

Trying to be a first-rate reporter on the average American newspaper is like trying to play Bach's 'St. Matthew's Passion' on a ukulele
Baghician's Observation

Kolkata to Kunming in two hours

While the bullet train between Ahmedabad and Mumbai is still a dream waiting to become a reality, the Chinese have now come out with a sensational proposal of running a bullet train between Kolkata and Kunming. According to the Chinese Consul General in Kolkata, if the project becomes reality, it will take just two hours to cover the two thousand km journey. He made another astounding claim in the same breath. The proposed bullet train will take two hours to cover a distance which a flight takes two and a half hours. In other words, the bullet train will run faster than an aeroplane! The route will lie through Myanmar and Bangladesh and form part of the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) corridor. This is the first time that the idea of such a 'corridor' has been mooted.

The Chinese official did not give any details of the proposed project. Whether a proposal to this effect has been formally made to the Indian Government and if so what was New Delhi's response; the cost of the project; and whether it will be built entirely with Chinese money which India will have to repay and at what rate of interest. Pakistan is already reeling under a \$50 billion debt to China for building the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Many fear that Pakistan will be unable to repay the loan and eventually be forced to sell stakes to the Chinese company or companies that are building it, in the same way that Sri Lanka was forced to sell 80 per cent equity to the Chinese for the Hambantota port project.

China had earlier urged India to join the CPEC. Naturally, India did not agree. The present proposal to build a railway line from Kunming to Kolkata may be another bait to draw India into the One Belt One Road (OBOR) project which India has refused to be part of. China is now pursuing a policy of economic colonialism. It is lending billions of dollars for infrastructure development in developing countries, to bring them under its economic domination. Naturally, it will try to bring India into its net. Officially, New Delhi has never said that a Kolkata-Kunming bullet train project has been proposed by Beijing. In the circumstances, the Chinese Consul General disclosing such a proposal at a media conference in Kolkata is intriguing. But now that the Chinese official has made it, New Delhi should make its position clear.

Battle of facts on Rafale deal

REFLEX ACTION

Nitya Chakraborty

Finance Minister Arun Jaitley is steadily losing his battle with the opposition, especially the Congress President Rahul Gandhi over the facts on Rafale deal. Right now, he is not the Defence Minister but he is taking the most active part in defending the Government decision on the new agreement on Rafale purchases against blistering attacks by Rahul Gandhi who has termed the deal announced by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Paris in April 2015 as the biggest scam in independent India's history.

Keeping aside the political slugfest between the BJP and the Congress in the final year of the NDA regime on the eve of the Lok Sabha elections in 2019, the deal has thrown up some issues which are of paramount importance in protecting the national interests of the country. Jaitley has not touched those issues in posing 15 so called questions to Rahul Gandhi. The primary issue is what happened in the last fifty days before the announcement by the Prime Minister on the Rafale deal on April 10, 2015 that the deal was completely changed in its character and the public sector HAL was dropped to accommodate Anil Ambani led Reliance Defence Ltd. The sequence of developments leading to the final announcement of the Prime Minister makes it apparent that the Prime Minister had one point agenda to change the deal scrapping the role of the public sector HAL and he did not mind, in the process, in sacrificing the interests of the country's leading public sector company in aircraft manufacturing.

As the defence experts mention, the NDA government took power on May 26, 2014 and by that time, the final understanding with the UPA government was reached for the purchase of 126 Rafales which involved the outright purchase of 18 fighters and the manufacture of 108 more in India on the basis of transfer of technology. This is most

important part as this helps in helping India through HAL, to technologically upgrade the country's R&D since generally the big foreign defence manufacturing companies are very reluctant on technology transfer. The UPA gov got this done in early 2014 and the French company Dassault Aviation signed a detailed work share agreement with HAL in March 2014 to have transfer of technology and production of Rafale in India.

Even in February 2015, eight months after Modi became the Prime Minister, there was no change as far as the French company was concerned. On February 19, 2015, fifty days before Indian PM's surprise announcement about new Rafale agreement, the CEO of Dassault Aviation Eric Trappier told pressmen that he was confident on completing the final negotiations and signing the deal for full complement. HAL was in the picture as the collaborator. Then again on March 25, 2015, Trappier said in the presence of the HAL officials "You can imagine my satisfaction to hear from the HAL chairman that we are in agreement for the responsibilities sharing, considering as well our conformity with the REP in order to be in line with the rules of the competition. I strongly believe that contract finalization and signature will come soon".

Thus, even fifteen days before the PM's announcement scrapping the role of HAL and bringing down the number from 126 fighters to 36, HAL was actively involved as far as the French are concerned. But in Modi magic, things went in a

different direction at the time of the announcement. The dropping of HAL and induction of Reliance Defence was the Indian decision and not the decision of the French company. PM announced his decision on April 10, 2015 but even two days ago on April 8, the Indian foreign secretary S. Jaishankar had no inkling that such an announcement would be made and HAL would be excluded. So all indications suggest that this monumental decision having prime importance to the future security of the defence forces of India, was taken by the PM without going through the normal procedures with checks and double checks in such vital security area.

Jaitley's question charging Rahul of giving contradictory figures make no sense as the former defence Minister Manohar Parrikar himself gave contradictory figures about pricing after the PM announcement. Parrikar was then the Defence Minister. This indicated that he himself was not in know of full details of the deal. The best course would be for the Government to disclose the prices. The experts are quoting the price of Rs.1611 crore per plane which is nearly three times more than the price allegedly agreed to by the UPA gov in negotiations in early 2014.

If the Government is confident that the pricing under the Modi agreement is far more favourable compared to the pricing under the UPA gov draft, it will be desirable for the NDA government to officially disclose the prices and nail the Congress "lie". If Jaitley can prove that the Rafale deal has been in national interests and the Prime Minister has been able to extract a much better deal compared to the UPA, this is the best time to disclose the prices and nip in the bud all "propaganda" by Rahul Gandhi and the opposition. Will Jaitley and the Modi government take up this challenge? (IPA)



A squirrel looks like offering prayer to a Ganesha idol in Bengaluru, as 'Ganesha Chaturthi' festival being celebrated all over the country, on Thursday

Unsung heroes of Air India

FOCUS

B. Sivaraman

One of the prevailing myths about high-wage high-tech workers in India is that they are only concerned about their pecuniary benefits. The other associated myth is that their propensity to resort to direct action to safeguard their rights and interests is inversely proportional to their salary level. Both the myths have been smashed by the commercial pilots—especially from Air India and its subsidiaries—time and again. The latest such display was in the middle of August in the context of their exemplary services to the Kerala flood victims.

What is significant is that the Indian Commercial Pilots' Association (ICPA) suspended their strike over the delay in payment of wages and non-payment of flying allowance and postponed their decision to go on strike to render this selfless service. They had even offered to work without payment to render their services to the people of Kerala, which is significant considering that a co-pilot earns Rs.5 lakhs and a captain Rs.7 lakhs per month. Thanks

to torrential rains, the highest in 50 years, the Cochin civilian airport was totally marooned and was officially closed on 14 August. While defence aircrafts and helicopters were immediately pressed into service to rescue the people marooned, no less significant was the service rendered round-the-clock by the commercial pilots of Air India and other airlines in carrying relief material and evacuating the stranded passengers from Cochin Air Force base from 16 August onwards in numerous sorties and in diverting the Cochin flights to Thiruvananthapuram and Kozhikode airports till Cochin Airport resumed operations, thanks again to the day-and-night work of the airport employees there. It was a splendid display of selfless sacrifice rather than selfish pecuniary cravings. But the Air India pilots and other airport employees remained unsung heroes.

However, the Air India pilots remained assertive on their rights all the same. The wages of Air India employees were delayed for five successive

months. The pilots and cabin crew were not paid their flying allowances, which account for 70% of their take-home pay. The ICPA threatened to go ahead with their decision to suspend operations. The management buckled in and paid the flying allowances and salaries on 22 August. It was a major victory for the ICPA and they revoked their decision to strike. ICPA general secretary Praveen K. Keertisaid, "There is no permanent settlement on the issue of delayed wage payments as the management had not officially replied to our letter nor has invited us for talks. In future the same story might resume all over again because the basic problems giving rise to the financial crisis—like idling of Rs.25,000 crore worth of aircrafts for want of spares—were not addressed." Air India's assets have been valued at Rs.30,000 crore but its debts have swollen

to Rs.50,000 crore! In August 2004, the controversial decision of Praful Patel, the then Civil Aviation minister in the UPA, to indiscriminately increase Air India's shopping list of aircrafts precipitated the existential crisis for the Maharaja. On 1 December 2017, the Supreme Court directed the CBI to complete in the next six months its probe into allegations of irregularities in purchase or hiring of 11 aircraft for Air India for a whopping Rs.70,000 crore. But the CBI under the NDA has not completed the investigation.

Also tax evader Hasan Ali was caught with \$8 billion unaccounted money in Swiss banks. The kickback he reportedly got as a conduit in the Boeing deal with Air India. This startling information was part of a 2007 Enforcement Directorate (ED) chargesheet. But the Income-Tax Appellate Tribunal set aside these

charges and now Khan is guilty of tax evasion only to the extent of Rs.3 to 4 crore!

Well, Khan might have got a reprieve but not Air India. It doesn't have the money to pay salaries in time or the dues of suppliers such as Airbus, Honeywell, Meggit International, Goodrich, Hamilton, and Wesco Electric etc. leading to the shortage of parts resulting in the grounding of Rs.25,000 crore worth of planes leading to a huge loss. The Modi government first decided to privatise the loss-making Air India and even appointed Rothschild and Ernst & Young as executioners. But the government suspended the idea due to opposition from RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat, who wanted Air India to be sold to an Indian corporate house. Tatas are still in talks with the government to take over Air India but they won't take over the huge accumulated losses and would insist on government waiving its huge loans. Under such uncertainty, the AI pilots might have won a battle but the war would prove to be protracted. (IPA)

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| 10 Smooth and even (mus) | 7 Adult insect |
| 11 Spanish currency | 6 Small child |
| 14 Field diversion | 12 Plump |
| 17 Teaching periods | 13 Female sheep |
| 20 Approached | 15 Tree |
| 24 Worshipped | 16 Regret |
| 26 Long-leaved lettuce | 17 Vestige |
| 27 Inches | 18 Henhouse |
| 28 Whole | 19 Show contempt |
| 29 Corn spike | 21 Border |
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