CHATTERBOX

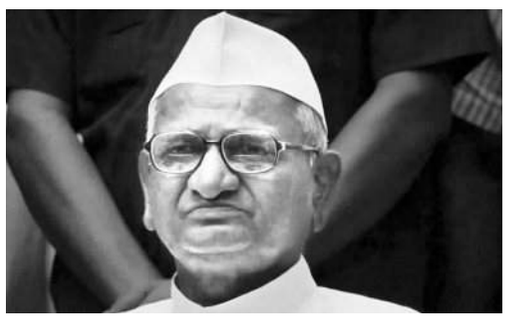
Road to Opposition unity harder than first thought

All gambits to draw Mayawati and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) into the Opposition circuit appear to be failing. The initial hope was that Mayawati would attend the Lalu Prasad-led Opposition rally last week. But Congress President Rahul Gandhi found the cooler climes of Norway more attractive than Patna's Gandhi Maidan. Once Samajwadi Party leader Akhilesh Yadav confirmed he would be attending, Mayawati dropped the idea. There is also no clarity on the role of the Nationalist Congress Party, none of whose leaders attended the rally. Akhilesh Yadav without his father, Mulayam Singh Yadav (who has said the *mahagathbandhan* is not the right way forward) is nothing. The road to Opposition unity is harder than first thought.

Anything to win an argument

If the local media in Uttar Pradesh is to be believed, the Samajwadi Party (SP) will do anything to win an argument. Speaking in Azamgarh, considered a pocket borough of the party, former chief minister Akhilesh Yadav said that his successor, Yogi Adityanath, should not mind if the SP came to power next and decided to rename Gorakhpur — so named after the religious sect that Adityanath belongs to. He also made a startling assertion: Most of the children who died due to lack of oxygen at the Gorakhpur hospital were Muslim. This was presumably to highlight an "anti-minority bias" of the state government. Even to neutral observers, this was unfair and provocative. The SP needs to be careful — claims of being misquoted cannot be a permanent refuge.

DID THEY REALLY SAY THAT?



It has been six years of a historical movement that aimed at creating a corruption-free India. But even after six years, the government has not drafted a definitive law to end corruption

India Against Corruption chief Anna Hazare, warning of a renewed movement for Lok Pal, in a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi on August 30

CHECKLIST

WHAT CHINESE MEDIA SAID ABOUT INDIA'S WITHDRAWAL FROM DOKLAM

- ***Global Times*:** "India's behaviour was absolutely illegal and excuses, like Bhutan's request and China's road construction, that it used to legitimise its behaviour have proven ineffective as well. That's why it chose to withdraw at this moment, and it was the only option for India."
- ***China Daily*:** "The Chinese government attaches great importance to developing neighbourly and friendly relations with India... China expects India to honour historical treaties and agreements as well as the basic principles of international law."
- ***People's Daily*:** "About two months ago, the Indian military trespass grossly encroached on China's territorial sovereignty, and trampled on the fundamental principles of international law and basic norms governing international relations... Now the withdrawal of Indian troops has laid a foundation for the further development of the China-India relation. It is good to see that the two countries have solved the conflict peacefully."
- **ECNS:** "China and India have agreed to end the stand-off in the Donglang area of both countries' border, China's foreign ministry confirmed on Monday. As of 2.30 pm Monday, India has withdrawn border personnel at the face-off site at Donglang. The foreign ministry also said that China will continue to protect its territorial sovereignty."
- ***South China Morning Post*:** "In an earlier position paper, China said that at the peak of the crisis, up to 400 Indian soldiers and two bulldozers were engaged in the confrontation. The withdrawal comes a week ahead of a BRICS summit in Xiamen, Fujian province, where Chinese President Xi Jinping will play host to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the leaders of the three other major emerging economies."
- **Shanghaiist:** "India has historically been closely allied to Bhutan, but in recent years China has sought to increase its own engagement with the tiny mountainous kingdom. That has fed into a broader competition for regional influence between the two Asian powers."

OPINION

NARENDRA MODI

Violent suppression won't be tolerated

When on the one hand, a sense of festivity pervades the land, on the other, news of violence comes in from one part of the country — it is only natural to be concerned. Ours is the country of Buddha and Gandhi, it is the land of Sardar Patel, who gave up his all for the unity of the nation. For centuries, our forefathers have imbibed community values, non-violence, mutual respect — these are inherent to us. We have been hearing and saying *Ahimsa Paramo Dharma* from our childhood. In my address from the ramparts of the Red Fort, I had said that violence in the name of faith will not be tolerated, whether it is communal belief systems, subscribing to political ideologies, allegiance to a person or customs and traditions. No one has the right to take the law into one's own hands in the name of one's beliefs. In the Constitution given to us by Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar, there is every provision for ensuring justice for each and every person. I want to assure my countrymen that people who take the law into their own hands and are on the path of violent suppression — whether it is a person or a group — neither this country nor any government will tolerate it. Each and every person will have to abide by the law; the law will fix accountability and the guilty will unquestionably be punished.

My dear countrymen, our country is a land of diversities — these diversities are not limited to our cuisine, lifestyle and attire. We observe diversity in every walk of life. Even our festivals are replete with diversity. Ours is a rich cultural heritage, spanning thousands of years — when we look at our cultural traditions, social customs, historical events, there would hardly be a day left in the year, which is not connected with a festival. You would have noticed that all our festivals follow the almanac of nature. There is a direct connect with nature. Many of our festivals are linked straightaway with farmers and fishermen.

Speaking about festivals today, I would first like to wish you all Michhami Dukkadam. The Jain community celebrated the Samvatsari Parva yesterday. In the month of Bhadra, Paryushan Parva is celebrated by the community. The last day of Paryushan Parva is observed as Samvatsari. This is indeed a remarkable tradition. The festival of Samvatsari is symbolic of forgiveness, non-violence and brotherhood. It is also known as the Kshamavani Parva, and on this day, people traditionally greet each other with, "Michhami Dukkadam". We have been hearing in our *shastras*, our holy texts, "*Kshama Veerasya Bhushanam*", that is, forgiveness is the adornment of the brave. The one who forgives is valiant. And Mahatma Gandhi always said, forgiveness is the quality of great men.

Ganesh Chaturthi is being celebrated with fervour across the country. When we speak of Ganesh Chaturthi, it is but natural to talk about Sarvajanik Ganeshotsav, that is, community celebrations of the Ganesh Festival. This tradition was established by Bal Gangadhar Tilak 125 years ago and it was 125 years ago that Sarvajanik Ganeshotsav became a symbol of India's struggle for freedom. And after Independence, this festival has become a vehicle of raising social and educational awareness. This Mahaparva, mega festival stands for unity, equality, integrity and honesty. My heartiest greetings to all of you on the occasion of Ganeshotsav.

Onam is being celebrated in Kerala. This festival is known for its social and cultural significance. It gives the message of love and harmony, awakens new hopes and aspirations and gives new confidence to the people. And I would like to mention to my countrymen, that festivals like Navaratri in Gujarat, or Durga Utsav in Bengal are tremendous tourist attractions. Other festivals of our country, too, provide an opportunity to attract foreign visitors. We should think about what more can be done in this direction.

In this series of festivals, Eid-ul-Zuha will be celebrated in a few days from now. Heartiest felicitations and best wishes to all countrymen on Eid-ul-Zuha. Festivals are of course symbols of faith and belief; in the new India, we should transform them into symbols of cleanliness as well. In individual households, festivals and cleanliness are linked together. In fact, preparations for festivals always begin with cleaning. This is nothing new for us, but it is important to convert it into a social character. Public cleanliness must be insisted upon not just in our homes but in our villages, towns, cities, states and in our entire country.

My dear countrymen, definitions of being modern are perpetually changing. These days, a new measure to gauge a new dimension, a new parameter, has come into being. It determines what your upbringing has been, how modern you are, how modern your thinking is. And that measure is your level of environment consciousness. Are your activities eco-friendly, environment-friendly or otherwise? It is considered to be unacceptable in society today if you are not environment-friendly. And as a result of this I find that the eco-friendly Ganpati in this Ganesh Festival has turned into a huge campaign. If you go on YouTube, you will see that children in every home are making earthen Ganesh idols and colouring them. Some are using vegetable colours, while some are pasting bits and pieces of paper. All sorts of experiments are being carried out in every family. This is probably the first-of-its-kind, the most widespread experiment in environment consciousness. Media houses, too, are making a great effort in training people, inspiring them and guiding them towards eco-friendly Ganesh idols. And as I mentioned, our country is blessed with millions and millions of the brightest of brains. And it is nice to see all sorts of new innovations. Someone told me about a gentleman, who is an engineer and who has collected and combined special varieties of clay, to give training in making Ganesh idols. The Ganesh Visarjan or immersion is done in a small bucket of water, where the idol dissolves in no time. He didn't stop there. A tulsi sapling was sowed in it. The campaign for cleanliness initiated three years ago will be marking its third anniversary on October 2. And the positive results are now being seen. Toilets have increased from 39 per cent to almost 67 per cent of the population. More than 2.30 lakh villages have declared themselves open defecation-free.

Gujarat saw devastating floods recently. Many people lost their lives. When the waters receded, there was so much filth everywhere. That is when, in Dhanera in the Banaskantha district of Gujarat, volunteers of Jamiat-Ulema-e-Hind cleaned 22 affected temples and two mosques in a phased manner. The volunteers set a fine, inspiring example of unity for cleanliness. If this committed effort towards cleanliness become inherent to us, our country will certainly take our nation to greater heights.

Edited excerpts from the English rendering of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Mann ki Baat, *broadcast from New Delhi on August 27*

ILLUSTRATION: AJAYA MOHANTY

SUSHIL MODI is back as Bihar's deputy chief minister and finance minister. He tells **Satyavrat Mishra** about the priorities of the new government in the state.

'JD(U)-BJP alliance will sweep polls if it doesn't make silly mistakes'

Q&A

SUSHIL KUMAR MODI

Deputy chief minister and finance minister of Bihar

It is alleged that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Nitish Kumar had decided to join hands much before his resignation in July. How would you respond?

There is no truth in such allegations. When Kumar submitted his resignation to the governor, we formed a three-member committee to decide the future course of action. After discussions, we decided to support the government. We asked permission from the central leadership. After we got the green light from Delhi, we announced our support for Kumar.

Who knew that Kumar would resign? What would have happened had Lalu Prasad asked his son to resign? There is no truth in the allegations of Kumar's resignation being a preplanned event.

You had said in interviews with various publications that the BJP would never have an alliance with Kumar. What changed?

I have never said that. All I said was "we don't what's going to happen". It is true that the best years of Nitish*ji*'s political life were with the BJP. Everyone who has ever been with the BJP always find his or her way back to us. I, however, always thought Lalu*ji* would go to great lengths to protect the Grand Alliance governance, given the political future of his now ex-minister sons. Therefore, I used to say that if there isn't any threat to the government, then where is the question of our role.

Till the last day, we believed that Lalu*ji* would ask his son to resign to save the government and the political power. However, he made it a matter of prestige and Kumar also refused to budge. Kumar remained adamant that Tejashwi Yadav must come clean on the allegations. Kumar showed true grit in doing so. Only a few leaders in the country can take a stand on corruption today.

The BJP and Kumar share a rocky past. How can the party trust him?

Situations can change.

Nitish*ji* has always been a flag-bearer of anti-Congress politics. He never liked the Congress work culture. People have seen the glorious days of National Democratic Alliance-1 and therefore they wanted us back together.

Mark my words: This alliance will sweep both the 2019 Lok Sabha election and the 2020 Bihar Assembly polls if we don't make silly mistakes. It reflects the wishes and aspirations of the majority of Bihar's voters. The Congress is already discredited and on the verge of extinction in Bihar. Apart from Prasad's core support base, no other social group is ready to accept him because of his bad track record in governance.

There has been a rise in right-wing political statements and incidents in Bihar. Does this mean the Hindutva factions would be more assertive from now onwards?

Hindu or Muslim can never be a topic in governance. Our agenda has always been development and it will remain so. We have been working for the public in Bihar and will continue to do so. Our motto will be "*sabka sath, sabka vikas*" and we will work for each and every person in Bihar without any discrimination. Our government will leave no one behind.

The BJP was most critical of the new prohibition law in Bihar and even called it a "Talibani law". Will you change the law now?

We have always supported prohibition. The law might be a bit harsh, but till date there has been no complaint about its misuse. A law or policy can be reviewed, but people are happy with the stringent ban on liquor. Even our own leaders and workers have supported the liquor ban. Therefore, despite being in the Opposition, we couldn't muster the courage to speak against it. Prohibition has also shown various positive social and economic impacts. No government can now dare to repeal prohibition from the state. However, if we find the law is being misused, then being a sensitive government we will certainly review it.

The state coffers took a hit last year because of prohibition. How would you mange it this year?

We can't get back the ₹5,000 crore that we lost because of the liquor ban. However, the goods and services tax (GST) is expected to be a big boost for our finances. Being a consumer state, we are expected to gain the most from this new tax regime. Moreover, we expect more funds transfer from the Centre and we will now focus on better monitoring. We will focus on a higher growth rate, which will ensure higher fund allocations from the central government.

During the Bihar Assembly election in 2015, the prime minister had announced a special package worth ₹1.25 lakh crore for the state. However, as per the state government's data, only ₹23,500 crore has been utilised till March 31, 2017. Will the situation improve now?

There was confusion over whether the Bihar government would get the money. The truth is that more than 80 per cent of the funds will be given directly to the implementing agencies. For example, the Centre has promised ₹53,000 crore for the roads sector in the state, but the money would be given directly to the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI).

On the other hand, many projects listed in the special package such as AIIMS, central university are pending because of problems in land acquisition. We have now decided to give land to all these projects on a priority basis, so that we can utilise every single penny of the package.

What would be the agenda of the new government?

This time we will focus on second-generation reforms. Our priority will be to settle land disputes in Bihar, which I believe is the root cause of almost all crime in the state. For this, we had decided to conduct surveys, digitise land records, formalise the mutation process, etc, with a focus on bringing land disputes down to a minimum.

This government has been formed on the issue of on corruption. Therefore, we will never compromise on that issue. We will promote the use of information technology in the daily functioning of the government. All payments would now be routed only through the electronic mode and the use of cash and cheques would be discouraged. We have decided to complete Aadhaar seeding by the end of this calendar year and payments in social security schemes would be sent only through the bank accounts.

In infrastructure, we have decided to connect every house with electricity by the end of the next year. By the end of 2019, we will achieve the target of 100 per cent farm electrification; every farmer will be given an electricity connection for the purpose of agriculture. To boost agricultural production, we will ensure proper implementation of the third Agriculture Road Map. We will also focus on the health sector, which was ruined by the misrule of Tej Pratap Yadav. Road construction will also be on our radar.

From banker to organic farmer

Deepak Gupta grows chemical-free food and wants farmers to go back to the practices they once knew but have forgotten

ADITI PHADNIS

THE OTHER INDIA

As career changes go, it is nothing short of dramatic. Banker Deepak Gupta has turned farmer. Not just any farmer — he grows and retails only organic fruit and vegetables. And not any organic either — natural farming.

As a child whose father was in the railways, Gupta travelled all over India during his growing-up years. In the early 1980s, he studied at Delhi's Shri Ram College of Commerce, did an MBA from XLRI and worked at HDFC Bank and ICICI, winging it to Johannesburg and Toronto as a banker.

International exposure led to a deeper appreciation of the way things are done at home, especially lifestyle. The organic food movement in the West was the result of consciousness that chemical poison was leaching into human bodies, causing mutations and leading to diseases such as cancer.

After Gupta and his wife Smita returned to India, in 2012, they decided to go into organic farming, knowing next to nothing about farming. Their company is called Organic Maati.

He recalls his first attempt to locate organic farmers. "I found that there was a farmer in Sonipat, who was growing organic vegetables," Gupta says. "I had his name and 'Sonipat' as the only coordinates. I drove there. I drove for miles but just couldn't locate him. It took an hour on foot to find him finally. His name is Ramesh Dagar and he taught me a lot." Gupta's other guru was Subhash Palekar, the Vidarbha-based proponent of Zero Budget Natural Farming that goes beyond organic farming and uses only desi seeds and cow manure, thus costing next to nothing by way of inputs.

Organic farming follows a mechanical template: If you've left land fallow for three years, used no chemical fertilisers and inputs (and a couple of other to-dos), your produce qualifies as organic.

But there's the tricky issue of genetically modified (GM) seeds. Natural farmers use no GM seeds. "GM seeds produce more, are hardier and need less labour, but they are expensive and good for only for one crop," he explains. "If one crop fails, you are bankrupt — you have nothing. Once you get hooked on to GM, you keep returning to them — and then it is pesticides, chemicals and the whole shebang. Can that really be good for you? Natural farming uses desi Indian seeds and the crop itself serves as seed for the next crop: It is farming the way our ancestors used to do. True, labour costs are higher. But what you produce is pure and additive-free."

He realised that chemical-free food was just one part of an experience that more Indians needed to go through. Smita launched a line of clothes for babies that uses only vegetable dyes. A range of personal body-care products has just been launched. Gupta has embraced the world of back-to-basics by launching a farm experience anyone can have without actually owning a farm: He takes land on rent, cultivates it for fruit and vegetables, paying locals to do what they do best, and for a small sum, anyone can be the "prince" of that piece of land, enjoying 50 per cent of the produce and treating farm visits as weekends away from the stress and pollution of cities. For ₹50,000 a year, you can be at one with the purity of the elements of nature.

Deepak and Smita Gupta

If the land has been fallow for three years, and no chemical fertilisers and inputs have been used, the produce qualifies as organic

But does it earn him any money? "Not yet," he says. Organic Maati is yet to break even. But the team is getting there. "We are very small currently, with only 15 families in the rental farming model," he adds. For him, what is rewarding is that more and more farmers are waking up to farming practices they once knew but had forgotten and are producing natural and/or organic produce, re-learning from Gupta. He is content, knowing that once they scale up their operations, he would be able to make it a commercial enterprise — and be at peace with the earth.

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Know thy frenemy

Indians cannot afford to remain oblivious about China

News that the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) has made it compulsory for new recruits to speak Mandarin, and the Tibetan dialect of it, highlights a key anomaly in India today. Knowledge of China — its rich cultural heritage, its political and economic institutions, even its language — is woefully inadequate. China is India's biggest trading partner, a key rival for influence in Asia and, as the row over the frozen fastness of the Doklam plateau has indirectly accentuated again, a perpetual source of tension along the border. Beijing has adopted India's adversary and terror-sponsor Pakistan as a client state. Since the mid-nineties, successive Indian governments have desperately sought to introduce policy that will replicate China's economic miracle. The two countries stand on the same side on seminal global issues of the day such as climate change and seek to collaborate in building post-Cold War institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. In short, no country fits the label of India's "frenemy" better than China.

Yet, the collective disinterest in China is striking and borders on ignorance. Each year, more Indians travel to the declining world powers of Europe and the US than to the rising superpower that lies over the Himalayas. For the average Indian, China stands for Chinese food — now so localised as to bear no relation to what is actually available in China — action movies of Jackie Chan, a Hong Kong martial arts actor, and, above all, cheap prices. For a generation of tiny sector manufacturers — lock-makers, kitchenware, producers of household bric-a-brac, idol makers, for instance — China is the country that put them out of business. The more educated upper middle class and rich may have a slightly better acquaintance with the Middle Kingdom. The thoughts of Sun Tzu, the 6th century Chinese general and strategist, remains in vogue among Indian managers. Feng Shui and Chinese tea (with its dubious weight loss benefits) are leading fads among the chatterati. Mao Tse Tung's Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution may resonate as will Deng Xiao Peng, the architect of China's authentic great leap, and Tiananmen Square. Some may even know of Yao Ming, the 7-foot 6-inch basketball player who has belied China's reputation for short men.

In truth, though, for the well-heeled Indian traveller, knowledge of Chinese culture is mostly filtered through visits to Singapore and Hong Kong. French, Spanish and German outdo Chinese as a foreign language of choice. True, the number of Chinese language institutes have increased significantly as Indian businessmen increase their relations with the world's second-largest economy, but Mandarin courses are an option only in upscale schools. Beyond this transactional expansion, a more profound understanding of China, its history and unique and complex governing institutions — the very ones that established its global domination and almost eradicated poverty in a generation — is poor even in Indian academia and the foreign policy establishment.

Perhaps nothing reflects this irrational disinterest than the Ministry of External Affairs' decision to sharply cut the modest ₹1 crore annual grant to the Institute of Chinese Studies, the leading and well-reputed think-tank that partners with Harvard University and MIT. The MEA has decided to opt for a project-by-project approach from this year reportedly because ICS had differed with the government on some issues such as its approach to the One Belt One Road initiative. This is a pity. Fostering closer cultural and academic relations would go a long way in enriching understanding and promoting more informed and optimum policy outcomes in place of the raw jingoism that colours the popular discourse — as it did during the Doklam stand-off. Knowing your enemy is time-honoured advice from Sun Tzu and Kautilya alike. In the more nuanced world of 21st century diplomacy knowing your frenemy is critical too.

The agenda for Xiamen

The forthcoming BRICS Summit is an opportune moment to forge ahead on economic collaboration through more concrete initiatives and outcomes

CHANDRAJIT BANERJEE

The 9th BRICS Summit being held in Xiamen, China, over September 3-5, is expected to come out with several new cooperation mechanisms. The centrepiece of the Summit would be economic cooperation, given that the group represents the largest and fastest growing nations among the emerging economies, the ones which will dominate the global economy in the near future. In an increasingly inward-looking global polity, the BRICS group must redouble its efforts to foster cross-border trade and investment to keep the engines of the global economy humming smoothly.

The five BRICS member nations of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa account for 43 per cent of world population, $17 trillion or 22 per cent of the nominal global gross domestic product (GDP) and 17 per cent of world trade. Each of the countries has different strengths and characteristics, and a closer alignment of their complementarities bears positive implications for their growth process as well as that of the world at large.

Recognising this, the five countries have stressed cooperation through ministerial meetings on issues such as agricultural development, environment, labour and employment and financial sectors. The establishment of the New Development Bank (NDB) with participation from all the members is a landmark definitive outcome of the BRICS process and has already identified renewable energy projects in each of the member nations with a credit pipeline of $4-5 billion in the next three years.

For India, greater trade engagement with other the BRICS countries would bring rich dividends. Since 2009-10, when the first Summit was held, India's exports to these countries have barely inched up — risen from $17 billion to $18 billion in 2016-17 — with their share in total exports declining from 9.6 per cent to 6.5 per cent. Imports have soared from $44 billion to $ 77 billion in this period, but most of this arises from surge in imports from China. China accounts for two-thirds of India's exports and four-fifths of its imports relating to the group.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi with President Xi Jinping at the 8th BRICS Summit in Goa, in 2016 PHOTO: PTI

The 9th Summit is an opportune moment to forge ahead on economic collaboration through more concrete initiatives and outcomes. The Strategy for BRICS Economic Partnership was outlined at the Ufa Summit, stressing trade and investment, infrastructure connectivity and financial services. The road map for this should be quickly brought out and actioned.

In trade, the BRICS economies must go beyond their traditional trade baskets to develop intra-BRICS supply chains, leveraging their diverse free trade agreements. With strong economic heft in their respective regions, such trade can be a stepping stone for addressing a wider range of countries in each continent. For example, BRICS and BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) with common members can work together to unlock the potential of trans-continental trade.

To best facilitate trade flows, it is important that the five countries jointly identify and resolve non-tariff barriers to trade. The business participants of the dialogue process can play a critical role in this effort

To best facilitate trade flows, it is important that the five countries jointly identify and resolve non-tariff barriers to trade. The business participants of the dialogue process can play a critical role in this effort. The group should also work on harmonising standards and sanitary and phytosanitary measures for ensuring trade facilitation.

A key area for the BRICS to address would be promotion of services trade. Services are playing an increasingly larger role in their economies in both output and employment, and a vibrant trade ecosystem must enhance trade in services such as tourism, professional and business services, IT services and entertainment and media, among others. E-commerce can be an important driver of trade as well, for which issues in cross-border logistics, financial gateways, and Intellectual Property Rights would need to be addressed. The five countries could also work on capacity building and skill development for promoting trade.

In the connectivity and infrastructure area, while the NDB has made a good beginning, there is need to leverage the competencies of Russia and China for addressing gaps in the other three countries. A BRICS sovereign wealth fund could be considered which would have contributions from all five countries to take up viability gap funding in long-gestation projects. The export-import banks of the five countries may also establish dedicated lines of credit for infrastructure projects in the member nations.

Public-private partnership models can be developed to build new infrastructure. For example, large projects can have participation of public and private companies, converging consultancy from India with project management expertise from China and resources from Brazil and Russia. Such partnerships should be structured in a manner that incentivises private sector participation.

As large and populous emerging economies, the BRICS nations will be impacted by the evolving industrial revolution based on automation, robotics and digital technologies which is reshaping supply chains. Innovation and R&D are being promoted in all the countries, and mechanisms to share best practices and devise common responses could be devised.

Going forward, what the BRICS countries do together will be closely watched by the world, especially by other developing nations, as these countries will be leading economies of the future. The Summit process can impart a strong impetus to cooperation and collaboration for all-round sustainable development of all emerging economies.

The writer is Director General, Confederation of Indian Industry

A prescription for boosting thermal power demand

VIVEK SHARMA

By 2030, India aims to have 40 per cent of its electricity generation capacity to be of renewable origin. With such energy becoming increasingly competitive, demand for conventional thermal power is set to trip.

Today, 25 Gw of untied thermal power capacity, and another 25 Gw is expected to come up in the next three to five years in the private sector, entailing an investment of ₹2.5 lakh crore, could end up being stranded.

With sluggish demand, the average Plant Load Factor (PLF) for coal-based power plants has steadily declined from 78.9 per cent[1] in fiscal year 2008 to sub 60 per cent levels in the last fiscal year. The situation is expected to worsen because lower PLFs will lead to lower profitability and impair project viability.

Adding to the woes is worsening asset quality and rising non-performing assets (NPAs) of banks. Data from the recent Economic Survey for 2016-17 show the NPA ratio in the generation sector is 5.9 per cent[2] of total advances (outstanding) of ₹473,815 crore.

The Survey says the shift to renewables is likely to render a part of the assets in conventional energy generation idle, or result in them being used at a much lower level than their maximum technically feasible capacities. "The investments in these plants being sunk, it would be no longer possible to recover any returns from them although their useful life is still not over."

India's Chief Economic Advisor Arvind Subramanian, the primary author of the Survey, also cautioned that overemphasis on renewable energy could land a double whammy for the government — eroding viability of thermal power plants and increasing bad loans of public sector banks.

The Survey estimates that in fiscal year 2017, the social cost of renewables was around three times coal at $11 per Kwh — including the cost of stranded thermal assets and NPAs — and makes a philosophical point that the pace of investments in RE should be in sync with the total cost accrued to the society.

The 50 Gw of stranded thermal capacity and mounting bad debts at banks reminds one of the path the ill-fated Dabhol power project took. This time, too, discussions are whether debt taken by private sector from banks could be passed on to public sector entities even as the core problems afflicting the sector remain unaddressed.

But there is a better, more sustainable route to revitalising the stranded assets, which is to focus on both demand and supply. The government needs to lead electricity demand creation especially given that low PLFs are a result of more supply chasing less demand.

That's why we believe 'Power for All' and 100 per cent metering of existing and new consumers should be implemented at a war footing.

To do so, states can explore options such as direct benefit transfer and offer metered connections free or at concessional rates. And as demand picks up over the medium to long term (since demand is a function of economic growth and rural electrification, both of which are on a gradual grind up), proper procurement planning can ensure thermal projects meet the base load.

Secondly, the supply side needs to be quickly plugged by focussing on two areas:

- Thermal capacities of 40 Gw are under planning or construction stage and likely to be commissioned before 2022 by various state and central generating entities.

Given the industry's predicament, there is no case for new spending by states for these capacities more so since power could be competitively procured from stranded capacities or from plants running at low PLFs. The money thus saved can be used for direct benefit transfer and other social goals.

And the NTPC, instead of focusing on investing in new capacities, could look at taking over joint venture plants that were set up along with states, and/or acquire state generating stations where there is significant room for efficiency improvements.

- Secondly, according to the Central Electricity Authority report 2015, at the national level, 34 Gw thermal assets are more than 25 years old. Present environmental norms require these plants to be decommissioned and there is no merit in making fresh investments to upgrade them into super critical plants. Early decommissioning of inefficient plants would be the better bet here. This replacement could be done through transparent competitive bidding by the same procurer holding power purchase agreements of these old plants. This would not only help distribution utilities reduce their power purchase cost, but also integrate stranded thermal capacities.

While the share of renewables will continue to grow, calibrating that growth with thermal assets by making stranded assets viable will help stanch the haemorrhaging in the sector and turn things around.

[1] *According to the Central Electricity Authority*
[2] *Economic Survey 2016-17, Volume 2*

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OTHER VIEWS

Demonetisation has totally failed to curb black money

It has not been able to deliver on the objective it professed all along

With the RBI's annual report, released on August 30, showing that as much as 98.96% of the demonetised currency had returned to the central bank as of June 30, the gains in the form of cancelled liability from the note ban have been piffling.

For the Finance Minister to now claim that the "confiscation of money" had not been an objective, and for his Ministry to say that the government "had expected all the SBNs (specified bank notes) to come back to the banking system to become effectively usable currency," is disingenuous. If that were indeed the case, the rationale behind the various stop-go announcements that followed in the wake of the November 8 decision are hard to fathom. For instance, the RBI circular setting a ₹5,000 limit on deposits of withdrawn notes unless done under the government's amnesty scheme, tendered for the first time or explained otherwise was clearly a measure intended to dissuade bank customers from returning the demonetised currency. True, demonetisation has had some beneficial spin-offs such as arguably fostering greater compliance with the tax laws and reducing the economy's reliance on cash through increased adoption of digital payments. But such gains could have been achieved by other and less self-defeating ways.

As things stand, it is unclear how many of those who have laundered their black money will be punished. Despite the large amounts that were deposited in banks post-demonetisation, it is doubtful whether the Income Tax authorities have the necessary resources to track down and penalise the corrupt. All in all, the costs of demonetisation, which has resulted in robbing the country of its economic momentum, are far greater than the benefits it has bestowed.

The Hindu, September 1

Marital rape is a crime

It must be treated as such

The recent submission by the government of India in the Delhi High Court arguing that marital rape should not be made a criminal offence is a regressive stand, and one that has the potential to be extremely harmful to victims of sexual abuse in the country. The government has argued that criminalising rape within a marriage "may destabilise the institution of marriage" and could become a tool of harassment of husbands. Adding insult to injury was the Twitter statement of Swaraj Kaushal, Mizoram Governor and husband of the minister of external affairs Sushma Swaraj that if marital rape were to be criminalised, "there will be more husbands in the jail, than in the house"

By suggesting that such a law will be misused to persecute men, Mr. Kaushal and the government are attempting to perpetuate a patriarchal mindset that makes men afraid that "disgruntled" women would seek revenge upon their husbands by the use of this law. It is an argument that diminishes the struggle and emotional abuse that thousands of women, stuck in marriages that they have been forced into and cannot leave for fear of social ostracism, face every single day... Arguments against the criminalisation of marital rape will only add to these inequalities.

Hindustan Times, September 1

Restructuring army

Govt has begun well

The approval of the Union cabinet for the first phase of reforms in the armed forces is a welcome step. It will set into motion a plan to restructure the army which will redeploy 57,000 soldiers and civilians into fighting roles, thereby improving its operational efficiency. The idea is to improve the army's "teeth to tail" ratio, that is, increase the number of soldiers actually doing the fighting against those needed to support them to fight. This phase of reforms, which concern only the army, will be completed by end-2019.

There is a genuine fear in the defence services that by choosing to act on proposals internal to personnel management of the army, it has only picked the low-hanging fruit. These fears are based on the experience with implementation of reports of earlier committees. The toughest recommendations of both the Arun Singh Committee, following the Kargil Review Commission, and of the Naresh Chandra Committee, formed by UPA 2 government, were initially deferred and then never saw the light of day... The first steps with restructuring the army are important but they must be quickly followed by implementation of other recommendations, particularly those of higher defence management. Anything less will be another opportunity lost.

The Indian Express, September 1