

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

Disquieting signs

When the Pune police arrested several well known social activists and accused them of plotting the assassination of the Prime Minister and of being involved in the Bhima Koregaon incident earlier this year, the initial public response was one of utter disbelief. Immediately several well known academics like historian Romila Thapar and economist Prabhat Patnaik and three others filed a PIL in the Supreme Court against the arrests in which they alleged that the arrests were an attempt by the Government at "stifling of honest dissent" and their petition was to "protect democratic values and democracy." That the Supreme Court found substance in their case was proved by its order directing the police to keep the arrested detained in their respective homes. The police were insistent on taking them into custody for interrogation. But the apex court stuck to its decision.

Later, however, the police strangely omitted the charge of murder plot against the PM and confined to the Bhima Koregaon incident. The accused asserted they were not at Bhima Koregaon on the day of the incident. Now the Supreme Court has said it will scrutinize the police evidence against the activists to see whether the evidence is "cooked up". If it is found to have been "cooked up" the court will consider appointing a Special Investigation Team (SIT). The Pune police are already in the back foot. The Additional Solicitor General, Tushar Mehta, appearing on behalf of the State, has questioned the right of a citizen to approach the apex court directly. He also questioned the propriety of the apex court's right to "interference" in such cases. The ASG's stand betrays the mindset of the Government which is anything but democratic. It is only when the Government finds itself cornered does it question the right of a citizen to approach the highest judiciary and goes even further to question the right of the judiciary itself to take cognizance of a matter.

If the 'evidence' eventually does not stand judicial scrutiny and is found to have been cooked up to implicate law-abiding citizens whose political beliefs differ from those held by the ruling party and the Government, what steps should be taken against the officers concerned and their political masters who ordered them to do what they did? That the police do bring false charges has been established in many cases, the latest being the one in which an ISRO scientist was falsely charged with spying for Pakistan. The social activists are well known persons. And so are those who have filed the PIL. What does the common man do when the State turns against him?

Rising petroleum prices test people's patience

REFLEX ACTION

Anjan Roy

The country's patience is being tried by the rising price of petroleum and diesel. As the prices are scaling higher, the one question almost on every lip is: what is the government doing? Can't the price be brought down? The rising prices are being encashed by the politicians. The all-time buffoon among them, Derek O'Brien, was heard screaming on TV discussion sets "It's a loot, it's a loot, it's a loot".

But he was careful about underlining the exact nature of the loot: the central government's take by way of excise duty on petrol and diesel has gone up, while carefully not mentioning what his party's government was charging as state duty on petrol and diesel. Leaving aside such cheap tomfoolery, the fact is that the final prices of both items have increased hugely over the last one year. The retail price of petrol is hovering around Rs80 per litre. Diesel price is equally high. Being now allowed to fluctuate in step with the imported price of petro products, the prices have proved to be inconveniently volatile. There are three aspects of the situation which deserve to be highlighted. First, despite the sharp rise in price of diesel and petrol, consumption is rising as if rising prices do not matter. The crude oil import bill is surging and India is one of the key players whose demand now influences the global oil prices. The 2017-18 import bill is set at \$88 billion (March 2018). The current fiscal year bill for oil import is projected to go up around \$120 billion if the current rate of imports is maintained. This is clearly unsustainable and India will face a payments crunch.

Secondly, the price of crude oil is rising on the global markets for a variety of reasons, including the US stance on Iran nuke deal and imposition of sanctions on Iran's oil sales. Suddenly, a situation of

surfeit on the market has turned into a shortage. The Indian crude oil basket price had hovered around \$47.5 per barrel in 2016-17, was on average \$56.5 in 2017-18 and touched \$73 per barrel in April-July this year. Price is going up in spurts, as US is swinging into some action on sanctions. Thirdly, compounding the crude oil price hike is the depreciation of the Indian rupee over the last one year, which is having a far sharper impact on the domestic retail price. The rupee has depreciated from around 63.88/90 in September last year to over 71 to a US dollar at present. This itself is a major burden and is pushing up prices. The rupee import bill will rise by no less than Rs2.5 lakh crore over last year. Such massive burden cannot be carried on government budget.

There is no alternative to letting the retail price float and recover the costs. On top of that is the abject dependence of state governments on revenues from petrol and diesel taxes. Fortunately, this has not come at a time when the domestic economy is in dire straits. The lethal combination of a falling rupee with rising crude oil prices could be said to have come in an inopportune time for India. This might sound absurd in the current context but still it is true. Whenever these two phenomena come together, like astrological conjoint movements of planets, the results will be unpleasant. Prices in the final count will rise disproportionately high. But it has come when we are not as much vulnerable to the combined

forces. One indication is that despite the spike in prices, we are not too uncomfortable. There is some bit of dismay about the fast moving prices. But it is not as if worth a protest even. We can take the rise in our stride. That is possible because the economy is in other ways growing and at a reasonable pace. Disposable income is rising and people can take the rise, as it affects them without too much of a grouse.

But there are still smouldering causes for concern. Primarily because the oil consumption volume is rising too fast and our import dependency is mounting. As the government is talking about reducing import dependency for energy, the proportion of imports to total consumption is rising. In the last four years since 2014, import dependency has gone up by close to 10 percent and that is a huge burden. This is becoming a burden physically as well as financially. Our domestic oil and gas production has proved sluggish and has not risen. In fact, it is falling marginally. Conventional hydrocarbons production has not increased. And despite some encouraging prognostications about the presence of shale reserves, we have not made any progress on exploiting any of these resources.

Financially, meeting an import bill of around say \$100 billion would be a drag. Our exports are not rising in the face of global trade crises. On the other hand, in line with other emerging market economies, India is witnessing withdrawal of funds by foreign institutional investors. So the prospects of plentiful exchange resource would be a far cry. It would be imperative to strike a balance between rising consumption and solvency in external payments. That could possibly be reached by keeping prices high and recovering the true costs of imports. (IPA)



Idols of Gauri with Ganesh being immersed on 5th day of Ganesh Chaturthi, in Mumbai

Opposition prospects for 2019 LS poll

It will be having adjustments with the smaller parties but finally the responsibility will be with the Congress as the leader. But in the states, where the regional parties are the rulers like West Bengal, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, the regional parties naturally will not leave space to the Congress in the name of anti-BJP alliance and there the fight is between the regional ruling party and the Congress can take place in Lok Sabha poll, but the understanding will be to be a part of anti-BJP alliance in post poll situation.

Even under this two track approach, there is a possibility of a common opposition candidate in about 400 plus seats leaving about 140 seats out of the total of 543 seats. If a total unity of the opposition parties is made possible against the BJP in 400 seats, there is every reason to believe that the opposition should be able to gain more than 272 seats from this 400 figure and the seats

from the other 140 seats where triangular fights might take place, will be additional. As Shourie explained the opposition need to remember that 31 per cent was the vote share Modi polled at the height of his popularity in 2014 and he is today much less popular and the opposition's starting percentage is 69 per cent if they have one common candidate against the BJP. As the 2014 Lok Sabha figures show that Modi became PM after 2014 poll because the BJP won 90 per cent of the seats in the states that contributes 60 per cent of the Lok Sabha strength. If the opposition combines in just three states, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Maharashtra that will be the end of BJP rule.

As of now, the trends show that the BJP might gain a few seats in Odisha and a few more in North East. In Bengal, its number will go up to most by one or two. But taken together these eastern and NE states have 87 MPs whereas the states

FOCUS

Nitya Chakraborty

where the BJP made massive gains in 2014 poll, the loss also will be equally massive. All depends on how the saffron leadership can meet the challenge of the united opposition in the Hindi speaking states. In southern states, apart from Karnataka, the BJP has not much strength in other states.

In Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, the total number of Lok Sabha seats are 102. In 2014 poll, the BJP won four seats out of which in two seats, it had an alliance with Telugu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh. Now, it might lose those two seats without its alliance with TDP. The BJP will try to get one or two seats in TN

but that is not certain yet as the DMK led by Stalin is on upsurge and the AIDMK is so faction ridden that the BJP might not get any electoral advantage even if it aligns with the ruling AIADMK.

If the Lok Sabha elections are not pre-announced in December and held in April/May 2019 as scheduled, the opposition, especially the Congress has to do two things - first the Party's election manifesto must reflect the aspirations of the masses, especially the young, unemployed and the farmers and it should form the core of the common minimum programme of the anti-BJP front, and second, the Congress must learn to act as first among the equals among

the opposition parties and treat the smaller parties with compassion and dignity so that the anti-BJP front can be sustained on a long term basis.

Apart from Rahul, the front leadership should be equally shared by Mamata, Stalin, Akhilesh and Mayawati. Mamata has to play a major role in negotiating with the regional parties, even those belonging to NDA now for support in the post poll situation if the developments demand so. Sitaram Yechury and Sudhakar Reddy of the Left are always available to the anti-BJP front to properly advise in terms of the content of the CMP. The opposition has adequate set of leaders who can act as a team in navigating the course of the Front to achieve the ultimate objective of installing a non-BJP government at the centre after 2019 poll. The leaders must have the firm conviction that yes it is possible - "we can do it". (IPA/Concluded)

Conventional Crossword

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| 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 |

- ACROSS**
- 1 Vigour
 - 3 Stringed instrument
 - 5 Prophet
 - 7 Beak
 - 9 Incline
 - 10 Flightless bird
 - 11 Attack
 - 13 Piquant element
 - 16 Accustom
 - 18 Fitting
 - 19 Goal
 - 20 Greedy
 - 21 Incite
 - 23 Et
 - 24 Swarm
 - 25 Worthless dog
- DOWN**
- 2 Wrath
 - 4 Parched
 - 6 Favourite
 - 8 Hex
 - 9 Very salty water
 - 12 Sharp
 - 14 Of various colours
 - 15 Heavenly body
 - 17 Keen
 - 18 Deep mud
 - 20 Liable
 - 22 Wildebeest

SUDOKU: 2317

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Yesterday's Solution 2316

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| 8 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 5 | 7 | 4 | 6 | 9 |
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| 2 | 7 | 9 | 5 | 3 | 4 | 8 | 1 | 6 |
| 4 | 5 | 8 | 9 | 6 | 1 | 7 | 2 | 3 |
| 1 | 6 | 3 | 7 | 2 | 8 | 5 | 9 | 4 |
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Yesterday's Cross Word Solution 325

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