

FETISH FOR 'STYLE' SAARC Yatra may add substance

THERE appears no end to the gesture-driven foreign policy being prosecuted by the PMO rather than the MEA, though the returns have not been commensurate with the media hype. Well, since it is the latter that seems the priority, Mr Narendra Modi's typically stylish "cricket diplomacy" on the eve of the ICC World Cup has done the trick ~ it re-captured the headlines from AAP's spectacular showing. Probably nothing more: maybe yielding even less than an evening on the banks of the Sabarmati. While stressing the willow game's serving as a regional adhesive, Raisina Hill also acknowledged what it otherwise opts to ignore: the colonial traditions that link the South Asian region. Indeed link all the nations in action Down Under this southern summer. In normal course the Prime Minister's symbolic "best of luck" to his counterparts would have merited a resounding "three cheers"; sadly it would trigger no more than two since it is clearly a second attempt at what he would have hoped would accrue when he invited them to his swearing-in. Inevitably the call to Islamabad attracts special attention, raises tricky queries. True that "baggage" must be shed, but since the BJP always asked what had changed in between the highs and lows of the bilateral relationship it is relevant to repeat the query ~ has there been any reversal of the factors that had prompted New Delhi to unilaterally junk the scheduled foreign-secretary interaction ~ has Islamabad dumped the All Party Hurriyat Conference that queers the pitch in the Kashmir Valley? Has that reconciliatory posture been adopted to facilitate the BJP getting a toehold in J&K clinging to the PDP's petticoat, or did "Barack" prove to be Mr. Obama behind the scenes?

What does trigger positive thinking is the announcement of the foreign secretary's SAARC Yatra. Without entering into argument over whether he enjoys the Prime Minister's confidence more than Sushma Swaraj does, the professionalism for which he is reputed might inject some sorely needed substance into the diplomatic effort. That he will be making specific trips to each country would liberate him from having to function within the farcical SAARC framework. And since this is the season of cricketing metaphors let it be noted that the No. 3 batter is often required to compensate for the flashiness of the No. 1. Will Jaishankar do for Modi what Dravid had to do for Schwag?

RHINO RHETORIC Rings a trifle hollow

THE hopes and enthusiasm of wildlife lovers raised by the Assam government's unveiling of a master-plan for protecting the endangered rhino were doused somewhat when the National Green Tribunal found it necessary to issue orders on a "basic". Making some scathing observations, the Tribunal directed the closure of all shops and eateries along National Highway 37 as it ran through the famous Kaziranga sanctuary, which apart from being the most populated home of the famed one-horn rhino also plays host to a rich, rare, collection of flora and fauna. The NGT issued similar instructions for smaller roads in the vicinity of known rhino corridors. Emphasising the gravity of the situation the "green watchdog" directed submission of a list of all animals killed as a result of traffic mishaps over the past couple of years, details of prosecutions launched against drivers who violated speed restrictions, and effective monitoring of sensors that help regulate vehicular traffic. If the pictures painted by the NGT were not in themselves disturbing enough, they also "took away" a lot from an elaborate plan the chief minister has trumpeted (there are elephants there too) to protect an estimated 2,329 rhinos in the park ~ which lost 29 animals to poachers alone last year, another five slaughtered in 2015.

The NGT has actually put the chief minister in a tight spot by pointing to how bureaucratic and top-heavy the plan he announced with much fanfare was. There can be no quarrel with the plan to raise a special Rhino Protection Force of 12,000 personnel, sophisticated equipment etc, but certain basic shortcomings could be addressed too ~ controlling traffic in Kaziranga being among them. Conveniently the chief minister passed the buck by seeking Central assistance for the plan. What would be worth watching is the success of his appeal to the corporate sector for assistance ~ provided the state government explains what initiatives it has taken on its own: for example the creation of high grounds within the park upon which the animals could "take shelter" during the floods that threaten their existence virtually every monsoon. The short point being that plans that sound so effective at press conferences fall flat for simple reasons ~ like allowing commercial activity along roads running through Kaziranga. The poacher is not the only killer.

WAITING IN TRIPURA Hope and despair for Bru refugees

FOR about 32,000 Reang refugees living in Tripura's makeshift camps in pitiable conditions since October 1997, it has been a constant swing from great expectation to disillusionment. They are now identified as Brus, ostensibly to distinguish them from their community scattered in other states and who are likely to get Scheduled Tribe status. Initially there were more than 40,000 of them but over the years some have been repatriated while some deserted camps on their own. They were forced to leave Mizoram following riots in which 10 people were killed after Bru militants allegedly murdered a Mizo forest warden. But even before this, tensions between Mizos and Brus had been building up ever since the latter demanded an autonomous district council as enjoyed by other ethnic groups. Central officials have admitted that a serious economic problem has cropped up due to Brus' prolonged stay in Tripura. The Lalthanawla government has taken the firm stand that it will accept only those who have genuine citizenship documents. The previous Zoramthanga government also took the same stand during its ten-year tenure.

The Bru National Liberation Front should pose no threat after about 800 cadres surrendered in 2006 and that was part of the agreement to pave the way for repatriation. The Mizoram government in 2010 had to suspend repatriation after some refugees blocked the passage of those who were being repatriated. The Mizoram Bru Displaced Welfare Organisation also wants the state government to fully implement the rehabilitation package before more are allowed to leave and also demands that the refugees be resettled in a compact area in Mamit district for security reasons. Now with both the government and refugees not sure of what the next development will be the problem is becoming more confused and intractable.

The WASH Summit

Beyond Toilets And Behaviour Change

philippe cullet

A WASH summit ~ WASH stands for water, sanitation and hygiene ~ is being organised by the Government of India in Delhi from 16 to 18 February. This is meant to reflect on the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) launched recently and to examine what it can and should achieve in the next five years.

This is an exciting time for anyone concerned with sanitation since SBM has given sanitation the status of a political priority for the Government. Indeed, since the launch of SBM in October 2014, cleanliness has started featuring much more regularly in the media. Cleanliness provides a way to force people to reflect on the link between solid and liquid waste, and sanitation and water, thereby broadening the framework within which sanitation is conceived.

The potential and limits of SBM can be best identified by comparing the framework for rural sanitation since this updates an existing programme, the Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan (NBA). On the whole, the Guidelines for SBM (Gramin) are conceptually similar to the NBA Guidelines of 2012. This allows for continuity but fails to address the shortcomings of the earlier policy framework. This is unfortunate because experience with the NBA and before that, the Total Sanitation Campaign, calls for further thinking on the manner in which the fundamental right to sanitation is realised in rural areas.

The WASH Summit should consider the previous experience with the implementation of NBA, which was largely focused on providing 'incentives' to build individual toilets and on ensuring behaviour change that would lead people to 'demand' toilets and use them once built. SBM (Gramin) does not deviate from this focus and in fact strengthens it by increasing the incentive amount. The focus thus remains on the provision of infrastructure and individual motivation. This strategy needs further thinking for several reasons:

First, the main emphasis of the rural sanitation campaign since 1999 has been on building individual toilets and motivating individuals to build and use them. This overlooks the fact that sanitation cannot be reduced to the elimination of open defecation. If open defecation is harmful to human health, individual toilets can only be an effective solution if they are accompanied by investments in management of the resulting human waste. Two-pit structures that do not leak contaminated water into the ground and ensure that no one handles human excreta (the practice of manual scavenging) can be constructed. However, this is not the design adopted in all cases and is unlikely to be adopted universally for cost and cultural reasons. We need to move beyond the focus on individual toilets towards strategies that integrate toilets within a broader paradigm that addresses the link between the use of water, production of wastewater and waterborne diseases linked to sanitation. Indeed, from the rights' perspective, what we should be concerned with is a right to sanitation, not a right to pee and/or defecate.

Second, the focus on individual toilets is premised on the existence of homogenous households where all individuals have similar access to the infrastructure and they benefit equally from it. Interestingly, in the state of Rajasthan, the honour of the village and the family has been the centre-piece of the strategy to eliminate open defecation. This is based on the premise that open defecation

by womenfolk debases the village/family. The rationale for toilet construction has thus been that it will protect women from the dangers associated with open defecation (including sexual aggression) and that women will not have to wait for the cover of darkness to answer the call of nature. At the same time, there has been little recognition that toilets meant to primarily serve women may be built in areas of the household compound used mostly by men. The thinking about sanitation thus needs to be broader. Ending open defecation results in various beneficial effects, but it does not necessarily foster the realisation of the fundamental right to sanitation of all. In fact, it may lead to unwelcome consequences, such as further confining women in their own homes.



Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) needs to be recast so that its main focus becomes the realisation of the fundamental right to sanitation repeatedly recognised by the higher judiciary

Third, sanitation must be understood much more clearly as something that impacts the private and public spheres. In this context, the specific emphasis of the SBM (urban) guidelines on community and public toilets as part of the overall conception of sanitation is welcome. In rural areas, the provision of community toilets has existed for a number of years but it has not been implemented, mostly because there is no provision for maintenance. A lot more attention needs to be given to community toilets if they are to make a real contribution to the realisation of the right to sanitation.

Fourth, there is need to emphasise the labour component of sanitation. The emphasis on 'behaviour change' is necessary but must be accompanied by investment in the people running the system. Thus, despite the emphasis put on sanitation, particularly since the launch of the NBA in 2012, there are still too few people within the local and district administration whose work focuses on sanitation. Further, there is a significant need for more people charged with maintaining the sanitation infrastructure, such as school toilets and public toilets. In this respect, SBM does not make any particular commitments towards strengthening the workforce that can make the mission a success in the short run and the long run. This requires attention not only in terms of strengthening capacity but also ensuring that the creation of additional workforce does not result in the reproduction of patterns of discrimination that are slowly on the way towards being eliminated (such as the practice of manual scavenging).

Fifth, the link between sanitation and water pollution remains largely unaddressed. It is in fact more visible now since the urban sanitation guidelines are exclusively focused on solid waste management. Black water (what comes out of toilets) is not the only form of household water pollution but it will remain largely mixed with grey water

(other household wastewater) for many years to come. The treatment and disposal of wastewater must thus be addressed comprehensively, as illustrated in the case of a city like Delhi, whose sewage is mostly dumped untreated into a river whose flow has been decreasing over time. A more direct link must be made in law and policy between water pollution (understood as an environmental issue) and sewage (understood as a sanitation issue). There will probably be significant resistance to this, as it will involve massive investments. However, this is essential in order to reach the goal of Swachh Bharat, as all the effort towards construction of individual toilets will eventually come to nothing in environmental and health terms if the broader issues are not addressed. This

'convergence' is a must if interventions are to make a difference in practice and it must involve both health and environmental aspects, which are mentioned in SBM but not comprehensively integrated. This is all the more crucial in a context where there seems to be a push towards weakening, rather than strengthening, environmental standards in place, as feared by many in the wake of the November 2014 report of the High Level Committee to review environmental legislation. The convergence needed is thus one that strengthens all the relevant frameworks simultaneously.

Sixth, there is a lot of emphasis on the fact that individuals must 'demand' toilets so as to create a sense of ownership. This is the reason why the financial assistance provided is termed an 'incentive' rather than a 'subsidy'. Yet, some criticise this payment as a waste of resources and argue that once villagers are 'motivated', they will find the resources to build a toilet. It is also sometimes argued that the incentive is actually sufficient to build 'a' toilet. At the same time, villagers have repeatedly highlighted the impossibility of building a fully functional latrine with the incentive money and the absence of additional resources to make up the shortfall. This partly explains the number of toilets used as storage spaces and the number of half-built structures that cannot really be put to any use. The problem is that the majority of rural households do not possess the necessary resources to invest in the kind of toilets that will not only make them end open defecation but that are also safe (in terms of concerns relating to leaching) and appropriate (in terms of no handling of excreta). Both the past and present government have shown that they are willing to make substantial investments to ensure the realisation of the fundamental right to sanitation. This is positive but resources need to be spent in a way that considers not only the narrow goal of ending open defecation but also all allied issues.

On the whole, SBM needs to be recast so that its main focus becomes the realisation of the fundamental right to sanitation repeatedly recognised by the higher judiciary. This reframing will provide the basis for building a much stronger policy framework recognising all sanitation-related entitlements. The forthcoming WASH summit provides an excellent platform to initiate this discussion.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Surrender to communal forces

SIR, ~ Apropos Kuldip Nayar's thought-provoking article, 'Storm over secularism' (5 February), it is a matter of grave concern that the BJP is gradually submitting to the will of its Hindutva fringe. Though the Prime Minister was at first trying to oppose the vitriolic fundamentalism propagated by the Hindutva lobby, he now seems to have either surrendered to the communal forces or adapted himself to this dihard ideology.

The secular political forces, represented by the Congress and the Left Front, has perhaps infused Modi with a strange sort of confidence that there is no political party to stall the irresistible ascendancy of the BJP. The non-BJP parties cannot afford to misinterpret secularism to woo the minority voters. The latter has seen through the hypocrisy.

Modi won a landslide victory in Varanasi despite the presence there of a large number of minority voters. During his election campaign he was able to project a secular image, if a political gambit. As head of government, he ought not to be dictated by his party's Hindutva wing.

His tacit support to the communal activities of the RSS and the VHP ~ such as re-conversion ~ cannot but harm the country's secular ethos. There is communal tension in Uttar Pradesh and Delhi.

The term "socialism" was denuded by the Congress when it endorsed privatisation and globalization as integral to economic reformation. The words, 'secular' and 'socialist' have considerable relevance in multi-religious India.

yours, etc., buddhadev nandi, bankura, 9 february.

Beyond AAP charisma

SIR, ~ Apropos the editorial, "Myriad messages" (12 February), when a party that breaks the 30-year jinx of coalition governments at the Centre with 282 seats on its own, ends up with just three seats in the Delhi Assembly, there is lot more than an AAP charisma. The Sangh Parivar has never allowed itself to be overshadowed by individuals. Vajpayee, Advani and others have been shown their places earlier, and so has it been with Modi this time around. The in-house politicking reminds one of how the CPI-M denied Jyoti Basu the opportunity to become Prime Minister. Modi perhaps continues to remain an outsider to the core group within the Sangh Parivar.

One wonders how an experienced Modi allowed himself to be cut off so effectively from the domestic scene as fringe elements of the rabid Hindutva bandwagon ran wild. The PM has been reduced to a mute onlooker and left dabbling with long-term

foreign policy. There clearly is a coterie that believes that Modi has been commissioned just to increase the GDP and that all else is out of bounds for him. With the Delhi elections behind us, we certainly have not heard the last of such internal contradictions within the Bharatiya Janata Party.

yours, etc., r narayanan, ghaziabad, 12 february.

Challenging task

SIR, ~ Delhi's Chief Minister-designate Arvind Kejriwal has decided to exclude from his ministry all those who had stirred a controversy during the previous 49-day tenure of the AAP government. He faces a challenging task of leading 67 party members in a 70-member legislative Assembly in an era of over-ambitious legislators.

It often happens that law-breakers claim to be king-makers. There are reports that some encroachers might try to revive their illegal activity by donning AAP caps. During Left Front rule in West Bengal, pavements across Kolkata were encroached upon by hawkers, many of them wearing red caps. In Delhi, residents of *juggie* colonies have erected shacks after being provided land/flats by the government.

yours, etc., madhu agrawal, new delhi, 13 february.

Thailand Agency Defends Mass Cyber Surveillance

THAILAND should not be compared with other countries, says Takorn Tantasith, secretary-general of its powerful National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC).

Defending the agency's controversial mass internet surveillance aimed at stamping out criticism of Thailand's monarchy, Takorn said in an interview: "We want to clear everything up. The feelings of people towards kings and monarchies are different from one country to another."

"In Thailand, we love the king so much that we regard His Majesty as the soul of the nation... We do not criticise the king. This is the tradition, the norm and the culture of Thailand."

The NBTC is the licensing authority for broadcasters and Internet Service Providers (ISPs).

The royalist military regime has been taking a harder line. Last month, it impeached former prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra, and summoned at least three former Cabinet members for a dressing down over their comments.

It also barred her from going overseas ahead of a criminal charge over a botched and allegedly corrupt rice purchase scheme that has cost the state billions of baht.

Last Saturday, the authorities seized banners satirising the regime from university students in Bangkok. Today, its hand-picked national legislative assembly is due to vote on a measure that would give the army powers to detain anyone for up to 84 days with no judicial oversight. The move has led the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to express concern.

A man was arrested last week for faking a royal statement, shared on social media, that said King Bhumibol Adulyadej, 87 and in frail health, had appointed a regent. In private, many Thais are anxious about the royal succession. On Tuesday, police said they had "dismantled an anti-monarchy network" and arrested the alleged ringleader in Bangkok.

Thailand's Article 112 and the Computer Crimes Act are the regime's key legal weapons. Article 112 ~ commonly called the lese majeste law ~ specifies up to 15 years' jail for anyone found guilty of insulting the king, queen, crown prince or regent. Cases under Article 112 are on the rise, analysts say. The law in effect kills all public debate and discussion on the monarchy.

Takorn said the NBTC has asked Facebook, YouTube and Line to remove content critical of the Thai monarchy. He acknowledged there could be technical difficulties, and that other countries may not have comparable laws.

While "groups of people" criticising the monarchy are a small minority, Takorn said their views are amplified by social media, spread quickly online and "make people think it is a big deal".

Warring groups were trying to drag the monarchy into politics, he insisted. Some 200 websites were shut down in November and December. There have been fewer cases this year, he added.

Asked about balancing censorship with expectations of free speech, he said: "Freedom still exists, even within the scope of martial law. We look at only two main issues ~ criticism of the monarch, and threat to national security."

The government must protect the monarchy, he said, adding: "We need to follow the law, and the law says protect the king."

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