

Bills won't win polls

SWAMINOMICS

SWAMINATHAN S ANKLESARIA AIYAR



The Congress party is feeling good after passing its two new bills on food security and land acquisition in Parliament. It believes it has occupied the moral high ground, and left the BJP making vague, unconvincing objections. The Congress hopes these bills will prove vote winners in the general election next May. These are delusions of grandeur. In fact, the bills are more likely to lose than win votes for the Congress.

First, voters are utterly cynical about new laws supposed to deliver Utopias. For example, the claim that the Right to Education would actually ensure decent education for all is today a sick joke. The NGO Pratham reports that, for all the ballyhoo, educational outcomes are going from bad to worse. Second, elections are fought on very local issues in each constituency, not on the so-called national issues that occupy newspaper headlines and TV prime time. The best proof comes from the 1996 election. The country had just gone through five years of unprecedented economic reform. When the Congress lost badly, many analysts argued that voters had rejected economic liberalization. The issue was put to the test in a survey by India's top psephologist, Yogendra Yadav. He asked voters whether they were aware of any change at all in economic policy, and if so, whether it was a good or bad idea. An astounding 80% said they were not aware of any change. Of the balance, 11% approved and 9% disapproved of the reforms. The key lesson was that the big ideological debates in New Delhi mattered little in grassroots campaigns at the constituency level, where a local lathi charge or fertilizer shortage was far more likely to decide the outcome.

Now, there are exceptions to this rule. Every now and then, an issue becomes so large and emotive that a national wave sweeps local issues aside. One example was the dramatic toppling of Indira Gandhi after her Emergency of 1975-77. Sympathy waves helped the Congress sweep the polls after the assassinations of Indira Gandhi in 1984 and of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991. But no land acquisition or food security bill can create such waves.

Congress attributed its victory in the 2009 election to MNRGA, the rural job creation scheme. In fact the party swept all the big cities, proof that record GDP growth was the main winning factor. Congress fared badly in poor rural states like Bihar, Odisha, Chattisgarh, and Madhya Pradesh, winning barely 20% of the seats. Clearly voters gave credit for MNRGA in these states to dynamic opposition chief ministers, not New Delhi. Something similar will happen with the Food Secu-



STALLED: The Cabinet has cleared projects worth crores but the procedure of land acquisition will cause delays

rency Bill and Land Acquisition Bill. There will barely be time to roll out the new laws before the general election. But to the extent there is any positive change, most of the credit will go to the local chief minister.

Can the new bills lose votes? Yes, indirectly. The Food Security Bill will cost maybe Rs 10,000 crore extra this year, and Rs 25,000-35,000 crore next year. Normally that would be affordable. But India is currently in a financial crisis: a crashing rupee threatens high inflation, investment funk, and lots of pain. Finance Minister P. Chidambaram has pledged to shrink the fiscal deficit to 4.8% of GDP. An extra Rs 10,000 crore on the food subsidy means an equivalent amount less in productive Plan investment. Foreign rating agencies are not amused.

Worse is the Land Acquisition Bill. This mandates a social impact assessment for every project requiring land acquisition, delaying such projects by at least one to two years. Now, the Cabinet is trying heroically to show it means business, and so has just cleared projects worth lakhs of crores. But many of these require land acquisition. So lakhs of crores worth of projects will now be delayed for a year or more. Chidambaram's claim that swift clearances will kick-start massive investment looks more dubious than ever.

To foreign investors and rating agencies, this is further evidence of deep structural flaws in India's political economy. In a quest for votes — which will probably fail anyway, the government is driving the economy downward. This is not the sort of government capable of, or even interested in, avoiding a crisis.

The result may well be a downgrade in India's credit rating to junk status. This will obligate pension funds and other foreign investors to exit from India. The rupee will fall further, inflation will rise faster, job and income growth will suffer more.

That's a recipe for losing a massive number of votes. Whatever the long-term benefits, the new bills threaten to be major vote-losers in the coming election.

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Hinduism's openness will carry it through present danger

Professor at the Divinity School, University of Chicago, Wendy Doniger's rather radical works on Hinduism, its scriptures and icons have provoked huge debates. Her latest book, 'On Hinduism', too questions established ideas about the religion and its contemporary face. She tells Malini Nair that Hinduism lives through its liberal followers

FOR THE RECORD

Your book arrives at a time when Hindutva seems to be back on the agenda of some political parties. But you maintain that the Hinduism of the future will have to be multi-cultural and pluralist and "light years ahead of fundamentalists of all religions". What makes you so optimistic? I do watch with growing apprehension as the right-wing, Hindutva-driven factions gain increasing power in India, but the responses I've had to my books, in both personal notes and published reviews, have been enormously encouraging. The kind of people whose texts I found throughout the history of Hinduism — open-minded, intellectually omnivorous people, capable of self-irony and generous to views other than their own — are still alive and well and living in India. I do believe that the great strength of Hinduism — its openness to contradictory ideas — will prevail and carry it through this present danger. However, in the book you also demolish the popular theory that Hindus are a tolerant community. I think the paradox becomes clearer when you

become more specific about what people are tolerant about. Hindus have generally been very tolerant about ideas; they did not persecute people whose beliefs about the gods were different from their own. This is the source of their quite justifiable pride in Hindu tolerance. But Hindus have not always been tolerant about behaviour — about what people ate, touched, or wore — and this, of course, makes for trouble with Muslims and Sikhs. What worries me most about the Hindutva brigade is that they are just as intolerant of behaviour as Hindus have often been, but now they are also intolerant of ideas, engaging in censorship of a fundamentalist nature that has never infected Hinduism until now.

You trace the 'dark shadows' of Hinduism — the way women and lower castes are treated — to Manu's diktats. Are you saying that Hindus haven't evolved?

I don't think that Manu is the source of mistreatment of women and lower castes, but he is a particularly brilliant and detailed example of it. The Manusmriti has been the canonical text for those who would enforce those aspects of Hinduism. I wouldn't call Manu's diktats particularly primitive or regressive; almost all the cultures I know have been, and often still are, sexist and classist; we all have a long way to go in social evolution. The caste system is a fairly extreme case of the classist abuse of human rights, but when you look at apartheid and the treatment of African-Americans under slavery, and still in America today, who can cast the first stone?

You point out that ancient Hindu texts, myths and epics happily allowed for some riotous "gender boundary jumping" between the gods and other divine figures. This tolerance was vastly different from the prudishness we see now, isn't it?

Alas, the contemporary Hindu attitude to alternate sexual behavior is indeed far more repressive than the attitudes of the ancient

texts. Even then, there was an official disapproval of such behaviour; in the dharma texts, but there were important departures from that conventional stance in such texts as the Kamasutra and in the imaginative literature of ancient India. The real prudishness, toward joyous heterosexuality, came in with the British and the Bengal Renaissance, and has now been taken up by Hindutva.

You have a different take on the Kamasutra. You see it as less of a "how to" manual and more as great literature on human nature, pro-women and compassionate. In fact you draw parallels between its content and contemporary dating scene.

It's such a pity that people continue to misread the Kamasutra, even after Sudhir Kakar and I provided such a clear translation of it. The "how to" part is just a small fraction of it. The rest has such an intimate and often hilarious understanding of how women feel about inadequate husbands and jealous co-wives. In the case of courtesans, it talks about how they choose between lovers of different advantages and shortcomings. The text also tells you how to meet possible partners, how to tell when someone likes you or doesn't like you, how to furnish your house, what to plant in your garden, games to play at parties, and so much else! You have done a lot of very unusual delving into the place of animals, particularly dogs, in the Hindu society and mythology. What pulled your thoughts in that direction?

Well, of course, it began simply with my own great affection for dogs, but then I noticed how often dogs played critical roles in Hindu texts, first as symbols of impurity (because they are scavengers, eating garbage) and then as symbols of devotion (because there is no one as devoted as a devoted dog). And that contrast seemed to me to epitomize the broader contrast between the caste-bound aspect of Hindu dharma, so fixated on purity, and the compassionate aspect of Hindu bhakti, which transcends ideas of purity.



We're better off minding our own business, really

RIGHT & WRONG

SWAPAN DAS GUPTA



There was a brief period in the mid-1990s when Indian newspapers suddenly began carrying front page reports of a conflict in the Balkans that few readers understood and fewer were interested in. The reason was quirky. Those were the days when cable TV enabled us to view CNN and BBC but domestic regulations prevented the operation of Indian news channels — apart from DD. Consequently, impressionable chief subs imagined that the hierarchy of news that resonated among the editorial classes in Atlanta and White City, London, had to find reflection in India.

Mercifully, that era was short-lived and the G-20 summit, with its preoccupation with the impasse over Syria, attracts the inevitable yawn from a readership that is too preoccupied with domestic concerns. Mercifully too, India is represented by a PM who is naturally taciturn. Imagine the plight

of the global leaders if, in addition to the cold stares that Obama and Putin have exchanged, it was subjected to a moral sermon on global iniquities by a Jawaharlal Nehru who had an opinion on everything and never made a secret of them.

One of the more positive contributions to post-Cold War foreign policy by PV Narasimha Rao — a canny, old fox — was that India stopped being preachy and confined its focus to matters that directly affected it. Of course, an escalation of the civil war in Syria following possible US air attacks to punish President Bashar al-Assad for his alleged use of chemical weapons against the rebel army will have a direct bearing on India's limping economy — by driving up oil prices and unleashing another wave of jihad. Yes, India has a direct interest in keeping the conflict localised. But the more pertinent question is: are we in any position to influence the course of events? Do we have the capacity to wag a finger at either the US, France and Russia or, for that matter, the theocrats in Iran who are itching to take advantage of an enlarged conflict? Earlier this week, during the Australian election



INTERNAL AFFAIRS: Events in Syria directly affect India but can it afford to get involved?

campaign, Liberal Party leader Tony Abbott (who may well be Australia's PM next week) advised his country to exercise exemplary caution on the Syrian crisis. Australia shouldn't, he said, "be getting ideas beyond our station." This is probably the most pragmatic and wise thing any politician has said in recent

times and it is one that, quite fortuitously, India must use as its guiding principle in foreign policy.

This is not to thereby imply that Damascus and Delhi are bound together by a 'special relationship' centred on dynastic rule. That there is huge internal dissatisfaction against the Assad regime is undeniable. The exasperation with one-party autocratic rule that began in Tunisia two years ago has proved extremely contagious. But the outpouring of resentment has also taken a direction that doesn't correspond to enlightened values. Democracy and human rights are not absolute principles as some western leaders seem to imagine; they are grounded in a political and cultural context that often defy those very ideals. The post-9/11 interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq had a greater measure of support throughout the world. But this tacit endorsement of intrusive and, very often drone-led, diplomacy, has today bred greater scepticism. Perhaps this has got a great deal to do with what historian Niall Ferguson detected as America's lack of an Empire mindset. Whatever the reasons, India's western neighbour-

hood is in a state of turmoil. More important, the 'baddies' Washington sought to eradicate — partly as an extension of its own homeland security — have regrouped and are likely to create problems for India in the not-too-distant future. The only other country that is likely to face even more serious consequences of the West's inability to cope with 'foreign' problems is Israel. But political correctness has deemed that it is 'not done' to be so forthright about the natural convergence of interests between India and Israel.

The sight of India as an inconsequential bystander at the G20 summit may offend national pride. But that is an incidental price to pay for our larger failure to live up to our allegedly awesome economic "fundamentals" and our wooliness over securing our immediate neighbourhood. The time to identify our national priorities couldn't be more pressing.

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When states determine the state of nation

OUT OF TURN

M J AKBAR



Change is a mist which floats through events, often obscured by the daily cloudburst of facts. It is noticed least by those it affects most.

Politicians have a sharper eye than they are given credit for, but they can miss the obvious. A tectonic shift is taking place in the structure of party politics. After a long and dominant reign, the high command is dead. It has become a dinosaur, a museum piece whose skeletal jaw hints at the massive bite it once possessed. Sonia Gandhi and L K Advani are the last inheritors of a concept that has exhausted its moment in history. After them, there will be command, but it will not be very high.

As in so much else, Mahatma Gandhi institutionalised the idea. In 1919, when he took control, he reinvented a top-heavy Congress with some radical engineering. He created a pyramid without slopes. Gandhi sat, or strode, at the apex. Across the wide base were the masses, busy building crypts in which Gandhi intended to bury the British Empire. The relationship between people and leader was direct, without intermediaries, nour-

ished by mutual sacrifice and commitment. Gandhi was transparent about his methods. He called himself a dictator before anyone could accuse him of being one.



FLEXIBLE POWER: Rahul Gandhi will have to bend to regional allies, more so than his mother has

ish by mutual sacrifice and commitment. Gandhi was transparent about his methods. He called himself a dictator before anyone could accuse him of being one.

Ascent through base and summit was by nomination, as Subhas Bose was to discover when he claimed an independent share of the mantle.

Of course Gandhi never imagined that Congress would become family property merely one generation after his martyrdom, but his pyramid-without-sides was perfectly suited for a dynastic module in which a different set of Gandhis claimed the first word and had the last one. The seal of authority is with the family, not the prime minister, whether the issue be a minor nominee for any position or the partition of a state like Andhra Pradesh.

Non-Congress parties devised variations peculiar to individual culture. Communists imported their command structure from the Soviet Union; it lasted about

as long as the Soviet Union. The Marxist politburo is a pale shadow of what it was even under Harkishen Singh Surjit. Today, the Bengal and Kerala parties shrug and take their own decisions.

India's melee of socialists, who were more democratic than Congress but not necessarily more egalitarian, despised the idea of command so much that they went the extra mile and destroyed their leaders. The movement, paradoxically, could only survive by splitting. It has quietly abandoned ideology for caste, and inducted some stability through family rule in smaller but more homogenous units.

The BJP created a high command, RSS, which served primarily as a guardian of ideology. This involved some contradictions. When the BJP was too weak to protect the Indian state in a national crisis, RSS gave nation priority over party and readily allied with Congress PM Lal Bahadur Shastri during the 1965 war with Pakistan, lauded Mrs Indira Gandhi as a goddess after the formation of Bangladesh in 1971 and helped her during the seminal challenges from secessionist forces in the 1980s despite the fact that she had banned RSS during the Emergency. On a parallel course, RSS interacted with BJP through a small set of Delhi leaders, who thereby also became pre-eminent figures in the party.

A rising federal impulse has also changed the character of parties. If chief ministers now bring in the votes, they will also take the decisions. The central government does not manage any geography; CMs administer the country. Delhi is almost quasi-colonial. It collects taxes, shapes legislation and takes some responsibility for security, but any policy relevant to the people, including food security, is the business of states. Delhi might, for electoral reasons, usurp advertising rights, but the real *annadaata* is the chief minister.

This phenomenon has strengthened regional formations, but also exposed their limitations, for none of them is in a position to provide the strong kernel without which a national alliance becomes too flimsy to survive. The solution to this conundrum? National parties with strong regional spokes.

Indian politics will mirror India. The balance of power within BJP has shifted. Its CMs are not beholden to Delhi; if anything, it is the other way around. The leadership tensions we report today are part of the transition process. Congress is less tense only because its provincial leadership has been emasculated. And yet, even a weakling like Kiran Reddy can threaten to split over Telengana; while in Assam a confident Tarun Gogoi swats away local ambition promoted by Delhi. Gogoi has measured the high command and knows it has potency issues.

Rahul Gandhi will not be able to run Congress as his mother has done, let alone his grandmother, Indira Gandhi. If he had a stronger personality he might have postponed the inevitable, but not prevented it. Change took its time, but it has arrived. The states of the nation will determine the state of India.

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REVERTS

Another man's poison

Vinod Mehta's article (In defence of Sonia, September 1) fails to distinguish between effectively aiding the poor and attempting to do it in a manner that actually harms them. Thus, I distinguish between populism as an objective — where we worry about the poor — and populism as a means (where counterproductive policies are followed to aid the poor but hurt them instead). Unfortunately, before the reforms which gained steam in 1991, we were into populist policies which had harmed the poor since low growth meant that we could not "pull up" the poor significantly above the poverty line, nor could we generate the growth-led revenues to undertake the social expenditures which we wanted to undertake to additionally help the poor. When some economists advocate a return to populist policies as a way of aiding the poor, I am reminded of the great economist John Kenneth Galbraith's witty retort to Nobel Laureate Milton Friedman: The trouble with Milton's prescriptions is that they have been tried. I applaud Mrs Sonia Gandhi for her populist objectives. But I despair when she accepts bad advice and turns to populist policies to achieve them. There seems to be a consensus now that expanded food security bill expenditures will add to inflation and harm the poor and the lower middle class. Will the UPA government wake up in time and spew out this poison pill?

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REPLAY

THOSE STEREOTYPES ARE SO OUTDATED. THERE'S MORE INDIAN DUDES DOING SITCOMS THAN THERE ARE RUNNING 7-11s. WE ARE STRAIGHT UP SNATCHING ROLES FROM WHITE ACTORS. MY LAST THREE ROLES WERE RANDY, CHET AND TOM

INDIAN-AMERICAN COMIC ASIF ANSARI RESPONDS TO JOKES STEREOTYPING THE INDIAN COMMUNITY IN THE US

The kings in our minds

THE UNDERAGE OPTIMIST

CHETAN BHAGAT



I remember that afternoon — the Western Express Highway in Mumbai had a traffic jam. The vital suburban highway connects various important points of the city, including the airport. I, like several others on the road, had a flight to catch. On a normal day, it would take ten minutes to the terminal. However, today, the traffic had not moved for over half an hour.

The jam wasn't due to road construction or a vehicle mishap. Instead, a few cops had intentionally stopped the traffic. "VIP movement," is all a cop told me when I asked. Some of us begged the cops to let us go lest we miss our flight. The cops shooed us away. The stranded crowd smirked at us, as if saying how stupid of us to even try.

I saw the faces of people waiting in their bikes, cars, buses and auto rickshaws. The long jam meant literally thousands of people waiting to move behind us. People were late for work, business meetings, doctor's appointments, social visits and college. Yet, while everyone was uncomfortable, nobody seemed agitated either. After all, this was a part of Indian life. A *neta* passes, the world around has to stop.

I made frantic calls to the airline staff and managed to get a boarding pass printed. When traffic finally cleared, I was lucky to make it to the flight. The airline, aware of the jam, had delayed the plane somewhat. It would now delay other flights elsewhere in India. Despite this, many passengers couldn't make it. These people spent considerable time, effort and money to re-book themselves to their destinations. I had a speaking engagement in my destination city. If I had missed this flight, the function would have to be cancelled.

Meanwhile, I assume the *neta* arrived in Mumbai, had people salute him, lift his bags and shut his car doors. He would have zipped off the highway on his way to cut a ribbon somewhere or have a meeting; probably important but not urgent either. If the road had not been cleared for him, he would have still reached his destination, perhaps ten minutes later (and with a more realistic picture of the roads and traffic in Mumbai.)

However, to ensure his comfort thousands waited for an hour; airlines upset schedules, and at least one event planner in the country had a panic attack. Who was this VIP? He was an MP, a minister. He was neither the king of India nor the colonial ruler of our country. We don't have those anymore. The person was an elected representative, someone people had chosen to do a job.

Sure, to handle a ministry of a large country is not a small job. He does deserve respect for it. However, does respect mean subservience? Does someone having a powerful job mean we accept any form of power abuse from him or her? Do we think it is ok for a busy city to stop just because some elected leader needs a smooth ride to his or her meeting? If we do, aren't we at some level accepting, and even

becoming accomplices to, the subjugation?

Of course, some would argue: what other option do we have? Creating a ruckus on the blocked road would only create more havoc. A public protest could turn into a mob-like situation, which isn't the solution either. The answer to power abuse is not anarchy.

So what do we do? Before we answer that, we need to see why our elected representatives continue to think of themselves as little monarchs.

Our political class inherited a British colonial system, which had zero accountability to the colonized. Quite cleverly, they never changed laws to bring in accountability, the cornerstone of a democracy. Till date, our *netas* try to rule us like colonial rulers and hate any proposals that reduce their powers or demand accountability.

While such legal and policy battles continue, a large part of the problem is also the Indian mindset. We do see them as our kings. We do think 'they



HIGH ROAD: Our elected representatives continue to think of themselves as monarchs

are in power' means 'they can do anything.' We do not realize 'being in power' means 'being in power to only do things in national interest.'

If Indians change this mindset, changes to laws and policies will follow. Specifically, if a majority of us see and expect *netas* to be service providers instead of rulers, it will trigger a huge behavioral change in the political class.

How do you change mindsets across the country? Well, start with yourself, and then try to change as many others as possible. If you suffered, talk about it. Text friends, talk about it on social networks and to your colleagues. Tell everyone if you witness abuse of power, especially when your service provider *neta* acts like an entitled prince. Sure, they drive your nation, but just as a hired driver drives a bus. The driver cannot start believing he owns the bus. The driver should also know that if he doesn't drive well, he would be removed.

So let us work on changing this mindset if we want a better India. Kings and colonizers left our country over six decades ago. It is time they left our minds.

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