, paying significantly higher wages than competitors, and extending its employee ownership benefits to Chinese workers. The company has also been offering housing allowances and health care benefits and, unusually, offering critical illness insurance for the parents of employees and inviting those parents to an annual meeting of the company's Chinese staff. Today, Starbucks China is run by a female

executive, Belinda Wong.

All these efforts have built up an extraordinary level of trust. But they took time and money — too much money, some shareholders complained in the early days of the endeavour.

"The years of losses built pressure from both within and from the street to leave and abandon the China market," Schultz said. Part of the company's challenge, he added, was the need to teach an entire country known for its tea about the culture of coffee drinking.

Starbucks faced many of the same pressures in China as Yum Brands, the owner of KFC, Pizza Hut and Taco Bell. Last year, Yum Brands spun off its China unit under pressure from shareholders who were concerned about the costs and volatility of trying to expand a business there.

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LETTERS

Sudden change of heart?

With reference to Satyavrat Mishra's report, "No one can beat Modi in 2019: Nitish" (August 1), what an irony that the Bihar chief minister and Janata Dal-United (JD-U) president, a bete noire of the Prime Minister since 2014, is now all praise for him. Nitish Kumar went to the extent of saying that nobody had the strength to compete with Narendra Modi and that the Opposition was in no shape to counter him. Of course, Kumar claimed that he had no option but to walk out of the Grand Alliance as continuing in it would have meant "compromising with corruption" — a reference to the charges against his former deputy and Lalu Prasad's son, Tejashwi Yadav, and other members of his family.

The moot question is: Was the alleged corruption involving Prasad and his family members an overnight development? Why such a sudden change of heart for Kumar? The chief minister is acting as if he is on a moral high ground after breaking away from the Grand Alliance, which had Prasad's Rashtriya Janata Dal as one of its constituents. Kumar was wise to work out a game plan to seize power in Bihar again by hobnobbing with the Modi-led National Democratic Alliance. Taken aback by Kumar's decision, Prasad started spewing venom against him. But it is Kumar who is sitting pretty in the company of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and other allied parties.

The old saying goes: Necessity is the mother of invention. In the modern era, political necessity is the mother of all sorts of holy and unholy need-based combinations. The alliance between the BJP and the JD-U in Bihar proves there are no permanent foes or friends in politics.

Kumar Gupt Panchkula

Fraught with danger

It is obvious that a culture of political violence involving the left and right-wing forces exists in Kerala. Political killings in



the state are a matter of concern. The realisation that political killings are avoidable and should not happen has not come a day too soon.

The meeting between leaders of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh can be the first step towards restoration of peace. The all-party meet must take measures to free the state from the scourge of political violence.

Political consciousness is good for democracy and a just social order. But it should not blind us to the fact that "human identity" is far more important than "political identity". Think of the irreparable loss of the families of slain political workers to understand the cruelty and futility of political violence. How many more children need to be orphaned

in attacks over political reasons before everyone regains sanity?

Clearly, the BJP wants to be a force to reckon with in Kerala and is aspiring for expansion. But it should not go about achieving this aim by engineering political violence or whipping up communal sentiment and leading to martyrs. Most of the clashes between the CPI-M and the BJP occur over ideological differences. Both the sides should repudiate violence in this fight.

One principal mass base of the left parties in Kerala is the Ezhava community, which the BJP has been trying to wean away through religious polarisation. But the Hindutva ideology is antithetical to Sree Narayana Guru's teaching of "one caste, one religion, one god".

The Kerala unit of the BJP should not think it can have its way in the state just because the party is in power at the Centre. Causing the collapse of law and order in the state and then citing it as a pretext to impose President's rule should not be on the BJP's agenda. The BJP is saying that Kerala is being "de-Hinduised" with nothing to substantiate this charge. Playing such mischief is fraught with danger.

G David Milton Maruthancode

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HAMBONE

BY MIKE FLANAGAN



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Focus on execution

Govt does not need to tweak laws to reduce pollution

The Union government is planning to bring in two crucial changes to the Environment (Protection) Act of 1986. The first amendment proposed is increasing the level of fines from ₹1 lakh to ₹1 crore. The second one is more important: The fine can be imposed without going through a judicial process prescribed in the current law and a designated officer would be the final authority to decide the money that needs to be recovered from the polluting entity. On the face of it, these changes will help officials enforce pollution control more effectively and swiftly, as the idea now is to place clear financial disincentives for polluters instead of trying to either shut down all polluting industries or sending the culprits to jail.

This latest change in approach has been brought about after Prime Minister Narendra Modi reviewed the cleaning of the Ganga, which is the second-most polluted river in the world, and sought a graded response to the problem without everything ending up in court. It is easy to understand the prime minister's sense of urgency. Mr Modi did make the project a centerpiece of his election promise, but it has been a particularly tricky challenge, with little being achieved despite thousand of crores of rupees of Budget allocations since 1986. Even Mr Modi's Namami Gange project has failed to make much headway. In February, the National Green Tribunal chided the Union government for "wasting public money" without any effective pollution control in this regard.

However, there are several reasons why the latest set of amendments is unlikely to yield results even if it is cleared. That is because the proposed changes show no real understanding of why repeated attempts over the past three decades have failed to bring about even an iota of change in pollution levels in the river. For one, taking away the criminality from such acts of pollution is a wrong signal. It essentially means an offender can pay to pollute. The river is a community asset and dumping millions of litres of untreated toxic waste has disastrous health effects, which cannot be overlooked because a polluting industrial unit is happy to pay ₹1 crore. Moreover, the government is not short of funds to remediate damages. Two, by undermining judicial review, the changes could make life easier for the official-polluter nexus, instead of reducing pollution. In fact, the existing law provides enough powers to officials if they want to bring polluters to book. That this does not happen shows the lack of intent on their part as well as the absence of political will. The truth is, far from the bluster of electoral grandstanding, a cleaner environment is still not a big enough constituency to summon political will. Change has to start with more efficient execution of the existing rules; bringing in amendments or new laws is unlikely to help.

Paradox on the learning curve

Higher education standards urgently need an upgrade

As the government moves towards offering the premier Indian Institutes of Management greater autonomy in their functioning, it may need to focus some attention on a unique but well-established paradox of the wider higher education system that absorbs the bulk of the country's school-leavers. The country boasts of the highest number of higher education institutions in the world — an astounding 33,723, according to an EY analysis — and the second largest number of enrolments in higher education at almost 27 million (to China's 33 million). Yet it is estimated that almost 75 per cent of these graduates are unemployable.

At a disaggregated level, the numbers look worse. Graduate employability levels cross 25 per cent for just one of the 10 key professions set out in the National Employability Report. That is relatively for low-level, low-paying clerical and secretarial jobs, for which science graduates, bizarrely, are the best prepared. IT-enabled services follow next, with an employability level of just under 25 per cent, with science graduates making the cut here too. In such so-called cerebral jobs like accounting, content development, and analysis, employability levels lie below 5 per cent — and science graduates are not front-runners in these fields. No surprise, then, that the employability of graduates as teachers varies from 10 per cent to 15 per cent, a pointer to the circular nature of the problem.

The crisis of quality in Indian higher education has been a long-festering one. It begins, of course, with the poor standards of India's primary and secondary education that create a pool of poorly educated school-leavers. Audits routinely reveal that Indian schoolchildren fall below the minimum standards demanded of their age-group — in one inter-country study, India ranked 71 out of 74, just above Kyrgyzstan. But up the value chain, the impact of lax and corrupt regulation kicks in, in which questionable accreditation of institutions flourishes with impunity. As a result, the higher education system suffers from a vicious cycle of poor quality and it is being compounded by the increasing proclivity of the central and state governments to make politically motivated interventions in university curricula and appointments. There has been a sharp rise in the proportion of private universities, which account for over 60 per cent of the total today from under 10 per cent at the start of the century. But that may not be the solution as the best professional institutions such as the Indian Institutes of Management and the Indian Institutes of Technology continue to be government-funded/created bodies. What is required is an overhaul of the entire system so that homegrown institutions can flourish.

Today, almost no institute of higher education from India figures in global top 200 rankings, even as authoritarian China, which has two, is making great leaps forward in higher education. In a country that likes to boast a "demographic dividend" — slightly less than half of India's population is below 25 years of age — these are worrying trends. When linked to diminishing employment growth owing to the rise of artificial intelligence, the chronic un-employability of India's educated youth raises the real prospect of social unrest, undercurrents of which can be detected in the growing violence of political contestations.

ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA



Democracy slowly confronting corruption?

Tolerance for corrupt politicians has gone down, but the voters' fury is yet to throw them out of office

It happened almost synchronously. On Wednesday, July 26, in the Indian state of Bihar, Janata Dal (United) leader Nitish Kumar resigned as chief minister. On the issue of corruption charges against his deputy, Tejashwi, he cited irreconcilable difference with Lalu Prasad's Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD). Mr Tejashwi is also Mr Prasad's son. Two days later, on Friday, July 28, in Pakistan, the Supreme Court disqualified Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif from holding office over corruption allegations. Following the judgment, despite having reservations on the verdict, Mr Sharif resigned.

Like most other major developments in South Asia, there are conspiracy theories attached to both the developments. In the case of Bihar, Mr Nitish Kumar joined hands with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and formed a government within 24 hours. This has fuelled speculations that the "caged parrot" of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) had been unleashed to file corruption charges against Mr Prasad's family only to destabilise the JD(U)-RJD coalition.

In the case of Mr Sharif's removal, some maintain that the Pakistani military is averse to civilian rule. It ruled the country for 30 years. Whenever a civilian government came to power through democratic means, it destabilised such governments before the expiry of its full term. Mr Sharif's removal is a case of a "legal coup" by the all-powerful Pakistan army by digging up the Panama Papers.

Beyond the conspiracy theories, the developments in Bihar and in Pakistan could also signify that democ-

ocracy in South Asia, particularly India, is slowly confronting corruption at high places. Democratic institutions and politics make corruption easier to discover and publicise, allow citizens and political oppositions to make it an important issue and take recourse to judicial redress. The threat of an electoral backlash against an alliance with the "perceived" corrupt may have deterred Mr Nitish Kumar.

It is important to note though that the menace of corruption at high places has been an important topic of public discussion in India almost continuously ever since Independence. Stanley Kochanek, a veteran India observer, had commented, "Nowhere in the world is corruption as widely discussed as it is in India."

Corruption was discussed in the early 1950s, when, for example, Rao Shiv Bahadur Singh, the father of departed leader Arjun Singh, was convicted and sent to jail for taking bribes to issue a forged document for a diamond mining firm. Home Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri's setting up of the Santhanam Committee to address its growing menace and the Partap Singh Kairon scandal in Punjab kept the discussion alive in the 1960s. In the 1970s, there was the Pondicherry scandal involving import licences under minister L N Mishra, followed by his mysterious death in a bomb attack, and the shadowy Nagarwala case. The A R Antulay scam and the Bofors scandal agitated the 1980s. It continued as a hot topic in the 1990s with the St Kitts controversy, Jain Hawala Case, the Sukh Ram telecom scam, and Lakhubhai Pathak



ASHOK K LAHIRI

The fifth Budget

The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has so far presented four Union Budgets. Its fifth Budget, however, will be fundamentally different from the previous ones and will be quite unique. There are many reasons for it being so, but the primary one is the roll-out of the goods and services tax (GST) from July 1, 2017.

How will the GST make such a big difference? Remember that the central excise duty and service tax account for almost 35 per cent of the Union government's gross tax revenues. Now, both these taxes have been subsumed under the GST. Of course, petrol, diesel and some other sectors are outside the purview of the GST at present and the two fuels account for over 54 per cent of the total excise collections or over 30 per cent of the combined revenues from the excise duty and service tax. But even after excluding them, the Union Budget's role in determining indirect taxes will be considerably reduced next year.

This is simply because all tax rates like the excise duty, service tax, a few other levies like the additional customs duty or the special auxiliary duty, and the state value-added tax (VAT) rates are now subsumed under the GST. Consequently, the forum for deciding the GST rates for various commodities and services will be the newly instituted GST Council and not the Union finance ministry. Indeed, the finance departments in state governments also will lose their jurisdiction over determining the rates for state VAT, as those will now be decided by the GST Council.

For industry and trade, too, this will be a new experience. The GST Council is headed by the Union finance minister and its members include all the finance ministers of state governments. Its secretariat

is serviced by the revenue secretary in the Union finance ministry. Representations for a review of GST rates will have to be made to the Council and not to the Union finance ministry or the finance departments of state governments.

Imagine, therefore, a situation, where the Union finance ministry will have very little to do by way of rate fixation or review of excise duty and service tax, which till last year used to account for more than a third of the government's gross tax collections! The change will be quite dramatic. State governments too will have nothing to do with a tax revenue stream that are on average well over 60 per cent of their own tax revenues.

What will this mean for the Union Budget? The Budget speech will be much shorter than in the past, as it won't be required to dwell on a large chunk of indirect taxes. All changes in the GST rates will be determined in the GST Council and will only require a token nod of approval of Parliament as part of the Finance Bill. The Budget speech therefore can be more focused on

Customs duty changes and direct tax provisions proposed in the Budget. But as it is widely known, direct tax provisions and Customs duty do not require many changes, which will make the Budget exercise simpler and shorter.

Expect, therefore, a shift in the emphasis of the Budget towards the government's expenditure priorities. The finance minister can devote more attention and time to outline the various schemes and projects for different sectors of the economy. In other words, with tax proposals being discussed and finalised in other forums like the GST Council, the Union Budget will become the government's principal document outlining its expenditure.



NEW DELHI DIARY

A K BHATTACHARYA

cheating case involving godman Chandraswami and Prime Minister Narasimha Rao. It thrived with the scams relating to Coalgate, 2G spectrum allocation, the Commonwealth Games and Vyapam in the first decade and a half of the 21st century.

The heated discussion on corruption at high places, however, seldom produced concrete results. In raking up the muck, the media seemed to be only following journalism's golden rule: "Bad news makes good copy." Most read them only to confirm what Kautilya said almost 2,500 years ago, namely corruption at high places was as irresistible as honey placed at the tip of the tongue, and detecting misappropriation of funds by public functionaries is akin to detecting when a fish is drinking water.

There were pious declarations from the highest in the land as well. In 1985, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi assured the nation that "The war on corruption will go on without let or hindrance." Even if there was a war, the casualties were practically invisible.

On his campaign trail before the 2014 Lok Sabha polls, incumbent Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced "Na khaunga, na khane dunga" or "I will not accept a bribe nor allow anyone else to do so". So, is democracy slowly confronting corruption in India now only because of a change in leadership?

Leaders matter, but it will be too simplistic to attribute the change only to a change in leadership. Unlike in an autocracy, leaders in a democracy are constrained by the Constitution, Parliament, bureaucracy and judiciary. Furthermore, leaders in a democracy reflect what the people or the voters want. The saying that people get the leaders they deserve has more than a kernel of truth. In a democracy, the electorate are the principals and the elected politicians are only their agents.

Indian democracy may be confronting corruption because of a transformation of the principals — the voters — from widespread poverty, illiteracy, and lack of information. In the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, the respondents in a survey mentioned corruption (almost 12 per cent) as the most important concern, next only to inflation (19 per cent).

Kautilya may have been right 2,500 years ago, but now in the information society that is India, there are better ways of detecting when the big fish is drinking water. Tolerance of misdemeanour at high places has gone down with the erosion of feudal culture. Not tasting the honey of public money placed at their disposal may be tough, but that is what people increasingly expect politicians to do for continuing in office and avoiding imprisonment.

Missing as yet though is the phenomenon of "voting the scoundrels out" with all its fury. For example, even after the CBI unearthed a mind-boggling booty in his house, Sukh Ram, the erstwhile telecommunication minister in Narasimha Rao's government, won the 1998 Himachal Assembly election from Mandi with a thumping majority. In spite of serious allegations of corruption, J Jayalalitha continued to win elections for AIADMK in her home state of Tamil Nadu. In Bihar, Mr Prasad, in spite of conviction in the fodder scam, managed to steer his RJD, and several of his family members, to victory in several seats. Hopefully, this will also change in the next Lok Sabha election.

The writer is an economist

An expenditure Budget will have other implications as well. The NDA government has so far remained committed to a path of fiscal consolidation. All its four Budgets so far have stuck to the fiscal consolidation targets, thereby gradually narrowing the deficit. It is now examining the recommendations of the N K Singh committee on fiscal consolidation and is likely to introduce a new piece of legislation to mandate a glide path for future fiscal correction.

In the normal course, a Budget exercise focused on expenditure is likely to be bad news for fiscal consolidation. But with the commitment to put in place a new fiscal consolidation road map, the potential damages arising out of an emphasis on expenditure programmes in the next Budget may be somewhat limited.

There is yet another reason why the fifth Budget of the NDA government may become a unique exercise. The option of changing the financial year to a January-December cycle is under examination at present, even though a committee of experts headed by former chief economic advisor, Shankar N Acharya, is reported to have disfavoured the idea. If indeed the government goes ahead with the switch-over to the proposed January-December financial year cycle from 2019, the presentation of the fifth Budget may have to be advanced by a couple of months to facilitate the launch of the new system.

If that happens, then the fifth Budget may not be the NDA government's last full Budget. With general elections due only in May 2019, there will be strong pressure on the NDA government to go in for a sixth Budget, which need not be an interim vote on account. This is because a change in the financial year to the January-December cycle will necessitate the presentation of the Budget at least by November of the previous year. The argument will thus be why present a vote on account for 2019, when general elections are still about seven months away.

This will violate the time-honoured convention that a government elected for a five-year tenure presents only five full Budgets. But a sixth Budget looks like a possibility if the NDA government advances the financial year to the January-December cycle from 2019. Purists will frown upon this, but the NDA government will no doubt present it as yet another initiative of Mr Modi.

Natural victims of development



BOOK REVIEW

GEETANJALI KRISHNA

At a time when a national highway is being carved through the Corbett Tiger Reserve and prime tiger habitats of central India will be drowned by the proposed linking of the Ken and Betwa rivers, *The Vanishing: India's Wildlife Crisis* by environmental journalist Prerna Singh Bindra examines the increasingly fraught relationship between economic development and conservation practices in India.

Having served on the National Board for Wildlife from 2010 to 2013, the author provides a rather frustrated insider's view of the politics behind the decision-mak-

ing, exposing the lack of thought and foresight behind the present flood of approvals for dams, roads and mines. In a sense, the book seems too little, too late. Ms Bindra writes that when she was preparing for a trip to see some of the last remaining great Indian bustards in the wild, it felt as if she were visiting a beloved relative on the deathbed. The lingering, biting melancholy is appropriate.

Ms Bindra's critique of the National Board for Wildlife (she calls it the "Notional" Board for Wildlife) is frank and hard-hitting. Decisions regarding environmental clearances are taken in the same amount of time, she writes, that it takes to make instant noodles — two minutes. She describes how she was part of a two-and-a-half hour meeting during which the committee cleared 58 projects, including the sanctioning of a dam that would submerge 82 square km of a wildlife sanctuary in Rajasthan; denotified the entire Trikuta Wildlife Sanctuary in Jammu, and

allowed limestone mining in the Son Gharial Sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh.

Often, she writes, the information provided to the committee was incomplete (deliberately so, at times) to fast-track "development" projects. For example, the proposal for the 800 Mw Kol Dam conveniently failed to mention that the project would submerge 125 hectares of the Majathal Sanctuary in Himachal Pradesh, home to the Cheer pheasant, a Schedule One (i.e. legally protected) species like the tiger. At the same time, Ms Bindra avers, half the dam had been constructed and National Thermal Power Corporation had spent ₹2,197 crore on it before the wildlife clearance had been obtained in 2010! The project was rejected at first. It was sent back for approval in 2013, by which time 80 per cent of the work had been completed.

The depressing state of environmental affairs under the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance went into free fall when the National Democratic Alliance

came to power. The new Wildlife Board had only three members (15 are mandated by the Wildlife Protection Act) and it cleared 133 of the 240 projects up for consideration in its very first meeting. Ms Bindra compares this to the committee under the previous government, which cleared 260 projects in five years.

The author's frustration is evident; the reader can almost hear her grinding her teeth when she describes a bridge over a Gangetic Dolphin sanctuary that was being designed with speed breakers to prevent accidents with "wild" animals. However, being passionate and frustrated isn't enough. *The Vanishing* offers few practical solutions to reverse, or at least mitigate, the damage.

A 20-page chapter and the Afterword focus on the destructive role of roads in wildlife habitats, but neither offers any suggestions on making non-invasive roads (of which there are several examples worldwide). Elsewhere, Ms Bindra draws attention to biodiverse areas that have been de-notified in the name of development. Rather than worrying about nomenclature, a better solution

may be to lobby for better conservation practices in the presently protected areas; simply calling an area "protected" does not make it so.

Conservationists across the world have noted the beneficial effects of responsible tourism on wild spaces. Yet, the author remains strangely silent on the role tourism can play in stemming the vanishing of our wild spaces. In this context, the author's conviction that the best way to conserve forests and wildlife is to isolate them, seems unrealistic, unnatural even. After all, men, trees, animals and the earth are bound inextricably together in the same ecosystem. Surely, if human development has been the root cause of the silencing of our wilderness, it must be part of the solution too.

Ms Bindra herself offers some heart-warming examples, Odisha's Athgarh Elephant-conflict Mitigation Squad being a case in point. It is a ragtag group of daily wagers employed by the forest department that, with mobile phones and empathy, tries to ensure that humans co-exist peacefully with wild elephants. Many other examples, in this book and beyond,

demonstrate the wisdom of rebuilding human relationships with the wild to further the cause of conservation. Relocating villages on the fringes of the forest, something which the author seems to advocate as being good for people as well as the wild, could sever the connection to nature and cause it to become, as Ms Bindra herself bemoans, the "other" in our lives.

The Vanishing is brave book that exposes the politics behind our country's environmental policies. Readers may get the sense that *The Vanishing* brings little that is new to the conservationist's table (except, perhaps, a little more despair), but what it says is important enough to be stated over and over again. Tigers and the pristine wild spaces they inhabit are in less danger from poachers as they are from the government's obsessive chase for double-digit economic growth. And this chase is going to cost us all dearly.

THE VANISHING

India's Wildlife Crisis
Prerna Singh Bindra
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