



Minimum government

The Centre faces a trust deficit as it seeks to restore public order in riot-hit Delhi

The communal violence that has claimed 42 lives since Sunday has been subdued but tensions continue to simmer in Delhi. Stories of human courage and camaraderie that shone through amid orchestrated mayhem offer hope, but what rankles is the complete breakdown of governance from top to bottom in the national capital. Several credible accounts of horrendous acts of omission and commission by the Delhi police have emerged. Instead of taking the police to task and wringing them into action, the Central government and the Delhi Lieutenant-Governor have fielded the Solicitor General to shield them from judicial scrutiny. The Centre's position in the court that action cannot be taken against the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders who made incendiary speeches until the police had perused all such speeches is analogous to arguing that one criminal cannot be probed unless all others are also probed – a bizarre logic. The Delhi High Court, which took up the matter with the urgency that the situation demands on Wednesday, incapacitated itself a day later as a different bench headed by the Chief Justice D.N. Patel put the case off to April 13. Meanwhile, Kapil Mishra, one of the BJP leaders against whom police action was sought, called for a rally on Saturday, purportedly for peace but clearly intended to stoke the fire. The arguments of the country's law officer were a public admission of the government's refusal to act against members of the BJP. With such blatant partisanship and abdication of responsibility, the government cannot be expected to stop violence and restore communal peace.

Meanwhile, the Delhi police have acted swiftly against Tahir Hussain, an Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) Councillor accused of involvement in murder and keeping sticks, stones and petrol mobs on the terrace of his house that was surrounded by a mob. The AAP has since suspended him from membership, and endorsed the police action against him. While the protests against the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act took a communal turn in several places, a counter-mobilisation also on communal lines has pushed the city to the brink in recent weeks. Right to assemble and protest is a fundamental right, but its exercise has to be in accordance with requirements of public order. It is the duty of the police to ensure that constitutional guarantees are upheld on the one hand, while, on the other, life and work goes on normally for the general population. The Central and Delhi governments, the police, and the judiciary have come up short against these markers of the rule of law. They are all facing a severe deficit of trust among the citizens. Peace and normalcy can be achieved only through restoration of the majesty and impartiality of the government. Unfortunately, there is no effort visible in that direction.

Regional bonding

India needs to engage with its neighbours for the realisation of its global ambitions

At a time when India has more or less shut down all conversations on the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and walked away from the ASEAN-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), former Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's push for regional economic integration and for India-Pakistan dialogue should be studied carefully by New Delhi. Speaking at *The Hindu's* Huddle conclave last week, Mr. Wickremesinghe set out a number of suggestions. He blamed India-Pakistan tensions for bringing economic integration within the SAARC region to a "standstill", explaining that the original purpose of the South Asian group was to build a platform where bilateral issues could be set aside in the interest of regional growth. Decriing the lack of economic integration in South Asia, and the failure of SAARC, as well as BIMSTEC (which includes Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand), to engender more intra-regional trade, Mr. Wickremesinghe suggested an even smaller sub-grouping of four countries with complementary economies: India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Thailand, to begin the process of reducing tariffs and demolishing non-tariff barrier regimes. When it comes to the intra-regional share of total trade, SAARC and BIMSTEC languish behind groupings such as ASEAN, EU and MERCOSUR. The Sri Lankan leader also suggested that with India's leadership, a more integrated South Asian region would be better equipped to negotiate for better terms with RCEP so as not to be cut out of the "productivity network" in Asia, and envisioned an Economic Integration Road Map to speed up the process.

Given the current policy trajectory of the Modi government, it is unlikely that any of the suggestions will be welcomed. The government has made it clear that talks with Pakistan are strictly off the table, and that a SAARC summit, which has not been held since 2014, is unlikely to be convened anytime soon. Second, the government, which has taken a protectionist turn on multilateral trade pacts, is relying more on direct bilateral deals with countries rather than overarching ones that might expose Indian markets to flooding by Chinese goods. For any regional sub-grouping in South Asia to flourish, it is India that will have to make the most concessions given the vast trade deficits India's neighbours have at present, which it may not wish to do. However, the overall projection that India's global reach will be severely constrained unless it is integrated with its neighbours, and tensions with Pakistan are resolved, cannot be refuted. India needs to be more accommodative for the realisation of its ambitions.

Scripting an audacity of hope, the Sanders way

The rise of the Vermont Senator as a frontrunner has upended many myths, and opened up several possibilities



VIVEK CHIBBER

The emergence of Bernie Sanders as the frontrunner in the Democratic Party primaries has stunned the world. But it shouldn't have. The U.S. is merely joining in the wave of electoral insurrections that are upending the political order across the world. Underneath it are two fundamental drivers. First, the phenomenal growth in inequality, both of income and wealth. After a period of four decades, from the 1930s through the 1970s, in which the gap between the rich and poor actually narrowed, economic inequality today is back to the levels not seen for 100 years.

But it isn't just that the rich have got richer. It is also that the standard of working class living has actually declined in many ways. Wages have stagnated for 40 years, and to maintain their income, families have had to work longer and longer hours. As a result, health indicators among the poor have declined as overwork, exhaustion, and anxiety have become epidemic. Several recent studies report not only dramatic increases in psychological stress among Americans, but also that its main cause is job insecurity and overwork – economic factors. All this while the U.S. is the only industrial country without a national healthcare plan. Hence, the physical and psychological breakdown goes untreated – and we have the hitherto unimaginable fact that life expectancy among adult males has actually decreased in recent years, for the first time in over a century – and that too, among white males, the section of the population pilloried by the left as "privileged". In the richest country in the world, the lifespan of working-class men is now getting shorter.

This collapse in living standards has been overseen by both political parties in the U.S.'s two-party system. This is the second driver. The Democratic Party was once seen as the party of the working class. And while this description was always a bit of an exaggeration, the unions and advocacy groups representing working Americans did have some influence within it. Because of that, the Democratic Party was behind the two waves of expansion of the welfare state – first the New Deal under Franklin D. Roosevelt, and then Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society programmes in the late 1960s. But, by the 1980s, this connection was severed. Under Bill Clinton, the Democrats became Republican-lite – committed to the same neoliberal economic principles. As Gore Vidal brilliantly described it: "There is only one Party in the United States, the Property Party... and it has two right wings: Republican and Democrat."

Rebellion against the elites

What is unfolding now is something akin to a rebellion against this order, with Mr. Sanders at its helm. The Vermont Senator has never been a Democrat. He has always run as an Independent, eschewing any connection with either Party. But once he decided to run for President, he knew that it would be suicide to try it outside the Democratic Party. This was Ralph Nader's great error in 2000, because in a winner-takes-all system, small third-party campaigns are inevitably viewed as spoilers. They not only lose, but end up draining votes from their closest ideological competitor – in this case, it would be the Democrats. Mr. Nader lost, and then was vilified for supposedly draining votes away from Mr. Gore. So, Mr. Sanders registered in the Party and ran under its umbrella, first in 2016 and then again in this cycle.

But make no mistake, Mr. Sanders is also running against the Democratic Party. And the Party's leadership understands that, which is why it is trying its best to



defeat him. The last time anyone ran on a platform as progressive as Mr. Sanders's was in 1984, when Jesse Jackson took on the emerging right wing in the Party with his 'Rainbow Coalition'. Mr. Jackson's campaign was in many ways very similar to Mr. Sanders's. It proposed national healthcare, a raise in the minimum wage, extending the social safety net and also a shift in foreign policy. Nobody expected it to succeed, and yet he made a serious run for the Party nomination – so much so, that a panicked Party had to take desperate measures to prevent its success, including shutting down polling booths in many cities where Mr. Jackson was gaining momentum. But Mr. Sanders's campaign is more radical, if only because the forces it is taking on are so much more entrenched after 40 years of neoliberal turn. Mr. Jackson ran when unions and civic organisations still had some weight inside the Party, and he could garner some support from them. Mr. Sanders stands virtually alone, having only the forces he built up, or has helped build up since 2016, as his support base.

Mr. Sanders's success has upended several myths about the American electorate, which the two parties have used to justify their neoliberal policies. The first is that the reason America does not have a robust welfare state is that the public is uniquely suspicious of "big government". In other words, when politicians refuse to even consider social insurance policies, they are merely reflecting American values. But in fact, public opinion polls have shown for decades that, when the question is posed appropriately, Americans

have expressed the same desire for social insurance as publics everywhere else. It is not that they are suspicious of big government, but that they have given up hoping that the state will ever do anything for them. Mr. Sanders is the first political figure in almost two generations to break through the embargo, and it has caught fire.

The second myth is that the only way to win is by veering toward the 'centre', which makes a Sanders platform suicidal because centrist voters are hostile to the policies it espouses. This has been the most common justification for eschewing progressive policies for decades, and it is a variant of the first myth. Once again, politicians are supposedly just following what the public wants. But what is not mentioned is that only about half of the American electorate participates in presidential elections – and it is the wealthier half. Poorer voters have given up on the system precisely because the system is not only indifferent, but hostile to them. They choose not to vote. So the 'centre' of the voting population is much to the left of the part that typically votes. It is to this section, shunted aside and ignored, to which Mr. Sanders is making his appeals, and it is working.

Welfare of minorities

The final myth is that Mr. Sanders is proposing "white" policies that ignore issues of race and ethnicity. This is the most toxic of the shibboleths. It supposes that economic issues – of wages, healthcare, education, etc. – do not attract black and brown voters. And yet, Mr. Sanders has built up the biggest following of all the candidates among non-white voters. He is the most trusted and most loved by minorities of any politician in America. In Nevada, Mr. Sanders garnered a staggering 70% of the Latino vote and was a close second to Joe Biden among the Blacks. The reason is obvious – because minorities are the most economically desperate section of the American population. They are the natural constituency for a

campaign centering on economic justice.

Mr. Sanders is succeeding because he is attracting voters who are either ignored or actively discouraged from voting by his Party. And with every victory, his campaign is gaining exponentially in strength. After five decades of neglect and abuse, working-class Americans had given up on the system. Their cynicism and sense of hopelessness was not only accepted by the two Parties, but encouraged by them. Up to this past weekend, the message on the airwaves was, "he cannot win". The idea is for every household to feel that even if they feel attracted to his programme, they are alone in their sentiments – that that mythical 'centre', will reject him.

But with every win, every success, the brute facts have become impossible to ignore. Iowa showed that he had a real base; New Hampshire confirmed that it was not a fluke; Nevada has shown that he is not only able to attract minority voters, but that he is by far the most popular candidate among them. Mr. Sanders got more votes in Nevada than the next three candidates combined. The Party is in full-blown panic and, over the next months, will do everything it can to stop him.

But its power is limited. The fact is that the American Parties have very little control over who can and cannot run on their tickets. Anyone is free to enter a primary, and if they can attract enough votes, it is very hard to stop them. And the Party leadership's helplessness is becoming palpable. The last weapon they had was their fear mongering, and now that too has become ineffective.

Mr. Sanders has tapped into a deep, simmering sentiment among the American people. It is far more dangerous than anger. It is hope – and it threatens to overturn the entire political establishment.

Vivek Chibber is a Professor of Sociology at New York University and editor of 'Catalyst' magazine

State lethargy amidst cough syrup poisoning

A national recall of Coldbest-PC, the medicine behind the death of 12 children in Jammu, is needed



DINESH THAKUR

A few days ago, we learnt that 12 children died in Udhampur district of Jammu due to poisoned cough syrup (Coldbest-PC). More are fighting for their life in a hospital. A team of doctors at the Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education & Research, Chandigarh, attributed the deaths to the presence of diethylene glycol in the cough syrup which was consumed by all the dead children. Diethylene glycol is an anti-freezing agent that causes acute renal failure in the human body followed by paralysis, breathing difficulties and ultimately death.

This is the fourth mass glycol poisoning event in India that has been caused due to a pharmaceutical drug. In 1973, there was a similar incident at the Children's Hospital, Egmore in Chennai that caused the deaths of 14 children. In 1986, similar poisoning at Mumbai's J.J. Hospital caused the deaths of 14 patients who were otherwise on the path to recovery.

In 1998, 33 children died in two hospitals located in New Delhi due to similar poisoning. In all three cases, the manufacturer of the suspect cough syrup, due to negligence or human error, failed to detect and contain the level of diethylene glycol in the syrup, thereby causing poisoning of the patients who consumed it.

Tracking the sold bottles

There will be plenty of time later to ascertain the cause and prosecute the guilty but the immediate concern for doctors, pharmacists and the drug regulators should be to prevent any more deaths. The only way to do so is to account for each and every bottle of the poisoned syrup that has ever been sold in the Indian market and stop patients from consuming this drug any further. Any patient who has consumed even a spoon of the syrup should then immediately be referred to a hospital for treatment.

According to the information available on the website of the United States Food and Drug Administration (USFDA), in 1937, when the United States faced a similar situation with glycol poisoning, its entire field force of 239 inspectors and chemists were assigned to the task of tracking down every single



bottle of the drug. Even if a patient claimed to have thrown out the bottle, the investigators scoured the street until they found the discarded bottle. This effort was accompanied by a publicity blitz over radio and television.

We do not see such public health measures being undertaken here; authorities are simply not communicating the seriousness of the issue to the general public. At most, the authorities in Himachal Pradesh (H.P.), who are responsible for oversight of the manufacturer of this syrup, have made general statements that they have ordered the withdrawal of the drug from all the other States where it was marketed. However, there is no transparency in the recall process and information about recalls and batch numbers is not being communicated through

authoritative channels. There is no public announcement by the Drug Controller General of India (DCGI), which is responsible for overall regulation of the entire Indian market. The suspect product, although manufactured in H.P., has been sold across the country. The website of the DCGI, which is supposed to communicate drug alerts and product recalls, has no mention of Coldbest-PC as being dangerous as of this writing.

Need for a recall policy

One of the key reasons why the DCGI and state drug authorities have been so sloppy is because unlike other countries, India has not notified any binding guidelines or rules on recalling dangerous drugs from the market. The 59th report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Health as well as the World Health Organization (in its national regulatory assessment) had warned the DCGI on the lack of a national recall framework in India. A set of recall guidelines was drafted in 2012 but never notified into law. In 2016, in a report submitted by me to the Ministry of Health suggesting measures to reform the drug regulatory framework, I had pointed out to the Ministry that a national drug recall framework was in urgent need. In

a pending case before the Delhi High Court, I have also sought for the notification of a national recall mechanism. The government is yet to file its response.

While a national recall of this adulterated medicine is the immediate need, the administration also needs to quickly identify which other pharmaceutical companies have received the spurious ingredient that was supplied to the manufacturer in H.P. from a trader in Chennai. It is very likely that the trader in question marketed the same ingredient to other pharmaceutical companies, who, like the manufacturer at the centre of the present scandal, may have failed to test it for its identity and purity. It is important for regulatory enforcement to raid and seize the records of the trader in Chennai and verify its sales. As of today, we have little to no information on whether any of this is happening. The lackadaisical response of drug regulators in India is not surprising. It is the result of a larger lethargy and arrogance that is emblematic of the babudom which is responsible for keeping us safe from unethical practices of pharmaceutical companies.

The writer is a public health activist and was the whistleblower in the Ranbaxy case

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Following 'raj dharma'
The Congress delegation's petition to the President seeking the sacking of Home Minister Amit Shah for his allegedly inept handling of the Delhi riots is a futile exercise ("Congress urges President to remove Amit Shah," Feb. 28). The virtual 'No. 2' in the Cabinet, Mr. Shah has already received a pat on the back from his party. The BJP, being a party with a difference, has never believed in taking any kind of action against any of its members, irrespective of their position, and this has been the trend ever since it came to power at the Centre in 2014. When acts

of commission indulged in by its motor-mouths hardly earns them even a mild rebuke, one can well imagine how acts of omission are likely to be dealt with. The President can hardly be expected to advise the government to follow *raj dharma* either, as the limitations of his office might come in the way of his proffering any kind of advice to the government, especially one that enjoys a brute majority. Every time the Opposition parties point a finger at the NDA government, holding it responsible for not reining in the rioters, the standard response of the BJP is to remind the Congress of the

riots in 1984, unmindful of the fact that two wrongs can never make a right.

C.V. ARAVIND,
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Peaceful assertions

The women of Shaheen Bagh have not only thwarted insidious attempts to malign and rubbish their protests, but asserted their independence of thought and action by not yielding to the wishes of Maulvis and Imams to end their protest. If only the government gives them a firm commitment that the National Register of Citizens would not be implemented, they may be persuaded to give up their protests and

leave the issue of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act to be decided by the Supreme Court. Whichever way the curtain finally comes down on the protests, they will for long be remembered as a renaissance movement of Muslim women who came out on the streets, showed physical endurance, grit and determination to stand up for their rights (Editorial page, "Hope, belief and the candles of Shaheen Bagh," Feb. 28).

R. RAVICHANDRAN,
Chennai

Humour in Parliament

Considering that parliamentary proceedings

these days are interspersed with disruptions and disturbances, it is heartening to read that 50 years ago, Rajya Sabha was witness to lighter and humorous moments, with members involving themselves in questions like, "which part of the life

is the most romantic?" It would be a good idea to send such reports to the present-day representatives for their benefit. (From the Archives, "Kissing tickles the elders too," Feb. 28)

S. ARJUN PRASANNA,
Bengaluru

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS: >> The last paragraph of a report, "High Court to hear plea for FIRs on April 13" (February 28, 2020) said: "On Wednesday, the Bench comprising Justice S. Muralidhar asked the police to take a 'conscious decision' on registering FIRs against the three BJP leaders". It was wrong. The High Court ruling did not limit the scope of its directions to only the four videos played in Court or to any particular alleged person. The web version of the report has been corrected.

>> In a report, "All-party MPs to meet Minister", (some editions, February 27, 2020) the name of the Civil Aviation Minister was wrongly mentioned as Mr. Suresh Prabhu instead of Mr. Hardeep Singh Puri.

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