

The difference between a moral man and a man of honor is that the latter regrets a discreditable act even when it has cost the land he has not been caught.

H. L. Mencken

Faultlines appear in the NDA

General elections are still at least fifteen months away (unless the dates are advanced to November or December this year) but following the recent election reverses suffered by the BJP faultlines have appeared in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). In Maharashtra, the Shiv Sena has parted company with the BJP. In Punjab the Akali Dal and in Andhra Pradesh the ruling Telugu Desham Party are making angry grunts and throwing dark hints that they may not sail under the NDA flag in the next elections. The Nationalist Congress Party is now seen to be coming close to the Congress. In Jammu and Kashmir it is a brittle alliance that binds the BJP with Mehbooba Mufti's PDP. If the BJP cannot do as well as it expects to in the coming State Assembly elections in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh and the Opposition emerges stronger, more allies in the NDA may find it convenient to veer away from the BJP.

In such a situation, new power equations may emerge in the BJP. That all BJP leaders and their followers are not happy with the present leadership of the party is quite well known. Former Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha has recently formed the Rashtriya Manch to oppose some of the policies of the NDA Government and have thrown a challenge to the BJP to throw him out if they can. Then there are others like former minister Arun Shourie and Shatrughan Sinha. They are certainly not mass leaders but they have a weight of their own. Shourie is known to be an eminent intellectual while Shatrughan Sinha, the 'Bihari Babu', has his own fan following. Individually they may not count for much but if they come together, they will be a force to reckon with - within the BJP.

Congress President Rahul Gandhi has been hinting for some time that after the next elections either there will be a UPA Government headed by the Congress or a weakened NDA Government headed by someone other than Narendra Modi. If this idea gains ground, those within the BJP who do not see eye to eye with Modi and his captaincy of the Government may find the courage to assert themselves. There is no doubt that in the last four years the government headed by Modi has not been able to tackle the major problems facing the country like unemployment, rural poverty, demand recession and attracting sizeable doses of investment. The next few months will be very critical for the NDA and its leaders. Their ability to hold the alliance together will be tested.

Budget 2018, impetus to rural economy

REFLEX ACTION

K R Sudhaman

Stung by the India shining campaign of ruling NDA in 2004, which did not go well with rural India and hence defeated in the elections, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has come out with an election budget that brings cheers to struggling Bharat, hit by farm distress and collapse of informal sector in rural economy.

Finance Minister Arun Jaitley, presenting the last full budget of Modi government before it goes to polls in May next year, announced a game-changing health insurance scheme to 10 crore below poverty families, which translates to 50 crore persons. The scheme, dubbed as Modi-care, much bigger than Obamacare, proposed by then U.S. President for the health of its population, will bring a sea change in the health care of the population. The details of the scheme with a component from states is yet to be worked out but aims to provide up to Rs 5 lakh cashless hospitalisation per year to all members of 10 crore below poverty line families. This will help in moving towards universal healthcare after food security was implemented a few years ago. Of course, it is not going to be easy to rollout just as food security programme, which took some years and a lot of money from the exchequer. But it was ultimately implemented for the betterment of people. Likewise, this healthcare programme might take some time to rollout but augurs well for the people. Health and education are two areas where government has to do a lot more even though some efforts have been made by successive governments. This healthcare effort of Modi government is one revolutionary step that stands out in the budget that needed to be applauded. This move is something originally started by Tamil Nadu government some years back for up to Rs 2 lakh hospitalisation and has been implemented in a few other states over the years. So this scheme is implementable at the national level and on a larger scale. Another significant measure in the budget is the impetus provided to the rural economy and address farm distress, which would be a force multiplier for

overall growth expected to surge toward 8 per cent annually. This would help India to become fastest growing emerging economy, now at \$2.5 trillion and expected to move two notches up in the coming months to overtake France and Britain to become fifth largest economy.

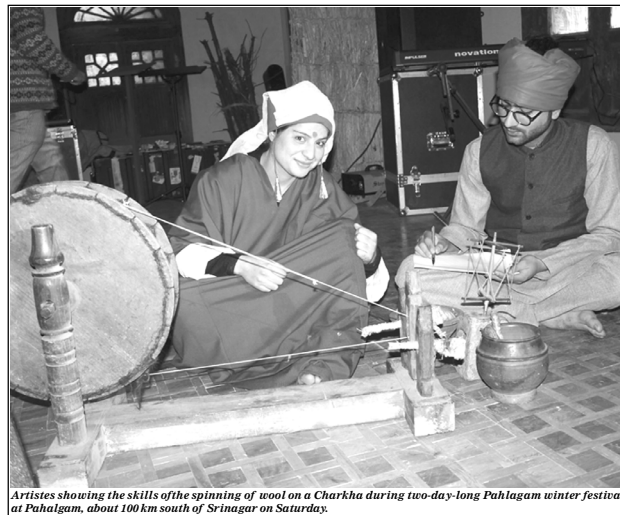
Jaitley announced several measures to kick-start the rural economy now stumbling due to the twin structural reforms of demonetisation and GST in the last one a quarter year. The ill-effects of these two measures, though good in the long run, have now been left behind. The measures including the decision to provide 150 per cent increase in minimum support price for the forthcoming Kharif crop, with a promise to ensure 1.5 times more farm income, will drive consumption in a big way, thereby helping growth of related sectors. The package of measures provided to pump-prime MSMEs through better access to finance or lowering of the corporate tax rate to 25 per cent to companies having turnover up to Rs 250 crore would help to spur both employment and growth in this vital segment of the economy. MSMEs account for nearly 40 per cent of manufacturing and 45 per cent of exports in the country. It employs many times more compared to large industries, which are increasingly becoming capital intensive. The stress on jobs in the budget will help to generate meaningful employment going ahead. This will also help to solve the problem of disguised unemployment in the rural area.

Measures to step up irrigation, particularly minor irrigation, and linking of peninsular rivers will bring more areas under irrigation. Though India has the largest irrigated area in the world, still only 45-50 per cent of arable land in the country is irrigated. This

augurs well for the rural economy as it is important to gradually minimise rain-fed farming, where yield is expected to reduce over the years because of global warming, fragmentation of holding and so on.

The Finance Minister also announced important measures to boost rural livelihoods. As Jaitley himself said in his 90-minute speech, the focus of the government next year will be on providing maximum livelihood opportunities in the rural areas by spending more on livelihood, agriculture and allied activities, and construction of rural infrastructure. The total amount to be spent by various ministries will be Rs.14.34 lakh crore, including extra-budgetary and non-budgetary resources of Rs.11.98 lakh crore. Apart from employment due to farming activities and self employment, this expenditure will create employment of 321 crore person days, 3.17 lakh kilometers of rural roads, 51 lakh new rural houses, 1.88 crore toilets, and provide 1.75 crore new household electric connections besides boosting agricultural growth. Some 22,000 rural haats are to be developed and upgraded into Gramin Agricultural Markets to protect the interests of 86% small and marginal farmers. Two New Funds of Rs.10,000 crore for fisheries and animal husbandry sectors are to be set up. Re-structured National Bamboo Mission is to Rs.1290 crore. Development of bamboo will help in creating large-scale employment in rural area. Loans to women self help groups will increase to Rs.75,000 crore in 2018 from 42,500 crore last year. Allocation to infrastructure has been stepped up to nearly Rs 6 lakh crore, which too will create rural jobs and development as most of the highways and railway lines pass through rural areas. The capital expenditure in Railways alone is 1.48 lakh crore and highways is a couple of lakhs of rupees. There is huge allocation to rural roads as well.

Overall, one would not be wrong in saying that a honest attempt has been made to address the concerns of rural India, which had hitherto been neglected and hence the government had earlier received a tag of encouraging crony capitalism. (IPA)



Artistes showing the skills of the spinning of wool on a Charkha during two-day-long Pahalagam winter festival at Pahalagam, about 100 km south of Srinagar on Saturday.

BJP's game plan for Nitish Kumar

Nitish Kumar is no more the plenipotentiary that he used to be. If the saffron sources are to be believed, patriarch Mohan Bhagwat has developed a sense of distaste. Nitish has become the victim of his own machination. It was his own betrayal of secular and socialist comrades and friends that made the BJP leadership skeptical. Though the BJP shares power with him, it never reposed trust in him in recent months. The BJP in fact has sent a clear message that the process of parting of ways has begun.

While Nitish created the impression among his rank and file that he would be the public face of the JD(U)-BJP alliance for the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP is already busy chalking out its independent strategy for going alone. The BJP leadership knows that the party cannot face the polls under Nitish's leadership. That would prove disastrous for the BJP. Proximity to Nitish has made even deputy chief minister and senior BJP leader Sushil Modi vulnerable.

His political actions are under watch. The BJP leadership nurses the view that he too should be shifted out of Bihar. In fact, the BJP

leadership would prefer to have both the leaders in the Rajya Sabha.

If sources are to be believed, both the leaders have already been allotted residences in Delhi. Nitish and Modi will contest Rajya Sabha seats in April when five seats from Bihar fall vacant. However, sources close to Nitish Kumar point out that he may not like to fall in line as this would prove to be suicidal for him. Once uprooted from Bihar, it would be a major challenge for him to get back to his roots. Though the central BJP leadership is ready to offer him an important cabinet post, JD(U) sources are not sure if Nitish would accept it. He would rather prefer to stay back in Bihar. Being a chief minister is politically more desirable and important than having a berth in the Union cabinet.

Already some political permutations and combinations have started in the state. While Nitish is personally trying to prevail upon the BJP leadership to rescind their decision, his party colleagues have opened dialogue with other parties. Some of the JD(U) leaders are of the opinion that in case the BJP does not reconsider its

stand, the party may follow in the footsteps of the Shiv Sena and Telugu Desam and come out of the NDA. One after another, the NDA allies have been registering their displeasure at its handling of allies. With the general elections knocking at the door, the complaints have become loud and bitter. While Shiv Sena had already announced to go it alone in the 2019 general elections and the subsequent assembly polls, Telugu Desam chief and Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh N. Chandrababu Naidu accused the BJP of not adhering to "mitra dharma".

In Bihar, smaller allies like the Rashtriya Lok Samata Party (RLSP) and Jitan Ram Manjhi-led Hindustan Awam Morcha (HAM) seem to be drifting away. It is rumoured that they have been in touch with the leaders of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD). Significantly, almost all the important leaders of the RJD participated at the RLSP-

organised human chain on the issue of education. The leaders of these smaller parties have been feeling alienated. They have one common complaint: BJP does not care for them and in the last three-and-a-half years even the presidents of the ally parties have not been invited for any kind of consultation or discussion. They are being made irrelevant and the BJP has been consistently eating into their base. The year 2018 is the best time for the allies to express their anger and secure their position.

The dissension in the NDA is quite perceptible. On Tuesday one of the NDA constituents, Rashtriya Lok Samta Party, organised a human chain in the state capital. No doubt, the party is quite small, but it created a serious turmoil. It could be gauged from the simple fact that JDU and BJP leaders boycotted the programme. Intriguingly, RJD leaders participated in full strength.

Political circles are agog with the speculation that Lalu Yadav sitting in jail has been working on a grand design.

Coinciding with the occasion, senior RJD leader Raghuvansh Prasad Singh declared that former chief minister Jitan Ram Manjhi and RLSP chief Upendra Kushwaha would soon switch over from the NDA fold to the RJD camp. Though Manjhi and Kushwaha denied any such move the RJD has one line to say:

"wait and watch". The RJD is using this situation to isolate Nitish politically. Though some stray leaders are opposed to any kind of relation with the RLSP, those who matter are quite jubilant at this development. Meanwhile, the formation of the "Rashtra Manch" by Shatrughan Sinha and senior BJP leader Yashwant Singh is being viewed as a positive move in the direction of winning over a good share of the upper caste people. Yashwant Singh has already made it known that "Rashtra Manch", a political action group, would start a movement against the policies of the Central government. The presence of leaders cutting across party lines is claimed to augur well. (IPA)

FOCUS

Arun Srivastava

Conventional Crossword

1	2	3	4	5	6
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13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30

- | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------|
| ACROSS | DOWN |
| 1 High mountains | 1 Saunters |
| 3 Agreement | 2 Drive forward |
| 7 Anger | 4 Afflict |
| 8 Nourishing thin soup | 5 Jail |
| 11 Excuse | 6 Beverage |
| 12 Concrete of naure | 10 Off |
| 13 Occurrence | 10 Headwear |
| 15 Comfort | 11 Delight |
| 15 Vended | 12 Party |
| 19 Grottoes | 16 Disciplined |
| 20 Efficacy | 17 Regard |
| 21 Cat's contented sound | 19 Domestic animal |
| 23 Concise | 21 Veget |
| 24 Flightless bird | 22 Regret |
| 26 Sly look | |
| 26 Teaching period | |

SUDOKU:2117

		8	1			7	3
			6	2		9	1
5	2					4	8
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7	9	1		2	8	3	
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6	9					5	2
8	7		5	6			
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Yesterday's Solution 2116

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

Yesterday's Cross Word Solution 125

S	P	A	R	K	M	A	R
P	Z	N	A	P	E	H	
I	N	U	R	E	R	A	V
L	R	E	I	D	E	A	
L	E	E	K	S	D	T	
V	N	L	E	M	O	N	
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A	L	O	E	G	O	N	G
P	E	L	S	E	I	T	
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