

A nation is a society united by delusions about its ancestry and by common hatred of its neighbors
William Ralph Inge

Rise in Transport Cost

At long last the West Bengal Government has been forced to agree to an increase in the fares rates of all modes of public transport – buses, minibuses, taxis and ferries. The rising cost of diesel made the fare hike inevitable. This will hit hard the middle class people who are already suffering from a number of factors making holes in their pocket – from a general rise in commodity prices to lower interest rates on term deposits to higher borrowing rates as the latest upward revision of repo rates by the RBI has done. Cooking gas price has also been raised. This is not the achche din the people voted the NDA Government for four years ago. The Government is giving excuses and explanations but is not spelling out any measures that will make the life of the common people a little less arduous.

Indeed, as the count down to the next general elections begins there is no ray of hope for any section of people anywhere. The farmers are up in arms. The job loss in the industries is much more than job creation. The middle class is fuming. They can only cut down on the cost of food because other expenses – from commuting to children's education, from the doctors' bill to clothing – cannot be reduced. Students look despondently at a bleak future when they complete their studies and enter the job market.

The ruling party is trying desperately to hold its NDA flock together and keeps NDA allies in good humour. The opposition parties are trying to take electoral advantage of the people's discontent but they have also failed to come out with a programme to mitigate the sufferings of the people. It is difficult to understand why the Centre should be under so much financial constraint. By levying huge excise duty on imported fuel even when fuel prices had fallen in the global market, the Centre has earned tens of millions of rupees. It has cut down heavily on budget allocations for many Centrally-sponsored schemes and passed on the burden to the State Governments. Most of these schemes were related to job creation in the rural areas. The health of the banking industry is woeful. Corporate sharks have defrauded the banks and made them sick. Now the Government is pumping in people's money to make good the loss by way of recapitalization of the banks. Meanwhile the common people are having to cough out more money every day to stay afloat.

Too many chinks in BJP's 'invincibility' armour

REFLEX ACTION

Amulya Ganguli

As in London last April, Narendra Modi participated in a choreographed question-and-answer session in Singapore recently, where one of his responses was apparently to a pre-set query. The difference between the two events was that the BJP aficionado and censor board chief, Praseon Joshi, managed to camouflage the pre-arranged nature of the show in London with much greater efficiency than what was done in Singapore.

The faux pas of the organizers in Singapore related to the mechanical act of the English translator of Modi's replies in Hindi to read out in full the script that had been given to her, instead of confining herself to only the portion which the prime minister had said. Since the latter gave a much shorter reply to a question than what was apparently decided on earlier, the translator did not know where to stop and read out a much longer version of the speech. It was an embarrassing episode which again showed that Modi preferred a pre-scripted interaction in order to avoid controversial issues. The problem, however, with such stage-managed shows is the fostering of an illusion of control and invincibility, which are the hallmarks of the Modi dispensation. The illusion is also created by the orchestrated chanting of "Modi, Modi" by cheerleaders or ganized by the party, as in Shantiniketan recently. These are standard techniques of authoritarian regimes which may work in a dictatorship but are out of place in democracies. This was the lesson which Indira Gandhi learnt to her dismay when she told a journalist after her 1977 defeat that she did not receive any feedback about the prevailing discontent because of the press censorship.

It is possible that the present-day rulers, too, may find themselves to be out of touch with the popular mood if they keep themselves away from no-holds-

barred press conferences and depend only on pre-arranged pow-wows with "reliable" scribes and expect the saffron social media trolls and heavily-biased television channels to give an idea of what the people are thinking. It is probably because the BJP leaders have been living in such an echo-chamber that they have failed to anticipate the shift in the public mindset that has been evident in a number of recent by-elections.

The carefully monitored shows in London and Singapore were noteworthy not only for the rehearsed interactive sessions, with the anchor, Praseon Joshi, providing cues to the prime minister for indulging in self-praise about his energy and concern for the poor, but also for keeping out suspected dissenters from the audience. Where, for instance, was the professor who asked Rahul Gandhi during an unrehearsed interaction in Singapore last March about India's economic woes during the reigns of the Nehru-Gandhi family? A negative feature of living in a closed environment is not only to miss out on what the people outside are thinking, but also to breed a sense of hubris about the correctness of the path which the ruling party is following along with contempt for the existing norms. One of the examples of this disdain was the Karnataka governor, Vajubhai Vala's decision to give as many as 15 days to the BJP's chief ministerial nominee, B S Yeddyurappa, to prove his majority on the floor of the

House even if the indulgent leeway was seen as an open invitation to defections. The Supreme Court's curtailment of the time-limit to a day was, therefore, a well-deserved snub to the governor. But the latter could have avoided such an admonition if he did not live in a secluded atmosphere of the party faithful and eschewed his partisan preferences on entering the Raj Bhavan. If he didn't do so, it is because the BJP has apparently convinced itself that the 2014 verdict is an all-time declaration of faith by the people in the party, which is why BJP president Amit Shah has said that the BJP is looking forward to win all elections from panchayats to parliament for the next 50 years.

The objective is laudable and should perhaps be pursued by other political parties as well. But it nevertheless emphasizes the idea of a one-party rule which can also be seen in the BJP's oft-repeated ambition of ushering in a Congress-mukt Bharat. Yet, when the Congress was in power at the centre and in most of the states, especially in the first 20 years after 1947, it never spoke of ridding the country of the various opposition parties. Instead, as observers have noted, the country's first prime minister made it a point to attend the parliamentary sessions regularly and listen attentively to the opposition speakers.

Even if this belief in democratic traditions was trampled upon by the Congress during the Emergency, it was regarded as an aberration, as a Congress stalwart of the time, Y B Chavan, had said. Moreover, the party was punished for its sins by the electorate in 1977. In this context, BJP patriarch L K Advani's statement a year after Modi's assumption of power that the anti-democratic forces have become "stronger" and the more recent open letter by a group of retired bureaucrats about the growing authoritarianism are worrying signs. (IPA)



Pope Francis blesses a child in Saint Peter's square at the Vatican---REUTERS

Needed: Priority for core economic issues

FOCUS

G Srinivasan

For the Modi Government, the celebration of the four years of corruption-free governance with the receipt of the mixed message of the latest batch of by-polls to Lok Sabha and State Assemblies across the nation behind, the crucial final year of its first term is replete with existential challenges on the economic front. Politically, Modi may be invincibly in a pole position to lead his party for a second term with the rank and file adoring him as the mascot of the BJP with all the adulations due to a celebrity leader, despite the manifest protests of the party's elders, who were left high and dry during the last few years. Though there is not much of a difference between a dynasty and a single-party supreme leader in terms of his or her writ being run unquestioned, the fact remains that a viable democracy like ours always throws up puzzling results at the hustings whenever people feel short-changed or betrayed by leaders who promised a lot but delivered precious little in making a qualitative difference to their otherwise morose existence. Inflation, rising crude oil prices and agrarian distress remain by far major challenges now.

In this context, apart from the domestic rating agencies or a few multilateral institutions, such as the IMF or the World Bank, the assessment of credible inter-governmental think tank of 34 rich industrial countries such as the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation & Development (OECD) always counts and matters. India is also enjoying observer status in OECD. The first NDA government's tallest leader, Atal Behari Vajpayee, had said way back in 1999-2003 that India would join the league of advanced nations by 2020. It was also significant that during Vajpayee's tenure India got the observer status in the OECD when Jaswant Singh was the Finance Minister. The digression apart, what the OECD has said in its bi-annual World Economic Outlook of developments in individual OECD and selected non-member economies, the latter include India, matters in terms of where India is perched in its ambitious goal to be an advanced country after a decade and a half of Vajpayee's assertion.

OECD maintains that India's economic growth is increasing, making it the fastest-growing G20 economy with investment and exports underpinning and complementing, duly bolstered by the smoother implementation of the new goods and services tax (GST). For a country credited to enjoy demographic dividend of youthful population, OECD's observation that job creation in the formal sector to remain sluggish, "leaving the vast majority of workers in low-productivity low-paid

activities" meant that there is anything scarcely to cheer up for growth-propelling forces to render the growth engine gain traction. Rightly OECD contended that investing more in education and training, combined with modernisation of labour laws, would help foster better jobs and render growth more inclusive. It is rather unfortunate that the Modi Government had not improved much on investing in education and training or reforming the arcane labour laws to suit the mundane needs of modern investors or self-employed start-ups. It is one thing to make high-faluting sloganeering on increased focus on imparting skills or reforming labour laws incrementally without giving anything by way of leeway to the employer to make the best use of one of the vital factors of production, i.e., labour in an efficient manner to maximise returns on the scarce capital at exorbitant interest cost in a high-cost economy. The OECD report, while lauding the number of employees eligible for social security benefits has been boosted by an amnesty scheme for companies, noted that this still stands below 10 per cent of total employees. It further pointed out that India's

employment data is partial, which suggests that "overall job creation has been lackluster". This is a serious indictment on the reporting of labour statistics in the country as recently an unseemly controversy broke out over the alleged creation of seven million jobs in 2017-18 based on payroll data in the organized sector. This was widely criticised and commented upon by independent policy wonks as being innovatively imaginary or imagined conclusion based on extant imperfect data! However, OECD rightly noted that better assessing outcomes, in particular in terms of job creation, would be key to identify best practices and modernisation of laws. Recent initiatives to improve the quality and timeliness of labour data should continue, it said.

As India is suffering from investment famine with private investment in a dormant mood, OECD aptly argued that bringing the banking system back to health is crucial to support the recovery in investment. Recapitalisation of public sector banks is supporting loan revival and recent steps to speed up the recognition of stressed assets

would help improve the resolution of non-performing advances (assets)-the NPAs which are large by global norms. It noted that reforms to improve the bank governance are also needed to avoid a new build-up of NPAs. Better safeguarding the interests of minority shareholders would put pressure on banks to take more prudent and independent decisions, while better risk management and auditing in public sector banks would contribute to the quality of banks' portfolio. It suggests that public sector banks should be given the ability to attract and retain talents, including through more elbowroom in setting employee compensation. These are nothing dramatic or not thought through by domestic economists and their innumerable ilk but the progress in taking action in this direction remains glacial and guarded by the authorities.

With time running out for the incumbent government as it must perform have to seek renewed mandate before long, it is time the political leadership focused its attention on core economic agenda sans diluting its energy and efforts in the absurd political theatres to score brownie points over its scattered opponents, who were yet to find their feet from the debacle of their 2014, notwithstanding their new-fangled zeal to put up a combined fight against the NDA! (IPA)

Conventional Crossword

1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10		
11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28

- | | |
|----------------------|--------------------|
| ACROSS | DOWN |
| 1 Flower | 1 Preferable |
| 4 Dissolve | 2 Baking chamber |
| 7 Amazon | 3 Thin fog |
| 8 Wearies | 4 Equal |
| 10 Labour | 5 Self |
| 11 Fantastic trick | 6 Tarry |
| 12 Printing measures | 9 Coarse file |
| 14 Pay attention | 13 Ripa |
| 17 Deeply engrossed | 15 Direction |
| 19 Land measure | 16 Fault |
| 20 Eastern rulers | 18 Time in grammar |
| 23 Rotate | 21 Article |
| 25 Tenth part | 22 Be carried |
| 26 Hazardous | 24 Discumber |
| 27 Yield | |
| 28 Worth | |

SUDOKU: 2217

5	9		6					
	2		3		5			1
4				7				
	5	6		8		9	3	
			3					7
9	7		5			4		
8		1						
			8			3	9	

Yesterday's Solution 2216

3	8	4	2	6	5	9	7	1
5	6	1	3	9	7	2	8	4
7	9	2	4	8	1	5	6	3
8	2	6	9	7	3	4	1	5
1	4	3	8	5	2	6	9	7
9	7	5	6	1	4	3	2	8
6	3	7	1	4	9	8	5	2
2	5	9	7	3	8	1	4	6
4	1	8	5	2	6	7	3	9

Yesterday's Cross Word Solution 2225

S	W	A	N	P	A	G	E
P	A	G	O	D	A	O	E
A	R	I	D	R	A	P	E
C	L	R	A	T	T	A	N
E	V	E	N	E	D	L	
O	F	F	E	E	L	E	R
R	I	F	L	E	S	E	E
O	D	E	R	D	A	W	N
T	T	E	R	A	S	E	D
S	U	E	D	E	B	E	E

DISCLAIMER
The views in the articles published here are absolutely the views of the author and The Echo of India does not stand liable for them.