

A nation is a society united by delusions about its ancestry and by common hatred of its neighbors
William Ralph Inge

The Trump-Kim meeting

What was unthinkable even a couple of months ago has happened. The joint statement signed by President Donald Trump of the US and President Kim Jong-un, the "Supreme Leader" of North Korea, at the end of their historic summit meeting at Singapore, said that President Trump had "committed to provide security guarantees" to North Korea while Kim "reaffirmed his firm and unwavering commitment to complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula." The world has heaved a sigh of relief as both nuclear-power countries were talking of destroying each other. After Trump agreed to provide security guarantee to North Korea, Kim reciprocated the gesture by assuring complete denuclearization.

Several decades ago, the former president of the now dissolved Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, had said that the alternative to co-existence of countries with difference social systems was co-destruction. There are now about ten countries, some known some suspected, which possess nuclear weapons. They have also developed powerful delivery systems called Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) that can hit their targets thousands of miles away with great precision. This has rendered useless the utility of atomic weapons as means of offence and aggression. Today, atomic weapons are meant only to deter other countries from embarking on a nuclear misadventure. Atomic weapons have now become tactical rather than strategic weapons. What is more, the country targeting another with atomic weapons may itself become the victim if winds flow back the radioactive fallout to that country.

Nuclear technology may have been acquired by many other countries as well though they have not yet embarked on the path of nuclear weaponization. The nuclear monopoly once enjoyed by the Big Five ended long ago. For any country or any statesman now to think of launching a nuclear attack would be a mad idea because it will invite MAD or Mutually Assured Destruction. The world now will have to move toward total denuclearization and in this the Big Five - United States, Russia, China, Britain and France - will have to take the lead because between themselves they hold the largest number of nuclear warheads. The biggest stumbling blocks to implementing a time-bound denuclearization programme will be the US and China - one a declining Power which wants to act as a self-appointed world policeman and the other a rising Power which wants to replace the US and emerge as the sole hegemon.

Too many chinks in BJP's 'invincibility' armour

REFLEX ACTION

Amulya Ganguli

As in London last April, Narendra Modi participated in a choreographed question-and-answer session in Singapore recently, where one of his responses was apparently to a pre-set query. The difference between the two events was that the BJP aficionado and censor board chief, Praseon Joshi, managed to camouflage the pre-arranged nature of the show in London with much greater efficiency than what was done in Singapore.

The faux pas of the organizers in Singapore related to the mechanical act of the English translator of Modi's replies in Hindi to read out in full the script that had been given to her, instead of confining herself to only the portion which the prime minister had said. Since the latter gave a much shorter reply to a question than what was apparently decided on earlier, the translator did not know where to stop and read out a much longer version of the speech. It was an embarrassing episode which again showed that Modi preferred a pre-scripted interaction in order to avoid controversial issues. The problem, however, with such stage-managed shows is the fostering of an illusion of control and invincibility, which are the hallmarks of the Modi dispensation. The illusion is also created by the orchestrated chanting of "Modi, Modi" by cheerleaders organized by the party, as in Shantiniketan recently. These are standard techniques of authoritarian regimes which may work in a dictatorship but are out of place in democracies. This was the lesson which Indira Gandhi learnt to her dismay when she told a journalist after her 1977 defeat that she did not receive any feedback about the prevailing discontent because of the press censorship.

It is possible that the present-day rulers, too, may find themselves to be out of touch with the popular mood if they keep themselves away from no-holds-

barred press conferences and depend only on pre-arranged pow-wows with "reliable" scribes and expect the saffron social media trolls and heavily-biased television channels to give an idea of what the people are thinking. It is probably because the BJP leaders have been living in such an echo-chamber that they have failed to anticipate the shift in the public mindset that has been evident in a number of recent by-elections.

The carefully monitored shows in London and Singapore were noteworthy not only for the rehearsed interactive sessions, with the anchor, Praseon Joshi, providing cues to the prime minister for indulging in self-praise about his energy and concern for the poor, but also for keeping out suspected dissenters from the audience. Where, for instance, was the professor who asked Rahul Gandhi during an unrehearsed interaction in Singapore last March about India's economic woes during the reigns of the Nehru-Gandhi family?

A negative feature of living in a closed environment is not only to miss out on what the people outside are thinking, but also to breed a sense of hubris about the correctness of the path which the ruling party is following along with contempt for the existing norms. One of the examples of this disdain was the Karnataka governor, Vajubhai Vala's decision to give as many as 15 days to the BJP's chief ministerial nominee, B S Yeddyurappa, to prove his majority on the floor of the House even if the

indulgent leeway was seen as an open invitation to defections. The Supreme Court's curtailment of the time-limit to a day was, therefore, a well-deserved snub to the governor. But the latter could have avoided such an admonition if he did not live in a secluded atmosphere of the party faithful and eschewed his partisan preferences on entering the Raj Bhavan. If he didn't do so, it is because the BJP has apparently convinced itself that the 2014 verdict is an all-time declaration of faith by the people in the party, which is why BJP president Amit Shah has said that the BJP is looking forward to win all elections from panchayats to parliament for the next 50 years.

The objective is laudable and should perhaps be pursued by other political parties as well. But it nevertheless emphasizes the idea of a one-party rule which can also be seen in the BJP's oft-repeated ambition of ushering in a Congress-mukt Bharat. Yet, when the Congress was in power at the centre and in most of the states, especially in the first 20 years after 1947, it never spoke of ridding the country of the various opposition parties. Instead, as observers have noted, the country's first prime minister made it a point to attend the parliamentary sessions regularly and listen attentively to the opposition speakers.

Even if this belief in democratic traditions was trampled upon by the Congress during the Emergency, it was regarded as an aberration, as a Congress stalwart of the time, Y B Chavan, had said. Moreover, the party was punished for its sins by the electorate in 1977. In this context, BJP patriarch L K Advani's statement a year after Modi's assumption of power that the anti-democratic forces have become "stronger" and the more recent open letter by a group of retired bureaucrats about the growing authoritarianism are worrying signs. (IPA)



Students of Ursuline Convent, Ranchi celebrating their success after securing the 1st position in Jharkhand 10th Board Examination results, in Ranchi on Tuesday

Needed: Priority for core economic issues

FOCUS

G Srinivasan

For the Modi Government, the celebration of the four years of corruption-free governance with the receipt of the mixed message of the latest batch of by-polls to Lok Sabha and State Assemblies across the nation behind, the crucial final year of its first term is replete with existential challenges on the economic front.

Politically, Modi may be invincibly in a pole position to lead his party for a second term with the rank and file adoring him as the mascot of the BJP with all the adulations due to a celebrity leader, despite the manifest protests of the party's elders, who were left high and dry during the last few years. Though there is not much of a difference between a dynasty and a single-party supreme leader in terms of his or her writ being run unquestioned, the fact remains that a voluble democracy like ours always throws up puzzling results at the hustings whenever people feel short-changed or betrayed by leaders who promised a lot but delivered precious little in making a qualitative difference to their otherwise morose existence. Inflation, rising crude oil prices and agrarian distress remain by far major challenges now.

In this context, apart from the domestic rating agencies or a few multilateral institutions such as the IMF or the World Bank, the assessment of credible inter-governmental think tank of 34 rich industrial countries such as the Paris-

based Organization for Economic Cooperation & Development (OECD) always counts and matters. India is also enjoying observer status in OECD. The first NDA government's tallest leader, Atal Behari Vajpayee, had said way back in 1999-2003 that India would join the league of advanced nations by 2020.

It was also significant that during Vajpayee's tenure India got the observer status in the OECD when Jaswant Singh was the Finance Minister. The digression apart, what the OECD has said in its bi-annual World Economic Outlook of developments in individual OECD and selected non-member economies, the latter include India, matters in terms of where India is perched in its ambitious goal to be an advanced country after a decade and a half of Vajpayee's ascension.

OECD maintains that India's economic growth is increasing, making it the fastest-growing G20 economy, with investment and exports underpinning and complementing, duly bolstered by the smoother implementation of the new goods and services tax (GST). For a country credited to enjoy demographic dividend of youthful population, OECD's observation that job creation in the formal sector to remain sluggish, "leaving the vast majority of workers in low-productivity low-paid activities" meant that there is

anything scarcely to cheer up for growth-propelling forces to render the growth engine gain traction. Rightly, OECD contended that investing more in education and training, combined with modernisation of labour laws, would help foster better jobs and render growth more inclusive. It is rather unfortunate that the Modi Government had not improved much on investing in education and training or reforming the arcane labour laws to suit the mundane needs of modern investors or self-employed start-ups. It is one thing to make high-faluting sloganeering on increased focus on imparting skills or reforming labour laws incrementally without giving anything way of leeway to the employer to make the best use of one of the vital factors of production, i.e., labour in an efficient manner to maximise returns on the scarce capital at exorbitant interest cost in a high-cost economy.

The OECD report, while lauding the number of employees eligible for social security benefits has been boosted by an amnesty scheme for companies, noted that this still stands below 10 per cent of total employees. It further pointed out that India's

employment data is partial, which suggests that "overall job creation has been lackluster." This is a serious indictment on the reporting of labour statistics in the country as recently an unseemly controversy broke out over the alleged creation of seven million jobs in 2017-18 based on payroll data in the organized sector. This was widely criticised and commented upon by independent policy wonks as being innovatively imaginary or imagined conclusion based on extant imperfect data! However, OECD rightly noted that better assessing outcomes, in particular in terms of job creation, would be key to identify best practices and modernisation of laws. Recent initiatives to improve the quality and timeliness of labour data should continue, it said. As India is suffering from investment famine with private investment in a dormant mode and mood, OECD aptly argued that bringing the banking system back to health is crucial to support the recovery in investment. Recapitalisation of public sector banks is supporting loan revival and recent steps to speed up the recognition of stressed assets would help improve the

resolution of non-performing advances (assets)-the NPAs) which are large by global norms.

It noted that reforms to improve the bank governance are also needed to avoid a new build-up of NPAs. Better safeguarding the interests of minority shareholders would put pressure on banks to take more prudent and independent decisions, while better risk management and auditing in public sector banks would contribute to the quality of banks' portfolio. It suggests that public sector banks should be given the ability to attract and retain talents, including through more elbow room in setting employee compensation. These are nothing dramatic or not thought through by domestic economists and their innumerable ilk but the progress in taking action in this direction remains glacial and guarded by the authorities.

With time running out for the incumbent government as it must perforce have to seek renewed mandate before long, it is time the political leadership focused its attention on core economic agenda sans diluting its energy and efforts in the absurd political theatres to score brownie points over its scattered opponents, who were yet to find their feet from the debacle of 2014, notwithstanding their new-fangled zeal to put up a combined fight against the NDA! (IPA)

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19	20		21		22	23
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28				29		

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|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| ACROSS | DOWN |
| 1 Church leader | 1 Annoyance |
| 3 Stops up | 2 Fruit |
| 8 Plunder | 4 Everyone |
| 9 Avoid | 5 American elk |
| 11 Shut | 6 Assumed attitude |
| 12 Female horse | 7 Precipitous |
| 14 Observe | 10 Part of a church |
| 15 Vigour | 11 Goddess of tilage and corn |
| 18 Affray | 13 Transmit in stages |
| 19 Female sheep | 16 Disguise |
| 22 Continent | 17 Frighten from |
| 24 Lotter | 18 Combine |
| 26 Old stringed instrument | 20 Walk through water |
| 27 Border | 22 Subtle emanation |
| 28 Water grasses | 23 Heavy substance |
| 29 Musical group | 25 Colour |

SUDOKU: 2222

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

Yesterday's Solution 2221

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

Yesterday's Cross Word Solution 230

F	A	C	E	T	B	A	L	D
A	W	E	A	I	R	I		
C	A	D	E	T	A	M	E	N
T	R	E	M	O	R	S	E	
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A	S	H	R	A	M	N		
T	A	S	P	E	R	S	E	
T	H	O	R	S	T	E	A	K
I	V	I	M	N	N	E		
C	L	A	D	H	I	D	E	S

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