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There's no case to subsidise fuel

High petrol prices could push users towards clean energy

The Narendra Modi government made a politically brave and economically sound decision to raise petroleum prices in the country. The government seems to be in two minds about how to defend its decision. The Bharatiya Janata Party has been apologetic and blamed everything from the weather in the Caribbean to the Goods and Service Tax for the price hike. Minister KJ Alphons, on the other hand, defended it in class terms. There is no reason for New Delhi to be defensive. **ourtake**

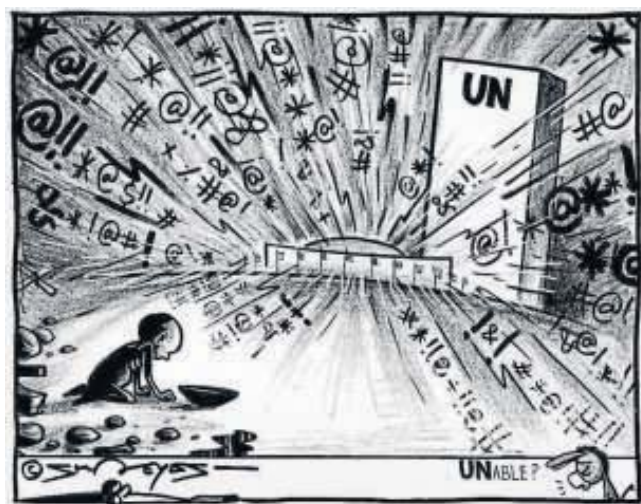
There are many arguments in favour of the decision.

The obvious one is that the government should not be subsidising fuel in the first place. The previous government tried to do that during the commodity spike that drove crude prices well over \$100 a barrel. The net result of these and other government handouts was to divert funds away from sectors where the money could have been more usefully employed. Also, this outlay aggravated already high levels of domestic inflation and undermined the purpose of the subsidy in the first place. Subsidised prices also result in higher consumption. When fuel prices rise, consumption should naturally fall. If the price rise is masked, people are encouraged to burn more fuel and increase the amount of subsidy. Indians need to become used to the idea that pump prices rise and fall in tune with global trends. Indian fuel prices are admittedly artificially high because of layers of state and central taxes. The government uses petrol sales for revenue purposes. This is an inevitable result of so few Indians paying income tax. But there is also a positive consequence of such high taxes. Namely, it helps keep India on a low-carbon path of development and encourages a shift to renewables. The Modi government rightly takes the threat of climate change seriously and has deliberately tried to raise the cost of polluting fuels.

India has among the highest effective costs of carbon in the world. This inflicts a degree of economic pain on the population, but it needs to be understood that this is far outweighed by the existential damage that the country will suffer from higher temperatures. Somewhat like spending to maintain a military, spending a bit more every day to hold back climate change is about investing against a catastrophic future event. No one should begrudge this and the government should not be shy about explaining why petrol prices is in the national interest.

bigdeal

SHREYAS NAVARE



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The futures of the Rohingyas and Myanmar are both at stake

Suu Kyi's government represents a critical period between democracy and an unenviable past



SANJOY HAZARIKA

If anything, Aung San Suu Kyi's 29-minute State of the Union address underlined the crown of thorns that she wears.

When Myanmar's State Counsellor and non-official head of government, broke her resolute silence today on the Rohingya crisis, having held out for weeks against international appeals on the military crackdown in the Muslim-dominated parts of Rakhine state, she still avoided addressing the critical issue of oppressive State violence.

The broadcast was dominated by the Rohingya crisis though she referred to the community only once by name and that too when she spoke of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) which has been designated as a terrorist group by her government.

Suu Kyi acknowledged that thousands of Muslims had fled into Bangladesh and assured of the upholding of human rights and promised action against those regardless of religion, ethnicity or political connections. To many, it did not go far enough. But could she?

For it is not just the Rohingyas, the immediate tragedy, which is the core issue — it is securing and stabilising the very future of Myanmar's democracy based on its multi-ethnic structure, a point she returned to time and again.

When Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy won an overwhelming majority in national elections two years back ending decades of military rule, expectations were sky-high in the world, not just her homeland. It has not been easy. Efforts to

broker peace with Myanmar's many warring ethnic groups have been shaky, the economy is in poor shape and it's been a delicate tango with the generals who hold four key Cabinet posts and 25% of the Parliament's MPs.

Suu Kyi held out hope for the return and repatriation of the Rohingyas — but it was conditional: if they agreed to abide by a process of verification. She acknowledged that there were many charges of human rights abuse but made no mention of the fact that it was the military which was largely accused of this violence.

The predicament in which the Nobel Peace Prize winner finds herself is seen in her guarded references to the military, that they had been told to abide by the law, respect human rights and that no security operations had taken place recently.

Suu Kyi, who has been criticised by several fellow Nobel Laureates, spoke glowingly of how many Muslims continued to live in their villages. "More than 50% Muslim villages" were unaffected by the violence, she said.

But that immediately asked a simple counter-question: what happened to the other 50% and why?

In fact, in just over a month, close to 400,000 had left their homes and flowed into Bangladesh, propelled by fear and the impact of violence and security campaigns. There are 300,000 Rohingyas who had left in earlier years and are too scared to return. The army went on an offensive following coordinated attacks by ARSA on 30 military camps, timed to devastate the sliver of hope which had appeared when former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's report on the situation was released. Suu Kyi's government responded positively to the call for dialogue — but it was not to be.

As a result of successive government policies, largely that of strong-arm army regimes which ruled with an iron fist despite internal schisms and changes, the



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Rohingyas, who happen to be Muslim with a history of living in the western part of the country over centuries, have been converted into stateless, non-citizens of Myanmar for nearly 60 years.

Suu Kyi sought to deflect widespread criticism, by inviting diplomats "and friends" to visit the affected areas, and declaring that the Rohingya crisis was but one of many challenges.

She is clearly at a perilous point of her political journey, when she needs to reach out to the majority Burman community and calm the fears of both sides, opening a transparent dialogue that enables the Rohingyas to return to their homeland in peace and dignity. She knows, as much as

anyone else, especially the generals, that her elected government represents a truly critical transition period that stands between a democratic Myanmar and returning to an unenviable past.

We note that the Government of India has asserted in the Supreme Court that there are security issues in the presence of 40,000 Rohingyas here. But there cannot be a blanket blacklist of tens of thousands of poor and vulnerable people who have sought refuge here. After all, Suu Kyi's offer of taking back refugees from Bangladesh is conditional. And can India carry out collective expulsions, or return people to a place where they risk torture or other serious violations?

New Delhi has to instruct its agencies to adhere to the law. Article 21 of the Constitution lays an obligation on the Government to ensure the life and liberty of all living in the country, without distinction of nationality or otherwise.

Sanjoy Hazarika is director, Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI)
The views expressed are personal

FAMILY POLITICS

Mayawati climbs aboard the dynasty bandwagon

The party president's recent introduction of her nephew has sent a clear message about her succession plans



NEERJA CHOWDHURY

Dynasties are once again dominating the political discourse. The BJP's senior leaders have taken Rahul Gandhi head on for his comments questioning why people should get after him when dynasties are a fact of life in India — be it in politics, in business or in professions.

And now comes Mayawati's launch of her family at her recent rally in Meerut, at the first public meeting she held since she lost the elections in Uttar Pradesh.

It was surprising not because it marked a turnaround in her earlier position of denouncing dynasties. Nor was the presence of her brother Anand Kumar new, for she had named him as the party's vice-president in April, and though she had clarified he would not stand for any elected position, clearly he was expected to officiate at the BSP meetings in her absence.

In any case, he has been her acknowledged fund manager for over a decade and is a known face in UP's political circles. But, so far, he had maintained a low profile, and whenever journalists greeted him, he would greet them in return but say very little else.

It was the introduction of her nephew, 23 year old Akash Kumar, which took many by surprise though he had accompanied Mayawati recently to Saharanpur, the scene of violence against Dalits by Thakurs which had sent shock waves through the Dalit community.

With her "formal" introduction of her brother and nephew at the Meerut rally, where they made a calculated entry on the stage waving to the audience, Mayawati sent a clear message to her party cadre about her successors.

The reasons why Mayawati may have decided to fall back on her family are not far to seek. The BSP is facing an existential crisis today, as it notched up a dismal 19 seats in the March elections.

The Dalits, and this includes a smattering of her own community of Jatavs, veered around to the BJP in 2014 and in 2017; and if there is one community the BJP is eyeing with 2019 in mind, it is the Dalits, notwithstanding Saharanpur, Una, and



Mayawati has lost several of her topmost and trusted lieutenants in the last one year

Rohith Vemula, which has led to anguish amongst several sections of Dalits. It is not surprising therefore that BJP chief Amit Shah has made a point of eating in Dalit homes in state after state.

Mayawati has also lost many of her topmost and trusted lieutenants in the last one year. Besides, she would be worried about the new challenges she now faces, not just from a BJP on the rampage, but also from the new forces on the rise like the Bhim Sena, particularly active in western UP, with an appeal to younger Dalits who are disenchanted with Mayawati's old style of functioning, with power concentrated in her hands alone.

Hence the entry of Akash Kumar.

He is young, a management graduate from London, who the "bua" hopes will have an appeal for the young Dalit voter. In Saharanpur he was seen talking to people, commiserating with families who had suffered in the violence, promising them succour. Will it work?

Over the years, leaders have increasingly turned to their family members to manage the big money generated through political activity, as they are found to be more trustworthy than even the closest of colleagues. The generation of big money has also given a fillip to dynastic politics in India.

There could be another factor for why Mayawati felt compelled to rope in her family. In case of arrest — and there are cases against her and also against Anand Kumar — there would be someone "reliable" to take charge of the party in her absence.

Today the reins of many a party are moving into the hands of the younger generation.

This is also the case in the crucial Ganga belt, be it Akhilesh Yadav (SP), Tejeswari (RJD) and now Akash Kumar though it is early days yet for him. They may well join hands in 2019, though there is no move forward so far on the coming together of the SP and the BSP, which could alter the political landscape in UP.

Even as the BJP has found another issue to flog Mayawati with — the BJP may well make dynastic rule versus merit and opportunity an issue in 2019.

This could have an appeal to the younger voter — dynasty may not be a factor likely to perturb her cadre. Nor, for that matter, has it agitated people in rural areas. This too is an Indian reality, at least so far.

Neerja Chowdhury is a senior journalist and political commentator
The views expressed are personal

anotherday

NAMITA BHANDARE

Hillary comes to the sisterhood a little too late

I was on a flight out of Delhi when the results started coming in. But I wasn't breaking out into a sweat: My column was ready; Hillary Rodham Clinton was taking the White House.

As soon as I landed, I realized I would be rewriting that column. It had taken 240 years for a major American party to nominate a woman to run, but the victor was Donald Trump, a man who had boasted of sexual assault.

How did Hillary lose, and to such a man? It's this question that Hillary addresses in *What Happened*.

Conceding that the book isn't a comprehensive account of the elections, Hillary admits, "I couldn't get the job done, and I'll have to live with that for the rest of my life."

And yet, there is a lack of both candour and insight. Hillary says she didn't want to be seen as a "woman candidate" but "rather as the best candidate whose experience as a woman in a male-dominated cul-

ture made her sharper, tougher, and more competent." Fair enough.

And so, like so many women politicians, Hillary plunged into a campaign that was highly sexist and misogynist, making light of her gender or not mentioning it at all.

There's her fatal error in the second presidential debate where, just days earlier, the world had heard Trump bragging about groping women. Yet, far from being apologetic, Trump follows Hillary menacingly on the small stage. Instead of calling him out, what does Hillary do? Nothing (her explanation: "a lot of people recoil from an angry woman").

If a woman vying for the world's most powerful job cannot tell a man to back off, what do we teach our daughters about claiming safe public spaces? It's a defeat that is strategic as well as moral.

Hillary comes to the sisterhood too late. Partly this is because, she writes, the American electorate is not receptive to the idea of the woman's liberation movement. And so, it might be perfectly understandable for a feminist candidate intent on winning to downplay her gender simply as political

strategy. To now claim common cause with female engineers battling harassment in Silicon Valley seems a bit opportunistic. The fact that sexism is alive should have been a rallying cry, not a belated woe-is-me realisation.

The book has its moments. Hillary is incandescent when talking about her daughter Chelsea. About her marriage she writes, "we've certainly had our dark days" where there were times where she'd ask if the marriage "could or should survive".

But to be a woman in politics can be "excruciating". The moment she steps forward, "it begins: the analysis of her face, her body, her voice, her demeanor; the diminishment of her stature, her ideas, her accomplishments, her integrity. It can be unbelievably cruel."

Writing *What Happened*, Hillary says, was "cathartic". Unfortunately, there is little to learn from it for future generations of women leaders that will inevitably follow, and win.

Namita Bhandare writes on social issues and gender
The views expressed are personal

This Navratri, bring some positive change and direction into your life



Jaya Kumar

The nine-day Navratri festival is here and many parts of India have geared up again to worship goddess Durga — the ultimate power of the universe. She is the epitome of strength or 'shakti'.

But if we really think about it, shakti is within us. Our faith, our attitude and our approach towards life is dictated by the power which lies within us. Looking at the deeper meaning, we will realise that there is a hidden meaning of the word Navratri. It signifies the new light. A new night that

will fill us with new energy and strength. Just the way goddess Durga has killed the evil forces manifested by Mahishashur, to protect mankind and do good unto all; we should also pledge to inculcate good values in ourselves and resolve to become good human beings.

We should build values to stand against our internal evil forces too. Following the idea of a new beginning, this period inspires you to do something that you haven't done in the past. Change should be a part of life and following new directions and dictums, we should promise to do something new. So, this Navratri, let us resolve to ensure that our lives turn to new and better ways, while we rejoice in the celebrations with family and friends.

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