

THE ECHO OF INDIA

... Keeps you ahead

People's Aakrosh

The all-India Aakrosh Divas observed by the united Opposition on Monday was the first organized expression of public anger at the thoughtless decision of demonetization taken without any preparation. Even on Monday, full nineteen days after the Prime Minister's nighty announcement, bank counters and ATMs became 'cashless' within a short time of opening. The more fortunate customers who had gone to withdraw much-needed money at the month-end were told to try their luck after 20'clock. The elderly chose to call it a day and return home broken-hearted. Tomorrow for them would in all probability be yet another day of uncertainty. But for the first time since demonetization, news started trickling in from Hyderabad to Manipur of angry customers venting their wrath on bank officials. People were no longer rejoicing at the Prime Minister's 'bold step' against Kalaadhan.

The docile sections of the media played down the public response to the call given by the Opposition parties, lest it should incur the displeasure of the powers that be. The Opposition parties made allegations that during the period preceding demonetization, the ruling party had spent huge amounts of money to buy real estate or to deposit in bank accounts. What they said was confirmed by party spokesmen admitting openly that the party had indeed purchased many plots of land in many States but that payments made were above board. The spokesmen, however, did not answer the question that was on everybody's mind - why the BJP had never gone on a spree of buying land ever before it came to power.

The CPM, steadily losing influence and strength across the States, including the ones which it once ruled, had also been a party to the unanimous decision of the Opposition parties. But the party unilaterally gave a bandh call in the three States where it still has some base - West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura. In West Bengal the bandh proved to be a total flop while in the other two States it had some success because the CPM is in power. In the event, the party only succeeded in helping the ruling BJP to claim that the Opposition was disunited. What the CPM did amount to disrupting the solidarity of the people. What the party gained from such a call is debatable. Objectively, the CPM helped the BJP by introducing a discordant voice in the chorus of protest by the people.

Dhaka's defence gear acquisition

Bangladesh has just acquired two refurbished diesel-electric Chinese submarines at a reported price of \$203 million. The first was delivered on November 14. The delivery of the second is a matter of days. They are 035 (Ming-class) subs. The acquisition of Chinese subs by Bangladesh seems to have taken our Government completely unawares and caused consternation. This is natural. India cannot view with equanimity China's involvement in as sensitive a field in Bangladesh as defence. Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar is being dispatched post haste to Dhaka on a two-day visit by the month end.

The acquisition of the subs is not, however, a one-off event. It is part of the Bangladesh defence establishment's Forces Goal 2030. As a part of this, the Navy has drawn up an ambitious expansion programme to raise its fleet strength to 150 ships by 2030. In December, 2013, the Bangladesh media reported that the Navy was building a submarine base near Kutubdia island, off Cox's Bazar in Chittagong, keeping in view the future need for a safe haven for its submarine fleet. Bangladesh, it may be recalled, had bought two Ming class submarines earlier in 2014. The mandarins of the South Block must have been aware of these developments. At present India is building six submarines. All of them are scheduled to join the navy by 2020. Could not have India made a timely offer to Bangladesh to build two subs for its navy and thus kept China out of it? What is the imperative for Bangladesh to strengthen its navy rapidly? The answer is simple: to protect its vast maritime territory in the Bay of Bengal. Two international awards have settled Bangladesh's maritime disputes with India and Myanmar in favour of Bangladesh. In its verdict, the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) awarded Bangladesh 70,000 sq. kms (30,888 sq. miles) area in the Bay of Bengal. In the second verdict, the Hague-based Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) awarded Bangladesh an area of 19,467 sq. kms (7516 sq. miles), finally settling its maritime boundary

REFLEXACTION

Barun Das Gupta

dispute with India. This came in July, 2014. The two verdicts together give Bangladesh a maritime territory equal to the country's landmass. Though China was against the liberation movement of Bangladesh (it was siding with Pakistan at the time), once the hard reality of its emergence as a sovereign independent country could not be wished away, China began to mend fences with Bangladesh. It accorded diplomatic recognition to Bangladesh in October, 1975 and went about deepening and diversifying its diplomatic, political, military and economic relations with it.

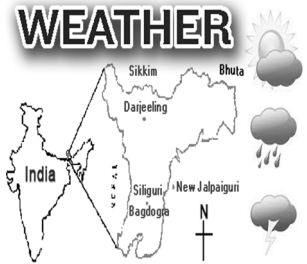
In 1991, the then Prime Minister, P. V. Narasimha Rao adopted his famous "Look East Policy" to forge closer economic links with India's neighbours primarily to shore up its strength as a regional power. There was an unstated objective also: to counter China's growing influence in the region. A decade later, in 2002, Bangladesh also adopted its Look East Policy to maximize and diversify its economic intercourse with her neighbours, particularly with China. The year 2005 marked the 30th anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries. It was declared the China-Bangladesh Friendship Year. In April that year Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao visited Dhaka and a number of agreements of mutual cooperation and two MOUs were signed. China offered to assist Bangladesh, among other things, in developing nuclear energy. Since then, Sino-Bangla cooperation has extended to many fields - from training of defence personnel to infrastructure development. Geo-strategically, China has been trying to encircle India with its 'string of pearls' policy. Now India is actively pursuing a counter strategy. Beijing's unilateral claim over the South China Sea has brought it in conflict with its one-time friend and ally Vietnam, besides Japan, Malaysia and the Philippines. India has

signed an agreement with Vietnam for exploring mineral resources in the South China Sea to which China is dead opposed. Indo-Vietnam cooperation is increasing, including defence cooperation. India is actually building an informal and unannounced alliance to protect its interests in South and South-East Asia and neutralize the growing Chinese influence. China's challenge to India is not just military. It is also economic. China is taking active part in the development of many neighbouring countries. Chinese assistance extends to as small a country as Fiji in the far away South Pacific Ocean.

Sino-Bangla relations have to be seen in this wider and complex international background and their implications for India understood. It should be borne in mind that China tried to befriend the Rajapakse Government in Sri Lanka and succeeded in getting one of its submarines docked in a Sri Lanka port in 2014. The sub was spotted twice. The presence of a Chinese sub in Indian waters alarmed New Delhi. It heaved a sigh of relief when Mahinda Rajapakse was defeated in the 2015 presidential elections and Maithripala Sirisena succeeded him. Sirisena rectified the pro-China tilt in Sri Lanka's foreign policy. Sino-Bangladesh defence cooperation has steadily grown. Today the Bangladesh Army has Chinese tanks, its Air Force has Chinese fighter jets and its Navy has Chinese frigates and missile boats. Bangladesh is now a major importer of Chinese arms. This June, the Bangladesh cabinet cleared the Ropnar nuclear power plant project. It will be built by Russia at an estimated cost of \$11.38 billion. The money will be provided by Russia under a line of credit. China was keen on getting the project but eventually Bangladesh gave the contract to Russia. Pakistani media alleged there was gentle Indian nudging behind the change of mind of the Hasina Government. Bangladesh is exploring all avenues for its speedy development. India will have to extend its hand of cooperation to Bangladesh to the best possible extent to protect its interests as best as it can. (IPA)



Foreign tourists click selfie in front of Taj Mahal on a foggy morning in Agra on Wednesday.



Source: IMD Govt/In

Impact of note scrapping & state polls

FOCUS

Harihar Swarup

Contrary to propaganda by the BJP, the party has not gained in recent bye-elections; neither is it an endorsement of demonetisation. Bye-elections constitute a very limited test of the popular mood post demonetisation. In any case, the BJP is not a major player in West Bengal, Tripura, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry and results in these parts of the country cannot be construed to be a vote against the Prime Minister.

On the other hand, the BJP has failed to dislodge the incumbent parties from any of the state. The solace for the BJP is that it has retained the Lakhimpur seat (in Assam), though with a steep fall in margin. Similarly, it has won the Shahdol (Madhya Pradesh) seat, but again, with a markedly reduced margin.

The party can take comfort from the fact that it has retained the two Lok Sabha seats in Madhya Pradesh. The Opposition may be entitled to feel that it has made inroads into the ruling party's strongholds.

Ruling parties enjoy an inherent advantage in bye-elections. Voters see little point in antagonizing their rulers when there is no immediate prospect of a change in government. West Bengal, Assam, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry had gone to polls in April-May, this year and the recent bye elections were not expected to deviate from the general election trend. It is, obviously, too early to suggest that the BJP has scored spectacularly well with the voters with the "surgical strike" on black money. The real referendum will come in a few months

time in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, by which time the RBI-induced dislocation would have sorted itself out - one way or the other.

By that time also the Prime Minister would have finessed his "pro-poor, pro-rich" argument, and, it should be an interesting contest between a pan-Indian political posturing and regional articulation of sub-nationalist aspirations.

It would be curious to watch how the demonetisation experiment impacts other political parties' capacity to spend huge amounts of money in these two crucial states. The ruling party at the Centre

believes that it is in the safe zone because it only uses "clean" money while the rivals would be sunk without a prayer because they rely exclusively on tainted money which now has become "raddi".

Whether the BJP's self-serving calculation works to its advantage or not, the citizen would like to believe that demonetisation drive has cleaned, at least temporarily, the electoral system. The integrity of the electoral process needs to be restored.

With just a few months to go for assembly elections in Punjab, the ruling Akali Dal-BJP alliance confronts a

double whammy. Not only does it face grave anti-incumbency due to poor governance record and perception of heavy corruption, it now has to deal with effects of demonetisation particularly on farmers.

The latter have been greatly hampered by lack of access to new currency as they mostly deal in cash to meet the costs of such as seeds, fertilizers and diesel during the sowing time. Reports suggest that only three-fourths of wheat sowing has taken place in the state this year due to cash crunch.

Congress hopes to take advantage of that and turn the page after a disappointing performance in the 2014 Lok Sabha election, and the AAP is looking to shed its tag of a

Delhi-centric party. After losing momentum due to infighting, AAP is trying to seize the initiative by playing up its image as a crusader against corruption.

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has announced that MP and comedian Bhagwant Mann will contest against Deputy Chief Minister Sukhbir Badal.

AAP also received a shot in the arm when two independent MLAs who earlier supported cricketer-politician Navjot Singh Sidhu - have now signed a pact with them. This development has

put a question mark on Sidhu's new political forum - Awaaz-e-Punjab - now left with just his MLA wife Navjot Kaur Sidhu and former India's hockey Captain Pargat Singh.

Congress may have made former Chief Minister Amarinder Singh the chief of their campaign committee but shielded away from declaring him to be its CM candidate.

If Congress now seals the deal with Sidhu, that will enhance its prospects in face of AAP's disruption of bipolar politics in the state. (IPA)

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.