

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

Nirbhaya gets justice at last

It is little over five and a half years that a 22-year paramedic student who has come to be known as 'Nirbhaya' was brutally gang-raped by a group of friends in capital Delhi. She died in a Singapore hospital a few days later. Our judicial process is such that it has taken the 'due process of law' such a long time for the apex court of the land to confirm the death sentence passed on the guilty. One of the rapists who was a minor at the time escaped with three years' confinement in a correctional home. It is a moot question whether a 'minor' who is capable of committing rape should at all be treated as a minor. Nirbhaya's death led to the setting up of the Justice Verma Commission which recommended amendments in the Indian Penal Code (IPC). The sections relating to rape were made more stringent. Eventually, the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act was passed.

It may be argued that neither the harsher penal provisions in the criminal law nor the passing of the POCSO Act has stopped rape and sexual molestation of children. True. But civil society has to ensure that perpetrators of such heinous crimes pay for their crime with their lives and are denied the opportunity of committing the same offence twice. Rapists and murderers can hardly be 'reformed' by putting them in correctional homes. Cases of both murder and rape are on the rise and there may be many reasons for this - from economic, social and political to purely psychological. Social scientists will address themselves to the task of identifying the causes and suggest measures of dealing with them.

But society as an organic body has to protect itself from perverts who suffer from no moral compunction for inflicting grievous injuries to fellow human beings to satisfy their lust or greed. Death sentence for rapists has become all the more necessary now because men in power and authority are found to be defending murderers - directly or indirectly. He who commits a rape or murder should know that if he is caught he will have to hang because society considers him beyond 'correction'. Nirbhaya had fought valiantly against her assailants despite being very much outnumbered. She died and her companion was grievously injured. He will carry the traumatic memory of that night all his life. Her death has not gone entirely in vain because her death awakened social conscience to the need for enacting stringent laws against rapists.

Expectation of benevolent oil stars

REFLEX ACTION

K Raveendran

Astrology columns are often seen to forecast subjects of certain planets facing the risk of grave danger from fire and water, sometimes even life-threatening. It is not known if crude oil has a ruling planet of its own, but geo-political developments on the earth have been found to cause wild swings in oil prices. There seems to be something in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's horoscope that brings him luck by way of oil. One does not know if it is due to his Ghanchi caste, which has traditionally been a community engaged in selling oil, just like the Telis of north India.

Modi was lucky to reap the benefit of an oil bonanza when he took office in 2014 as it coincided with a crash in global crude oil prices. Since he assumed charge in May, the price of the Indian basket of crude oil crashed from \$113 per barrel to \$50 by January. The dream run went on for another year when the price further tumbled to \$29. This put the Modi government in a unique situation to manage the fiscal deficit and allocate resources to the new government's priority programmes, if there were any. Modi even used to sell his luck. "Ok, let's accept that I am lucky but you have saved money. If Modi's luck is benefiting the people, what can be more fortunate? If due to my good luck, prices of petrol and diesel come down and common man saves more, then what is the need to bring someone who is unlucky?" he was once quoted as telling an election rally in Delhi. But irrespective of his claim, people were not so lucky as his government kept increasing the tax on petrol and diesel, which forced them to part with almost the same money they had been paying when the international oil prices were high. As 2018 approached, the oil stars in Modi's horoscope apparently started looking away. International crude oil prices were climbing consistently and, with dynamic pricing of petroleum products in place, this meant that consumers had to dish out more for the same quantity and discontent

was growing as people felt that the government was helping the oil companies to surreptitiously make more money. But with the announcement of Karnataka elections, the oil companies froze the hikes, although the government feigned ignorance about why the companies did so.

But the reason became clear when BJP lost nearly all subsequent by-elections, held after the companies resumed raising the prices with a vengeance. There was big hue and cry as prices hit historical highs even surpassing the peak of the crude oil price boom, although that phase did not last long as developments in the international oil market forced a reverse and the local companies started re-adjusting retail prices accordingly. Of course, it began with a farcical drama of a one-paisa cut, for which the government drew flak from all around. As the situation seemed to be turning normal, there is another scare now by way of the falling value of rupee, which automatically implies higher output for crude imports and further strain on the fiscal deficit and therefore the prospects of more hikes in retail prices.

But as Modi's luck would have it, by the time he is about to vacate office, maybe his oil stars are moving into their 'new houses' and things would again turn favourable. Indications of such prospects are already visible as the crude producing countries are re-thinking their strategies for obvious reasons. In fact, the recent reversal of the price increase started with OPEC leader Saudi Arabia brokering a deal with Russia and members of the cartel to turn the tap open for more oil to flow into the market. Crude oil prices

plunged by 7 percent in two sessions as Saudi Arabia and Russia confirmed their decision. This was followed by a meeting of OPEC deciding to add one million barrels per day of crude production across the cartel members to stabilise the market.

Obviously, the producers are seeing the writing on the wall about the future of oil as the primary energy source. Speculative froth in the oil futures markets has already vanished, replaced by a new trading calculus based on the realities of supply and demand. It is no small thing that the market has taken in its stride such a serious development as Trump's embargo on Iran, which at other times would have led the market to go through the roof. The new thinking by the oil producers has been prompted by the realisation that the future of fossil fuels is limited and there is no point in keeping huge reserves of a resource which may be of little value in future. The producers have realised that they need to make the maximum use of their reserves in the limited window of opportunity that is still available as fossil fuel burning for energy gives way to new technologies and the world, driven by climate change priorities, moves towards a carbon-free regime. By OPEC's own estimate, the number of electric vehicles on the road in two decades' time will touch some 266 million. Just one year ago, this estimate was 10 times smaller, indicating the past at which the market is changing.

This means that Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Russia will all seek to produce and export as much as they can, to monetise their oil reserves before demand for the black gold shrinks over the next decade. As each OPEC member seeks to maximize revenue, the only credible scenario is for a price war for retaining market share. Already market operators are talking in terms of crude prices at \$56 a barrel. And all this is possible before Modi's time runs out. That could well be another spell of good luck for him. (IPA)



A person trying to climb on a railing as people struggling for the regular life due to heavy rain in Mumbai

The emerging Nepal-India-China equation

Nepal Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli paid a five-day official visit to China from June 19. Before going into an analysis of that visit and its impact on Nepal, India and China relationship, it may be useful to take a brief look at an important development in the internal politics of Nepal in the immediate past.

The two communist parties engaged in working out the modalities of their merger into one communist party ever since the last parliamentary elections in December last year ultimately concluded their unification process on May 17 this year. Once at daggers drawn, the two parties decided to bury the hatchet after the parliamentary elections in December last year when they found that together they commanded clear majority in parliament. The name of the united party is Nepal Communist Party, not the Communist Party of Nepal. A near-parity was maintained in forming the Central Committee and the Standing Committee of the NCP. Of the 441-member CC, 241 are from Oli's party, the CPN (United Marxist Leninist) and 200 from Pushpa Kumar Dahal's (better known as Prachanda) CPN (Maoist Centre). In the 43-

member Standing Committee, 25 are from CPN(UML) and 18 from CPN(MC). The united party has 174 seats in the 275-member parliament. This has at last given Nepal the much needed political stability it lacked. The past few years had witnessed frequent changes in government because no party commanded a clear majority on its own and had to depend on the support of other parties.

Before the merger, Prachanda was perceived as being pro-India and Oli as pro-China. Keeping this in mind, one can turn to Oli's China visit within a month of the merger of the two CPs and see what transpired. The burden of Oli's speeches in China was that Nepal was to follow an independent foreign policy. In an interview to the CPC organ Global Times, Oli said that from the very first, his government had "intensified engagements with both China and India." He went on to say: "We have made it clear that we will pursue an independent foreign policy and a balanced outlook in the conduct of international relations." He emphasized that "We are firmly committed to allowing our territory to be used against the sovereign interests of our neighbours." This clear and categorical statement should allay fears

and misgivings, if any, in the minds of policy makers in New Delhi. As many as 14 agreements were signed between Nepal and China during Oli's visit in the fields of connectivity, transportation, energy, infrastructure development and tourism. The most important was, of course, the one on building a strategic railway link that will connect Kathmandu with the Tibet region of China across the difficult mountainous terrain of the high Himalayas. Oli himself described this agreement as an important one. However, no details of the project agreement, like the project cost, the expected date of completion, the likely amount of investment by the Chinese and the interest on the loan to be charged by the Chinese companies, have been disclosed.

Besides, China will undertake exploration of natural gas and petroleum products in Nepal. This is rather intriguing because there are no known reserves in Nepal

FOCUS

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acquire proprietary rights on the projects they finance. According to a survey made by the Quartz online business magazine, eight countries are likely to find themselves in the Chinese debt trap. These are: Djibouti, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Maldives, Mongolia, Pakistan and Montenegro. Sri Lanka, it may be borne in mind, has had to sell 70 per cent equity in the Hambantota port project to the Chinese company building it. Bangladesh also carries a huge Chinese debt burden of \$8 billion.

As a seasoned political leader, Prime Minister Oli must be aware of the risks involved in taking huge loans from China for building 'mega projects'. As far as India is concerned, it should seriously consider the suggestion of Nepali Congress leader Mahat and offer to build a railway line to Kathmandu. Such a line is justified not only on purely economic and financial grounds but also for compelling strategic reasons.

If China has a rail link with Kathmandu, there is no reason why India, being the closest neighbour and having a cultural and historical bond with Nepal for thousands of years, should allow China to steal a march. (IPA)

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| 11 | Cereal | 5 | Calm |
| 12 | Stop | 6 | Masticated |
| 14 | Writer of verse | 9 | Emotional state |
| 16 | Wash lightly | 10 | Corn spike |
| 18 | Lazy person | 13 | Absence of sound |
| 20 | Heavy substance | 14 | Sea-rocker |
| 21 | Proverb | 15 | Jubilant |
| 23 | Perform | 17 | Unpleasant |
| 24 | Meditate | 19 | Sharp blow |
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| 29 | Drowsy | 26 | Narrow beam |

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