



Dangerous escalation

Russia's expulsion of U.S. mission staff could lock the two countries into a retaliatory spiral

Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision to cut the U.S. diplomatic presence in the country by 755 signals a serious escalation in tensions between the two superpowers. His move came three days after the U.S. Senate passed a sanctions Bill targeting Moscow and allies. The scale of the cut is unprecedented and is comparable to the shutdown of the American diplomatic mission in Russia after the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. The decision also signals that Mr. Putin, who had pinned hopes on the Donald Trump administration to improve ties, is losing heart about such a reset. When Barack Obama expelled Russian diplomats in the last leg of his presidency over Moscow's alleged interference in the presidential election, Mr. Putin did not retaliate, apparently hoping to strike a new beginning with the incoming administration. During his campaign, Mr. Trump himself had expressed interest in building stronger ties with Moscow. But despite Mr. Trump's overtures, the U.S. establishment has continued to take a hard-line position towards Moscow. While the investigation into the allegations of Russia's election-time interference is still under way, Congress went ahead preparing the sanctions Bill. Passed by both Houses of Congress with a near-total majority, the Bill also seeks to limit Mr. Trump's ability to suspend or lift sanctions on Russia. After the White House said the President would sign the Bill, Moscow retaliated.

The new sanctions will add to Russia's economic troubles at a time it is already battling sanctions imposed by Europe and the U.S., and dealing with a commodities meltdown. Mr. Putin could impose counter-sanctions, but the chances of winning a trade war with the world's largest economy are slim. Hence, Russia's formal declaration of a diplomatic war to show that it can hurt America's geopolitical interests elsewhere. Whenever Russia and the U.S. joined hands to address the world's pressing problems in recent years, there were results. The Iran nuclear deal is one example. The Trump administration's willingness to work with the Russians in Syria has also helped calm parts of the war-ravaged country. The ceasefire brokered by Moscow and Washington between the Syrian regime and rebels in July is still holding, raising hopes for a sustainable political solution to the crisis. Besides, if the U.S. wants to address the North Korean nuclear crisis diplomatically, which is perhaps the biggest foreign policy challenge before the Trump administration today, it could do with Russia's help. Russia is also crucial to stabilising Afghanistan, where it is reportedly arming the Taliban. But instead of expanding their cooperation and addressing these challenges as responsible global leaders, the nuclear-armed powers seem to have fallen into the old Cold War-era spiral of irrational mutual hostility.

Washed out

Protocols followed by State governments to deal with floods need an urgent review

The floods that have ravaged parts of eastern and western India, leaving at least 600 people dead and displacing thousands, highlight the need for a massive capacity-building programme to deal with frequent, destructive weather events. A monsoon deluge is not an uncommon occurrence in the subcontinent, and there is considerable variability in the duration and frequency of rainfall in different regions. Moreover, there is a clear trend of even drought-prone regions in Gujarat and Rajasthan encountering floods, in addition to the traditional axis covering States along the Brahmaputra and the Ganga. What people in the flood-hit regions expect of governments is speedy relief and rehabilitation. Alleviating financial losses is crucial for a return to normality, and the Centre has announced a solatium for the next of kin of those who have died. But there are other actions people need on the ground: short-term housing, food, safe water, access to health care and protection for women, children and the elderly. Given the weak foundations of social support in policymaking, these factors have an aggravated impact during natural calamities. It is dismaying that some States have not been able to use disaster relief funds as intended, and the Centre has asked them to set off the unutilised portion when making fresh claims. Such a wrangle is unseemly at a time when people need relief.

Catastrophic events, such as the Chennai flood of 2015, also necessitate a review of the protocol followed by State governments in controlling flows from dams and reservoirs. Apparently, much of the waters that have inundated parts of Jalore in Rajasthan flowed from a dam that was opened to relieve pressure, catching many by surprise. A review of the deployment of National Disaster Response Force teams near waterbodies and their experience, together with data compiled by the Central Water Commission, is bound to reveal the hotspots where better management and, perhaps, additional reservoirs, can mitigate damage. Such studies should not be delayed, considering that official data put together by the Centre show that even in the past four years, between 1,000 and 2,100 people have died annually, while losses to crops, public utilities and houses touched ₹33,000 crore in one of the years. Governments cannot legitimately expect that people with marginal incomes will take calamitous losses in their stride, with neither social support nor financial instruments available to rebuild lives. Sustained economic growth needs action on both fronts. It is essential also to look at the public health dimension: many without the coping capacity develop mental health issues including post-traumatic stress disorder in the wake of such catastrophes, and need counselling. A vigorous monsoon is vital for the economy, but governments should be prepared to deal with the consequences of excess rainfall.

The Reserve Bank is off target

The idea that interest rates are the right way to tackle inflation in India needs a serious rethink



PULAPRE BALAKRISHNAN

“Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back.” These lines from John Maynard Keynes come to mind when observing the recent performance of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) with respect to the conduct of monetary policy. Strenuous effort has been made to lead the citizen to believe that one of the many significant actions of the government of the day is to have moved monetary policy in India onto a “modern” plane. The centrepiece of this claim is that the central bank will now be judged entirely in terms of its record on inflation. That is, the RBI has been reconfigured as an “inflation-targeting” central bank. As part of this arrangement, it has been set an inflation target of 4%. Then, somewhat counter-intuitively, it has been given leeway in the form of a band within which the inflation outcome may lie. This band is wide, ranging from 2% to 6%.

Missing the point

Since the move to inflation targeting, naturally, the RBI has been watched. In the early days it appeared to be coming out with flying colours with inflation not only well within the band but also declining. However, that the growth in the segment of the economy most directly under the control of the RBI, namely manufacturing, has been declining too has been noticed



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less. Under the new arrangement, the RBI cannot be held responsible for what happens to growth as it is to be judged entirely by what happens to inflation. But since June there is disruption and not in terms of the new vocabulary. Consumer price inflation has now declined to 1.5% in June; though only 0.5% below its lower bound, this inflation rate is far below the targeted 4%. Surely this is a case of missing one's target by a long shot.

Rather than waste our time shaming the RBI, we should fruitfully engage with the idea of whether inflation targeting is the right way to tackle inflation in India. That central banks are unable to control the inflation rate is evident from the record of the Bank of England. One of the first central banks to shift to inflation targeting, and endowed with intellectual capital of the highest class, the ‘Old Lady of Threadneedle Street’ has a dismal record of achieving its inflation target. Why is this so? Is it that the bank was also trying to accommodate other economic variables such as employment or the exchange rate? While the latter is possible of course, it is highly unlikely, as no group of high-profile professionals would want to fail so publicly in their mandated task. The reason why they fail is because ‘inflation targeting’ is based on a poor

understanding of inflation.

A flawed model

The model underlying inflation targeting is that inflation reflects output being greater than the economy's ‘potential’. The task now is to bring output back to its potential level via an interest rate hike. A problem with the model is that the potential level of output is unobservable. Moreover, the potential is believed to be subject to change by the proponents of the model themselves. To these infirmities, the response given is that it does not matter, as we need only observe inflation to conclude that there is an output gap. The problem with this form of reasoning is that it is self-referential. This may be demonstrated in the form of a conversation that proceeds as follows: “Why is the inflation rate rising?” “Because unemployment is below its natural rate.” “But how do you know?” “Because inflation is rising!” Here, ‘natural rate’ refers to the level of employment corresponding to potential output. It appears that under inflation targeting, the policymaker must proceed on faith. This is not a sound basis for governance.

Developing countries such as India have an economic structure different from the developed ones of the West for which inflation target-

ing was first devised. An aspect of this is that agricultural production is subject to fluctuation, and along with this the prices of agricultural goods. Now, when the relative price of agricultural goods rises due to slower growth of agriculture, the inflation rate rises. Such an inflation has nothing to do with an economy-wide imbalance gap as visualised in the ‘output gap model’ underlying inflation targeting. Under inflation targeting, the response to rising agricultural prices would be to raise the rate of interest. This may have some desirable impact on inflation but it can come only at the cost of output loss in the non-agricultural sector. The output loss can only be rationalised as necessary by holding on to the assertion that inflation reflects actual output being greater than potential. But note that the whole process has been set off by a slowing of agricultural output. Now, the only way the output gap model can retain some traction in the context is by asserting that along with the reduction in agricultural output growth, the potential output is growing at an even slower rate. This is completely *ad hoc* and without a scientific basis.

Role of agriculture

The role of agricultural prices in driving inflation in India is evident presently. Though the overall consumer price index is rising at 1.5%, that for agricultural commodities is actually falling, reflecting the fall in the relative price of agricultural goods we have referred to. Thus the RBI may have just got lucky over the recent past that commodity prices, which include domestically produced agricultural goods and imported oil, have grown at a slower pace. So, it is not at all clear that even when the inflation rate was within the band, it was the RBI's handiwork rather than the hand of the weather gods in evidence. Champions of inflation targeting, observing the current de-

cline in the inflation rate in India, are quick to claim victory for the RBI in terms of having anchored inflationary expectations, a claim for which the slightest evidence is given. It is to be recognised that even though the RBI cannot directly move agricultural prices, its response to their movement matters. As agricultural price inflation continues to fall, driving down the overall inflation rate, the real rate of interest rises. If the central bank does not respond by lowering the policy rate the real rate of interest will continue to rise, with negative consequences for non-agricultural output. This is exactly what we observe happening of late. We want to avoid a deflationary spiral.

To end with some exegesis. So, who in the case of our ‘modern’ monetary policy might be the “defunct” economist of the quote we started out with? It is Milton Friedman who asserted – without argument, it may be noted – that inflation reflects an output gap. The idea itself he borrowed from the nineteenth century economist Knut Wicksell. Friedman had recommended money supply control, a policy aggressively adopted by Margaret Thatcher in England but also in most parts of the West. When this policy failed, it was replaced by ‘inflation targeting’. This choice of terminology was truly inspired, for its very use conveys the resolve of actually trying to do something about inflation. But it is also tendentious, bearing the suggestion that there is no other method of inflation control. Whatever you may say about Friedman, he was not a slouch when it came to inflation. Back in India, with the RBI off target by a wide margin, we can see that inflation targeting is not what it is cracked up to be. Inflation control here requires supply management. This is not rocket science.

Pulapre Balakrishnan is an economist

Don't shoot the messenger

Proposed amendments to the Whistle Blowers Act defeat the very purpose of the legislation



ANJALI BHARDWAJ & AMRITA JOHRI

More than 15 whistle-blowers have been murdered in India in the past three years. Parliament may have passed the Whistle Blowers Protection (WBP) Act in 2014, but this did not help save their lives as the government has doggedly refused to operationalise the law. The Act aims to protect people who bring to the notice of the authorities concerned allegations of corruption, wilful misuse of power or commission of a criminal offence against a public servant.

A wider definition

Significantly, in defining who a whistle-blower is, the law goes beyond government officials who expose corruption they come across in the course of their work. It includes any other person or non-governmental organisation. The importance of such progressive expansion is underlined by the fact that in the last few years, more than 65 people have been killed for exposing corruption in the government on the basis of information they obtained under the Right to Information (RTI) Act. The RTI law

has empowered the common man to have access to information from public authorities – which only government officials were earlier privy to – making every citizen a potential whistle-blower.

The WBP law has provisions for concealing the identity of a whistle-blower, if so desired, following cases such as Satyendra K. Dubey's, whose murder in 2003 led to demand for such legislation. In a letter addressed to the Prime Minister, Dubey, a manager in the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) posted at Gaya, had highlighted corrupt practices in the NHAI and specifically requested that his identity be kept secret. But the information was leaked, leading to his murder.

Most notably, the law affords protection against victimisation of the complainant or anyone who renders assistance in an inquiry. This is critical as whistle-blowers are routinely subjected to various forms of victimisation – suspensions, withholding of promotions, threats of violence and attacks. The law empowers the competent authorities to accord them protection, which includes police protection and penalising those who victimise them. Whistle-blowers Ram Thakur, Nandi Singh and Amit Jethwa were intimidated and sought police protection in vain, before they were murdered.

Instead of operationalising the WBP law, an amendment Bill, which fundamentally dilutes the



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law, was introduced in Parliament in 2015 by the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government without public consultation.

Shooting the messenger

The amendment Bill seeks to remove immunity provided to whistle-blowers from prosecution under the draconian Official Secrets Act (OSA) for disclosures made under the WBP law. Offences under the OSA are punishable by imprisonment of up to 14 years. Threat of such stringent penalties would deter even genuine whistle-blowers. The basic purpose of the WBP Act is to encourage people to report wrongdoing. If whistle-blowers are prosecuted for disclosing information as part of their complaints and not granted immunity from the OSA, the very purpose of the law would be defeated.

Further, to ostensibly bring the WBP Act in line with the RTI Act, the amendment Bill says that complaints by whistle-blowers containing information which would pre-

judicially affect the sovereignty, integrity, security or economic interests of the state shall not be inquired into. In addition, certain categories of information cannot form part of the disclosure made by a whistle-blower, unless the information has been obtained under the RTI Act. This includes what relates to commercial confidence, trade secrets which would harm the competitive position of a third party, and information held in a fiduciary capacity. These exemptions have been modelled on Section 8(I) of the RTI law which lists information which cannot be disclosed to citizens.

Two laws, different objectives

The amendments ignore the fact that the two laws have completely different objectives. The RTI Act seeks to provide information to people, while the WBP Act provides a mechanism for disclosures to be made to competent authorities within the government to enable inquiry into allegations of corruption and provide protection to whistle-blowers.

Conflating the two laws is inappropriate and would preclude genuine whistle-blowing in several scenarios. For instance, what about government officials who come across evidence of wrongdoing in the normal course of their work and do not need the RTI Act to access relevant information? Again, should complaints exposing corruption in nuclear facilities or

sensitive army posts not be inquired into just because they contain information relating to national security? Surely the country would benefit if such wrongdoing is exposed so that appropriate action can be taken.

If the intention was to ensure that sensitive information pertaining to national security and integrity is not compromised, instead of carving out blanket exemptions the government could have proposed additional safeguards for such disclosures such as requiring complaints to be filed using sealed envelopes to the competent authorities.

Concerns about these regressive amendments were brushed aside and the Bill pushed through the Lok Sabha in haste. The amendment Bill is listed for discussion and passage in the Rajya Sabha in the current session. To reconsider amendments that would fundamentally dilute the law, and provide an opportunity for public consultation, it is imperative that the Bill be referred to a select committee of the Upper House.

There is no justification for not operationalising the WBP Act. It is the moral obligation of the government to immediately promulgate the rules and implement the law to offer protection to those who, at great peril, expose wrongdoing.

Anjali Bhardwaj and Amrita Johri are members of the National Campaign for Peoples' Right to Information (NCPRI)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Lost opportunity

A.P.J. Abdul Kalam rose to become a beloved first citizen after achieving several milestones in the field of science and technology. His statue at his memorial that depicts him as a veena player along with the Bhagavad Gita has created needless and politically-tinged controversy (“Row over holy books near Kalam statue”, July 31). It might also give the wrong impression about the “Missile Man” as it has removed the “concrete science” out of him. Instead, it would have been apt to have had a replica of a rocket near the statue along with a series of science books by renowned scientists. The image should be such that it is striking and inspires children, whom he loved the most, to develop a scientific temper as a way of

life as envisaged in the Constitution.
VICTOR FRANK A.,
Chennai

■ The former President of India was an apolitical personality who was chosen for the top post by virtue of his simplicity and greatness. He was not only a great man but also a rocket man, and his religion was science and technology. Instead of having a veena, a model of a rocket next to him would have been most appropriate. It is unfortunate that religion is involved in almost everything. One of his great passions was tree planting. Perhaps those involved with conceptualising the memorial could have announced an annual tree planting programme across India on his anniversary. An opportunity seems to have been lost to perpetuate his

memory in a great way.
K. JAYANTHI,
Chennai

Promoting hate

News of yet another political murder in Kerala is quite disheartening. Kerala has always been considered to be a progressive and developed State, and its people known to be open-minded, unorthodox and cosmopolitan in outlook. But the recent spate of violence has shown that Kerala is obviously no better than other States when it comes to hate and revenge killings. Be it in the name of cow or political ideologies, the nation is slowly getting engulfed by a sense of insecurity; an ugly situation where religious and political ideologies triumph over the value of human life. The interest the Central government is taking towards matters in Kerala

while turning a blind eye to hate killings in other States is equally surprising. The Kerala incident shows that it is not the lack of literacy; rather, it is the lack of sensibility and sensitivity which is the root cause for such hate crimes (“Rajinath calls up Pinarayi over violence”, July 31).
JOSEPH PAUL,
New Delhi

'Dr' here too

In India, a significant percentage of the population depends on traditional systems of medicine and homoeopathy. In India, a NEET examination is the entry point for all systems of medicines. Apart from basic subjects, every system of traditional medicine and homoeopathy has its own subjects. Irrespective of the system of medicine they practise, all medical graduates have an equal

right to be called a doctor. Instead of splitting hairs, the authorities should be looking at those who obtain their medical degrees from Russia, China and other countries where the standards of medical education in allopathy are suspect. In the report, the sentence “MBBS doctors grumbling about traditional medicine practitioners and homoeopaths calling themselves ‘doctors’” was uncalled for. I am sure a prestigious newspaper such as *The Hindu* does not intend to be the mouthpiece of “some grumblers” (“The ‘Dr’ is in (or is it?)”, July 28).
DR. BEENA AMAR BODHI,
New Delhi

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

The news report, “U.S. prods India on Pyongyang” (July 31, 2017), erroneously stated that a stepbrother of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un was assassinated in Jakarta. It should have been Kuala Lumpur.

The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in

The dilemmas of delimitation

The time has come to grapple with the implications of the freeze on parliamentary seats and seat allocations to States being lifted in 2026



T.K. VISWANATHAN

On Monday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated a brand new Parliament Annexe building that will afford our lawmakers more space and enable better functioning. In a few years from now, we might actually need a new building for Parliament altogether due to the likely increase in number of seats in both Houses after the lifting of the freeze imposed by the Constitution (Forty-second Amendment) Act, 1976, which is due in 2026.

But more than the need for a new building, the debate has to centre around issues with constitutional dimensions of far-reaching importance — how these additional seats will be allocated to the States, and how to address the concerns which necessitated the freezing of the allocation of seats on the basis of the 1971 Census figures.

Frozen in time

According to Article 81 of the Constitution — as it stood before the Constitution (Forty-second Amendment) Act, 1976 — the Lok Sabha was to comprise of not more than 550 members. Clause (2) of Article 81 provided that for the purposes of sub-clause (a) of clause (1), there shall be allotted to each State a number of seats in the House of the People in such manner that the ratio between that number and the population of the State is, so far as practicable, the same for all States. Further, clause (3) defined the expression “population” for the purposes of Article 81 to mean the population as ascertained at the last preceding Census of which the relevant figures have been published.

As a result of this mandate, States which took a lead in population control faced the prospect of their number of seats getting reduced and States which had higher population figures stood to gain by increase in the number of seats in Lok Sabha. To allay this apprehension, Section 15 of the Constitution (Forty-second Amendment) Act, 1976 effected a freeze on the population figure with reference to the 1971 Census (which was 54.81 crore with a registered



electorate of 27.4 crore) for the purposes of proviso to Article 81(3)(i) until the relevant figures for the first Census taken after the year 2000 have been published. Section 3 of the Constitution (Eighty-fourth Amendment), Act 2001 extended the deadline from 2000 to 2026.

As a result of the freezing of the allocation of seats, the allocation done on the basis of the 1971 Census continues hold good for the present population figures. According to the 2011 Census, the population of our country stands at 121 crore with a registered electorate of 83.41 crore. Basing the 1971 Census figure of 54.81 crore to represent today's population presents a distorted version of our democratic polity and is contrary to what is mandated under Article 81 of the Constitution. So when the first Census figure will be available after 2026 — that is, in 2031 — a fresh delimitation will have to be done which will dramatically alter the present ar-

angement of seat allocation to the States in Parliament.

Before addressing the problem of accommodating the increase in numbers, there are more important questions which require to be debated and answers found. First, the concerns expressed by the States in 1976 which necessitated the freezing of seat allocation on the basis of 1971 population figures would appear to hold good even today and have to be addressed to the satisfaction of all stakeholders.

The second question that has to be addressed, which is equally if not more important, is how the Presiding Officers of the Houses/Legislatures will deal with such a large number of members jostling with each other to capture the attention of the Speaker to raise issues in the House. Even with the current strength of 543 members, the Speaker finds it extremely difficult to conduct the proceedings of the

House. Members do not show much heed to the entreaties of the Speaker, thereby making smooth conduct of House proceedings a difficult affair. The Speaker's directions and rulings are not shown proper respect, and disruptions of proceedings aggravate the problem. The sudden increase in numbers will render the task of the Speaker more difficult and onerous.

Third, the Zero Hour, Question Hour and the raising matters of urgent public importance, which are warp and woof our democratic fabric, will be subjected to severe strain because the 60-odd minutes which are available in the morning before the normal legislative business of the House begins will require our Parliament and Legislatures to sit for a longer duration each day during the session as well as have more number of sittings in a year than at present.

While 2026 is still a few years away, if we do not start a debate now on how to deal with the problems that are likely to arise, we will be forced to postpone the lifting of the freeze to a future date as was done in 2001. This will only postpone the problem for which we must find a solution sooner or later. Even the various proposals for electoral reforms which have been recommended by various Commissions over the past decade do not address these issues. These are challenges which our political leaders have to address in the immediate future.

T.K. Viswanathan was Union Law Secretary, Secretary General of the Lok Sabha and Consultant to President Pranab Mukherjee

The Manila envelope

India's financial aid to the Philippines to fight the Islamic State signals a reworking of its Asean outreach



HARSH V. PANT

In a significant development, India has decided to provide a financial assistance of \$5,00,000 (₹3.2 crore) to the Philippines to aid its fight against the Islamic State (IS)-affiliated terror groups in the troubled Mindanao province. This is the first time India is sending aid to another nation to help it fight terrorism, thereby becoming an important marker in New Delhi's attempts to burnish its credentials as an emerging security provider to the wider Asian region.

For a long time, India has been trying to convince the world that it remains one of the worst victims of terrorism. But its focus has largely been on Pakistan's use of terrorism as an instrument of state policy. And where India viewed Pakistan as the epicentre of terrorism, the world remained reluctant to put adequate pressure on a nation that was seen as a close ally in its 'war against terrorism'. However, under the Narendra Modi government, India has taken a tough stand on Pakistan's support for terrorism by underscoring its concerns at various international fora. In this context, India's support to Manila shows a new-found sense of urgency in standing shoulder to shoulder with other victims of terror, even when the source of the problem is different.

Recapturing Marawi

The siege of Marawi, about 800 km south of the capital Manila, began in May when the Philippine security forces launched an offensive to capture Isnilon Hapilon, leader of the IS-affiliated Abu Sayyaf group. Despite the military offensive, militants remain in control of Marawi which they view as key to their efforts to create an IS province. The civilian toll has been rising, with more than 500 people killed and nearly 4,00,000 civilians displaced. Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has taken a hard line, vowing to “crush” the militants and declaring martial law over the entire southern Philippines. Yet, the end of the conflict is not in sight.

India has expressed its concerns at the situation and used this crisis to enhance its anti-terror and deradicalisation partnership with the Philippines. India is also conducting cybersecurity training for the Philippine security forces, focusing on deradicalisation. And with this financial aid, India has emerged as the largest donor in efforts to contain the crisis.

China has provided 15 million pesos (approximately \$3,00,000) in aid compared to India's 25 million pesos (\$5,00,000). With

the recent fall of Mosul and the fight for Raqqa intensifying by the day, there are suggestions that the days of the IS in its current shape are numbered. The IS of today may appear to be a pale shadow of its past menace when at its peak, since the end of 2014 through 2015, it controlled territory comprising roughly 1,10,000 sq. km, across both Syria and Iraq. But the underlying forces that gave rise to its emergence in West Asia remain as potent as ever and the ideological attraction of its ideology shows no sign of fading. In many ways, it is imperative for India to take a more proactive role in the global struggle against the IS.

India's engagement with the Philippines is also key to underscoring its growing role in Southeast Asia where China's rise has already created serious challenges for the wider region. The regional states are looking at external balancers at a time when America's commitment to regional security has come under a scanner under the Donald

Trump administration. The regional security architecture there is under strain as China's divide-and-rule policy has made it difficult for regional states to put up a united front. Many states

have suggested that India needs to play a larger role. As India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) celebrate 25 years of their partnership this year, it is a politically opportune moment to upgrade India's regional profile.

The Philippines has also been trying to recalibrate its ties with China, under stress because of a suit brought by Manila to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague challenging Beijing's claim to almost all of the South China Sea. Though Manila won the case last year, it has not been able to push Beijing to moderate its stance on the maritime dispute. Meanwhile, Mr. Duterte visited China last October and signed deals worth \$24 billion in infrastructure investment and loan pledges. India cannot easily match China's growing economic profile but it has other means to build partnership with a very important region in its foreign policy matrix. The recent outreach to Manila is an important step in that direction. Hopefully, it won't be the last.

Harsh V. Pant is a distinguished fellow at Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi and professor of international relations at King's College London

SINGLE FILE

Out of Bollywood's long shadow

Viewing the world of Bhojpuri cinema through scholarly lens

HARI NARAYAN



This Independence Day will see the launch of a new Bhojpuri entertainment channel, Dishum TV, to add to the entertainment matrix of nearly 15 television channels dedicated to a language spoken by about 33 million speakers in the country. However, though the language is one of the fastest-growing ones in the world — spoken by citizens of at least nine countries apart from India — and its film industry is worth ₹2,000 crore, not much seriousness is given to it when it comes to either journalistic writing or academic research. In this regard, it is important to ask a question: Is it possible to look at the cinephilia of the target audiences of such cinema through a scholarly lens? That's the foolhardy enterprise the January 2017 issue of *Bio-Scope* journal sought to attempt.

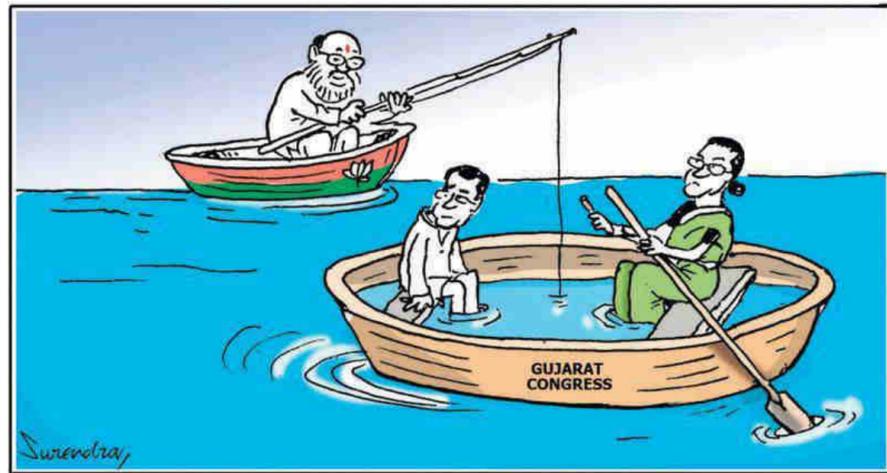
Mapping its evolution

An important study in the issue was that pertaining to Bhojpuri cinema and its struggle to emerge out of the shadows of the Bombay Big Brother. The article 'Bhojpuri Consolidation in Hindi Territory' by Akshaya Kumar tried to trace the rise, fall, and the regrouping of Bhojpuri cinema since 2004 by centring it at its primary pivot, the male singing star. It said that there are a few reasons why male stars remain at the industry's centre. The first reason is the skewed balance of power due to the scarce and scattered distribution infrastructure. The second is a music economy which privileges the graduation of a singer-performer to an acting star. The article also traced the origins of saucy lyrics in Bhojpuri songs not just to the already-high sleaze quotient in its music, but also the exhibition space where the films first became popular. The decrepit cinemas that began screening Bhojpuri movies in the early 2000s had till then formed the exhibition sites for soft-porn. The films contained an improbable duality — they could scandalise through their songs even as their narrative remained morally acceptable.

Mr. Kumar's study harked back to a key question: What explains the rise of Bhojpuri cinema in the early years of the 21st century? Here, Avijit Ghosh's book *Cinema Bhojpuri* (2010) provided an explanation by telling that the urban cinema of the decade had an alienating influence on a section of the audience that could not identify with the “feel-good, upper-class, urban-centric” Hindi cinema that was in vogue at that time.

The inflection point here was *Sasura Bada Paisawala* (2004), which grossed ₹9 crore as against a budget of just ₹30 lakh. This was followed by the success of *Pandit Ji Batai Na Biyah Kab Hoye* (2005) which earned more than 10 times its budget of ₹60 lakh. With these two films, two singing stars were born — Manoj Tiwari and Ravi Kishen. The ensuing boom lasted for more than half a decade before, as Mr. Kumar points out in his 2017 paper, the industry turned against itself, on account of the shifting balance between production and exhibition sectors.

As the nation marks 70 years of Independence, perhaps it's time to go beyond merely paying lip service to its diversity by looking at the cinema of the peripheries through a more empathetic lens?



CONCEPTUAL Gold standard ECONOMICS

A monetary system where the supply of money in the economy was fully backed by gold. Under this system, citizens could freely exchange their currency notes for gold at the central bank. Most of the world was under the gold standard until 1914, with each currency being defined as a particular weight of gold. Since they were essentially units of weight, the exchange rates among currencies were naturally fixed under the gold standard. For instance, the pound sterling which was defined as 1/4th of a gold ounce was always exchanged for five U.S. dollars which was defined as 1/20th of a gold ounce.

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ABSTRACT Beating back climate change

A two-pronged geoengineering approach

SHUBASHREE DESIKAN After there being, for years, a near-taboo associated with discussion and research on geoengineering, now there is a renewed interest in solutions to climate change problems that involve modifying the Earth's system. However, the approaches that have been explored so far either fell short or exceeded the required parameters.

A collaborative study by researchers from India, China and the U.S. published in *Geophysical Research Letters* has offered a combination of two dominant methods — stratospheric sulphate aerosol increase and cirrus cloud thinning — to reduce global warming and precipitation rates to pre-industrial levels. The supercomputer simulation, based on the Community Earth System Model, suggests this as a possible way of dealing with planetary emergencies.

“[A]n accelerated warming in the future could result in planetary

emergencies such as successive crop failures. Do we then have a plan to tackle this? That is where geoengineering comes in,” says Govindasamy Bala, from the Indian Institute of Science, who is part of this international collaborative research. He does not fail to emphasise that there must be a strict governance framework set up while exploring these options, as they involve ethical and moral questions.

One of the well-studied methods proposed in geoengineering was to spray minute sulphate aerosol into the stratosphere. This would have the effect of reducing the warming to pre-industrial levels, but would also reduce the precipitation at a much higher rate than required to balance the effect of carbon dioxide. The other option proposed was cirrus cloud thinning. Since the cirrus clouds, which are at a height of 10 km above the Earth's surface, also trap the heat, thinning them could cool down the Earth system.

However, this reduces the rate of precipitation to less than the required amount.

The study suggests that a cocktail of these two approaches would change both temperature and precipitation at the same rate at which they are being increased by carbon dioxide; hence, the approach could, in principle, simultaneously restore both temperature and rainfall to pre-industrial levels.

According to Mr. Bala, the main advantage of geoengineering, when compared to, say, carbon sequestration, is that it costs less. “In the place of cost in the order of, say, \$250 billion every year for direct methods, geoengineering could cost around \$5-10 billion,” he estimates. There is also the problem of scale — after trapping billions of tonnes of carbon dioxide using the direct carbon sequestration methods, how does one transport and store it?

This nascent research only underlines the need to achieve consensus on climate change mitigation.

FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO AUGUST 1, 1967

Ship abandoned off Madras

A ship due to arrive in Madras has been “abandoned” in the sea about 75 miles East, following a fire that broke out in her engine room. The Master of the vessel and a crew of 24 have however been saved, though one is feared dead. The ship is believed to be a “wreck”. S.S. “Angelina” was scheduled to touch Madras Harbour at about 10 O'clock last night [July 31]. She is presumed to have left either Calcutta or Visakhapatnam earlier, obviously empty, since she was to load iron ore here [Madras], according to information available locally. By about 3 p.m. yesterday [July 31], a message from the ship reporting the fire accident was received but within half an hour, contact was lost.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO AUGUST 1, 1917

Relief from a man eater.

A terrible man eater has been causing great havoc for the last one year in the Chikati Bodokimidi and Mohivi taluks. The District Collector advertised that a reward of Rs. 500 would be given to the person who bags the animal... The Raja of Chikati lay in wait for the tiger, but it eluded him. The famous shikari, the Raja of Mandasa, who killed several man eaters and shows rare courage in shooting them from a very short distance was requested by the Berhampore revenue divisional officer to free the tracts close to Berhampore from this danger. On the 29th at 5.15 p.m. the Raja bagged the animal with one shot in a beat. The length of the tiger is 8 ½ feet and height 3 ½ feet. The Raja was honoured last night in Berhampore and the streets of Berhampore witnessed a very grand procession with the shot tiger in front, the Raja following behind on a horse with all his paraphernalia.

DATA POINT

Telecom: the dream run continues

The number of telephone subscriptions in India increased by 11.13% in 2016 compared to the previous year, mostly due to the growth of the cellular (wireless) network. And the landline (wireline) network continued to shrink, with the number of connections declining by 4.37% compared to the previous year.

