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A thought for today

Who will be second, third or fourth? That is not my business

MAMATA BANERJEE

Didi No. 1

Mamata is to Bengal as Modi is to north India

Trinamool Congress's sweep in the latest round of civic body elections in Bengal puts aside any doubts regarding its political dominance in that state. Winning all seven civic agencies spread across north and south Bengal, Trinamool secured a mammoth 140 out of 148 wards. Among the opposition BJP won six wards, the Left Front just one, and Congress couldn't even open its account. This comes after Trinamool made inroads in the hills of Bengal by winning the Mirik municipality in May. Taken together, chief minister Mamata Banerjee is today Bengal's undisputed leader, much like Prime Minister Narendra Modi is the No.1 politician at the national level.

In fact, among the ranks of opposition parties on the national stage, Mamata is surely the most dominant. She has combatively taken on BJP both within Bengal and at the Centre. She has decimated the Left and left Congress listless. Her political machinery in Bengal is ruthless. With BJP gaining some traction in the state at the expense of Trinamool's minority appeasement, Mamata has played the 'Bengali pride' and linguistic chauvinism cards to counter the Hindutva card.

So could Mamata be the leader opposition parties are looking for to take on Modi in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls? The answer is negative. Mamata doesn't have the pan-India appeal that Modi commands. She is very much a Bengali leader and has failed to make political gains outside her state. Nor does she have a stellar development track record – industrialisation and job growth in Bengal continue to be lacklustre. Plus, Mamata's mercurial temperament is a hindrance to coalition building. At this point the only thing she offers the opposition is hope that the BJP juggernaut can be halted. Nonetheless, Didi reigns supreme in Bengal even if Modi has much of north India.

It's Sunny In Kochi

Could Leone be the neta we need?

When Sunny Leone, actress and former porn star, showed up in Kochi to inaugurate a phone showroom, she drew an absurdly huge crowd. Students bunked college to come and gawk, men piled atop hoardings and buses to catch a glimpse. It was a surging sea of testosterone. Malayali men bitterly divided in their politics and beliefs came together, united in their feelings for Leone.

Sunny should run for public office. She shows us a different way of being, one where sexuality is not shameful and repressed, where women comfortably occupy their bodies and spirits without insecurity or apology. Millions of Indian men only know female sexuality in two dimensions, from videos or images, and she blows their mind with her actual humanity. She radiates self-acceptance. In public appearance, she is gracious, but also funny and cheeky, she politely shows sexist interviewers their place, and gets on with her life.

Many of the men who came to look at her may be incapable of mentioning her without a bawdy joke. But the joke's really on them, for not being able to reconcile their own desire with respect, not being able to truly look a woman in the eye. So if Leone, aka Karenjit Kaur Vohra, were to join politics, she would be leered at, certainly. But she would also give us a glimpse of freedom and autonomy and choice, where women are not objects and vessels of group honour, but full individuals.

The Stain Of History

Events in Charlottesville show that the legacy of slavery continues to disunite America

Manoj Joshi

America has always had a certain vanity about being a beacon of democracy and republicanism. Recent events in Charlottesville reveal that this democratic colossus has feet of clay. Clashes in the small Virginian town, near Washington DC, have been triggered by those opposing the removal of the statue of Robert E Lee, commander of the armies of the Southern states of the US who sought to perpetuate African-American slavery in the US in the 1860s. And 150 years later, the current US President Donald Trump is finding it difficult to condemn their actions, even though many of them profess neo-Nazi and white supremacist ideals. To their credit, a majority of Americans are appalled at the behavior of their president.

The enslavement of people kidnapped from Africa by the millions is a stain on American history that just won't go away. One reason for this is the incomplete integration of the US. The American constitution formally accepted slavery till the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, a reluctant and inadvertent consequence of a war which was actually fought to keep the American Union intact, not abolish slavery. Indeed, African-Americans only got their civil rights including the right to vote in the mid 1960s, fifteen years after all Indians got them. Racism still pervades the US with white politicians, especially in the South, using all kinds of tricks to disenfranchise the poorer blacks and Hispanics.

The persistence of historical memory, leaping over decades and centuries is not, of course, unusual; there are those in India who are still fighting the battle of Haldighati and have never gotten over the disaster of the 3rd battle of Panipat. And so, this twisted American Civil War replay in Charlottesville.

Following their defeat, Southern states were under martial law and US Congress even saw some African-American legislators in the 1860s and 1870s, but then came a reversal, and they were once again condemned to the bottom of America's social pile, along with a system of apartheid that forcibly separated the lives of black and white people till the mid 1960s.

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In this period, African-Americans were lynched on the flimsiest of pretexts and white Southerners sought to recapture their racist history by honouring many of those who fought against the Union by erecting statues and naming schools and institutions after them. It's recently that we have seen a movement to remove them.

Charlottesville is at the epicentre of this historical churning. It is a small, pleasant town with a well-known university founded by Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the US, who had estates nearby. He is the principal drafter of the American Declaration of Independence and a towering intellectual of liberal democracy. Another nearby estate belonged to George Washington, the first president of the country, and the man who led its armies to victory.

Slavery loomed much larger in their minds. For one, both used slaves to work their estates. But they were conscious that they were leading a democratic revolution as well. For that reason the word "slavery" never figured in the American constitution, even though a fifth of the American population were African-Americans, mostly slaves. They were counted for the purpose of allocating seats in the US Congress, but needless to say they did not have the vote, leave alone liberty.

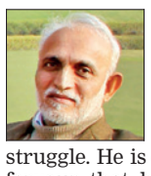
Jefferson was ambivalent about slavery, even terming it as a terrifying "fire bell in the night." But when he died, he simply parcelled out his slaves in his will like any property, including his own children from an African-American mistress. Washington, to his credit, freed or manumitted his slaves on his death.

The election of Donald Trump has opened these terrible wounds. Some whites continue to believe that the US is, or ought to be, a white nation, even though blacks have been there for as long as them, albeit involuntarily. They attack immigration for diluting the country's whiteness and globalisation for the loss of jobs. Many of these angry white men are the core constituency that propelled Trump to victory.

Battle Over Quit India

Modi boisterously appropriates what Congress believes to be its family heirloom

Parsa Venkateshwar Rao Jr



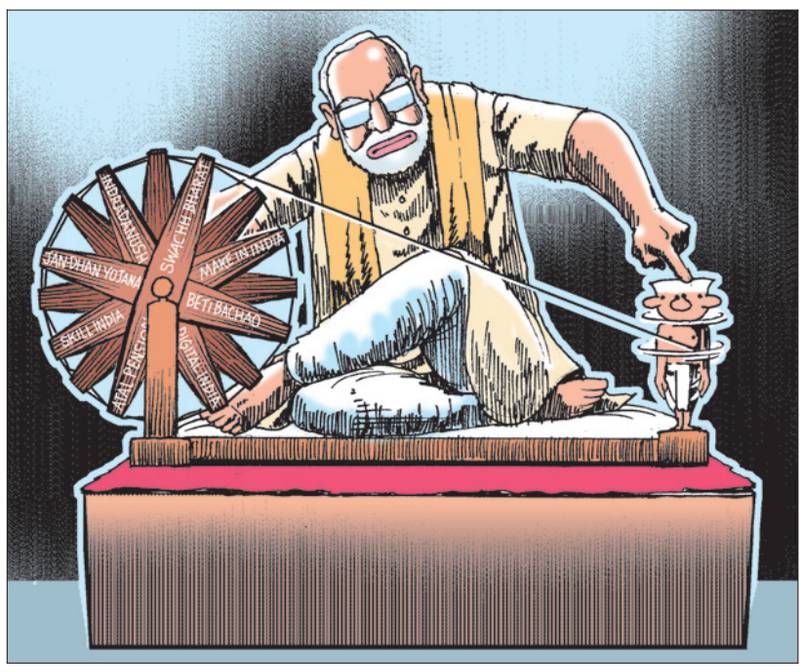
Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been thinking on his feet, as it were, on the issue of hitching his party to the bandwagon of freedom struggle. He is celebrating, with all the fervour that he can muster, the 75th anniversary of the Quit India Movement of 1942, the 70th anniversary of India's independence, and he is planning grand celebrations for the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi in 2019 and the 75th anniversary of India's independence in 2022.

It has become clear by now that Modi believes hugely in atmospherics. The main opposition party, Congress, feels left out and more than a little peeved by the PM's boisterous appropriation of the freedom struggle, which the grand old party of India believes to be its family heirloom.

Congress leaders have always been contemptuous of the Hindu right-wing and they have forever taunted their ideological adversaries for having never taken part in the freedom struggle. Of course, the charge is unfair in historical terms. There were many who did not believe in the politics of agitation popularised by Mahatma Gandhi from 1920 onwards which placed the Congress party in the lead position, but who had been looking at other ways of gaining independence from British suzerainty.

The Muslim League was never part of the agitational approach of Gandhi's Congress, and neither were many other sections like the Zamindars, the Unionist Party in Punjab, the Justice Party in the Madras presidency and the Krishak Samaj Party in Bengal. One of the prominent leaders who did not accept Gandhi's extra-constitutional approach was BR Ambedkar.

So, if the case is to be argued as to whether people who did not court prison and raise anti-British slogans did not fight for freedom from the British, then it would be an argument that would be difficult to sustain. There were different political groups and each dealt with the British keeping in mind what they believed to be their own interests. There is little doubt that Congress had a broader viewpoint than all the others put together. It claimed to speak for the whole country, for all the groups and all the regions. The others contested the Congress claim to be representing all.



This was specially so in the case of Muslim League. The Hindu right-wingers were indeed in a quandary because they could not say that Congress did not represent the Hindu majority. As a matter of fact, the League dubbed the Congress as the party of the Hindus. There was no room in the arena for other Hindu sectional interests. Hindu Mahasabha leaders like MR Jayakar and Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya continued to exert influence in Congress. In a way, communal Hindu elements found a voice within Congress. Nehru and others were aware of this and greatly resented their presence.

Modi has turned the argument over whether one participated in the freedom struggle on its head by asserting that present day India ruled by BJP derives inspiration from the 1942 Quit India Movement to transform India. In contrast, all that Congress president Sonia Gandhi could bring herself to say was that it was Jawaharlal Nehru who had moved the Quit India resolution on August 9, 1942. Sonia was clutching a twig of history, while Modi took upon himself the burden of carrying the spirit of Quit India Movement, at least by way of rhetoric, to transform India of today.

It can be seen in retrospect that the Quit India Movement was a historical blunder because the Muslim League and others became stronger between 1942 and 1945. Many Congress leaders, including Nehru, were not comfortable with Gandhi's decision

Congress has now been reduced to a party which clings to memories of the past, invoking its heroism of long ago to seek solace in its bleak present and infuriated by the Modi strategy of appropriating the heritage of the freedom movement for BJP with much panache. It can be said that Modi's words and gestures sound hollow because he does not really believe in the Gandhian morality of loving the adversary. And most importantly, he is not able to come to terms with Gandhi's proclaimed political heir, Nehru.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee had no hesitation in looking up to the Nehruvian legacy because Vajpayee had greater self-confidence than Modi does. The prime minister's belligerence in what he says and what he does not say betrays a brittle sense of his own self. But he is moving in the right direction by acknowledging loudly and clearly events like the Quit India Movement which was essentially a Congress ploy.

It can be seen in retrospect that the Quit India Movement was a historical blunder because the Muslim League and others became stronger between 1942 and 1945. Many Congress leaders, including Nehru, were not comfortable with Gandhi's decision. Though it was a tactical blunder, Gandhi was right in going ahead with it because all the Congress leaders were imprisoned, and when they came out of prison at the end of the war, they were burnished heroes who had paid the price for refusing to go with the British war effort.

But no Congress leader of the day ever showed any resentment towards the bureaucracy, towards the Indian armed forces who participated in World War II, nor with the industrialists and many others from different walks of life who were not in the Quit India Movement. Congress in 1945 carried everyone else with it. Modi seems to be trying to appropriate the legacy of the freedom struggle with barely a nod towards Congress. Congress's anger is palpable.

The writer is a political commentator

Trade wars and the Great China Wall: How India can get its act together for a China-smart trade policy

Ajay Srivastava

"A trade war between China and India seems to be looming as India moved last Wednesday (August 9) to impose anti-dumping duties on 93 products from China. Now Chinese companies must reconsider the risks of investing in India amid strained bilateral trade ties, and India should also be prepared for the possible consequences for its ill-considered action." Thus spake Global Times, organ of Chinese state media, on August 13. But what is the reality of India-China trade?

India exported goods worth $10 billion to China in 2005. India had a trade surplus with China during 2003-5, reveals trade data maintained by China. In 2016 Indian exports are still about $10 billion, but its trade surplus has turned into a deficit of more than $50 billion. What happened in the intervening years? The trade deficit was largely the result of China's technical advancement. But China's strategy to stifle Indian imports also played an important part.

During 2005-16 India emerged as a competent global supplier of polished diamonds, small cars, generic medicines, buffalo meat, etc. China imports these products in large quantities for domestic consumption, but not Indian products.

How does China reject Indian products? Quality cannot be a problem as India exports these products to over a 100 countries, including the US and EU. So China uses a complex set of inspection, product testing and quality certification requirements to stifle imports from India. Such restrictions are called non-tariff barriers (NTBs). WTO rules regulate import tariffs but are weak on regulating NTBs.

The list of restrictions is long. China uses non-tariff barriers to maim exports from India without anyone realising what is happening

Chinese experts inspect Indian factories. Cost is borne by the Indian side and clearance seldom comes. Only Chinese labs do the product testing, and no appeal is allowed on their decisions. Punitive product testing requirements ensure that India cannot export buffalo meat to China. China will not accept Indian basmati rice, while Pakistan's rice is welcome. Again, no appeal allowed on the decisions. Issuance of quarantine certificates for fruits or vegetables may take 3 years. Indian IT firms cannot take part if the tender size is more than $100 million. The list of restrictions is long.

Such measures ensured that India's exports to China in 2016 stayed at the 2005 level, even as India allowed almost unrestricted access to Chinese goods during 2005-17. Of Indian imports of mobile phones, telecom equipment, and bulk drugs, 70% come from China. If China stops supplying bulk drugs India's pharma exports will have a tough time, but China is already working to move up the value chain.

More than 95% of Indian imports of everyday use items also come from China. It is time to reduce this critical dependence on China. A time bound action plan to manage imports and increase exports can incorporate the following steps.

Push for large scale manufacturing in 30 product groups from electronics, engineering and chemical sectors. Accounting for 92% of imports from China, these should form the core of Make in India programme. Provide 20 years direct tax holiday for investments in these sectors.

Create a hundred design studios for new product development. Put in place the German Mittelstand model of industry-research-academia collaboration. This will help innovation-driven small firms and reduce dependence on import of daily use goods.

Create an institution responsible for developing standards and setting guidelines for inspection, testing and quality certification of critical products. China's NTB regime was aided by a lack of Indian preparedness on these issues. Thereafter, use NTBs to manage harmful imports as everyone else does. China used NTBs to maim India's exports without anyone realising what is happening. Anti-dumping duties can be used as short term measures but create too much noise.

Be more diligent in trade negotiations. For example India's signing the Information Technology Agreement (ITA) in 1997, which was voluntary, blocked development of India's IT hardware industry.

Finally, the truth about the Global Times story. Anti-dumping duties on 93 Chinese products were already in force for a long time. It was not a new development, although given the usual Chinese spin.

The writer is from the Indian Trade Service. Views are personal

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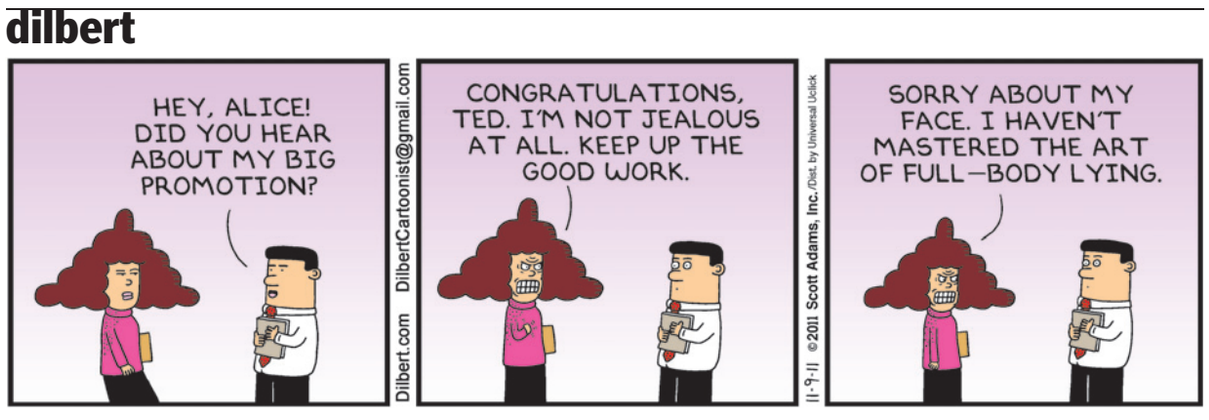

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Be Free

The highest activity a human being can attain is learning for understanding, because to understand is to be free. Peace is not an absence of war, it is a virtue, a state of mind, a disposition for benevolence, confidence, justice.

Baruch Spinoza

How The Gentle Overcomes The Rigid

Marguerite Theophil

Good advice that is often repeated by different people through our lives is to be as strong as a rock, or to be firm and immovable like a mountain when confronted by tough situations. Yet, the counsel of the ancient Chinese sages, who saw things rather differently, is to be strong – like water.

Lao-tzu advises emulating this element, even if it seems contrary to what our minds and conditioning indicate. We are told in the Tao Te Ching: Nothing in the world is as soft and yielding as water. Yet for dissolving the hard and inflexible, nothing can surpass it; the soft overcomes the hard and the gentle overcomes the rigid. Everyone knows this is true, but few can put it into practice.

We underestimate its power, unless faced with tsunamis or heavy flooding. Water can crash with force, but also slip through or go around obstacles, or wear them away in time. Flexibility, not rigidity, is extolled as the strength to develop in these teachings.

The excessive engagement and stimulation we face these days make us over-focussed, watchful, stressed and rigid. We believe all will be well if we can be in control of external forces. This does not work, yet we resist being like water – open and capable of flowing with the circumstances by responding accordingly. The idea of control should be viewed differently; while we cannot control most of what happens to us, we can control how we react.

As with water.

Water does not stiffen in expectation of a blow, but rather curves around the impact. And in the martial arts, it is this kind of strength that allows us to succeed.

Bruce Lee famously declared: You must be shapeless, formless, like water. When you pour water in a cup, it becomes the cup… in a bottle, it becomes the bottle… in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Water can drip and it can crash. "Become like water my friend."

the speaking tree

But more significant is his recounting of an experience that taught him more about another aspect of strength – that of letting go, moving on. "Suddenly a bird flew by and cast its reflection on the water. Right when I was absorbing myself with the lesson of the water, another mystic sense of hidden meaning revealed itself to me; should not the thoughts and emotions I had when in front of an opponent pass like the reflection of the birds flying over the water?"

Margaret Atwood, in Penelopiad, writes: "Water … cannot be broken; if we are like water, then we cannot be broken either… Water does not resist. Water flows... Water is not a solid wall, it will not stop you. But water always goes where it wants to go, and nothing in the end can stand against it. Water is patient. Dripping water wears away a stone. Remember that, my child. Remember you are half water. If you can't go through an obstacle, go around it. Water does."

Life lessons from water include the understanding that persistence wins over hurry; the hard and rigid are overcome by the relentless application of gentle things. Water changes its form in response to its environment, but never loses its meaning; solid or light, cold or hot, water is always water. And in being like water, we also need to remember – that water is a source of nourishment and healing, and we can be like that towards ourselves and towards others.

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