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1) Who is to be blamed for Incidents such as Bangalore Mass Molestation?

Introduction

The New Year's eve once again shamed humanity, when in the presence and "protection" of 1500 policemen, women were touched, grabbed, abused without restraint on Bangalore's iconic MG Road.

There have been a spate of such despicable acts across the length and breadth of the country that have come to light in the recent days that seems to point out that there has been a serious discrepancy in the grooming of our generation next.

The cases of molestation by two bikers, caught on camera, of a working woman on a Bangalore street, biting the tongue of a burka clad woman by a molester in Bangalore and another case of mass molestation in Delhi's Mukherjee Nagar by goons who even attacked the cops for intervening to protect the woman.

The brazenness of uncouth hooligans gets supported, when the police goes on a denial mode and says that "there is no evidence that it happened" and when, the likes of Samajwadi Party leader, Abu Azmi or Karnataka Home Minister G Parameshwara, suggest that 'such things happen' and advice women to wear Indian clothes and not to go out late evening unescorted.

Who is to be blamed?

I feel that the typical Indian mindset of male superiority vis-a-vis female gender, which inhibits them to accept the fact, that today's women are equally liberated, especially, financially and intellectually, is the root cause behind such appalling behavior of Indian men.

A few decades ago, the limit of influence of the women was restricted to the extremities of their domestic domain. The present generation of youth had mostly seen elder women folk tied down to the whims and fancies of the men at home.

The young girls of this generation, on the contrary want to break the shackles of male tyranny and become self reliant. Education and different forms of electronic media has enlightened them and they have optimally utilized the liberty provided to them by their parents, who, in many cases had only girl children or found the girl child more responsive than her male sibling.

The wide propagation of gender equality by media, NGOs and governmental institutions encouraged the girls of the present generation to carve a substantial niche for themselves in this male dominant environment.

The present day young men, especially those who have a low self esteem, accruing out of shabby treatment meted out to them by the environment owing to their inadequacies, exhibit their power (inferiority complex) by overpowering girls and molesting them.

The deliberate segregation of boys and girls at home and educational institutions right from their childhood, the rural-urban and the small town-metro cultural divide is also one of the major reasons for such incidents to take place. The mentality carried by the youth from conservative backgrounds may result in them going overboard when given an opportunity.

There is also a small percentage of girls who take this liberty for granted, especially those who had initially lived under a very tight control of their parents. Such girls are sometimes unable to draw the line and get caught in unsavory situations. It is always good to maintain your poise and dignity.....the others will always respect it.

The society must evolve and not degenerate with time. If we see around us the mindsets are becoming more and more regressive rather than becoming progressive. The capacity to give space to other castes, communities and genders is progressively diminishing.

The flagging tolerance levels also acts as a catalyst for such abnormal antisocial motions.

Conclusion

Finally, I wish to highlight that the men have no right to tell what women must wear or do and ought to respect their honor and dignity.

There are a number of legislations in place to protect the rights of women. However, we need to devise ways and means to implement these laws more stringently.

Please read my previous blog to familiarize with the legislations that are in force to fight crime against women

2) BHIM- a leap towards Cashless Economy

Introduction

On the eve of 31 Dec 2016, Prime Minister Modi, while addressing the nation announced about the new scheme called BHIM (Bharat Interface for Money), named after Babasaheb Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, the architect of the Constitution of India. BHIM is the latest unified app for UPI(Unified Payments Interface)which will allow the users transfer money to anyone with a UPI- enabled bank account , or even a regular bank account through IFSC code.UPI, as a payment system was first announced in April 2016,by the 'National Payments Corporation of India'(NPCI) along with the Reserve Bank of India.

Why BHIM is beneficial to common masses?

While mobile wallet companies like Paytm and Mobikwik made great business cashing in on demonetization, UPI didn't get that much of a push. However BHIM now, compensated this anomaly. BHIM will let you send and receive money to other UPI accounts or addresses. You can also send money via IFSC (Indian Financial System Code) and MMID(Mobile Money Identifier)code to users who don't have a UPI-based bank account. There is also the option of creating your own QR (Quick Response) code for a fixed amount of money, which the merchant can scan to make the deduction.

Is BHIM just another mobile Wallet?

BHIM has distinct new features than a normal mobile wallet like PAYTM or MOBIKWIK. You can store a limited amount of money in a mobile wallet, which you can send to only someone who is using the same wallet. But BHIM since UPI-based and thus linked directly to a bank account. All that payee needs is a bank account. If this account is UPI- enabled, you can just ask for the payee's VPA or Virtual Payment Address and make that payment to that account directly. The advantage is that there's no need to remember an account number ,or to share with anyone. The VPA is all that is needed .Up to Rs 10000/- can be send per transaction and up to Rs 20,000/- in any 24 hours.

Simple Operating Procedure

BHIM lets you choose your preferred bank, after it has verified your mobile number. You get an SMS, so it's best to use the same number as the one that's linked to your bank account. BHIM will ask you to set a 4-digit pass code. The App will then ask you to select your bank. If your account is UPI activated, it will reflect the relevant number. You will see options to send and receive money, and transact via IFSC. If UPI is not activated, you can put in six digits of your debit card number, and the expiry date, after which the Ap will let you use it. Right now the App is only available as an Android App which can be down loaded from Google Play Store. The iOS users are out of the system. The Apple i-Phones are also need to be brought to BHIM soon.

Saket Modi, CEO and cofounder of Lucideus Tech, one of the security vendors involved with the UPI system and BHIM app, said-"Encryption of BHIM is in line with what a Google Wallet or Apple Pay will be using, but let us remember this is just one aspect of the security. We worked on the security of UPI's common library. When former RBI Governor Raghuram Rajan launched UPI, NPCI had made a library which it shared with all banks with net banking. They were asked to embed that common library inside their net banking application. So if you want to use UPI with just your bank, it means you have to download 'Pockets' or the ICICI net banking application which is UPI enabled, to do these transactions. Before BHIM there was no common application for UPI alone. Though there was a common library always, now NPCI can boast of its own App which will facilitate a lot more transactions using a uniform app".

Three tier Security

BHIM App has three levels of authentication providing high degree of security. For one, the app binds with a user's mobile number. Secondly the user needs to sync whichever bank account (UPI or non UPI enabled)

needed to conduct monetary transactions. Thirdly, when the User sets up the app, they are asked to create a UPI PIN. This PIN is what is finally needed to complete a transaction. Further, it is needed every time you need to log into app. "There are three factors of authentication versus a normal net banking app or a chip-pin debit card which will only have two levels of authentication"- points out Modi.

The safety precautions ensure that even if your mobile gets stolen nobody can transact until they know your UPI pin. Even if someone does some fraud and gets your documents and duplicates your SIM, to access your device, they won't be able to transact because they won't have the UPI pin to access the app.

Conclusion

BHIM's launch comes at a time when the government has given a massive push to digital payments and the idea of a cashless economy. It also means that for smart-phone users, there is now a government authenticated app to carry out payments, without always having to rely on third party players.

However, right now BHIM app is facing teething troubles. The internet is spotty or non-existent across vast swathes of the land. NPCI's official Twitter account for BHIM app tweeted earlier saying that they have a high server load, due to which they are facing intermittent issues. The tweet announced that NPCI would be releasing a new version to resolve this issue. Let us all hope that 2017 is going to be a happening year to steer the nation towards a cashless economy there by ushering monumental economic growth rate.

3) TECHNOLOGIES MAY CHANGE OUR LIVES

Introduction

The 'Tomorrow-land' is visible with more clarity as the mist enveloping future India is lifting rapidly. Technology is changing the landscape of Indian social life swiftly. Shopping has almost become a virtual exercise, with internet bringing malls into our drawing rooms. Home has become the 'new workplace'. The world has already shrunk into a global village, which has brought all tasks as close as a click on a keypad or a touch on a screen.

Now India is ready to embrace the latest technologies and inventions which are going to revolutionize the lives of human beings of this world. India had missed the bus on the First Industrial Revolution in 1784, when water and steam first mechanized production. India couldn't reach up to Second Industrial Revolution in 1870, which saw a proliferation of technologies to create Assembly lines for mass production. However we endeavored to catch up with the Third Revolution in 1969, which used ELECTRONICS and information technology to automate production. I believe, now India is poised to jump into the band wagon of the eminent Fourth Industrial Revolution, which would be a fusion of most sophisticated technologies blurring the lines between the physical, digital and biological spheres.

Today's India

Within a gap of one generation, ie, say 30 years India had transformed. Dooradarshan was the only black and white TV channel even in 80s. Now we have nearly 900 TV channels giving digital clarity to the images as if you are in a movie hall. The state owned Telephone connections which were a status symbol in 80s today, have blasted into a communication revolution connecting all fiber of society, with about one billion cell-phone subscribers and 1.1 million cell PHONES added every day.

In the field of automobiles we had only three models of cars to choose from, now we have more than 100 models from the world's best automobile Companies. There was one state owned domestic airlines, now there are 12 Airlines bring air travel affordable to middle class Indians. Now with demonetization of high value currencies, India is geared to move on to a cashless economy, though the path is bumpy and stony.

Futuristic India

Immune Engineering is blazing new tracks in medical science. Soon patients own cells (T cells, a subtype of white blood cells) will be armed genetically to fight and disarm diseases like cancer. Tissue Engineering which combines medicine with engineering, allow organs and all types bones to be artificially manufactured and fitted

successfully into a live body. The days are not far, if a liver fails to function you don't have to look for a donor. Another path- breaking invention is the creation of 'Plastic -eating Bacteria' which will dispose poisonous and toxic plastic waste from the face of earth making our earth cleaner. In the fields of Agriculture, Gene editing of plants will improve yields almost 50% more without the use of any pesticides which are harmful to human health. Vertical farming methods will save on land and water scarcity.

In the Automobile world, road safety is going to be the most major concern in the coming days. Car-to- car communication will enable each vehicle to stay away and warn the occupants and thereby, avoid collisions. Driver-less cars are already getting popular in Europe and US. The pilotless cars are equipped with fool- proof navigational technology to sense accidents well in advance, and are boarded with state- of-the- art 'Artificial Intelligence' to adopt timely and appropriate remedies to ensure safety. These cars are capable of sensing about 94% of the probable accidents since most of the accidents are caused by human-error. A new paint material also is to be introduced soon which can gather energy from NATURAL sources like wind and sunshine to power cars and even walls. Bye to our fuel worries!!

Mass transportation also is going through great modernization. A pod/capsule like vehicle called "Hyper loop" is being designed to transport passengers through near- vacuum tubes at super speeds of 1,200 kmph. Almost like a jet, but using 'magnetic levitation'. Imagine going from Delhi to Mumbai in an hour, faster than a plane!!

Textile world also is undergoing tremendous modernization offered by nanotechnology and design of super-insulated LIGHT fabrics, which are capable of using one's body heat only to give adequate warmth, even in sub-zero temperatures. These fabrics could eliminate the need for indoor heating in near future. The Immersive virtual Reality (IVR) research has taken us to an unbelievable audio - video experience. By wearing IVR headsets you can be taken to an out- of- body experience into any imaginary world, giving you all-around five dimensional visions and sound quality while you can freely move around.

In the field of sanitation waterless toilets will be popular soon, a remedy to save fresh water. All trains will adopt this technology which also converts solid waste into manure. Swachh Bharat could be a reality, after all.

As I mentioned, the corner stone of Fourth Industrial Revolution is 3-D printing technology. Also known "Additive Manufacturing" it uses a process in which successive layers of materials are printed and laid on TOP of each other by computer- controlled machinery, to create an object of any shape or size. In future customized products will be tailor- made by this technology eliminating mass production, with amazing speed and accuracy. In near future cars, buildings and most of the consumer products may be made using 3-D printers. In the coming years we will also see our mobiles getting charged using energy from thin air, using electromagnetic signals as power source. Mobile phone is no more depended on electric power.

Conclusion

Folks, these are only few inventions that are mentioned here. Many more break-through technologies are in the pipeline. Though technology brings us closer through social networking sites and multi-media, it can also generate old divisions and create new hatreds. Though it can generate new jobs, it can also endanger jobs among less educated masses. Humanity can only survive the ordeals of nature by being selective about new technologies which have the potential to change our life forever.

4) Integrated Theatre Commands – an Operational Imperative

Introduction

The future battlefields will be non-linear and multi-dimensional and will be characterized by high tempo of operations conducted in a compressed time and space coupled with a high degree of transparency using cutting edge technology.

Considering that the nuclear dimension will further limit the depth and duration of the future conflicts in the sub-continent, the wars will be short and intense.

Thus, it will be an operational imperative that the response to an aggression by the three Services is highly, swift, precise and in concert. Every element deployed in the battle space will have to mesh, synchronize and move in a clockwork precision.

In order to address the issue, the concept of Integrated Theatre Commands is being considered. The concept entails having a unified command of the three Services for geographical theatres that are of military security concern.

The commander of such a force will be able to bring to bear the resources at his disposal with seamless efficacy, e.g. a 'theatre command' in the east will integrate components of the IAF and the Army and also have flotilla of the Navy integrated with it.

Let us understand the nuances of structuring our armed forces into these Theatre Commands.

Inception of the Concept

The three Services presently have 17 single Service Commands and two Tri-Service Commands, i.e. Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) and Strategic Forces Command (SFC).

These 19 Commands have considerable duplication in terms of overlapping geographical zones of responsibilities and operational objectives.

Since, none of the Command HQs are co-located; it results in challenges of coordination in intelligence sharing, planning and execution of assigned tasks.

The need for greater integration amongst the three Services came for serious consideration after the Kargil conflict.

Both the Kargil Review Committee and the follow-up Group of Ministers (GoM) recommended the appointment of a Chief of Defense Staff (CDS), essentially to synergies the response of Indian Armed Forces and provide single point military advice to the political authority of the country.

It was felt that the change will need to be implemented from top down, so as to take root and be effective.

It must be understood that no single weapon or force reaches its full potential unless employed with complementary capabilities of the other Services. Actually, integration is a corollary for 'jointness'.

In other words, the concept of Integrated Theater Commands as is being proposed for institution is based on the premise that, "complementary operations will be built around a key force rather than a key Service".

The Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) & the Integrated Defense Staff (IDS)

The Chiefs of Staff Committee was appointed on 01 October 2001. The primary aim of setting up the COSC was to fulfill the need of providing an institutionalized framework for Defense Management at the highest level.

All the three service chiefs, i.e. Army, Navy, Air Force and the chief of the Integrated Defense Staff (IDS) compose the Chiefs of Staff Committee. The Scientific Adviser to the Minister of Defense is invited to attend, if and when required.

The member of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, who has been the longest on the Committee, holds the appointment of the Chairman of COSC. The present Chairman of Chiefs of Staff Committee is Navy Chief, Admiral Sunil Lanba.

The Chiefs of Staff are the authority for advising the Defense Minister and normally through him the Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs on all military matters which require ministerial consideration.

As brought out above, the senior most chief from any of the three services assumes the appointment of the chairman of COSC. Hence, there is no permanency in this “single point contact” agency, which was created with the view to bring about synergy in tri-service operations. Also, the tri-service command is headed by a three-star officer junior to the military chiefs who are four-star.

The Integrated Defense Services (IDS) is in effect the principal functional arm and Secretariat to the Chiefs of Staff Committee. It was created by the Government on 23 November 2001, based on the recommendations of the Group of Ministers which was set up in 2000 (post-Kargil) to review India's defense management.

Chief of Defense Staff

The post of the Chief of Defense Staff is being proposed to be of a four-star General, who would be in-charge of the tri-services command at Andaman and Nicobar islands, the strategic command in-charge of nuclear weapons along with the upcoming cyber and space command.

The HQ IDS is staffed by officers and personnel from all the three services, with the primary aim of bringing about a high degree of synergy between the Armed forces.

The IDS is headed by the Chief of Integrated Staff as the Chairman. The present Chief of Integrated Defense Staff is Lt Gen Satish Dua.

Advantages of Integrated Theatre Commands

Conceptually, a theatre needs to be identified on the basis that it shares a contiguous geographical boundary with a competing entity or an adversary, say Pakistan or China.

This geographical area must also include adjoining seas and space that may be essential for man oeuvre of own forces to address the threatening entity/adversary and also its geographically contiguous collaborator(s).

The major advantages of having integrated theatre commands will be as follows:

- Better acclimatization of troops to the given battle space, which will assist them to comprehend the operational requirements correctly in the assigned area of operation.
- Training needs and administrative requirements of the troops can be better understood, which would allow specialization and suitable honing of battle drills at all levels.
- Equipment can be procured, maintained and pre-positioned for quick mobilization and apt application during the envisaged, short duration, high intensity war.
- The allocation of military hardware, in terms of weapon systems, command, control and communication equipment and combat support elements will be theatre specific and result in optimization of the resources.
- Unified command of the three Services under one designated commander will allow for prompt and precise decision making and will remove unnecessary tri-services one-man-up ship.
- The unified commander will not have to look over his shoulder for resources and will be able to apply the assets at his disposal, swiftly at the time and place of his choosing. The same will also lend to economy of effort, as the resources will not lie idle or get committed unduly.
- Hence, it goes without saying, that the theatre commands will afford better coordination, intelligence sharing, apt advice and seamless conduct of operations in a given theatre of operation.

Integrated Theatre Command Concept: Challenges

The exercise of identifying geographical theatres of military security concern and arrive at a common politico-military-economic strategy will be a mammoth task, which has to be undertaken by the Indian strategists and military planners.

China restructured its forces into theatre commands in October 2015. However, in their case the re-organization was presumably done with the aim to bypass the military bureaucracy & establish direct political control over the military. Hence, the context needs to be carefully understood.

The challenges envisaged in the implementation of this concept are discussed below:

- The recommendation of the Naresh Chandra Committee for appointing a Permanent Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) itself is facing bureaucratic opposition from within the Ministry of Defense (MoD).
- The latent fear amongst the bureaucrats and the politicians of allowing military leadership from becoming too powerful stems from witnessing frequent military coups in Pakistan, who's military was formed out of breakaway units from the Indian military and follows similar ethos.
- The bureaucrats-turned-politicians, the police lobby, IPS turned politicians and the craving to maintain primacy by playing on Inter-Service rivalry and exercising overt control over financial expenditures, equipment acquisitions and appointments have not permitted institution of a CDS.
- It is suspected that even the service chiefs want to perhaps maintain their own turfs and have never been united in telling the government forcefully that the appointment of a CDS is necessary for the good of the military and the country.
- At the strategic and tactical levels also there could be some challenges, like the distribution of certain specialized resources which are held in limited numbers, e.g. multi-role combat aircrafts, command, control and communication equipment, early warning assets, etc.
- Division of such meager resources will reduce combat efficiency at the point of decision.
- Besides, interoperability of troops and equipment from dormant sectors to the active areas during war will be difficult and less effective.
- Another serious challenge that could be faced is that the concept of a theatre command may promote a sense of “fighting battles, rather than fighting a war”, which in turn may reduce our ability to either win a battle or the war.

Conclusion

The prevailing geo-political scenario in the sub-continent, with multifarious threats, calls for jointers and synergy in every sphere.

However, the notion to not let go off power prevents the country from taking progressive decisions, e.g. the institution of National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC), a centralized body to counter terrorism threat was objected to by the states.

Finally, it must be clearly understood that, jauntiness and integration of the Military is an inevitable requirement for the modern day battlefield. The armed forces will have to consider ‘jointness’ as a cardinal pre-requisite while embarking upon its futuristic modernization plan.

However, the establishment of Integrated Theatre Commands will require an attitudinal shift by turning the sense of insecurity and mutual suspicion into a sense of belongingness amongst the Services as well as the politico-bureaucratic establishment.

5) Anti-Jallikattu Lobbyist – More than what Meets the Eye

Introduction

Jallikattu is an ancient traditional sport, which entails taming the bull. It is practiced in the state of Tamil Nadu as part of Pongal celebrations on Mattu Pongal day.

The raging bull is released into the crowd of people, who then Endeavour to ride the bull for as long as it is possible to bring it to a grinding halt.

At times, flags are affixed to the bull's horns that are required to be secured by the person riding the bull. The flags actually simulate coins that used to be traditionally attached to the horns of the bull that were required to be retrieved as prize money by the participants. Hence, the name Jallikattu, is derived from salli (coins) and kattu (package).

Historical Perspective

The sport of Jallikattu derives its roots from the 'Mullai' geographical division of the ancient Tamil country and was practiced by the dwellers of that region, called Aayars during the Tamil classical period (400-100 BC).

A seal from the Indus Valley Civilization depicting the practice, preserved in the National Museum, New Delhi and a cave painting in white kaolin discovered near Madurai depicting a lone man trying to control a bull, estimated to be about 2,500 years old, hold testimony to the fact that this tradition comes along from time immemorial.

As the time went by, the sport grew in popularity amongst the common people. The participants were encouraged with prize money and soon, the event became a platform for display of bravery and physical prowess.

Reasons for Encouraging Jallikattu

A more practical reason for encouraging the sport comes from the fact that this practice ensures that only the strongest and most virile bulls are used for breeding, thus effectively making the offspring of such bulls stronger, less susceptible to diseases and able to produce higher quality milk.

Small farmers cannot afford to keep stud bulls, so each village has a common "temple bull" which services the cows of the village. These "temple bulls" are specifically bred and specially reared to participate in this event. The calves are fed a nutritious diet so that they develop into strong and sturdy animals.

Male calves in other regions, where Jallikattu is not practiced are sold and taken for slaughter quite early. Consequently, the availability of males will reduce and hence the farmers will be forced to go in for artificial insemination, which is cost prohibitive and is directly in contravention of in-situ (local) conservation.

Therefore, unless there are bulls that are being bred and reared in the in-situ region, the genetic pool of the breed will not be healthy as no adaptation to changes in climate; local environment would have been ingrained. Consequently, we will be messing with the NATURAL process of evolution and preservation.

Native cattle have evolved over millennia, adapting to the local environmental conditions. They are an integral part of farming, especially for small and marginal farmers as they serve multiple purposes like ploughing,

transportation, source for farmyard manure, organic treatments like panchagavya, jeevamritham, and as a source of A2 milk.

Thus, Jallikattu is the traditional and a highly practical way by which farmers in Tamil Nadu are able to preserve the genetic strength and traits of the indigenous cattle breeds.

Secondly, the bulls which are able to perform well in Jallikattu fetch higher prices in the markets, making the engagement of bulls in Jallikattu a valuable activity to farmers. Thereby, the population of bulls gets appropriately reared and preserved.

Jallikattu Ban and Resultant Protests

The practice of Jallikattu was being protested against by animal activists from the FIAPO (Federation of India Animal Protection Agencies) and PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), which is an American organization, since 2004.

Concurrently, the Animal Welfare Board of India filed a case in the Supreme Court to ban Jallikattu because it involved cruelty to animals.

The Board claimed that the bull taming exploits the bulls' natural nervousness by deliberately placing them in a terrifying situation, sometimes even chilli powder is put into their eyes to agitate them and the practice effectively involves catching a terrified animal.

The Supreme Court, on 27 November 2010, passed a ruling and asked the Government of Tamil Nadu to allow Jallikattu for five months in a year and directed the District Collectors to make sure that the animals that participate in Jallikattu are registered with the Animal Welfare Board, who could send their representative to monitor the conduct of the event.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Environment and Forests issued a notification in 2011 that banned the use of bulls as performing animals, thereby banning the conduct of the event. However, the practice continued to be held under Tamil Nadu Regulation of Jallikattu Act No 27 of 2009.

The Supreme Court on 07 May 2014 struck down the state law and banned Jallikattu. It ruled that “cruelty is inherent in these events, as bulls are not anatomically SUITED for such activities and making them participate is subjecting them to unnecessary pain and suffering, so such events were outlawed”.

In order to uphold the traditional value systems of the Tamil people, on 08 January 2016, Ministry of Environment and Forests permitted the continuation of the tradition under certain conditions, effectively ending the ban. However, the Supreme Court overturned the government order on 26 July 2016.

In retaliation to the stay imposed by Supreme Court banning Jallikattu, hundreds have gathered at Chennai's Marina beach since 08 January 2017, carrying posters saying 'save Jallikattu'.

Anti-Jallikattu Lobbyist – More than what Meets the Eye

The protesters have brought out some reasons that are beyond what the animal rights activists have highlighted. First of all, setting the records straight, it is believed that in a year, a total of about 10,000 instances of a bull leaving the vaadi vaasal (gate) take place during jallikattu. Of the thousands of players who take part, hardly 50-100 get injured in a year, and numbers of deaths due to the event are actually miniscule.

There is a huge dairy lobby that opposes the sport and wants all native breeds to be eradicated so that commercial dairy farms with IMPORTED breeds, yielding more milk can be created. The contribution of milk from local cows coming from the villages reduces their profits. Events like jallikattu throw a spanner in their plans.

Besides the fear of losing self-sufficiency in milk production, the promotion of organic farming will also get a setback. Once the imported foreign breeds replace the native breeds, multinational commercial companies will dominate the dairy industry in India. The livelihood of millions in rural India will get adversely affected.

The second lobby is that of the beef exporters who also tend to gain from ban on Jallikattu. If there is no demand from the jallikattu enthusiasts, the price of such prized bulls will fall to a rock bottom.

There is a huge demand for Bos Indicus variety of beef in the Gulf, Malaysia and Western countries. It is considered an exotic and healthy meat, just like country chicken. Hence, the beef traders who are mostly, if not

all, agents of EXPORT companies and slaughter houses based in Kerala will be happy to purchase high quality meat at low prices.

Lastly, the cultural disconnect between the urban society and the rural customs and practices, is also responsible for a lot of misconceptions.

The hype created by the urban editors and reporters with their usual view to sensationalize news has further resulted in a host of internet crusaders to launch their attack against jallikattu.

It is believed that, unimaginable cruelty is meted out to animals by giving them alcohol, prodding and twisting their tails etc, that organisers beat the bulls, stuffing something pungent in their nostrils, confine them in a dark, suffocating place in order to enrage them.

However, on the contrary, these bulls are literally worshiped by the farmers and reared with a lot of care and affection. Besides, the bulls are registered with the authorities, with photographs as well as the owner's information. Any violation of the laid down orders invites action against the owner under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act.

Conclusion

The swelling crowd of protesters at the Marina beach of Chennai forced the Tamil Nadu CM O Panneerselvam to meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi for passing an Ordinance to allow the practice of Jallikattu.

However, PM Modi is reported to have told him that the entire matter is sub-judice and it is now up to the Supreme Court to take the final call.

It is a catch-22 situation for the government as public sentiment cannot override Supreme Court's order, and it will set a dangerous precedent if an ordinance is brought in to counter the ban.

6) Global Implications of US Withdrawal from Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)

Introduction

President Donald Trump was sworn in as the 45th President of the United States of America on 20 January 2017. Living up to his brazen reputation and campaign pledges, he announced the US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) as one of his first executive actions.

The TPP had been the main economic pillar of the Obama administration's "pivot" to the Asia-Pacific region to counter the growing influence of China in the region. Though, TPP would have led to only a 0.1% increase in US jobs and added about 09% to USEXPORTS by 2030, it was seen more as a national security imperative.

The incoming US President Donald Trump called this free trade agreement "as a potential disaster for our country". He argues that it disadvantaged American industry, workers, and wages, and that he believed in dealing "directly with individual countries on a one-on-one (bilateral) basis in negotiating FUTURE TRADE deals."

However, this knee jerk action by Trump administration is being globally viewed as a self goal that would eventually lend itself to creating a vacuum - happily occupied by a very assertive China.

Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)

The Pacific 4 (P4) countries (Brunei, Chile, New Zealand and Singapore) were a signatory of Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership Agreement (TPSEP or P4) since 2005. The said partnership may be called as a precursor to TPP.

In January 2008, the US agreed to enter into talks with the Pacific 4 (P4) members regarding trade liberalization in financial services.

The primary objective of the agreement was to vastly reduce tariff levels among member countries and standardize policies on various issues including safeguarding intellectual property rights.

There were 19 rounds of formal negotiations that resulted in formalizing a final proposal to be endorsed by 12 countries, which was announced on 05 October 2015.

The signatories include Australia, Vietnam, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, the US and Brunei. They together represent 40 percent of the world economy.

The finalized proposal was signed on 04 February 2016 in Auckland, New Zealand, concluding seven years of negotiations. It currently cannot be ratified due to U.S. withdrawal from the agreement on 23 January 2017.

The TPP was one of President Barack Obama's signature efforts, as part of a broader strategy to increase American influence in Asia and checkmate China's economic and military ambitions.

Besides, this agreement with nations along the Pacific Rim would have covered a wide variety for trade of goods, granted US cattle ranchers a better access to Japan and lowered the tariffs on apparel IMPORTED from Vietnam.

Global Implications of US Withdrawal from TPP

The most immediate and significant implication of this abrupt move by the US administrations would be a loss of credibility amongst its trading partners.

This economic nationalism and isolationism will ultimately end up hurting the nations that embraced such FREE agreements with the US. It is but obvious that scores of such nations will seek bilateral alternatives or other multilateral alternatives.

Thus, this initiative by Trump administration will be a self defeating one, if its trading partners move on to establish multilateral trade ties with other more reliant partners.

The general consensus on the issue is that by announcing its withdrawal from the TPP, US has succeeded in shooting itself in the foot by making it more difficult and costly to EXPORT its goods to the rest of the world. Besides, it has also ceded its ability to play a primary role in shaping the global trade architecture, presumably to China.

The United States has lost a valuable opportunity to write the rules of 21st century trade, including in areas where it would break new ground like state-owned enterprises and the digital economy.

Implications for Canada and Mexico

The North American FREE TRADE Agreement (NAFTA) is a trilateral trade block in North America. This Agreement, signed between USA, Mexico and Canada, came into force on 01 January 1994.

Trump has vowed to also renegotiate the North American FREE TRADE Agreement and has often mentioned it in the same breath as the US withdrawal from the TPP. The alarm bells for such renegotiations have already been sounded.

Canada is highly vulnerable to US protectionism as only 12 percent of the cars assembled in Canada are sold domestically, with the vast majority being shipped to US. In case, a higher import tax is levied after the NAFTA is renegotiated, it would make the proposition economically unviable for Canada.

Similarly, a lot of European automakers, especially, Germans have transferred their production plants to Mexico from United States, owing to cheaper labor and being more cost effective. Trump has threatened German carmakers with a 35-percent IMPORT tax if they do not build more cars in the United States.

The Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto, sensing the change of guard by US, has already declared that his country hopes to bolster trade with other nations and limit its reliance on the United States. Chinese state media derided Western democracy as having "reached its limits."

Implications for Peru

Peru is one of the best performing economies of Latin America. The major reason for its growth and progress has been Lima's bi-lateral trade pact with Washington, which was inked in 2009.

US-Peruvian commerce boom has helped to haul millions out of poverty in that country, establishing Peru as an upper-middle-income nation.

Meanwhile, Americans too benefited from increased access to Peruvian goods, everything from organic artichokes and quinoa to gold, SILVER and other metals mined in the Andes.

Yet those gains could be at risk if President Donald Trump follows through on his campaign promise to renegotiate US trade deals, in particular the bilateral Peru treaty.

Implications for China

China will stand to gain the most if US adopts a more protectionist approach in global trade. It is a well established fact that Beijing, despite its internal economic challenges had very craftily postured itself to be the most stable economy even during the period of economic recession.

Once again, it is already in the process of portraying itself as the guardian of trade multilateralism and transparency by pushing its existing alternative to the TPP, i.e. “The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)”.

The RCEP involves negotiations between 16 countries, which include 10 members of the ASEAN and six regional partners (India, Japan, China, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand).

The RCEP would involve much lower standards for the environment, labor rights and intellectual property protection than the TPP and potentially leaves US businesses at a competitive disadvantage in Asia.

Besides, the RCEP, China has been the major force behind the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the BRICS Bank, both of which are headquartered in China.

Thus, while the US is busy tying itself up into knots on the global stage, both politically and economically, China is systematically forging better economic ties across the globe to hoist itself to a comparatively advantageous position.

A good example of the above stated fact can be seen in how China has cleverly leveraged itself into a favorable position while negotiating with Russia (which has been ousted by US and its European allies) to secure its energy needs.

Another flawed judgment made by the US Congress, which provided China an opportunity to garner unprecedented support of the emerging economies, is failing to agree to reforms of the International Monetary Fund to give China and other developing nations greater say in global affairs.

The creation of Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank has seen some of the closest allies of Washington, including Australia and Britain, to rally behind Beijing and join it.

In order to reduce the over dependence of Asia-Pacific economies on highly industrialized economies like the US and Japan, and the advent of regional trade blocs in other parts of the world, another forum of 21 Pacific Rim member economies, called the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), came into existence in 1989.

The primary objective of this economic forum was to establish new markets for agricultural products and raw materials beyond Europe.

Hence, China has meticulously developed many multilateral economic forums to explore and exploit them to its advantage. On the contrary, a protectionist approach adopted by US may result in its economic isolation.

White House economists under Obama found that a deal between just China and Japan could jeopardize \$5 billion in US EXPORTS and millions of American jobs.

Implications for India

TPP warrants slash of tariffs, it contains anti-corruption measures, intellectual property obligations, human rights and child labor conditions, and environmental commitments. Consequently, India as it is would have been ineligible to join such an economic conglomeration.

Thus, the demise of TPP will not have a very major direct impact on India. However, there could be the following long term implications for India:

- The vacuum created by withdrawal of US from TPP may call for new alignments and partnerships in Asia-Pacific, where China in all likelihood will emerge as a reliable bastion for smaller/ emerging economies.
- The rebalance and shaping of the environment very painstakingly articulated by the Obama administration will slowly begin to wither away. The balance of power in the region will slowly tilt towards China and Japan.
- China’s growing economic and politico-military clout will be a cause of concern for India, who will have to rethink its trade alliances in a more protectionist global environment.
- US while renegotiating bi-lateral trade deals in Asia-Pacific will need India by its side to counter the competition offered by China.
- India, with its competitive wages and underutilized potential, will also possibly tend to gain overall.
- Lastly, the urgency to complete RCEP will now diminish as the competition and influence of US and its European allies would recede. Thus allowing greater elbow room for the emerging economies, who will demand for a greater stake in the global economic affairs?

Conclusion

The decision taken by Trump will help him gain credibility with some of his base by actually fulfilling one of his more contentious campaign promises, but that base is weak to begin with, and unless there are tangible gains in manufacturing jobs (due to other factors), the electoral impact is likely to be negligible.

The same can also be said of the potential benefits of negotiating/ renegotiating new trade pacts by US on a one-to-one basis with a win-win proposition. If that were to be the case, the US withdrawal from TPP could turn into a net positive for all nations concerned.

However, to see that happen, it would take many years and painful negotiations down the road, and Trump would probably need to remain in power for eight years to have a hope of accomplishing that under his WATCH, even if he were to begin in 2017

7) Reasons for India's Overreach to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Requirement of Realignment of Ties with the Middle East Nations

Introduction

In an unprecedented departure from the convention, the Narendra Modi government, on the occasion of the nation's 68th Republic Day, invited a contingent of 179 United Arab Emirates (UAE) soldiers to participate in the parade at the national capital's majestic "Rajpath".

The UAE's Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Deputy Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces of the UAE was the guest of honor at this year's Republic Day celebrations.

Though, last year also, the French contingent participated in the Republic Day parade, when the French President François Hollande was the Chief Guest for Republic Day celebrations. However, unlike the previous year, displaying a special gesture of respect this time around, the UAE contingent was allowed to lead the parade.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been very upfront with his initiative to reach out to the Middle East nations, especially UAE, with varied objectives in mind. We shall discuss the same in the ensuing paragraphs.

India-UAE Relations

The UAE is a federation of seven emirates, and was established on 02 December 1971. The constituent emirates are Abu Dhabi (which is the largest and serves as the capital), Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras al-Khaimah, Sharjah and Umm al-Quwain.

Each emirate is governed by an absolute monarch and together, they jointly form the 'Federal Supreme Council'. One of the monarchs is selected as the President of the United Arab Emirates.

Sheikh Zayed, ruler of Abu Dhabi and the first President of the UAE, oversaw the development of the Emirates and steered oil revenues into healthcare, education and infrastructure.

The ties between India and the United Arab Emirates have been traditionally close on account of commerce, culture and kinship and dates back to 3000BC.

People-to-people contacts and barter trade for CLOTHES and spices from India in exchange for dates and pearls from the region have existed for centuries.

At present, UAE is home to nearly 2.6 million Indians, who are playing a major role in its nation building. The Indian expatriates constitute 15 and 20 percent professionally qualified personnel, 20 percent white-collar non-professionals (clerical staff, shop assistants, sales men, accountants, etc), and the remainder 65 percent comprises blue-collar workers.

The Indian expats at UAE significantly contribute towards the Indian economy, with an annual remittance of about 15-17 billion.

PM Modi had commenced his engagement with UAE, with an official two day visit to the country in August 2015, and had held extensive talks with the Crown Prince Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan in Dubai. The most significant highlight of the visit was that the Indo-UAE relationship was elevated to a 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership'. Thus, turning a new chapter in the Indo-UAE relationship after a long gap of 34 years, as the last PM of India to have visited UAE was Mrs Indira Gandhi in 1981.

The key areas of cooperation charted out during this very meaningful engagement included, TRADE, defense, security, maritime security and intelligence sharing.

The two countries have further consolidated the "strategic partnership" by signing 16 pacts in various fields during the recent visit of the Crown Prince of UAE to India.

Reasons for India's Overreach to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Requirement of Realignment of Ties with the Middle East Nations

Source of Energy Import: The primary reason for India's overreach to the UAE is that, UAE is India's gateway to West Asia in general and the Gulf region in particular, and most importantly, the region is the source of 70 percent of India's energy IMPORTS.

The UAE is a significant contributor to India's energy security and was the fifth largest SUPPLIER of crude oil in 2015-16.

Employment to India's Workforce: The Gulf region provides employment to a lot of Indians with diverse skill sets.

Indian expatriate labor constitutes around 30 percent of the total population of the UAE, and Indian workforce has a significant presence in Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar.

Economic Interdependence: The second major reason for forging better ties with UAE is the economic interdependence. Indo-UAE trade stands at \$50 billion, making the UAE India's third largest trading partner for the year 2015-16, after China and the US.

It may be noted that, the UAE is the second largest export destination for India with an amount of over \$ 30 billion for the year 2015-16. And of course for UAE, India is the largest trading partner for the year 2015 with an amount of over \$ 28 billion (non-oil trade).

Further, fortunately for India, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), comprising of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have adopted a 'Look East Policy' and are looking for promoting long term economic and trade relations with countries like India. Thus, India needs to reciprocate and consolidate upon this initiative taken by the GCC, especially UAE.

In order to bring out the relative significance of Indo-UAE trade, while of the total Indo-GCC bilateral trade of \$ 97,467.61 million, Indo-UAE trade accounted in this to the extent of \$ 49,745.95 million.

Investments in Developing Infrastructure in India: The UAE is the tenth biggest investor in India in terms of FDI. There is an estimated \$8 billion UAE investment in India of which around \$4.03 billion is in the form of foreign direct investment, while the remaining is portfolio investment.

The favorable investment climate in India is expected to draw other GCC states such as Saudi Arabia, and Oman, besides the UAE, also to invest in India and participate in its planned infrastructure expansion.

Fillip to Indian Investments in UAE: The Gulf States are interested in human resources from India to develop sectors in which India is proficient, like information technology, construction, transportation, and services.

There are several prominent private and public sector Indian companies and banks (60,000 Indian companies in total) that are already operating in the UAE, including companies such as L&T, ESSAR, Dodsal, Punj Lloyd, Engineers India Ltd. and TCIL.

Cooperation on Security Concerns: A sizeable trade to India flows through the Gulf of Eden, which is fraught with piracy and terrorism.

In order to provide protection to commercial vessels, Indian warships have also been deployed in the Gulf of Aden to carry out anti-piracy patrols on the route usually followed by Indian commercial vessels between Salalah (Oman) and Aden (Yemen).

Tackling Terrorism and Growth of Radicalism The UAE is a Muslim country, which is at the same time a modern country, without any direct linkages between terrorism and religion.

It shares India's concerns about growing threats of terrorism and radicalization worldwide. During the official interaction between PM Modi and the Crown Prince of UAE, of the 31 points that were discussed 17 pertained to security.

The major aspects that were discussed and agreed upon for putting in coordinated efforts included: counter radicalization and misuse of religion by groups and countries; denounce and oppose terrorism in all its forms and manifestations; enhance cooperation in counter terrorism, intelligence sharing and capacity building; promote cooperation in cyber security; establish a dialogue between the national security advisors and the national security council's; cooperate in maritime security and strengthen defense relations; and establish a strategic security dialogue.

Access the Strategic Choke Points Connecting the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean: An important component of India's overreach to UAE and the other Gulf nations is to be able to keep a vigilant eye on the important choke points through which the flow of India's trade takes place to West Asia and Europe.

The same was only possible by way of developing defense-cooperation with both Iran on the one hand and Gulf countries on the other.

Moreover, The Indian Navy has undertaken a series of naval exercises with a number of Gulf States in the recent years, thereby lending its hand to Indian diplomacy in expanding India's reach in the region.

Maintaining a Balanced Disposition in the Middle East: The Modi government has been able to walk the tight rope with respect to developing all round relations with Israel on the one hand and Iran on the other, PM's visits to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE dispelled the notion that India's strategic goals in West Asia, the country's "extended neighborhood," had any malice.

Royal Snub to Pakistan: The UAE, like Saudi Arabia, are old strategic allies of Pakistan. The UAE, along with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan were the only three countries to recognize the Taliban government in Afghanistan.

The UAE has made a critical shift in its policy, since then, and has openly backed India on terrorism emanating from Pakistani soil.

The acceptance of India's invitation by the Crown Prince of UAE to not only be the chief guest at the Republic Day parade, but also, make its contingent march shoulder to shoulder with Indian troops, has a much deeper symbolic significance that may qualify for a "royal snub" to Pakistan.

Conclusion

The diplomatic overreach extended by India to UAE on its 68th Republic Day defines its continued efforts to harness India's stakes in a region, which is passing through a phase of momentous change.

There are regional pressures of ethnic divide and fight for dominance to control the resources in the region, happening in the backdrop of external forces exerting pressure to realign loyalties for personal gains.

India's interests lies in the emergence of a stable balance of power in this region which is presently beleaguered by multiple fault-lines.



8) GREAT WALL OF DONALD TRUMP

Introduction

At the third Republican Debate in October 2015, Donald Trump famously declared- "We're going to do a wall to sever Mexico from US; we are going to have a fat beautiful DOOR on the wall; we're going to have people come in, but they're going to come in legally"

His speech made ripples in United States. The US - Mexico border runs 1,989 miles (3,100 KM), with more than 12 million people residing along it. It has 35 border cities, 45 crossing points and 330 ports of entry. Every year, 350 million people cross it legally. The border runs through four American states: California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. It covers a diverse a terrain, from ocean waters (the Pacific and the Gulf of Mexico) to urban areas (San Diego, Tijuana etc,) and deserts too. It also has two major rivers running across (the Colorado and Rio Grande), encompassing farm lands, deltas, and rugged mountains.

The Scope of the Wall

It is now estimated that the wall would be at least 1,300 KM long, 40 feet high, and contain 19 million tons of concrete!! However the challenges are many fold making it a gigantic effort. The US would first need to build roads and other infrastructure just to reach the border area. To make matters worse, almost all the land along the border is privately owned. It is worth remembering that US former President George W Bush tried to build border fencing starting in 2006, and he faced stiff opposition and hostility from local ranchers and farmers. Many of them took the government to court. Trump had also been belting out confusing ideas during the last months whenever he spoke about the Mexico Wall. At times, he said it would be 25 feet, and some other times, 55 feet high. Also he had been stating that the wall would be running the entire border, often changing his statement to announce that he wanted it only 1000 miles long, (for the 650 - odd miles of steel-fencing, Republicans spent \$2.4 Billion, to keep illegal immigrants out- 350 miles of fencing to block pedestrians and 300 miles of blockades to keep vehicles out). However, as an election promise Trump had vowed to make a wall, not just fencing.

The Estimated Cost

A 2009 Government Accountability Office analysis put costs at \$ 6.5 million a mile for pedestrian fencing and \$ 1.8 million per mile for vehicular blockades. So NATURALLY a Wall of brick and concrete, predicted by Trump would cost much more than that. In February 2016, Trump said the wall would be made of precast cement," probably 35 to 40 feet up in the air. That's high; that's a real wall. It will actually look good. It'll look, you know, as good as a wall is going to look".

Trump has cited a \$ 10 billion estimate that was given to him during the campaign by the 'National Precast Concrete Association'. That comes to about \$ 7.4 million per mile. A Washington Post fact checker put the cost

at \$ 25 Billion. Over and above the construction cost of Wall the cost of acquiring the land from private owners will add on. "Building a wall is the most expensive and least effective way to secure a border" - opined representative William Hurd of Trump's own Republican Party, whose sprawling West Texas swing district encompasses more than 800 miles of the border. He further said-" many areas in my district are perfect examples of where a wall is unnecessary and would... impact the environment, private property rights and economy". Mexicans have refused to contribute towards the cost of construction of the wall. Hence the burden of this colossal expenditure of the wall is expected to fall squarely upon the US tax payer, starting with existing funds in the Department of Homeland Security account - \$ 100 million - dedicated to "border security fencing, infrastructure, and technology".

Can Trump Force Mexico to pay?

Former Economic Advisor Steve Moore said there were two ways Trump could make Mexico pay for the wall. One could be by way of a tariff on products IMPORTED to the US from Mexico, though Moore said Trump didn't prefer this strategy. Another option was to institute a border crossing fee on a person or vehicle entering the US from Mexico.

Trump talked about more methods to make Mexico pay- like increasing fees on "all temporary visas issued to Mexican CEOs and diplomats" and on border crossing cards. He also has plans to block undocumented immigrants from sending money home.

To add further spice to the issue, Trump had ordered federal agencies to tally the foreign aid Mexico receives from US, in what is being seen as a possible threat to stop it. But the amount is only \$ 142 million in 2016- a modest amount towards the building of the wall.

Conclusion

It is worth noting that in 2006, Boeing and a team of companies won a federal contract to construct a Wall to protect US border with Mexico which stretches about 2000 miles from California to Texas. Five years and about \$1 Billion later, the Government called it off. It was an utter failure of a project. Nearly all of the money had been spent on just 53 miles of the border in Arizona. A huge loss to the Exchequer.

The business man Trump may have another strategy in mind to deal with the prospective construction companies who may be interested to get a piece of the construction action. The Stocks of several leading construction companies jumped after the latest talk from Trump, as investors bet not only on a pay-day coming from a Mexican border, but also from proposals floated for about \$ 1 Trillion in infrastructure projects.

9) The Key Highlights and Review of the Union Budget: 2017-18

Introduction

The Union Budget, referred to as the ‘**Annual Financial Statement**’ of Government of India, as per the provisions of Article 112 of Indian Constitution, is presented each year (unlike this year, on the last working day of February) by the finance minister of India in the Parliament.

The process of bill presentation is initiated by the means of the financial bill and the appropriation bill, which has to be passed by the house before it comes into effect from April 1st every year. The first day of April marks the beginning of India's financial year. This is the fourth Union Budget, which was presented by the Modi government.

The **Finance Minister Arun Jaitley** presented the Union Budget 2017-18, by introducing the Finance Bill in the Lok Sabha on the 01st of February 2017. The Lok Sabha will now discuss the same and vote on the budget before it comes into effect on 01 from April 2017.

Some Interesting Facts about Budget

The word Budget has been derived from the French word “**Bowgette**”, which means a “leather bag”.

The first Budget was introduced in India by the East India Company to the British Crown on 07 April 1860.

The first Union Budget of Independent India was presented by **R.K. Sanmukham Chetty**, the then finance minister of India on **November 26, 1947**.

India has had **25 finance ministers** since Independence. Mrs Indira Gandhi has been the only women Finance Minister of India to have presented the Union Budget.

Morarji Desai, the former finance minister and later the PM of India, presented the budget a **record 10 times**. This is the most by any finance minister in the history of India.

Indian Economy Fact Sheet

- Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation fell from 6% in July 2016 to 2.4% in December 2016.
- The Current Account Deficit has fallen to 0.3% of GDP from 1% in H1FY17.
- There has been a 36% increase in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flow.
- India's foreign exchange reserves are at \$361 billion as of January 2017, which is in effect enough to cover 12 months needs.
- Fiscal Deficit (gap between earnings and spending) for 2017-18 is pegged at 3.2% of GDP.
- Revenue deficit will be reduced to 2.1% for 2017-18 from 2.3% in the previous year.
- Net market borrowing would be Rs 3.48 lakh core in 2017-18 from 4.1% in the current fiscal.

Fiscal Status

- The fiscal status for the next financial year, as described by the Finance Minister during his Budget speech pointed out the following facts:
- Total expenditure - Rs. 21, 47,000 cores. The FM recommended abolishing of existing separate heads for planned and non-planned expenditures.
- Capital expenditure (new acquisitions/procurements) will be 25.4 % of the total expenditure.
- Total resources transferred to States and Union Territories is Rs 4.11 lakh core.
- Fiscal deficit for 2017-18 pegged at 3.2% of the GDP.
- The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has predicted that India's GDP will grow by 7.2% in 2017 and by 7.7% in 2018 and the World Bank projects India's GDP growth rate as 7% in 2016-17, 7.6% in 2017-18 and 7.8% in 2017-19.
- In comparison, the IMF estimates that the world GDP will grow by 3.1% in 2016 and 3.4% in 2017.

Key Highlights of Union Budget: 2017-18

The Finance Minister highlighted that the agenda of this year's budget is: "Transform, energies and clean India" i.e. "TEC-India" and he hailed both GST and demonetization as 'tectonic changes' in the Indian economy.

He said that demonetization was a bold and decisive measure that will eventually lead to higher GDP growth. He pointed out that its impact will be transient and will not spill over to the next fiscal.

The key highlights of the Union Budget 2017-18, which has been presented by Finance Minister Arun Jaitley are discussed below:

Agriculture Sector

The FM pointed out that the agriculture sector is expected to grow at 4.6% in the current year and said that the government was committed to its promise to double the farmers' income in the next five year. With this in mind, he announced the following:

- Total allocation for rural, agricultural and allied sectors for 2017-18 is Rs 1, 87,223 core. This is 24% more than the allocated amount last year.
- Rs 10 lakh core is allocated as credit to farmers, with 60 days interest waiver.
- Mini labs by qualified local entrepreneurs to be set up for soil testing in all 648 Krishi Vigyan Kendras in the country.
- Long-term irrigation fund has been set up in NABARD, and its corpus will be raised from Rs 20,000 core to Rs 40,000 core.
- A dedicated micro-irrigation fund will be set up by NABARD to achieve the goal of 'Per Drop More Crop'. Its initial corpus will be Rs 5000 core.
- Dairy processing infrastructure fund will be initially created with a corpus of Rs. 8000 core.
- Infrastructure funds for dairy will generate extra rural income of Rs 50,000 core per annum.
- In order to provide security against natural disasters, the coverage of Fasal Bima Yojana to go up from 30 % of cropped area to 40 % in 2017-18 and 50 % next year.
- Steps are being taken to help farmers to increase production and deal with post harvest problems.
- Market reforms will be undertaken, states will be asked to de notify perishables from Essential Commodities Act so that these do not rot because of no fault of the farmers.

Rural Population

The Finance Minister said that his focus in this Budget was to spend more in rural areas, infrastructure, poverty alleviation, and yet maintain fiscal prudence.

He made the following announcements with respect to various schemes to uplift the rural population:

- A total of Rs 3 lakh core has been allocated to be spent for rural India.
- It was declared that 50,000 Gram Panchayats will be made "poverty free" in the next year.
- The government targets to bring one core households out of poverty by 2019.

- The allocation for MGNREGA for 2017-18 has been increased to Rs 48000 core from Rs 38,500 core. This is the highest ever allocation for this rural employment scheme.
- Space technology to be used in a major way in various MGNREGA works. In order to improve monitoring and bring about transparency, geo-tagging of all MGNREGA assets is being done.
- Increase participation of women in MGNREGA up to 55%.
- A total of five lakh farm ponds will be constructed under the MGNREGA.
- The government is committed to ensuring conducive labour environment, and will undertake legislative reforms to simplify labour laws in India.
- PM Awas Yojana allocation has been raised from Rs 15,000 cr to Rs 23,000 crore, which will make it possible to construct one crore houses by 2019 for homeless.
- Rs 27,000 crore will be allocated for rural roads in the financial year 2017-18 as against Rs 19,000 crore in 2016-17 under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana.
- The government aims to achieve the target of 100% rural electrification by March 2018.
- High speed Internet to be allocated to 1, 50,000 gram panchayats.
- Ensure provision safe drinking water to 28,000 arsenic and fluoride affected habitations.
- Open defecation free villages to be given priority for piped water. Sanitation coverage has already reached 60% inhabitants under the Swachh Bharat mission.

The Youth

- A system of annual learning outcome in schools to be introduced; innovation fund for secondary education to be set up.
- Additional 5000 post-graduate seats per annum and two new AIIMS to be set up in Jharkhand and Gujarat.
- PM Kaushal Kendras will be extended to 600 districts; 100 international skill centers to be opened to help people get jobs abroad.
- Courses on foreign languages will be introduced.
- Focus will be on 3,479 educationally-backward blocks.
- Government will provide education through digital platform, for which purpose, access to SWAYAM education portal online, which will be introduced with 350 online courses.
- A total of 3.5 crore youth to be trained under Sankalp programme launched by government.
- Quality and market relevance will be noted in vocational training.
- National Testing Agency will be conducting major entrance examinations and CBSE will be freed from conducting examinations, so that it can focus majorly on academics.
- UGC will be reformed for higher education, whereas colleges and institutions will be provided greater autonomy.
- Generation of employment for youth is also being targeted. It is believed that the new metro rail policy is expected to open up multifarious jobs for the youth. Besides, job creating packages will be introduced in the sectors of textiles and tourism. Additional opportunities for employment of women to open up through model shops and establishment bill.
- In order to incentivize entrepreneurship and start-ups, firms incorporated after 31 March 2016 could now avail of a three-year tax holiday in the first seven years of their existence.

Healthcare

- Rs 500 crore allocated for Mahila Shakthi Kendras at village level for rural women empowerment will be initiated in this financial year.
- Rs 6000 will be transferred directly into the accounts of pregnant women as a nationwide welfare scheme.

- A sum of Rs. 1, 84,632 crore have been allocated for women and children healthcare.
- Elimination of tuberculosis by 2025 is being targeted.
- Health sub centres, numbering 1.5 lakh, will be transformed into health wellness centres.
- Undertake structural transformation to regulate the framework of medical education.
- Aadhaar-based smartcards will be issued for senior citizens to monitor health.
- The government has targeted to eliminate Kala Azar by 2017, Leprosy by 2018 and Tuberculosis by 2020 as part of the health policies.

Railway Budget

In a departure from the convention, this year's Union Budget incorporated the Railway Budgets also. The major announcements included:

- The allocation exclusively for Railways is Rs. 1, 31,000 crore, which is 22% more than the previous year.
- In order to promote digitalisation and provide relief to the commuters, it was announced that no service charge will be levied on tickets booked through IRCTC website.
- In an effort to provide safety to passengers, Raksha coach with a corpus fund of Rs 1 lakh crore will be created over the next five years.
- All unmanned level crossings will be eliminated by 2020.
- A total of 3,500 km of railway lines to be commissioned this year, which is 2,800 km more than last year.
- SMS-based "clean my coach service" is put in place.
- Coach Mitra facility will be introduced to register all coach related complaints.
- Five-hundred stations will be made differently-abled friendly.
- Steps will be taken to launch dedicated trains for pilgrimage and tourism.
- Railways will offer competitive ticket booking facility.
- By 2019 all trains will have bio-toilets.
- New Metro rail policy will be announced with new modes of financing.
- All coaches of railways to be fitted with bio-tyres by 2019 and at least 25 stations will be redeveloped over the next year.
- Railways to implement end-to-end solutions for some commodities, and propose to feed 7000 solar railway station in medium term.

Infrastructure Development

- A total allocation of Rs. 39, 61,354 crore has been made for infrastructure development.
- Rs 2.41 crore have been allocated for transport sector, including railways, road and shipping. Out of which Rs 64,000 crore has been earmarked for National highway projects. Pace of construction of roads has increased to 133 km/day in 2017 as against 73 km/day during the period 2011-2014.
- Crude oil strategic reserves to be set up in Odisha and Rajasthan apart from the three already constructed.
- Rs 10,000 crore for BharatNet project to expand broadband coverage.
- Expenditure in the field of science and technology has been pegged at Rs 37,435 crore.
- Special efforts will be made to ensure adequate flow of credit to underserved areas of North-eastern states and Jammu and Kashmir.
- National Housing Bank will refinance individual loans worth Rs 20,000 crore in 2017-18.
- Affordable Housing has now been given 'Infrastructure' status. Further, instead of built up area, the carpet area of 30 to 60 sq meters will be applicable for affordable housing.
- In order to give an impetus to real estate sector, the holding period for capital gains tax for immovable property has been reduced from 3 years to 2 years. Also, the real estate developers will now get tax relief on unsold stock as liability. They need to pay capital gains only from the year that the project is completed.

Defence Sector

- The defense sector has been allocated Rs 2.74,114 crore, which is 11% more than the previous year.

- Defense expenditure, excluding pension, is set at Rs 2.74 lakh crore, which is about 12.7% of the governments' overall expenditure.
- The capital acquisition component meant for modernization of the forces has been pegged at about Rs 86,400 crore for the coming fiscal, compared to about Rs 78,500 crore last year. However, the Defense Ministry had returned close to Rs 36,000 crore of unspent funds allocated to it for capital acquisition last year.

Boost to Digitalization

In order to give an impetus to cashless and digitalized economy for greater transparency and to check corrupt practices, following was announced:

- Computer emergency response team for financial sector will be formed.
- No cash transaction above Rs 3 lakh will be permitted with effect from 1st April 2017.
- The government will introduce two schemes to promote BHIM (Bharat Interface for Money) App - referral bonus for the users and cash back for the traders. Nearly 1.25 crore people have already adopted the BHIM app.
- Aadhaar enabled payment service will be launched soon.
- Direct Bank Transfer (DBT) will be promoted. A total of 84 government schemes are already on the DBT platform.
- Easy online booking system for travelling by Army and other defense personnel will be in place soon.
- Banks have targeted to introduce additional 10 lakh Point-of-Sale terminals by March of 2017. This number is set to hit 20 lakh by September 2017.
- Computerization of loan disbursal from primary agricultural societies by NABARD. Integration of 63000 functional PACs with core banking support and district cooperative banks over 3 years at a cost of Rs 1900 crores. This will be done with the support from state governments.

Political Funding and Plugging of Corruption Avenues

- The maximum amount of cash donation for a political party has been reduced to Rs 2,000 from the earlier, Rs 10,000 from any one source.
- Political parties will be entitled to receive donations only by cheque or digital mode from donors.
- An amendment is being proposed to the RBI Act to enable issuance of electoral bonds, which can be purchased by a donor from banks or post offices through cheque or digital transactions. These can be redeemed only by registered political parties.
- The government is considering introduction of a new law to confiscate assets of high and mighty offenders who escape the country.

Taxation in Union Budget 2017

Personal Income Tax

- Some unbelievable facts about personal income tax are as follows:
- Firstly, only about 3.81% of the 1.25 billion people pay taxes in India. Out of 3.7 crore who filed tax returns in 2015-16, only 24 lakh persons showed income above Rs 10 lakh.
- Individuals numbering 1.95 crore showed an income between Rs. 2.5 lakh to Rs. 5 lakh.
- Only 1.72 lakh people showed income of more than Rs. 50 lakh a year.
- Moreover, out of the total 76 lakh individuals who reported income of over Rs 5 lakh, 56 lakh are salaried.

Proposed Personal Income Tax Slabs

<u>INCOME SLAB</u>	<u>TAX RATE</u>
Up to Rs 3 lakhs	Nil
Rs 3 lakhs to Rs 5 lakhs	5%

Rs 5 lakh to Rs 10 lakh	20%
Rs 10 lakh to Rs 50 lakh	30%
Rs 50 lakh to Rs 1 crore	30% + 10% surcharge
Above Rs 1 crore	30% + 15% surcharge

Corporate Taxation

- Corporate tax accounted for a little less than 19% of the government's receipts last fiscal, whereas personal income tax receipts accounted for just 14 % of the total receipts.
- Small firms with turnover up to Rs 50 crore will now only need to pay 25% tax instead of 30%. It is estimated that about 67 lakh companies will fall in this category.
- Firms incorporated after 31st March 2016 could now avail of a three-year tax holiday in the first seven years of their existence.
- There is also a proposal to allow a carry forward of Minimum Alternative Tax (MAT) for the so-called 'zero-tax' companies for a period of 15 years up from the current 10 years now.
- It is conjectured that with the implementation of GST, the highest corporate tax rate is likely to be reduced to 25 percent against 30 percent now.

A Review of the Union Budget: 2017-18

The tax liability of major chunk of population of India that earns up to five lakhs annually has been reduced to half, e.g. an individual earning up to Rs 4.5 lakhs will pay no tax if he uses the full limit of Rs 1.5 lakh in investment under Sec. 80c.

Thus, this Rs 15,500 crore sop given by FM Jaitley to individual tax payers will put more money in their pockets to spend; the economy will get the much needed stimulus for growth.

Further, incentives like a simple one page return for people with an annual income of Rs 5 lakh other than business income and filing of I-T returns for the first time will not come under any government scrutiny will encourage many to become honest tax payer.

Next, the positive fallout of the demonetization exercise has been twofold. Firstly, more money is available with the banking sector to give credit to investors and secondly the tax base has phenomenally increased. The advance tax in personal I-T is 34.8% more than the last three quarters of this financial year.

The enhanced revenue generation through taxation coupled with availability of surplus liquidity with the financial institutions, a lot can be done in the fields of infrastructure development and social security needs to change the face of India.

Improved infrastructure, with availability of skilled workforce will automatically draw domestic and foreign investors, giving a fillip to the countries socio-economic development.



10) **President Trump's Executive Order Banning Entry of Refugees and Immigrants to US**

Introduction

President Donald Trump has signed an executive order on 27 January 2017, which temporarily bars entry to refugees and immigrants.

Consequently, the US customs officials at airports detained and denied entry to individuals affected by the executive order.

However, on February 03rd, a federal judge in Seattle suspended the executive order nationwide, allowing banned visitors to travel to the US.

Salient Features of the Order

The order brings in a suspension of the ongoing "US Refugee Admissions Programme" for 120 days. However, there is also an indefinite ban on Syrian refugees.

Citizens of the following seven Muslim-majority countries: Iraq, Syria, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen, will face visa suspension for 90 days. However, some visa categories, such as diplomats and the UN, are not included in the suspension.

The order also introduces a cap of 50,000 refugees to be accepted in 2017, as against a limit of 110,000 set by former President Barack Obama.

The order lays down that priority will be given to refugees, who are religious minorities facing persecution in their countries. President Trump gave an example of Christians in Syria in an interview to illustrate this point.

However, the order says that exceptions could be made on a case-by-case basis.

The following categories of immigrants have been identified and rules apply to them as thus:

Citizens from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen

All travelers who have nationality of Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen are not permitted to enter the US for 90 days, or be issued an immigrant or non-immigrant visa.

However, those individuals with visas that were not physically cancelled may now travel if the visa is otherwise valid.

Citizens with Dual Nationality

Those citizens who hold passports from more than one country, other than those banned by the order are allowed.

Citizens of one of the banned countries can enter if they present a valid passport from a non banned country.

Refugees Program

The regular refugee program is suspended until further notice. The order suspends all refugee entries for 120 days. Syrian refugees are barred indefinitely. However, around 800 refugees, who are presently “in transit”, will be allowed in.

Green Card Holders

The order does not apply to the entry of Green Card holders who have legal residency in the United States.

However, the White House Chief of Staff Reince Priebus pointed out that they too could be subject to greater questioning at airports.

Special Immigrant Visas Holders

Iraqi translators and other special immigrants who have worked with US troops had been given special visa preferences in the past. So as not to alienate the US allies, such special immigrant visa holders will be treated the same as green card holders.

These individuals will now be allowed to board their flights to the US.

Frequent Travelers

The order suspends the Visa Interview Waiver Program, which allowed frequent visitors to travel back and forth to the United States, such as business executives, to skip an in-person interview at US embassies and consulates. Now those interviews will be required.

Reasons Cited for the Ban

President Trump, while announcing the executive order, cited the terror attacks of 11 September 2001 and referred to the order as a measure to ensure safety and security of the American people.

He defended his plan by saying that it is “not a Muslim ban” and played down concerns that the order has anything to do with religion and said, “This is about terror and keeping our country safe”.

However, critics argue that the 19 hijackers who committed the 9/11 attacks came from countries not included in the suspension. They were from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt and Lebanon.

Besides, despite the State Department deeming some countries like Pakistan and Afghanistan as “terrorist safe havens” in 2015, those nations were not on the suspension list.

Hence, the executive order has been imposed selectively, keeping the overseas interests of US in mind and perhaps that’s why Saudi Arabia has been excluded.

Travel Ban Blocked by Court

A ruling by a federal judge on 3rd February temporarily blocked the enforcement of the travel ban. Meaning thereby that, “Those individuals with visas that were not physically cancelled may now travel if the visa is otherwise valid.”

The Seattle court ruling came in response to a challenge by Washington State attorney general, who argued that the executive order violated a clause in the US constitution that prohibits the favoring of one religion over another.

The US Congress, in 1965, had passed the Immigration and Nationality Act, which states that no person could be "discriminated against in the issuance of an immigrant visa because of the person's race, sex, and nationality, place of birth or place of residence".

Thus, the exclusion of all Syrians from entry into US would be enough to challenge the executive order in court. Moreover, the fact that all Muslim countries have only been included in the ban lends weight to the critics' argument that the order is "anti-Muslim".

Appeal against the Court Ruling Denied

The US Justice Department lodged an appeal with the ninth US circuit court in San Francisco against the Seattle court's ruling on 04th February and argued that blocking the travel ban amounted to questioning President Trump's judgment on national security risk.

However, the San Francisco appeal court on 05th February denied the grant of administrative stay on the issue, pending full consideration of the emergency motion.

The court has asked those challenging the travel ban to respond to the appeal filed by the Trump administration, and the justice department to file a counter-response to the same.

Worldwide Protests against the Travel Ban

The travel ban sparked protest demonstrations in New York, Philadelphia and Los Angeles as well as in other cities, and also outside Trump's Florida resort, where he was attending a ball with his wife, Melania.

There were also protests in London, Paris, Berlin, Jakarta, Manila, Hong Kong, Sydney and Melbourne. The ban is being called unconstitutional, immoral and dangerous.

Conclusion

President Trump while lodging the appeal on Saturday tweeted that, "The judge opens up our country to potential terrorists and others that do not have our best interests at heart. Bad people are very happy!"

However, the higher court's denial of an immediate stay would mean that the legal battles over the ban will continue into the coming weeks. The open hostility displayed by the Trump administration towards the judiciary may lead to a constitutional crisis in America.

11) BUDGET-2017 ANALYSIS: A BIRD'S EYE VIEW

Introduction

The Budget 2017 was an anti-climax after the economic turmoil created by the demonetization misadventure. Finance Minister Arun Jaitley was like a good school boy who does a fine balancing act to keep the teacher happy and also be the most popular boy among students. The economists were ecstatic that he maintained fiscal prudence, even while increasing capital expenditure on infrastructure by 25 %. He tried to make the Budget common-man friendly too, by a combination of tax cuts and higher spending, particularly in transport and rural infrastructure, which should have a healthy multiplier effect and spur consumption.

Significant Effect on Indian Economy

The cut in personal income tax rate from 10% to 5% in the lowest tax slab will raise disposable incomes, while a record budget allocation in MNREGA (Rs 48,000 crore) will put more money in people's hands. Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana which has promised 10 million new houses to the poor masses by 2019, saw the allocation pegged to 23,000 crore, indicating the resolve of Government on reconstruction of Bharat.

One figure is a solid indicator- Agriculture and Allied sectors get a whopping Rs 1.87 lakh crore, 24% higher than last year. Among the many things this allocation does is, address problems of farmers by putting in Rs 40,000 crore into irrigation and crop insurance. It is also heartening to see that the Government is finally focusing on labour-intensive industries instead of the highly propagated Make in India campaign which turned out to be hype without generating adequate jobs. This budget has targeted another sector- the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) by reducing taxes. Finance Minister is relying on them to spur economic growth and jobs as they comprise 37% of the GDP.

Crusade against black money

The Government also endeavored to continue the black money purge through the Budget by putting limit on cash transaction up to 3 lac, reducing the limit of undisclosed donations to political parties from Rs 20,000/- to Rs 2,000/-, and rationalizing real estate capital gains measurement. Government also announced several incentives and methods to promote digital transactions. Despite major state elections this year, the Centre has resisted the temptation to go in for populist schemes and freebie announcements, which is commendable. However, the manner in which political parties were allowed to operate their party fund accounts without any scrutiny or Income tax drag-net looked very suspicious and scandalous, since it was evident that most of the politicians who were serious custodians of ill-gotten money, could easily launder their unaccounted money through political party fund accounts.

Loop Holes in the Budget.

Although the Union Budget addressed this issue of political fund accounts the Finance Minister put another loop hole in the legitimacy of it. Any man with his nose down can see through it - If party funds can be collected as each undisclosed donations less than Rs 2000/- the system can be easily manipulated the way it was running earlier, but with more paper-work. The genuineness of this reform by the government, is a suspect since BJP collected about 560 crore official donations last year from undisclosed sources, the highest among all political parties. The political parties funds can only be controlled and kept clean by periodical audits and fixing proper accountability on office bearers. However the party accounts are beyond the reach of RTI as per existing rules. Is it an exercise to hoodwink the public, one wonders.

The Budget fails to tackle structural problems of our economy. Though many a Budget down the lane had been packed with schemes for farmers back-to- back, farmers fortunes entirely depend on a good monsoon. The farmer's suicidal tendency is in the increase in India in spite of all remedial measures introduced by the government.

Unfortunately we don't bother to plug the loopholes in the highly corrupt supply network and civil administration. Perhaps all political parties benefit out of this disorder. Again there was no attempt to rationalize subsidies on food and fertiliser. The allocation is Rs 2.15 core and the whole pipeline is porous and prone to high leakages.

Conclusion

The Budget witnessed a faint- heartened approach to solving the problems of NPAs of PSUs. Although the Budget was expected to bring in some path breaking tax reforms to encourage bulk of the tax evaders to come to the main stream of tax payers. As on date, the total number of tax payers is abysmally, a miniscule. As a school of thought originated by an elite group of Chartered Accountants, a revamping is required in this matter. Approximately 57 types of taxes are being levied in India presently. If we abolish all prevailing taxes and keep only one direct tax and one indirect tax, it will revolutionize the Indian economy, i.e.; GST and BTT (Banking transaction tax). BTT up to 2% may be levied in this case, on all banking transactions depending upon the type of transaction. But it is only possible if the majority of public turns digital and use minimum currency for their day to day life.

In a nutshell, this Budget gives us a vision- of a slowly waking up India into a digital tomorrow.



12) Implications of Revamping H1-B Visa and other Impending Decisions of Trump Administration for India

Introduction

President Donald Trump has reportedly drafted an executive order to revamp the H1-B visa, which allows thousands of Indians to work at tech giants like Google and Microsoft in the US.

The proposal has sent shock waves down India's \$150-billion IT outsourcing industry.

It may be noted that India's IT outsourcing industry, accounts for around 9.5% of the country's GDP and employs nearly 3.7 million professionals.

What is H1-B Visa?

H1-B visa is a non-immigrant visa that allows US firms to employ foreign workers in 'specialty' occupations that require theoretical or technical expertise in specialized fields for up to six years.

It is estimated that nearly 86% of H1-B visas for computer-related jobs and 46.5% for engineering positions are bagged by Indians. The US issues 85,000 H1-B visas every year.

If implemented, the reforms could force major changes at the functional level of the India companies such as TCS, Infosys Ltd and Wipro Ltd, and shift the way American companies like Microsoft Corp., Amazon.com Inc. and Apple Inc. recruit talent.

Companies would have to try to hire American's first and if they recruit foreign workers, priority would be given to the most highly paid.

Procedure for Allotting H1-B Visa

The 'foreign work visas' were originally established to help US companies recruit from abroad when they couldn't find qualified local workers.

Companies operational in the US apply for the visa of personnel required by them and a random computerized lottery picks up the candidates from the pool of applicants who have applied.

Invariably, the companies apply for more than three times the numbers required to recruit top talent, in order to increase their chances of getting their petitions selected in the lottery system.

Furthermore, it has also been seen that majority of the companies outsource the recruitment to 'outsourcing firms' who use the visas to fill lower-level information technology jobs and the lottery system benefits the outsourcing firms that flood the system with mass applications.

In the recent years, there have been allegations that the 'foreign work visas' program has been abused to bring in cheaper workers from overseas to fill jobs that otherwise could have gone to Americans.

Therefore, as per the proposed legislation, if the minimum wages for employees in US are increased considerably, it will not be of any advantage to hire people from overseas.

Reasons for the Issue Coming into Prominence

The issue picked up steam, when a Bill aimed at revamping the visa programme, first introduced in 2007, was reintroduced last week.

In addition, Democratic Congresswoman Zoe Lofgren submitted her own bill, called the 'High-Skilled Integrity and Fairness Act of 2017', which, among other restrictions, called to significantly raise the minimum wage that applicants of such visas must earn in order to qualify.

Consequently, on 30th January, reports of a draft executive order to revamp US immigration laws for foreign workers also surfaced.

The order instructs the secretary of homeland security to consider changes to the H1-B visa programme to "ensure that the beneficiaries of the programme are the best and the brightest."

Further, the bill seeks to prohibit companies from hiring H-1B employees if they employ more than 50 people in the US and more than 50% of those employees are H-1B and L-1 visa holders.

The Bill also gives the labour department enhanced authority to review, investigate, and audit employer compliance with programme requirements, as well as to penalize fraudulent or abusive conduct.

However, as on date there is no official word on any changes to the visa programme by the US government, the firms from the Silicon Valley are already beginning to feel the heat with their stock market shares beginning to tumble.

Pre-emptive Actions by Companies

The Indian companies like TCS, Wipro, and Infosys have said to have anticipated such an eventuality and had started working on their Plan 'B' since the last few years, which entails the following:

- Commenced investing in "near-shore centers" facilities close to the US, e.g. TCS has already set up offices in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay, and a "global delivery centre" in Mexico. Similarly, Wipro has opened a software development facility in Mexico.
- Increased local hiring in America, e.g. Infosys has taken a policy decision to employ workers from near-shore centres and students from America, mainly Indians on its projects. In fact, its current CEO, Vishal Sikka, is a Stanford-educated American national. Similarly, TCS is going all out to attract American talent. However, key challenge in this strategy is the shortage of skilled Americans.
- Fearing immigration reforms, Indian companies have also commenced spending to increase acquisition in the US, so that they are able to increase incorporation of local manpower.
- American clients are being pushed to adopt more virtual services. Indian companies are increasingly moving towards more hi-tech virtual needs rather than labour intensive projects, such as cloud computing, automation, and artificial intelligence. Naturally, wider adoption of cloud services and greater digitisation

would result in reduced requirement of employees in the US. In fact, the AI (artificial intelligence) platform of Infosys is already generating 5-6% of its total revenues.

Implications of Other Impending Decisions for India

There are some other decisions which the Trump administration is likely to take in the coming days, which may have serious ramifications for India.

Conclusion

A survey by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) has revealed that there are 100 Indian companies in the US, of which 40% belong to the IT industry, which had created more than 91,000 jobs there. Hence, it will be in the interest of the US to keep India humored.

Besides, Donald Trump could regulate the number of people allowed into the US, but legislating against bots in the cloud will be much tougher. So, Indian companies will still continue to generate revenue.

The bill if passed will undoubtedly serve as some set-back for Indian IT sector and would act as a speed breaker for the thriving IT business that provides employment to millions of Indians.

Notwithstanding, in the absence of qualified Americans, the pool of technology savvy, industrious Indians will continue to be employed by American/Indian companies in US as well as at their “near-shore centers”.

13) ARE WE READY FOR A UNIFORM CIVIL CODE?

Introduction

The debate about a 'Uniform Civil Code' and 'Triple Talaq ' has reached a boiling point in India with the Supreme Court resuming arguments about the constitutional validity of Triple Talaq. The Union Law Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad had openly criticized the age-old custom which had been abolished by many Islamic countries. The Law Minister stated that there were three focus areas of response: gender justice, gender equality and dignity, and the basic abiding principles of Indian Constitution. It puts women in a condition of great vulnerability. He further opined-" A large number of Triple Talaq victims have gone to the Supreme Court challenging this practice. In more than 20 Islamic countries, Triple Talaq has either been regulated or abolished altogether. We have framed our recommendations in consultation with PM and legal experts keeping in mind the troika of Gender justice, equality and dignity".

What Muslim women want?

A survey on Muslim women's views on reforms in Muslim Personal Law by 'Bharathiya Muslim Mahila Andolan in March 2015, carried across the country, brings out interesting revelations:-

- 92% women want a total ban on oral/ unilateral divorce.
- 95% have not heard about the All India Muslim Personal Law Board.
- 88% women want the Qazi who sends notice of Triple Talaq to be punished.
- 92% of Muslim women do not want their husbands to marry another woman while married to them.
- 47% do not have their Nikah-nama.75% had not read it at the time of marriage.
- 75% want the age of marriage to be above age 21.
- 53% have faced domestic violence.
- 55% Muslim women surveyed were married off before age 18.

Suddenly 'the possibility of a religion- neutral common code(Uniform Civil Code)' looms large in the constitutional horizon of India, especially in the backdrop of UP state elections. With the Supreme Court having resumed arguments on the Triple Talaq cases from January,the countdown has started. Law Commission of India floated a questionnaire calling for a public debate. The All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB) issued a volley of protests that the Government and PM had no right to interfere in their religious matters. The debate, however, is slowly getting snow- balled. As Uttar Pradesh has entered the election frenzy, the Triple Talaq issue is getting subsumed within the campaign rhetoric. On February 5, Union Minister Smriti Irani, on the campaign trail in Lucknow, demanded that the Congress and Samajwadi Party clear their stand on Triple Talaq.

Age old Debate

Flavia Agnes, feminist lawyer and director of Majlis Legal Centre, Mumbai said-" it's a debate dated back to 1930s. Personal Laws are patriarchal. Merely getting rid of such laws won't reform society. I disagree with the premise that a uniform law will bring change. Unless the cultural ethos changes the status of women will not change. For eg, look at the Dowry Prohibition Act 1961. It was,though made stringent in 1981, the practice of giving and receiving dowry is rampant in Hindu society. The debate has reached an outrageous pitch now. Over 50,000 Muslim men and women signed a memorandum demanding a ban on Triple Talaq, and forwarded to PM. Ishrat Jahan, who has lost the roof over her head as well as her children to her husband , says-" I don't accept divorce by phone. I want justice. I will fight to the finish". Afshan Begum who was given a Triple Talaq by her husband, a district judge in Aligarh, in February last year, wrote a letter to CJI- " I urge our PM to help women like me and stop this tradition of Triple Talaq, which has destroyed the lives of innumerable women".

Conclusion

The awareness of public towards a 'Uniform Civil Code' is phenomenally up- beat. It's not just Muslim women. Take the case of Albert Anthony a Delhi citizen who has challenged constitutional validity of Section 10A(1) of the Divorce Act, which prescribes a minimum two -year period of separation for Christian couples before they can file for divorce by mutual consent, whereas Hindus and Parsis can file a divorce suit after a year of living separately. Another interesting verdict - in 2016, in two different verdicts the courts upheld the rights of women to enter and worship at the Sabarimala temple in Kerala, where women are prohibited to enter and the Haji Ali shrine in Mumbai. Our personal laws are bizarre at times- While Indian males are liable to be jailed for marrying two women at the same time, in Gujrat just the promise of ever- lasting love (and a financial undertaking) before a Magistrate can keep one out of jail, thanks to the 'maitri Karar' contract between man and a woman. Also the family laws in Goa recognize 'limited polygamy'. Hindu Personal Laws prohibit 'Sagotra Vivaha'(marriage within clan) which has provoked honour killing diktats of khap panchayats in Haryana and Rajasthan.

I feel rather than targeting Muslim religion alone, all injustice against women of every religion should be strictly abolished from our secular India.



14) Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) Creates a World Record

Introduction

The Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) has established a new world record on 15 February 2017 by injecting into orbit 104 satellites from 07 different countries, nearly 3 times the highest number flown by a single mission currently.

The earlier record was held by Russia, when its Dnepr rocket carried 37 payloads in June 2014. The same had surpassed the American record of 34 satellites launched in January, the same year abode Antares rocket used by American Company Orbital Sciences Corporation.

India, before this highly distinctive launch, had launched a maximum of 20 satellites on 20th June 2016 using ISRO's PSLV-C34.

Mission Details

About the Launch Vehicle

The Indian Space Research Organization successfully launched the PSLV-C37 rocket carrying the 104 satellites, which lifted off from its launch pad at Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota at 9.28am on February the 15th to create history.

This happens to be PSLV's 39th flight and the launch countdown of 28 hours was the shortest so far in all PSLV missions.

The XL version of the PSLV was used in this launch for its 15th space mission. PSLV-XL was commissioned into service in 2008, when it sent India's first lunar probe the Chandrayaan-1 into outer space.

There are four stages in a PSLV rocket launch, during which it uses solid and liquid propulsion systems alternately. In terms of overall mission success rate, the PSLV has a 100 per cent success rate.

About the Payload

The payload included a total of 104 satellites that were placed into orbit. Out of which, 101 satellites belonged to six foreign countries. They included 96 from the US and one each from Israel, the UAE, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Kazakhstan.

The US satellites included a flock of 88 'Dove' satellites, owned by San Francisco-based Company 'Planet'. Each of these satellites measure 10cm x 10 cm x 30cm and weighs about 4.7 kg.

This flock of 88 satellites will take Planet's constellation to 100. This constellation of satellites will be used by US to provide high resolution, detailed imagery of the earth's surface.

Indian Satellites Launched

The PSLV-C37 rocket successfully launched a Cartosat-2 series satellite and two Indian nano-satellites, INS-1A and INS-1B.

The 664kg Cartosat-2 series satellite, which is equipped with panchromatic and multispectral cameras, will provide remote sensing services.

The images from the Cartosat-2 series satellite will be used for cartographic applications, urban and rural applications, coastal land use and regulation, utility management like road network monitoring, water distribution, creation of land use maps, change detection to bring out geographical and manmade features and various other land information system (LIS) and geographical information system (GSI) applications that will be used for a producing high-resolution images of the Indian landmass.

INS-1A and INS-1B are versatile and modular nano satellite bus system envisioned for future science and experimental payload.

Conclusion

The Indian Space Research Organization has so far launched 226 satellites, including 179 foreign satellites. The ISRO spokesperson informed that in another two months, the number of satellites built by ISRO will reach 100. Also, the lunar mission, Chandrayan - 2 is likely to be ready for launch by next year.

The ISRO with plethora of achievements to its credit is making every Indian's chest swell with pride. The milestones planted by ISRO in its onerous journey deserve honest recognition and befitting accolades. Please read my previous blogs to look at its journey and major landmarks created by it down the timeline.

15) NEPAL- A DOOMED DEMOCRACY

Introduction

Nepal, the strategically located 'Buffer State' between India and China, is called by few today as a 'Duffer State'. With China consolidating a strong foot-hold in Nepal, India has lost the status of being the 'most preferred neighbor nation' to Nepal. It was the only 'Hindu Nation' in the world, till the Maoist movement, through a violent up-raising threw out the monarchy, dethroned the King, Gyanendra Shah and declared Nepal as a democratic nation. However the repeated efforts of all stakeholders and political parties, so far have miserably failed to frame a perfect Constitution which reflect the aspirations of all Nepalis from its diverse terrains, consisting of valleys and mountains. Every political actor and power centre seems to agree that the

country needs to be rescued from the mess it is in. Each one has a prescription to remedy the problems, but nobody is ready to arrive at a national consensus.

Resentment against India

Narayankaji Shrestha, Vice Chairman of the ruling CPN(Maoist Centre), met several Indian leaders in Delhi- Ram Madhav (BJP) to Sitaram Yechury(CPM)- recently to warn them that " Indian interference in Nepal's politics must stop, and let Nepalis run their show". Indirectly he blamed India for the prolonged transition of Nepal towards a constitutional republic and for all the misfortune happened to Nepal in the recent past. He aired his concern about the future of Nepal- further uncertainty in the state of affairs may bring the monarchy back. A major section of the people of Nepal believe that the agitation started by Madesh region against the lop- sided new Constitution of Nepal, was orchestrated by India.

Brewing Trouble by Maoists

The Communist Party of Nepal-Maoists, a splinter group of the Maoist movement which toppled the monarchy, led by Neta Bikram Chand aka " Biplab" is currently holding it's secret national convention " in far-west Rolpa, which is likely to announce a 'parallel' government and renewed insurgency , something the Maoists did between 1996 and 2006 to topple the King. In the armed struggle over 17,000/- Nepalis died. The nation went through troubled times.

Revival of Hinduism

Parallel to Maoist up-rise, Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), a unified alliance of different pro- Hindutva groups, held its first 'Unity Conference' and left it for a national meet to decide whether Nepal's status as a Hindu Kingdom must be restored. In another similar move the dethroned King Gyanendra Shah, set out on a two-week trip to Madesh to assess the public mood and to gauge the possibility of monarchy's return, giving credence to the fear expressed by Mr Shrestha in Delhi. The King exhorted the public- " to make the political leaders accountable for things going wrong and save the country before it's too late".

New Dead-lock

Immediate amendments to the Constitution giving larger share of seats to Madhesh in local bodies, provincial and federal legislature as demanded, is being resented by the main opposition, the Communist Party of Nepal- Unified Marxist Leninist. The CPN- UML wants the local bodies poll to be held by the end of May, 2017, without amending the Constitution. Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal (popularly known as 'Prachanda'), will have to decide by another few days, whose side he wants to take.

In the meanwhile Ms Valerie Julluand, UN Residential coordinator, met PM and expressed her dissatisfaction over inadequate powers being given to the 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission' to investigate alleged human right excesses committed by the State and the Maoists during the conflict.

Failing Economy

In the midst of all these political developments, Nepal's economy is showing signs of unprecedented downside. A 400 Billion trade deficit in the first half of the financial year and the banking system is facing a liquidity crunch, which has forced the real estate business to plummet badly. In spite of the massive aids offered by China for several infrastructural projects, the economy is in a dampened state.

Conclusion

People may not care whether there is an election, but they are fed up now, losing patience over their political leaders who are not ready to cooperate with each other to arrive at an amicable solution. A strong political will and a sincere effort are expected from the government to deal with this precarious situation. The pressure is building upon all stake holders- the public may not pardon them further. The current Constitution stipulates a mandatory provision which proclaims that the present federal parliament shall cease to exist on January 21, 2018, and a fresh house, provisional legislature and local bodies are to be reconstituted before the deadline. With so many disagreements and bad blood around, the chances of Nepal missing 2008 deadline seems real.

16) The Genesis of the Satluj-Yamuna Link (SYL) Canal Dispute

Introduction

The Punjab assembly elections once again served as a trigger to bring into prominence the Sutlej-Yamuna Link (SYL) Canal issue.

The states of Punjab and Haryana have been fighting a slogging legal battle on the issue. The SYL canal once commissioned will augment Haryana's growing demands for water, while Punjab government has stated that it has no water to spare for any other state.

Let us understand the issue in detail and get an update on the latest developments on the SYL canal dispute.

Background

India and Pakistan post the division into separate entities, signed an agreement, and called the Indus Treaty, with respect to the sharing of river water in 1960.

As per the agreement the waters of the Western rivers (the Indus, the Jhelum and the Chenab) would be reserved for the exclusive use and benefit of Pakistan, whereas the entire flows of the three Eastern Rivers (The Ravi, the Beas and the Sutlej) would be available for the exclusive use and benefit of India.

It was further agreed upon that India would allow the use of Eastern Rivers for next 10 years to Pakistan, who would be given time for the construction of replacement canals in Pakistan till 31 March 1970.

After this transactional period, India would have the exclusive rights over the water of the Eastern Rivers, namely, the Ravi, the Beas and the Sutlej.

At the domestic front, the State Governments of Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir and Rajasthan were required to prepare a development programme for the utilization of the waters of the Eastern Rivers.

Based on an agreement reached between the states and the centre, the following allocation of water to the states was made:

Punjab: 7.2 MAF, Rajasthan: 8.0 MAF and Jammu and Kashmir: 0.65 MAF.

Reasons for Disputes:

The Punjab Reorganization Act, 1966, led to the bifurcation of the State of Punjab into separate entities, viz. Punjab and Haryana.

The State of Haryana laid claim over 4.8 out of 7.2 MAF (which was the entitlement of the composite Punjab State), on the principle of equitable distribution.

The new State of Punjab, on the other hand, conceded nothing to Haryana, mainly on the plea that, Haryana was not a riparian State, i.e. none of these rivers flow through Haryana.

Acting under section 78 of the Punjab Reorganization Act, 1966, the Union Government, allocated 3.5 MAF each to Punjab and Haryana and 0.2 MAF to Delhi.

In order to ensure full utilization of the water allotment to Haryana under this statutory decision, proposal to link River Sutlej and Yamuna was mooted under the Sutlej-Yamuna Link (SYL) Canal scheme.

The proposed canal is a 214-kilometer long canal and will connect the Sutlej and Yamuna rivers.

While, Punjab moved the Supreme Court against the statutory decision, Haryana, on the other hand, moved the same Court for compelling Punjab to implement it.

Negotiations for a Solution

On 31 December 1981, Chief Ministers of Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan came to an agreement that the surplus waters of Ravi-Beas, which was allocated to Rajasthan, i.e. 8.5 MAF, until such time when that Rajasthan was able to utilize its full share, the unutilized portion could be used by Punjab, whose normal share would otherwise be 4.22 MAF, that of Haryana being 3.5 MAF.

Consequently, Punjab withdrew its pending suits in Supreme Court as its allocation of water increased by 1.32 MAF over the allocation made by the Central Government (the allocation to Haryana remaining unchanged).

However, in November, 1985, the Punjab Legislative Assembly passed a resolution, repudiating the Agreement of 31st December, 1981 and declaring the White paper to be redundant and irrelevant.

The prolonged negotiations that ensued between the states resulted in the Punjab settlement of 24 July 1985. The important components of which were:

- The farmers of Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan would continue to get water from the Ravi-Beas system, to the same extent as was being taken on 01-07-1985.
 - Waters used for purposes of consumption would also remain unaffected. Quantum of usage claimed by Punjab and Haryana should be verified by a Tribunal, which would be presided over by a Supreme Court Judge.
 - The decision of this Tribunal would be rendered within six months and would be binding on both the parties.
 - The construction of the SYL canal should continue and should be completed by 15th August, 1986.
- However, the Shiromani Akali Dal launched a 'dharma yudh morcha', which pushed Punjab deep into terrorism and turmoil. Work on SYL was stopped in 1990 after the completion of 90% work as terrorists killed two top engineers and 35 workers engaged in the project.

Ravi Beas Water Disputes Tribunal

The contentions presented by the parties in response to the notice by the Tribunal were as follows:

Punjab: Haryana and Rajasthan, not being riparian States, should not claim any share from these rivers, which was the entitlement of Punjab alone. It was, but a concession made by Punjab to the farmers of Haryana and Rajasthan, to continue to allow the use of water from these rivers.

Haryana: The state of Haryana was carved out of Punjab and has equitable right on waters of these rivers. The Tribunal should first verify the quantum of usage as on the specified date and thereafter adjudicate on the claims of Punjab and Haryana as to the remaining waters.

The State of Haryana could not fully utilize its share of the Ravi-Beas waters, as the SYL canal had not been completed.

Rajasthan: The State argued that jurisdiction of the Ravi Beas Tribunal was restricted only to verification of the usage from the Ravi-Beas system as on 01 July 1985.

Since, the State's share was settled by the 1955 Agreement and later re-enforced by the 1981 Agreement, the Tribunal should not alter, vary or affect Rajasthan's share.

Conclusions by the Ravi Beas Water Disputes Tribunal

The Tribunal held the plea of Punjab unsustainable, that the waters of the Ravi and Beas belonged to it absolutely, and in its entirety, to the exclusion of both Haryana and Rajasthan.

The Doctrine of Riparian Rights, as also the Theory of ownership Rights of a State in river waters, was rejected. The Tribunal agreed with the contention of Rajasthan, that its share had been settled by the previous Agreements and that it was not a party to the second reference.

The Tribunal pointed out that Haryana was a part of composite Punjab before 1966 and it had the same right over the waters of Ravi and Beas as the present day Punjab.

The Tribunal made an allocation of 5 MAF to Punjab, and 3.83 MAF to Haryana, the total quantity apportioned being 8.33 MAF, including 1.11 MAF, which was surplus available (which Rajasthan could not utilize).

Any fluctuations in flow were to be shared in the same ratio as the allocation.

The concept of integrity of river basin was also upheld, by rejecting the plea for treating Ravi and Beas as separate entities. They formed a part of the entire Indus basin and were treated accordingly.

The claim of Delhi for additional supply over the existing 0.2 MAF of water was rejected, as falling outside the scope of the reference to the Tribunal.

Finally, the Ravi-Beas Waters Tribunal upheld the legality and validity of prior Agreements that had been entered into, by the respective States.

It may be noted that the Ravi Beas Water Disputes Tribunal, also called the Eradi Tribunal, was never notified.

Developments Leading up to the Present Status of the Issue

In 1996, Haryana filed a suit in the Supreme Court, seeking directions to Punjab, to complete the SYL Canal that was 90% ready after Rs 700 crore of taxpayers' money had been spent on it.

On January 15, 2002, and June 4, 2004, the Supreme Court ordered the Centre to complete the SYL Canal in Punjab.

On July 12, 2004, the assembly enacted the Punjab Termination of Agreements Act, annulling all inter-state agreements signed by the state relating to sharing of the Ravi and Beas water, including the December 1981 tripartite agreement.

Haryana filed an execution application for implementing the two judgments in the SYL suit on February 19, 2011, which is also pending for hearing.

A resolution was passed by the Haryana assembly on March 11, 2011, requesting the Centre to pursue the matter in the apex court for an early decision.

On January 24, 2015, Haryana filed an original suit in the apex court to get the Punjab Termination of Agreements Act declared illegal.

In 2015, Punjab filed a suit in the Supreme Court for setting up a new tribunal for settling the issue of sharing of surplus Ravi-Beas water on the plea that the availability of water in these rivers had reduced from 17.17 MAF to 14.35.

Also it made a plea that Haryana had received its share in the Yamuna as per the 1994 agreement that did not exist at the time of the award of the Eradi Tribunal.

On 17 March 2016, Supreme Court directed status quo on the land meant for Sutlej-Yamuna Link (SYL) canal after Haryana alleged that attempts have been made by Punjab government to alter its use by levelling it.

On 18 March 2016, Punjab Assembly unanimously passed a resolution against the construction of SYL Canal, saying that the state does not have water to share with Haryana.

However, the Supreme Court has already repealed the Punjab Termination of Agreements Act-2004 passed by the Punjab Vidhan Sabha and now the matter is pending with the apex court for implementation.

Latest Update on the Issue

The SYL became a major Assembly elections issue in Punjab. A Sikh students group held Water "Liberation March" on January 31st against Punjab's water being supplied to Rajasthan, Haryana and Delhi.

Also, ex CM of Haryana, BS Hooda refused to participate in the election rallies for Congress in Punjab as the Congress Chief Ministerial candidate; Amrinder Singh had adopted an anti-Haryana stance on the SYL issue.

In the State of Haryana also, the Opposition parties are continuously pestering the Manohar Lal Khattar Government to approach the Centre to ensure completion of SYL canal as soon as possible even as the Chief Minister has maintained that the SYL issue is of prime importance for the State Government.

Meanwhile, senior Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) leader Abhay Chautala and his party workers had announced a march to a location on the Haryana border close to Kapoor village in Punjab on 23rd February, where the foundation stone of the controversial Sutlej -Yamuna Link (SYL) canal was laid down in 1982 by the then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Chautala had said they would re-dig the canal.

However, Abhay Chautala and 19 INLD MLAs, besides other party leaders, were arrested by the Punjab Police for violating Section 144 as they tried to cross the Shambhu border.

The recent actions and statements by various leaders of Punjab and Haryana are being seen as political gimmicks. INLD is fighting for its survival in Haryana. It is a known fact, that the Chautalas and the ruling Badal family in Punjab share close family ties and this shadow-boxing on the water issue is just to appease the people.

The Supreme Court on 22 February made it clear that state of Punjab would have to comply with its order on construction of Satluj Yamuna Link (SYL) canal, saying the ongoing controversy over the project must be brought to an end at the earliest.

In its directive, the Supreme Court said that "there are two orders by the court earlier and also a reference on the issue. Canal has to be constructed. The decree has to be executed either through legal process or parties themselves sit together and find out a solution. If Haryana and Punjab fail to sort out then we have to pass order."

The court then asked both Punjab and Haryana to take all necessary steps to maintain law and order. It said that its status quo order on the project would continue and announced the next hearing of the case on 02 March 2017.

Conclusion

The water resource will continue to diminish in the times to come and as a nation we need to look at long term solutions to this very live challenge rather than addressing the inter-state water disputes piecemeal. Perhaps a good way to deal with this challenge is to make water a national asset and create a national water grid by inter-link all the rivers in the country.

17) Ramjas College Incident and the Gurmehar Episode

Introduction

The past year and a half has seen a steady, but definitive surge in the activities of divisive forces in our country. We always took pride in our unity in diversity, tolerance towards opinions of others, acceptance of one and all in our folds, magnanimity to forgive and forget and resilience towards hate.

When I was growing up, I was taught to hate the evil deeds, but not necessarily the perpetrator of evil, who is also God's creation and can be reformed, and that, there is always a non-violent means to correct an aberration. We are presently living in an era of theatricals, where, for want of better options to solve a problem the media and the political class tends to extrapolate, distract, and distort facts to prove a point in this ever competitive environment. And then, the commoners, like us, without applying our own minds get trapped into semantics. Sometimes I wonder how fellow citizens can get so intolerant that they want to encroach upon the personal spaces of others.

So, I thought of understanding the reasons behind the spread of some much hatred and look at who could be held responsible for the ever increasing voices of dissidence in our country.

JNU Issue – A Precursor to the Recent Incident

The students of JNU had organized an event in the campus on 09 February 2016 on the hanging of Parliament attack convict, Afzal Guru in 2013.

The programme called "A country without a post office" was organized to highlight the judicial killing (as per the organizers) of Afzal Guru and Maqbool Bhatt", through poetry, art and music.

Meanwhile, the members of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) staged a protest to demand expulsion of the organisers labelling them anti-national. They said that anti-India slogans were raised during the event and it called for charges of sedition against the organizers.

The University management ordered a disciplinary enquiry into the issue and said that the organisers had gone ahead with the event without taking permission.

Meanwhile, Delhi Police was requisitioned by BJP MP Maheish Girri and BJP's student front ABVP, who registered a case of sedition against "unknown persons" in connection with the event.

JNU Students Union President Kanhaiya Kumar was arrested in a sedition case over the Afzal Guru event on 12 February 2016.

However, Kanhaiya Kumar's supporters refuted the claims of ABVP that any anti-national slogans were shouted by him or others who had organised the event. They maintained that Kanhaiya was targeted because of his criticism of the government and ideological differences with the BJP.

Consequently, massive protests erupted on the campus by students with the tacit support from the non-BJP parties.

Finally, what it boils down to is that a number of student bodies and unions linked to India's leftist political parties are active at JNU, which are ideologically opposed to and are openly critical of the BJP.

On the other hand, members of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the ABVP, which are linked to the BJP, criticize JNU and call its students supporters of Naxal movement and Kashmir's separatist demands.

Ramjas College Incident

Ramjas College planned to organize a seminar on "Cultures of Protest", where JNU students Umar Khalid, who was accused of raising anti-India slogans at an event in JNU last year, and Shehla Rashid were invited to speak. However, on 21 February 2017, following violent protests by ABVP and members of college student union, the seminar was called off. Organizers of the seminar claimed ABVP members had "pelted stones, locked the seminar room and cut the electricity supply". The ABVP, however, denied the charges.

The students of Ramjas College organized a peaceful protest march to Maurice Nagar police station, demanding action against ABVP members who had allegedly disrupted the seminar on 22 February 2017.

The situation turned violent and clashes broke out between Left-backed All India Students Association (AISA) and ABVP. Dozens of students, teachers and some journalists were injured in the clashes. Delhi University professor Prasanta Chakravarty, who was roughed up by ABVP was admitted in the hospital with a damaged kidney.

Students alleged that the police was hand in glove with the ABVP members who attacked the protesters outside the college. Delhi Police suspended three of its personnel for their "unprofessional" handling of the protest, and transferred the case to the Crime Branch.

The Gurmehar Episode

Meanwhile, a social media campaign, "I am not scared of ABVP", started by a Lady Shri Ram College student Gurmehar Kaur went viral. She was trolled by many renowned personalities and she alleged that she had received rape threats over her stand on the issue.

Finally, owing to threats to her safety, Gurmehar Kaur withdrew from the campaign and has left Delhi.

I feel it was highly unfortunate that a 20 year old kid was trolled and threatened. All that she said was: "Pakistan did not kill my father, the war did".

The above statement nowhere says that she loves Pakistan. How a normal person would understand this is that this girl does not want to live in hate and feels that the complete country or the community cannot be blamed for her loss, it is the circumstances (war) that resulted in her loss.

At the end of any war, including the Kargil conflict, there were many Gurmehars' on both sides of the border. Doesn't it clearly defy logic, when we tell these Gurmehars' to continue to harbour pain and hate for the people of the opposite country to get peace and solace.

My Take on the Issue

To my mind the educated youth from these higher institutions of learning should have been more aware, mature and sensitive towards not allowing situation to get nasty.

While it is good to debate over any emerging fault-lines in our democratic system, but undermining the constitution and indulging in hooliganism is unpardonable.

The maturity displayed by the ruling government was found wanting, when the only action it could think of after a high level meeting last year was to hoist national flags at all central universities.

I completely agree that it is totally unacceptable to raise anti-national slogans. Surprisingly, not even one eye witness or the police investigators have been able to identify even a single sloganeer. This raises a few questions regarding, who could be backing these masquerades and how do they get away scot-free every time. Perhaps the following reasons can be ascribed to the student violence that has erupted incessantly over the past two years:

- ABVP, who had lost elections in JNU, wants to assert itself and also show the elected members in poor light.
- Rival political parties, like BJP, Leftist parties and Congress, each trying to score brawny points and display petty politics to remain relevant.
- The Saffron brigade (RSS) wants to impose their ideology over others, especially when the government of the day/ the PM never ever harshly rebukes the hate-mongers.
- The colleges/ universities are unable to use their discretion to nip the issue in the bud and prevent the situation from getting out of hand.
- Police inaction/ ineffectiveness of the state machinery to handle a crisis situation.
- Infiltrators from fringe elements with tacit support from our not so friendly neighbors have adopted this new strategy to subvert peace and harmony in the country.
- Lack of tolerance amongst the youth and poor judgment, are the reasons that they are so gullible to be used as pawns by political parties.

Need to Cut the Rhetoric

I feel, above all, we need to give more space to each other and not play around with words to make our presence felt in the social media.

A live example of the same was the massive ruckus created on the social media about a heading of Times of India, new paper. The paper had simply stated a fact (did not use the word ‘martyred for soldiers’), and the rival media groups highlighted it as if the paper was totally anti-national and did not empathise with our forces. ‘Consequently’, all of us suddenly found it obnoxious and trained our guns towards the news paper. For God’s sake let’s grow up. How many of us who commented on the news paper heading stood with our soldiers who were dragged around by their collars by Delhi police at ‘Jantar Mantar’. Similarly, the recent statement by the Army chief was blown out of proportion. There is nothing wrong to say that the stone pelters’ are abetting the jihadists and need to watch their backsides’ in future. However, since the PDP-BJP government is at their wits end to find a solution to the problem and the NC and Congress has to always show the alliance down in whichever way possible, so hell was let loose. I feel our sense of nationalism is getting completely misplaced. I wish our youth display their aggression to win Olympic medals, join the forces and fight the terrorists, take up the challenge to build-up the nation rather than dissipate their energy in meaningless squabbles and empty rhetoric.

Conclusion

I feel that time has come for the Modi government to embark upon a “Wake up India” campaign and for all political parties to rise above petty politics. It is also time for the saffron brigade to let people decide what they want to eat, read, think and speak. It is also time for the wise people of this country to understand that the true meaning of nationalism is to give away whatever that you have, including your life, when the need arises for the sake of the country and not destroy its assets while demanding more from it. It is also time for our gallant politicians to read the indicators of a frustrated nation where people have completely lost faith in the social justice system. Finally, it is time to be vigilant, sensitive, understanding, forgiving, accommodating, honest, principled, disciplined and above all.....Patriotic in the true sense of the word if our democracy is to survive.

18) Radicalization of Youth in India and its Adjoining Countries – A Clear and Present Danger

Introduction

The combined operation conducted by Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh police, after gathering actionable intelligence over the previous few weeks, was able to avert major terror attacks on communally sensitive targets.

These terrorists are said to belong to a self-radicalized group, which claims allegiance with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

The ISIS is under intense pressure due to the ongoing coordinated operations being conducted by the coalition forces of the Arab nations with the tacit support of US and other western allies.

The defeat in the battle of Fallujah, and with the Iraqi troops now almost at the verge of capturing of the hub centre i.e. the city of Mosul, the Islamic State is completely rattled.

In order to make up the depleting strength of its fighters it has sought to ramp up recruiting in South Asia, reaching out to prospective recruits online. India, with its large Muslim population is an important destination for their recruitment drive.

Brief Details of the Incident

The terrorists blasted a low-intensity bomb in the last coach of a Bhopal-Ujjain passenger train, near Kalapipal, around 80km west of Bhopal, which left at least 10 passengers wounded on 07th of March.

The MP police zeroed in on four men from CCTV footage at Bhopal railway station and apprehended them from Pipariya in Hoshangabad district.

Interrogation of these suspects revealed that they belonged to Aligarh and Kanpur in UP. They named their other comrades, namely, Saifullah of Lucknow, and 18-year-old Faizan, Imran and Azhar of Kanpur.

Police arrested Faizan and Imran, and confiscated a laptop that allegedly revealed that they were members of the state's IS cell. Their computer contained an elaborate plan to carry out blasts at Deva Shareef, the shrine of Sufi saint Waris Ali Shah, on 27 March 2017.

Finally, Saifullah was killed after a 12 hour long anti-terror operation in Lucknow on 08th March. However, one of the suspects, Azhar, who owns a mobile shop in Kanpur's Rahmani Market, managed to escape.

Radicalization of Youth in India and its Adjoining Countries – A Clear and Present Danger

Probability of frequent attacks by terror groups from across the borders has increased. Consequently, threat to innocent human lives, mistrust amongst communities and creating a sense of fear psychosis in the minds of everyone is inevitable.

Widespread deployment of security forces restricts freedom, causes inconvenience and alienates the public, which in turn becomes counterproductive to check radicalization of disenchanting youth.

Inability to maintain the sanctity of such large international borders with many countries that are hotbeds for terror outfits causes strain on the security setup and intelligence network of the country.

Polarization within the country, spread of saffron terror as a counterweight, increased intolerance towards the belief system of others, fringe element gaining strength, incidents of moral policing, trust deficit between communities and fanning of vote bank politics are, a natural fallout of a radicalized society.

In order to meet their intent of recruiting foot soldiers for their nefarious mission, the ISIS is progressively trying to radicalize Muslims in India and other Muslim countries surrounding India, like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Maldives and Myanmar.

India

National Investigation Agency (NIA) data has revealed that from those who have been arrested on account of ISIS allegiance, 12 were from Maharashtra, 10 from Hyderabad, 11 from Kerala, five from Karnataka and West Bengal each, four from Uttar Pradesh, two from Rajasthan, three from Tamil Nadu and one each from Madhya Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir.

Furthermore, NIA has said that, the agency was still searching for 35 identified absconding suspects.

It is estimated that a total of 25-35 Indians have so far gone to ISIS held areas in Iraq-Syria to fight for the terrorist group. Of them seven are said to have died and one has returned home to Mumbai.

Thirty other Indians, who were radicalised by ISIS elements, were also prevented from travelling to the conflict zone in the Middle-East and 150 are under the scanner of intelligence agencies, mostly from South India, who are believed to be attracted to the ISIS and are sympathetic to the group's activities.

It is believed that Indian recruits have been usually teches, who have been invariably utilized for cyber related activities and for menial jobs rather than fighting at the frontline.

Details of some of the known radicalized individuals are given below:

September 2014: 15 students, including a girl, were arrested in West Bengal while trying to cross into Bangladesh to join ISIS. They were left off after counseling as they had no criminal background.

January 2015: A 32-year-old man named Salman Mohiuddin was arrested by police at Hyderabad airport. He was on his way to Dubai and was planning to join ISIS after reaching Syria via Turkey.

March 2015: An MS student from America and a native of Hyderabad, Hafeez, joined ISIS in US. He later travelled to Syria and was killed by the Syrian Army.

September 2015: 38-year-old Nicky Joseph alias Asfa Jabeen from Hyderabad was an alleged recruiter for ISIS. UAE deported her to India.

December 2015: Three missing men from Hyderabad – Faruqui Hussaini, Abdul Basit and Mohammad Hussain arrested by the Maharashtra ATS. They were from amongst the same people who were let off in September 2014.

January 2016: Two men from Hyderabad arrested by the NIA. One was 54-year-old.

June 2016: The National Investigation Agency (NIA) busted an ISIS module in Hyderabad and arrested 11 suspects.

It was assessed by experts that the module was planning to trigger bomb blasts at communally sensitive areas like Charminar, busy markets and malls, Hindu religious sites and target an important government building.

Pakistan

Large areas of Pakistan-Afghanistan border region, especially the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the Swat district in the Khyber Pukhtunkhwa Province (KPP), is virtually being controlled by various militant groups aligned with Pakistani Taliban.

Pakistan's regional agenda in Afghanistan and Kashmir, in the shape of support for religious militants, is the real reason for radicalization in Pakistan.

Pakistan created a space for religious radicals, not realizing that such a policy was bound to have a local blowback.

Ethnic Divide and Lopsided Distribution of Power: The province of Punjab, in Pakistan, has disproportionate resources and influence in the power corridors, both political and the armed forces/ ISI. Hence, the other provinces look at it with contempt.

Baluchistan faces a growing insurgency as its people feel marginalized and isolated. Rifts between different communities in Karachi, the largest urban centre and port city of the country, especially between the Urdu-speaking migrant communities led by the Muttihada Qaumi Movement (MQM – United National Movement), Pukhtuns settled in the city, and local Sindhis, are assuming dangerous proportions due to tussles over resources and job opportunities.

Corrupt and Weak State: Rampant corruption in the criminal justice system, lack of access to justice and deficient law enforcement capacity has disillusioned a growing number of people in the country. Extremist ideologues have benefitted from these weaknesses of the state.

Loss of Tribal identity in FATA: Maliks (tribal elders) lost power and influence to clerics (religious leaders), who were empowered with the advent of Taliban's.

Consequently, discussion forums of tribal elders, called 'Majlis' that used to define the laws, regulations, and general policies in various FATA agencies, lost relevance and the younger generation in that area started listening to the fatwas (religious edicts) of Afghan militant leaders.

Most madrassas in FATA became training centres for jihadi/militant causes and traditional religious education became secondary.

Talibanization of the complete Khyber Pukhtunkhwa Province was a logical consequence of the above developments in FATA.

The Pakistani security forces' operations in the FATA area to contain the spread of the said radicalization resulted in widespread incidents of collateral damage that further enraged people of the area and drew them towards the fundamentalist movement.

The Sunni Connection: Another reason for the AF-Pak region to be harboring the world's deadliest terror groups is because of its Sunni orientation. Besides, being patronized by countries like Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and some North African countries, large scale opium cultivation serves as its primary source of funds to fight the jihad.

Inequality has Spurred Radicalization: A deteriorating economy, huge gap between the haves and have-nots, the feudalistic culture and multiple power centers within the country (Military-ISI, powerful clergy and democratic government) has created a sense of disarray that exhibits in the form of inequality and double standards.

The demand for joining the radical forces is popular, not only for its religious dimension, but also because it held out hope for social justice in a society, which is marked by vast inequalities.

Bangladesh

The ethnic composition of Bangladesh comprises of around 89% Muslims, while the rest being Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and others. The total population of the country is 160 million.

Bangladesh has two major militant organizations, namely, the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen, which claims to represent Islamic State in Bangladesh and Ansar-al-Islam, which pledges its allegiance to al-Qaida. Bangladesh government has banned both these militant organizations.

Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen, focuses its attacks on non-Muslims, whether a poor rickshaw-puller or a grocer, while, Ansar-al-Islam, in contrast, has laid down strict "targeting criteria" under which its fighters attack people carrying out "anti-Islamic" activities such as bloggers criticizing radical Islam or activists promoting gay rights. The above trend of an increase in Islamist attacks on religious minorities, secularist and atheist writers and liberal-minded Muslims has seen an upsurge since the 2013.

Since September 2015, there have been over 30 such attacks, and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) claimed responsibility for 21 of them. Some of these attacks in the recent times include:

Killing of the Bangladeshi-American writer and blogger Avijit Roy in February 2015, shortly after that Niladry Chattopadhyaya, another secular blogger, had been hacked to death at his Dhaka home.

Italian citizen Cesare Tavella, was gunned down as he went for a jog in the Gulshan neighborhood. Another Italian national Nadia Benedetti identified as the managing director for Bangladeshi branch of a British firm. Most of the foreigners that have been killed were connected with the flourishing garment business in Bangladesh.

Soon after the murder of the wife of an antiterrorism police officer, the Hasina government launched a nationwide crackdown; with authorities arresting thousands of people in what it said was an effort to fight extremism.

In two separate incidents in May and June 2016, two Hindu priests have been hacked to death in Jhenaidah district of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh analysts say the killing of Hindu religious leaders in the country is a focused attempt by the Islamists to create misunderstanding between India and Bangladesh at a time when bilateral relations are at its peak.

The most gruesome attack came on the night of 01 July 2016, when gunmen linked to the Islamic State raided a popular cafe in an upscale neighborhood in Bangladesh's capital city of Dhaka.

Twenty civilians (mostly Italian and Japanese nationals), six gunmen, and two police officers died, while 50 others, mostly police personnel, were injured. Tarushi Jain, an 18-year-old Indian national who attended the University of California-Berkeley, also died in the attack.

Maldives

The tiny island chain of the Maldives, with a population of just 345,000, is fast becoming a fertile recruiting ground for Islamic State jihadists.

Radical Islam is getting very strong in the Maldives and the strength of such elements that have made inroads into the strategic positions in the military and in the police is very significant.

The islands' capital, Malé, witnessed pro-IS rally last year featuring banners that called for the introduction of Shariah law in Maldives.

A prominent investigative journalist, Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla, went missing for many months after being abducted outside his home at knifepoint. While Mr Nasheed, leader of the secular opposition MDC party, has also received death threats.

The major reason for radicalization of youth in Maldives is that the government has allowed and tolerated the preaching of violent ideologies. The same has led to a significant number of local youth joining the ranks of extremist outfits abroad.

It is alarming to note that, out of the 200 people (huge percentage as compared to the population of Maldives) who have travelled abroad to join jihad, a vast majority is of ex-military personnel.

Like in Pakistan, Maldives has seen a large influx of funds from Saudi Arabia to support Wahhabism (most stringent form of Islam).

The funds are being directed towards payments to Wahhabi imams, construction and upkeep of mosques, and spreading a deeply conservative view of Islam, which is completely in contrast to the age old traditions of the island nation. Wahabism is said to be preached and promoted mainly by Saudi Arabia.

In a recent development in the first week of March 2017, Maldives, Abdulla Yameen government has planned to give the control of an entire atoll out, of its total 26 atolls to Saudi Arabia.

It is feared that, it would further promote Wahabism in the country, which already accounts for one of the highest numbers of foreign fighters in Syria in terms of per capita.

Moreover, there is a this strong perception among Maldivian civil society activists that the government is not only failing to take meaningful measures against radicalization but also using radicalized groups as a tool to curb political dissent.

The Islamic State has a design to not hit at the tourism industry, which is the mainstay of Maldives, because it is able to use the tourism industry for money laundering and recruitment.

It is a definite possibility that with the radicalization of police forces and the military, owing to infiltration of ISIS into their rank and file, it may only be a matter of time before Islamists create havoc in Maldives and fully take over the country.

Myanmar

The ethnic composition of Myanmar comprises of a majority of Rakhine Buddhists and a minority of Rohingya Muslims. The Muslims comprise about 4 percent of the 51 million population of Myanmar.

Hatred and bigotry toward the minority Rohingya have been deeply rooted in Rakhine state and ever since 2012, hard-line Buddhist groups, like Ma Ba Tha, have led an anti-Muslim campaign that culminated in violent riots, harassment and discrimination.

The threat to the lives of displaced Muslims, who had fled their homes after violent sectarian clashes, has converted the country's leading Madrassa, into a refugee camps and villages that have been under prison-like conditions since the last three years.

Rohingyas, lack basic rights in Myanmar, are denied citizenship, stripped of voting rights and denied access to adequate health care and education.

The analysts suggest that the abysmal living conditions in the refugee camps and the abject poverty of its residents has created conditions, just ripe for radicalization.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State in Iraq, has been fanning the communal divide in the country by making statements like, "One million of the weak Muslims are all without exception being exterminated in Burma," and has asked the Muslim world, as to what would they do about it.

Suggestions for Reversing Radicalization

The following measures can be instrumental in reversing the current negative drift:

Effective law enforcement can enable any state affected by this menace to expand its writ and support a system based on supremacy of the Constitution and rule of law. Strong steps by government against hate speeches, rumor mongering, and moral policing by unauthorized people will check spread of radical mindsets.

Police reforms that will help to make law enforcement more effective is the need of the hour. Further, establishment of a central agency like the proposed National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC) will help to streamline approach towards handling this menace.

Capacity building of intelligence network by the use of state of art technologies, better integration between the various resources deployed and centralized collection, collation and dissemination of actionable intelligence.

India must continuously Endeavour to establish a robust counter-terrorism partnership with the neighboring countries that are also adversely affected by the menace of radicalization.

Reforms in the criminal justice system are also critical. Injustice, whether real or perceived, makes the young more vulnerable to extremist ideologies. Justice must be delivered without delay and must be reformatory rather than punitive, as the use of force alone has seldom proved to be a durable solution.

Awareness through access to public education can also lessen the role of the divisive and decadent system. Perhaps including such topics in the curriculum that highlight the modus operandi of the divisive elements and the pitfalls of involvement in such activities can help impressionable minds to remain cautioned.

Incentivizing the publishing industry of the country to counter the sophisticated propaganda war by anti-national elements, and help in perception management of the masses.

Political leaders must ensure that the minority communities of their constituencies are afforded proper rights, protection and dignity. Inciting communal violence for votes may help the politicians in their short term goals, but, it would provide the separatists a perfect opportunity to entice the people and firmly establish a foothold in the country.

Finally, the government must play a significant role to create an environment in which the country stands united against all forms of divisive forces by winning the trust level of the people through just and effective governance.

19) NOTA - A TOOTHLESS LION

Background

NOTA(None Of The Above),electoral reform was introduced in India following the 2013 Supreme Court directive in the People's Union for Civil Liberties Vs Union of India judgment. Thus India became the 14th country to institute negative voting. However, NOTA in India doesn't provide for a 'right to reject'. It's literally a "toothless Lion". It implies- candidate with the maximum votes wins the election irrespective of the number of NOTA votes polled. Three years, one Lok Sabha election and four rounds of Assembly elections have passed since the introduction of NOTA option in the Indian electoral system.

NOTA - Public Reaction

Interestingly NOTA caught on to the imagination of public for some time. The 2016 Assembly elections also saw some active canvassing for NOTA, which allows voters to express their dissent against all contestants. In Kerala a group of women activists hit the road urging people not to elect any candidate if no woman was present in the fray. In Tamilnadu, a youth group campaigned for NOTA as a protest vote against corruption. However through the years, the interest of public, obviously because of its inability to decide the outcome of the polls, petted out. On an average, the maximum NOTA vote share has not crossed 2.02% of the total votes polled in any election cycle. The perceived cynicism of Indian voters against the political class thus seems exaggerated.

NOTA button saw its debut in the 2013 Assembly elections held in four states- Chhattisgarh, Mizoram, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh and the former Union Territory-Delhi. NOTA constituted 1.85% of the total votes polled. The average NOTA votes polled dropped to 0.95% in the 2014 Assembly elections held in eight states. However, it increased to 2.02% in the 2015 Assembly elections held in Delhi and Bihar. While Delhi polled a mere 0.40%, Bihar saw 2.49% of NOTA votes polled so far in any states in Assembly elections. In the 2016 Assembly elections held in Assam, West Bengal, Kerala, Puducherry and Tamilnadu, NOTA vote share dropped again to 1.6%. In the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, NOTA constituted 1.1% of the total votes.

It is worth noting that across the elections, the number of NOTA votes polled was larger than the winning margin in 261 Assembly constituencies which went to the polls since 2013 and in 24 constituencies in the Lok Sabha elections. One can argue that in these constituencies the NOTA votes did make a difference to the election results assuming that in the absence of this option a majority of NOTA voters would have preferred one or the other candidates in the fray.

The Patterns

A quick analysis of NOTA usage in all elections so far indicates some interesting observations. First, reserved constituencies have seen a relatively larger number of NOTA votes, which points to the continued social prejudice and injustice against SC/STs of the country, especially in the rural heartlands of India. Second, constituencies affected by left-wing extremism have also recorded higher NOTA performance and here probably it served as a pressure release valve to protest against the State itself.

Notoriously Nexal- infested constituencies like Bastar, Gadchiroli, Jhargram Kalyan rural, Chatra, Jaganathpur, Umarkote , Chattarpur etc., figured in the list of top NOTA voters in the Assembly elections of 2014, while in the Lok Sabha elections, Bastar, the Nilgiris and Nabarangpur occupy three top slots in terms of NOTA votes polled. Given the dissatisfaction of the people in these areas against the Indian state, these numbers are expected. However, it is heartening to note that these voters have used democratic methods to express their resentment against the Indian Union rather than boycotting the polls outright. Last observation- NOTA figures are comparatively higher in those constituencies which have seen a direct contest between the two prominent national parties, BJP and Congress. One may read into this as some indication of the people's

growing disenchantment with two mainstream political parties and yearning for possible alternatives. In a nutshell, Indian voters seem to be using NOTA not just to show their disapproval of the candidates but to express their protest against many things they perceive wrong in the Indian political system.

Conclusion

The early trends of NOTA need to be further analysed with more elaborate statistical and ethnographic tools. So far, a small number of Indian voters have come forward and used NOTA as an instrument of protest. This electoral reform will become a meaningful instrument of negative voting only if it becomes a 'right to reject' rather than a being a symbolic method to express resentment, as it exists now. Unless NOTA is provided with teeth, it will remain as a mockery of our democratic elections. If the voters are empowered by NOTA to pull down any or all candidates not worthy to represent them, the political atmosphere itself, will undergo a cleansing process, compelling all mainstream political parties to array leaders with clean image and unblemished track record, as their candidates. A PIL has already been filed in Madras High Court seeking the full 'right to reject' in place of present NOTA.

20) INDIA- CHINA: HONEYMOON IN AFGHANISTAN

Background

Sino- India relations was deteriorating for some times due to serious indifferences. A blatantly rude action by China was, putting on hold the inclusion of JeM Chief Masood Azhar's name in the United Nation's list of global terrorists. Another bone of contention for a long time was, China's resistance to accept India as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and its reluctance to support India membership in the NSG club. Recently, China has been flexing its muscles to express their displeasure when Dalai Lama decided to visit Arunachal Pradesh, an Indian state on which China had casted an evil eye. China's mega investment to construct its economic corridor through Pakistan Occupied Territory (POK) there by giving legitimacy to Pakistan over the disputed territory also had widened the rift in Sino- Indian relations.

Afghanistan – Common Platform.

Of-late Afghanistan has emerged as a platform providing new possibilities on the India- China cooperation front. After the restructured 'Strategic Dialogue' between both the Asian giants recently, our Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar said: "On Afghanistan, they certainly seem to suggest to us that their approach and policies are in tandem with us, not on different page". China expressed admiration for India's development work in Afghanistan amidst a broader understanding that New Delhi and Beijing need to strengthen the government in Kabul.

Growing shadow of Islamic State on China

China's friendly Afghanistan policy comes against a back drop of the growing threat of IS to China. The IS released a video recently of Chinese Uighur Muslims vowing to return home and "shed blood like rivers" even as the Red Army displayed its military might as a show of force in Xinjiang. A rattled China is calling for greater global cooperation against the IS, which is also a reason why China has joined ranks with Russia in a bid to engage the Taliban in Afghanistan.

China has for years blamed exiled Uighur" separatists" for violence in Xinjiang and has warned of the militants' potential to link up with global jihadists groups. Actually the Red Dragon is worried about the 'spillover effect' of continuing instability in Afghanistan. The impact of Afghanistan's destabilization will be felt not only in Kashmir but also in Xinjiang where the East Turkistan Islamic movement is active. More over China knows very well that restoring peace and stability in the region is essential for boosting its trade relations with western countries.

With the Donald Trump administration yet to clarify its position on Afghanistan, and with it, looking unlikely to add more American troops to the depleting reserves of Western forces in the country, it is not surprising that

China is keen to engage India, the one country that has built a reservoir of goodwill in Afghanistan and has demonstrated some ability to deliver concrete results on the ground.

After the strategic dialogue with China our Foreign Secretary was careful to underline the differences. On the Taliban he suggested that " China's characterization was that there were elements of Taliban which are very extreme. In their view there were also elements of Taliban than can work with international community and Afghan Government."

China's stand on Pak Terrorism

The sino- India counter terrorism dialogue was initially viewed as a promising bilateral initiative for dealing terrorism. But nothing of consequence emerged from these dialogues. For India, the main source of terrorism is Pakistan where the state machinery continues to view terrorism as a legitimate tool of national policy. For China, Pakistan is an important asset in its South Asia policy and an all weather friend. As a consequence, where New Delhi had, somewhat audaciously, expected to make common cause with Beijing vis-a-vis Islamabad and Rawalpindi, there was only disappointment at the outcome of these dialogues.

But as concerns started rising in the region about the consequences of the withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan in 2014, China reached out to India. This too couldn't go far as China continued to emphasize that its relationship with Pakistan was far more important than a regional approach on terrorism with India.

Conclusion

New Delhi should not expect Beijing to change its Afghanistan policy significantly to suit Indian interests. The road to stability in Kabul lies through Rawalpindi, and China has no intention to challenge the Pakistan Army who has vested interests to keep alive the fighting spirits of Taliban.

However, the fact that China is interested in working with India on Afghanistan suggests that new possibilities on regional cooperation are emerging, which India should not hesitate to explore.

21) Measuring the Implications of 'TsuNamo'

Introduction

The result of assembly elections in five states has shown that the Modi wave continues unabated. Except Punjab, in all the other states BJP has been able to stake its claim to form the government.

Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand was a clean sweep by BJP, where it completely decimated Congress-SP and BSP with 312 and 57 seats out of the total 403 and 70 seats respectively.

In Manipur and Goa, despite Indian National Congress winning more seats than BJP, i.e. 28 against 21 of BJP and 17 against 13 of BJP, respectively, it saw BJP literally stealing their chances of forming a government from right under their nose.

The following has emerged most significantly from these election results:

- PM Narendra Modi is the most popular mass leader of the country.
- It is now clearly impossible for any other single national party to stand up to the Modi-Amit Shah might.
- Congress Party has been crippled and will need leadership change if it wants to remain in the reckoning.
- AAP is not as significant a player as it was being made out to be.
- The 2019 General Elections are almost a given to BJP.
- The other parties including the regional parties will have to prepare a joint front by making a 'Mahagathbandan' if 'TsuNamo' has to be stopped.

Reasons Attributable to the Victory of BJP

The single most important reason for such an overwhelming victory of BJP is the face of Narendra Modi. BJP is now synonymous to Narendra Modi and there is no other leader in the country, who is as inspiring and can be called a mass leader.

The BJP President Amit Shah is very shrewd, calculative, manipulative and a seasoned 'king maker'. His strategies and reach cannot be matched.

In order to attract diverse vote bank, BJP applied 'social engineering' and reached out to voters from all sections and ethnic backgrounds, e.g. in UP it fielded around 170 non-Yadav and non-Jat OBC candidates from different castes like Lodh, Rajbhar, Saini, Gujjar, Shakya, Maurya, Dhankar, Nishad and Kevats.

As part of a bigger game plan, PM Modi during his election rallies made statements to polarise the vote bank, e.g. "Agar gaon mein kabristan hai, toh shamshan ghat bhi hona chahiye. Agar Ramzan pe bijli milti hai, to Diwali pe bhi milni chahiye". Besides, not even a single ticket was given to any Muslim in the entire state of UP.

Some of the recent actions taken by the government like the surgical strikes, demonetization and other pro-poor initiatives and schemes were adequately highlighted to stroke the national spirit and win over the voters.

Lastly, anti-incumbency, as well as the lack of suitable alternatives with the voters also worked in the favor of BJP.

Advantages of 'TsuNamo'

The series of phenomenal victories for BJP will make it easier for the Centre to push through key reform measures like tackling the Non-performing Assets, taxation reforms, expedite action on the strategic sale of PSUs, labour reforms, etc.

Uttar Pradesh accounts for 16 per cent of the country's population and accounts for 20% of the union budget. However, the state contributes just 11 per cent to India's GDP. Improved centre-state coordination can boost its output and the state can contribute more towards the national economy.

Reduced political opposition will allow meaningful discussions during the parliament sessions. Although, BJP will have a majority in the Rajya Sabha only after two more years as it goes into the next general elections. In order to reap the benefits of the steps being taken by the government, continuity of good leadership and majority across the country is required. The possibility of the same looks bright now and it is widely believed that BJP can deliver good growth, good reforms and bring about the requisite changes to make India a modern economy.

PM Modi has travelled across the world to attract foreign investments into India. A properly entrenched Modi government, which in all likelihood will stay for one more term, offers confidence to the foreign investors in terms of continuity in policy decisions and commitments of the government.

Disadvantages of TsuNamo

The greatest fear of Modi becoming all powerful will be that he has a dictatorial tendency and is known to take hasty decisions, like demonetization, and then, he also has the ability to justify his wrongs to the common people, so that they feel it was for their good only.

He is one of the greatest 'show-mans' of all times, which many a times results in too much publicity with very little outcome. A number of much publicised schemes and government programmes have not really made the desired results at the grass root level.

The agenda of Hindutva and divisive politics is part and parcel of BJP politics. The PM has never openly condemned or even made a statement against, hate mongering or moral policing. The country is presently passing through a very difficult phase and divisive politics is at its prime, where others decide what you will eat, speak or do/ not do. TsuNamo is likely to further dangerously divide the country on communal lines.

Conclusion

It can be reasonably assumed that a majority government in both the houses of parliament, which remains in power for ten years or more, will bring about greater stability and usher in policies that are in the long term interest of the country.

In the final analysis, I feel that the advantages of TsuNamo clearly outweigh the disadvantages. Modi being a very dynamic leader has the potential to steer the nation to greater heights.

22) HYPERLOOP- FAST FORWARDING INDIA

INTRODUCTION

The term Hyper loop has suddenly become a highly sensational debate in India. An unbelievable technological advancement in the transportation sector- amazingly futuristic as a sci-fi movie. Can a vehicle travel on earth clocking the speed of an Airplane? The answer is- yes. Soon Indians will witness this capsule like vehicle shooting through a tube like the bullet passing through the barrel of a gun.

Hyper loop is the futuristic technology conjured up by the entrepreneur Elon Musk. It is a system where magnetically levitating capsules are moved at high speeds through low pressure tubes, there by potentially reducing transport time - of people and goods - by more than 80%.This transportation system will revolutionalise the mobility of mankind on ground like never before.

A Hyper loop system is now being installed first time in the world, to connect Abu Dhabi and Dubai. The envisaged Speed of travel is a whopping 1200 km per hour. The time taken to reach the destination- an unbelievable 12 minutes.

Is Hyperloop a reality in India?

Hyperloop One, the company developing the technology, has begun an online vote for people to suggest and choose the best route to deploy a hyper loop in their countries. The company proclaimed that the Hyper loop One Global Challenge received 2,600 registrants from 90 countries. It then selected 35 semi- finalists from across the world, five of which are from India. The route choices of India are:

- Bangalore- to- Chennai (334 km in 20 minutes),
- Bangalore- to- Thiruvananthapuram (736 km in 42 minutes),
- Delhi- to- Mumbai via Jaipur and Indore (1,317 km in 55 minutes),
- Mumbai- to -Chennai via Bangalore (1,102 km in 50 minutes),
- Bangalore to Chennai (334 km in 20 minutes).

Hyper loop One has announced its ambitious project to run this service in India by 2021. Of the 500 plus technicians working on this ambitious project 25 plus are Indians. There are also reports that the company has already begun talks with the Indian Government to see how to make this possible, and how to combine this with the "Make in India" mission by sourcing the necessary material locally.

Pros and Cons

If approved, Hyper loop project would enable India to jump forward in its transport infrastructure and could transform the way business is conducted in India. The potential benefits to the goods transport by this fast and cheap transportation can be mind boggling, boosting the national productivity and economy.

However, in a country like India, the flip side of such a system is also clearly visible. At a time when railway infrastructure is abysmal and the airline industry is priced beyond the abilities of most of the populace, can India really afford another transport system for which the infrastructure required is huge? However if Hyper loop can run using renewable source of energy, as it is envisaged, it can be turned into a most popular, cheap and quick mass transportation system in India.

As of now, there are all probabilities that such a super fast mobility will be used by the upper echelon of the society only, like our Airlines.

23) DEFUNCT POLICE REFORMS IN INDIA

Background

The National Police Commission (1977-79), set up by the first Janata Government, kick-started the Police Reforms and mooted for a legislature to this effect. But it died its natural death since it was not towing with the interests of political parties ruling the states and Policing is an exclusive state subject. However the controversial issue was revived by Mr Prakash Singh, former DGP of Uttar Pradesh and a former BSF chief, who filed a PIL in 1996 seeking major changes to the police structure. His accent was on autonomy and more space for police professionalism by giving a fixed tenure for police officers in crucial positions beginning with the DGPs of the states.

Rickety Road to Reform

The Apex Court gave its path-breaking rulings in 2006, a decade after the filing of PIL, due to the complicated and time consuming process of consultations, since "police" being a state subject under our Constitution. The Supreme Court's directions to the States included a fixed tenure of two years for top police officers in crucial positions, setting up of a State Security Commission (in which Home Minister, DGP, a sitting judge, and the leader of the opposition party are members), the clear separation of law and order and crime investigations of the police (for checking corruption and nepotism) and creation of a Police Establishment Board to regulate police placement and discipline. It also mandated a new a new Police Act on the basis of a model Act prepared by the Union Government and circulated to all states. Policemen across the country were excited over this development and believed that an end to gross political interference in police routine was in sight.

However, the euphoria of the police fizzled out sooner than expected. Events Since 2006 have been dismaying, with most of the state governments devising their own means to dilute or scuttle the Supreme Court verdict. Finding that the SC has stepped in mainly because there was no law on the subject, many states brought in quick hotchpotch legislation to dilute the essentials of the SC direction.

Since the police is being used as a political weapon by all ruling parties in the states to arm-twist the opposition parties, no political party is willing to implement these reforms. With the connivance of willing bureaucrats who despise Police getting liberated, politicians made State legislation to circumvent the proposed police reforms. In fact they were a ruse to outwit the Supreme Court, without demonstrating any irreverence or defiance. To quote an example we still find DIGs and IGs being handed out a two year tenure on paper, but giving marching orders midway into their tenure on the most untenable and imaginary grounds. The most significant victim of this phenomenon was the Kerala State Police Chief DGP Mr Senkumar who was removed by the LDF government which came into power on flimsy grounds of failure of law and order. Now the former DGP has approached SC, for staying the Govt order to remove him by moving a petition against political vendetta.

A few states have made officers temporarily in charge of the post of DGP without having to obey the SC directions. The objectives of the Police Establishment Boards, conceived only to de-politicize appointments and transfers, have been set at naught by the DGPs getting informal prior political approval from the CM/ Home Minister. Naturally the same rotten system is being followed with a bridal make-up: to place politically amenable police officers in vital places in the police hierarchy.

Present Status

"Police reforms are going on and on. Nobody listens to our orders" lamented Supreme Court Bench headed by Chief Justice J S Khehar , last week, while declining the plea of a lawyer demanding immediate action to usher in major police reforms in the country.

It's pathetic and deplorable that the highest court of the land is so helpless in such a vital matter, which squarely affects our democratic set up. It epitomizes the sorry- state-of-affairs in public administration in the country, and it can only embolden our political heavy-weights to brazenly halt the proposed "Police Reforms Act".

24) The Resurgence of Ayodhya Ramjanmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute?

Introduction

The BJP's manifesto for the recently concluded UP elections prominently included, "exploring possibilities for construction of Ram Temple in Ayodhya within the constitutional framework".

The selection of Yogi Adityanath, the Mahant of Gorakhnath Math, as the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, has added further credence to the fact that the agenda of Hindutva is likely to be followed by the ruling party with greater vigour.

The views and track record of this Hindutva firebrand leader could be a bit unsettling for even those Hindus, whose belief in the Hindutva ideology is not adequately staunch.

However, while in power he will have to assume a more reconciliatory approach and has already declared that he will deliver on the Modi's mantra of 'sabka saath, sabka vikas'.

Notwithstanding, the 25 year old issue regarding the construction of Ram Temple at Ayodhya, which was also one of the major election manifestos of BJP, has already started to appear from behind the horizon.

In order to have a clear understanding of the present noise being created about the Mandir-Masjid debate, let us first comprehend, as to what this issue is all about.

Important Timelines of the Case

1528 - Babur invaded India in 1527 and built a mosque at Ayodhya, allegedly after demolishing a Hindu temple. It was popularly called 'Babri Masjid'.

1853 - First ever recorded communal clash over the site, which forced the British to put a fence around the site. They demarcated separate areas of worship for Hindus and Muslims in 1859. The site existed in this form for the next 90 years.

1949 - The workers of the Hindu right wing organization forced their way and placed Ram Idols inside the mosque. Both sides to the dispute filed civil suits for ownership of the Plot no 583. The administration locked the gates and declared the area disputed.

1984 - The movement to build a temple at the disputed site gathered momentum and Hindu groups formed a committee to spearhead the construction of a temple at the Ramjanmabhoomi site.

1986 - A district judge ordered the gates of the mosque to be opened after almost five decades to allow Hindus to worship inside the "disputed structure." Consequently, a Babri Mosque Action Committee was formed as Muslims protested the move to allow Hindu prayers at the site.

1989 - In November, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad laid foundations of a temple on land adjacent to the "disputed structure" in the presence of Home Minister Sh Boota Singh and then Chief Minister Sh ND Tiwari.

1990 - A coalition government under PM VP Singh was formed at the centre with a major support from BJP. In order to consolidate its political position better, the then BJP president Lal Krishna Advani took out a cross-country rathayatra to garner support for the move to build a Ram temple at the site. He was arrested in Bihar during the rathayatra and as a consequence, BJP withdrew its support from the centre government, bringing the government down.

1991 - Congress came to power at the centre after elections, while BJP became the major opposition party at the centre. The BJP at that time had power in many states such as Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. Kalyan Singh became the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh.

1992 - Kalyan Singh took steps to support the Ram janambhoomi movement such as making entry into area easier, promising no firing on Karsevaks, opposing decision of central government to send Central Police force in the area, etc. Meanwhile, several rounds of not so meaningful meetings were held between Babri Masjid Action Committee and VHP leaders in presence of the home minister.

06 December 1992 - The VHP and its associates, including the BJP, organized a rally involving 150,000 VHP and BJP kar sevaks at the site of the mosque. Fiery speeches were delivered by the BJP leaders such as Advani, Murli Manohar Joshi and Uma Bharti. Despite a commitment from the state government to the Supreme Court that the mosque would not be harmed, the mob demolished the mosque. More than 2000 people were killed in the riots that followed the demolition. The Congress government at the Centre, headed by PV Narasimha Rao, set up a commission of inquiry under Justice Liberhan.

2002 - Communal tension continued over the years. At least 58 people were killed in Godhra, Gujarat, in an attack on a train believed to be carrying Hindu volunteers from Ayodhya. The communal riots that followed the Godhra incident in Gujarat led to over 2000 people dead.

2003 - The court ordered the Geological Survey of India to find out whether a temple of Lord Ram existed on the site. In August, the survey presented evidence of a temple under the mosque. Muslim groups disputed the findings.

2005 - A group of five terrorists attacked the makeshift temple on 05 July 2005. All five were shot dead in the ensuing gunfight with the Central Reserve Police Force personnel and one civilian was killed by a grenade thrown by a terrorist to breach the cordoned wall.

The Ramjanmabhoomi-Babri Masjid Dispute in a Nut Shell

The crux of the said dispute is hinged to the land title-ship rights of a plot of 2.77 acres of land in the city of Ayodhya, located in Faizabad district of Uttar Pradesh.

The Hindus believe that this very spot was the birth place of lord Ram and a mosque was built by Babur after destroying their most holy temple that existed at that location in 1528.

The contention of the Muslims on the other hand is that the Babri Mosque was one of the largest and the most sacred mosques in Uttar Pradesh, which has a sizable Muslim population, was illegally destroyed by the workers of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and its associates, including the BJP on 06 December 1992.

Subsequent to the destruction of the mosque, a land title case was lodged in the Allahabad High Court, the verdict of which was pronounced on 30 September 2010.

The three judges of The Allahabad High Court ruled that the 2.77 acres of Ayodhya land be divided into three parts:

The first part was allotted to the site of the Ramlala idol (birthplace of lord Ram), which was assigned to the party representing 'Ram Lalla Virajman' who could install Infant Ram deity in that location.

The second part was allocated to the Nirmohi Akhara, who as per mythological belief, stand for the construction of Sita Rasoi and Ram Chabutara at that location.

The third part was given to the Sunni Wakf Board for the construction of the mosque.

Although, the above stated landmark judgment of the High Court was an important step towards the resolution of the long outstanding dispute, but all the three parties were not satisfied with the ruling to split the land and appealed against it in the Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court on 09 May 2011 stayed the High Court order splitting the disputed site into three parts and said that status quo will remain.

Recent Developments on the Issue

The Supreme Court once again stroked this highly controversial issue on 08 March 2017, when it remarked that it will examine the issue of reviving the conspiracy charges against L K Advani and Murli Manohar Joshi, Uma Bharati and Kalyan Singh for the demolition of the Babri masjid.

Amongst the most recent developments on the issue, the honorable Supreme Court on 21 March 2017 has called upon all the stake holders to look for an amicable, out-of-court settlement for the ongoing dispute over the Ram Temple rather than on insisting for a judicial pronouncement.

The above statement was issued in response to the BJP leader Subramanian Swamy's request to the apex court to constitute a bench to hear a batch of petitions challenging the 2010 Allahabad High Court order.

The court has urged all the parties to choose mediators to make a fresh attempt to settle the issue and if required, a principal mediator can be chosen by the court for settling the issue and has asked Swamy to consult the parties and mention the matter on or before 31 March 2017.

Conclusion

In order to amicably resolve the dispute, it is essential that the historical facts and religious sentiments of all are suitably addressed.

The Supreme Court's recent decision is being widely acclaimed. It is felt that the court must not exert its jurisdiction over aspects pertaining to faith (Aastha) and the solution for this long outstanding issue can only be found through cogent wisdom of all stake holders

25) Proposed Electoral Reforms in India: Key to Strengthen Democratic Process

Introduction

India, with its diverse and enormous population is considered to be the world's largest and strongest democracies. The most effective instrument to ascertain the efficacy of a democratic system is the general perception amongst the people of the country that the election process is free and fair.

Thus, it is imperative that to legitimize the power being bestowed on the political masters by the masses of the country; a highly versatile, fool-proof election process is in place.

However, in the face of unscrupulous use of money and muscle power by political parties to win the elections at any cost, the Election Commission confronts serious challenges to meet its designated aims.

The other factors that come into play during elections, which maligns the electoral process, is stroking the sensitive cord of casteism/ communalism by politicians, use of core issues, like poverty, unemployment, etc by political parties to unjustifiably win over the voters, the unauthorized employment of government machinery to improve their candidates election prospects, and lastly, the influence of criminalization in politics, e.g. poll violence, booth capturing, and intimidation of voters to render the established electoral system defunct.

In the subsequent paragraphs let us consider some of the electoral reforms that have been already instituted and also, those that are being proposed to be incorporated to ensure an unbiased election process.

Electoral Reforms Already Instituted

Electoral Reforms Pre-2000

The age to vote was reduced from 21 years to 18 years vide the Constitution (Sixty-first Amendment) Act, 1988.

The government employees deputed during the conduct of the elections for preparation, revision and correction of electoral rolls shall be deemed to be on deputation to the Election Commission in terms of their administrative control, superintendence and discipline for the period of such an employment.

The total number of persons from a constituency who must propose the name of the leader desirous of filing his nomination papers to stand for elections of Rajya Sabha and State Legislative Council must be minimum 10% of the total population of eligible voters of that constituency.

The use of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) is considered as one of the most revolutionary electoral reform to ensure fool-proof, efficient and eco-friendly conduct of elections. The EVMs were used for the first time during the State elections of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Delhi in 1988.

In the event of booth capturing or any other form of established poll violence/ intimidation of voters, the Election Commission has the authority to either declare the poll of that particular polling station invalid and may appoint a date for fresh poll or countermand election in that constituency because of booth capturing.

In order to check the non-serious candidates from contesting elections, the amount of security deposit which a candidate needs to deposit at an election to the Lok Sabha or a State Legislative Assembly was enhanced to Rs 10,000 and Rs 5000 for the general candidate and to Rs 5,000 and Rs 2500 for a candidate who is a member of a Scheduled cast/tribe respectively.

The disqualification from contesting elections to Parliament and State Legislatures on the grounds of insulting the National Honour, vide the Act of 1971 is for a period of six years from the date of such conviction.

There is a restriction on contesting for elections by a candidate from not more than two Assembly or parliamentary constituencies at a general election or at the bye-elections which are held simultaneously. These restrictions also apply to biennial-elections and bye-elections to the Council of States (Rajya Sabha) and State legislative councils.

In the event of the death of a contesting candidate, the party concerned will be given an option to nominate another candidate within seven days of the issue of a notice to that effect by the Election Commission. The elections will not be countermanded as it was the practice earlier.

Bye-elections to any House of Parliament or a State Legislature will now be held within six months of occurrence of the vacancy in that House.

There is a strict prohibition on carrying of arms for polling and accounts for a cognizable offence punishable with imprisonment up to two years or with fine or with both.

No liquor or other intoxicants shall be sold or given or distributed at any shop, eating place, or any other place, whether private or public, within a polling area during the period of 48 hours ending with the hour fixed for the conclusion of poll. The violation of this rule is punishable with imprisonment up to six months or fine up to Rs 2000 or both.

Poll Day has been declared as a paid holiday for the employees and any violation to this order will attract fine up to Rs 500.

The gap between the last date for withdrawal of nomination papers and the polling date has been reduced from 20 days to 14 days.

Electoral Reforms Post-2000

Publishing the results of exit polls (opinion survey regarding how electors have voted, etc by media houses) during the election to the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies within the period notified by the election commission shall be punishable with imprisonment up to two years and with fine or both.

The ceiling on election expenditure has been notified by the EC, which is between Rs 54-70 lakhs for parliamentary constituency and 20-28 lakh for assembly constituencies as per the Elections (Amendment) Rules 2014.

The appellate authority for appealing against the orders of the electoral registration officers at the district level will now be the district /additional district magistrate/officer of equivalent rank. Appeal against the orders of the district magistrate will now lie before the chief electoral officer.

Election Commission has given its consent to allow government servants and certain other class of persons to vote via postal ballot.

Indians who are living abroad and have not acquired the citizenship of any other country and have their names registered in the electoral roll of a particular constituency (place of residence) can vote.

Political parties are required to report any contributions received by them in excess of Rs 2000 from any source to the Election Commission. Earlier it was Rs 20,000.

Landmark Judicial Pronouncements towards Electoral Reforms

The Supreme Court of India, in 2002, directed that all the contesting candidates will have to furnish all personal information, including the criminal record at the time of filing of nomination papers.

In 2013, SC held that as per the existing provisions of Sec 8(4) of RPA, 1951, a legislator shall be disqualified automatically from being a member of the house, if he is convicted and sentenced to two or more years of imprisonment by a court of law.

Those candidates, who have not been convicted, but are under arrest for criminal charges have been debarred from filing the nomination papers from the prison.

The Supreme Court ruled in 2013, that the provision of 'Right to Negative Vote' be given to the citizens during elections. The same has come to be known as the None of the above (NOTA) option.

In 2014, SC laid a stipulation and directed the trial courts to dispose of the criminal cases involving MPs and MLAs/MLCs within one year, from the time the charges have been framed by the court of law.

Electoral Reforms Report (Proposal) Submitted by Law Commission of India, headed by Justice Shri A P Shah – 12 March 2015

Candidates or election agents should maintain an account and disclose particulars of names, addresses and PAN card numbers of donors and amount they received as contribution.

Companies Act 2013 to be amended with regard to the passing of resolution on the contributions from company's funds to a political party in the company's Annual General Meeting.

Political parties should maintain annual accounts audited by a CA. These accounts should clearly disclose the amounts received by the party and expenditure that they incurred which should be uploaded online for public inspection.

Political parties to maintain Regulations, stating that the party would not use violence for political gains, and avoid discrimination based on race, creed, caste, language or place of residence. Violation of this regulation to result in de-registration of political party to contest parliamentary elections for 10 consecutive years.

Law commission also recommends a suitable amendment to 10th Schedule of the constitution in relation to disqualification on the ground of defection by President or Governor instead of Speaker or Chairman along with ECI's advice.

Representation of People's Act is proposed to regulate the issue of paid news and political advertisements where in Definitions for Paying for News, Receiving payment for News, and Political Advertisement has to be inserted in Section 2 of the RPA. Disclosure provisions should be made mandatory for all forms of media to curb the practice of disguised political advertisement.

Regulating and restricting government sponsored advertisements has been recommended by Commission to prevent the use of public money for party interest.

The Commission has recommended that the candidate should contest from only one constituency instead of two that is prevailing now.

The Commission also recommends that independent candidates should be disbarred from contesting elections as they increase the voter's confusion and allow only political parties to contest Lok Sabha elections.

Introduction of common electoral rolls for Parliamentary, Assembly and Local body elections is also recommended to save an enormous amount of time and effort by the commission.

Electoral Reforms Under Debate

Bringing Political Parties under RTI: A debate is on to bring the political parties under the ambit of Right to Information Act.

In 2013, Central Information Commission (CIC) held that National Political Parties (NPP) are public authorities within the meaning of Sec 2(h) of RTI Act and directed them to appoint public information officer to provide necessary information as required by the citizens.

However, all the six NPP had defied the direction of CIC on the ground that they are not public authorities within the meaning of RTI Act.

Conduct of Simultaneous Elections: PM Modi has advocated the conduct of simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies.

The reasons being ascribed to this proposal are that frequent and successive elections results in disruption of the administrative machinery arising out of provisions, such as Model Code of Conduct. Besides, the cost of conducting election is colossal and results in unsavory incidents accruing out of communalism, caste conflicts, crony capitalism, etc.

However, considering the mammoth financial and administrative implications and certain technical glitches involved in the execution of such a proposal, it may take some more time before it can become a reality.

Electoral Bonds: In order to bring about greater transparency in political funding the government has proposed Electoral Bonds as a means of donations to the political parties.

The electoral bonds, which will be issued by notified banks, can be redeemed by recognized political parties within a prescribed time-limit.

Finance Minister Arun Jaitley, while speaking in Rajya Sabha on 23 March 2017, has invited the suggestions from all political parties on the subject.

Conclusion

It is cardinal that the general public of the country is continuously sensitized about the power of voting. Electing the right leader to power has a direct bearing on where the future of the country is headed.

In order to encourage more young voters to take part in the electoral process, the Government of India has decided, with effect from 2011 to celebrate January 25th of every year as 'National Voters Day'.

It is also important that the Election Commission is able to instill the requisite confidence and reinforce the belief of the common man in our democratic system.

The proposed electoral reforms discussed above will suitably cleanse the electoral process and bring about the desired accountability and transparency.

26) Process and Global Implications of BREXIT

Introduction

The United Kingdom's considered decision to exit from the European Union is being commonly referred to as BREXIT.

In order to commence the proceeding for exiting from the EU, a European Union Referendum Bill was introduced into the parliament and passed after it received the Royal Assent on 17 December 2015.

Under the provisions of the European Union Referendum Act 2015, UK government was empowered to hold a referendum on 23 June 2016 to decide whether it would like to remain with the European Union or leave it. The results of the referendum showed that the voters had opted in a majority for the 'leave' option.

Consequently, the stock markets worldwide reacted very sharply to the Brexit outcome and lost more than the equivalent of US\$2 trillion on 24 June 2016, making it the worst single day loss in history, in absolute terms.

The investors commenced shifting their assets into safe heavens like gold and the yen which surged, while the euro slumped around 3.5 percent against the dollar and the pound-sterling suffered its biggest one day fall of more than 09 percent against the dollar, which was marked as a 31 year low.

The results of the referendum for Brexit showed a fractured mandate, as Scotland and Northern Ireland both backed staying in the EU. Scotland backed 'Remain' by 62% to 38%, while Northern Ireland voted 55.8% to 44.2% for 'Remain' option.

The deep divide with respect to the decision to stay or leave EU within the UK heralds a serious threat to the very survival of United Kingdom itself.

Let us understand the background, mechanics of Brexit and the likely global implication of the same in the succeeding paragraphs.

Background Information

A regional organization, called the European Economic Community (EEC), was created by the Treaty of Rome in 1957. The aim of this organization was to bring about economic integration amongst its member states.

The UK was not a signatory to the Treaty of Rome and subsequently applied to join the organization in 1963 and 1967. However, both applications were vetoed by the then President of France, Charles de Gaulle because of the traditional rivalry between the British and the French.

Finally, after a lot of coaxing on 01 January 1973, UK gained entry into the EEC, while the Conservative Party was in power under Prime Minister Edward Heath.

The opposition, Labour Party, led by Harold Wilson, contested the October 1974 general elections with a commitment to renegotiate Britain's terms of membership of the EEC and then hold a referendum on whether to remain in the EEC on the new terms.

Referendum of 1975

The Labour Party after coming into power held a referendum on 07 June 1975, to decide whether the UK must remain a part of EEC.

Most of the administrative county in the UK had a majority of "Yes" except the Shetland Islands and the Outer Hebrides. As a final outcome, the referendum was approved by 67% of voters and the United Kingdom continued to remain a member of the EEC.

Creation of European Union

The Maastricht Treaty was signed on 07 February 1992, with the aim to integrate Europe by the European Community and came into effect from 01 November 1993.

The Maastricht Treaty, once it came into force in 1993, renamed the EEC as the European Community (EC) to indicate that it covered a wider range of aspects, rather than just economic policy.

The EC existed in this form until it was abolished by the 2009 Treaty of Lisbon, which incorporated the EC's institutions into the European Union's wider framework and provided that the EU would "replace and succeed the European Community".

The European Union was created as a single market, which allows the free movement of goods, services, money and people within the European Union, as if it was a single country. It is possible to set up a business or take a job anywhere within it.

The idea was to boost trade, create jobs and lower prices. The members are restricted to abide by common law, so as to ensure that the products are made to the same technical standards and similar rules are applicable to all in order to ensure a "level playing field".

On the flip side, the creation of EU resulted in many petty restraining regulations and robbed the members of control over their own affairs. Free movement within EU also resulted in mass migration from poorer to richer countries which burdened their infrastructure and resources.

Article 50 of Treaty of Lisbon

The Treaty of Lisbon was signed by the EU member states on 13 December 2007, and entered into force on 01 December 2009.

The Treaty of Lisbon amended the Treaty of Maastricht and greatly formalized the functioning of the European Union, to include:

- Created a more powerful European Parliament, with a bicameral legislature alongside the Council of Ministers.
- Consolidated legal personality for the EU, with the creation of a long-term President of the European Council, representatives for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.
- The Treaty also made the Union's bill of rights and the Charter of Fundamental Rights, legally binding.
- The Treaty for the first time gave member states the explicit legal right to leave the EU and a procedure to do so.

The previous British Prime Minister David Cameron, who belonged to the Conservative Party after coming into power in 2012, had announced that a Conservative government would hold an "in" / "out" referendum on EU membership before the end of 2017.

The provisions to leave the EU have been cited in Article 50 of the Treaty of Lisbon. Once the proceedings of Article 50 have been initiated, there is a two-year time period to negotiate the arrangements for exit.

Referendum of June 2016

The referendum was held across all four countries of the United Kingdom, i.e. England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as well as in the Overseas Territory of Gibraltar on 23 June 2016.

There were 382 local voting areas which were grouped into twelve regional counts. There was a separate declaration for each of the regional counts.

The voting in the referendum was meant for only British, Irish and commonwealth citizens over 18 years of age, who were residents of UK or Gibraltar. British citizens who have been living abroad for less than 15 years were also eligible to vote.

The final result of the referendum (combining all 12 regional counts from across the UK and Gibraltar) was announced in Manchester on 24 June 2016.

The outcome of this non-binding referendum showed a majority of voters, i.e. 51.9% voting in favor of leaving the EU, on a national turnout of 71.8%, with more than 30 million people voting.

Concurrently, the UK government announced that it would trigger Article 50 on 29 March 2017, which would put the country on course to complete the withdrawal process by 29 March 2019. The final stroke, however, will come with the government of UK enacting a Great Repeal Bill which will end the primacy of EU law in the UK.

The British PM David Cameron, who was a profound proponent of the 'Stay' option, announced his resignation on the day he lost the referendum and was succeeded by Prime Minister Theresa May, who was unanimously elected. She too was opposed to Britain leaving the EU had played only a very low key role in the campaign.

Road Ahead for BREXIT after 29 March 2017

The British PM Theresa May has already set up a government department, headed by veteran Conservative MP David Davis, to take on the responsibility of further negotiations with the EU and seek out new international agreements after Brexit.

The department also includes, the former defense secretary, Liam Fox, appointed as international trade secretary and Boris Johnson, as the foreign secretary.

Once Article 50 is triggered on 29 March 2017, the UK will have two years to negotiate its withdrawal from the EU. In order to accomplish the same, UK will be required to put up a draft deal for withdrawal from the EU to the European Council.

The draft deal will be required to be approved by at least 20 countries out of the total 27 members of EU, with minimum 65% of their population.

Once the approved deal is ratified by the European Parliament, UK would be free to leave EU. Internally, UK Parliament will have to repeal the 1972 European Community Act and replace it with a new agreement.

As brought out above, the terms of Britain's exit will have to be agreed upon by 27 national parliaments, which may take more than two years for the negotiations to come through. In which case, an extension of the negotiation period beyond two years will have to be sought by UK.

It may be noted that during the period of the negotiations, UK will have to continue to abide by EU treaties and laws, but will not be allowed to take part in any decision-making process.

Global Implications of BREXIT

It is widely believed that the withdrawal of UK from EU "has the potential to fundamentally change the EU and European integration.

On the one hand, the withdrawal could tip the EU towards protectionism, worsen existing divisions, or unleash centrifugal forces leading to the EU's unraveling. Alternatively, the EU could free itself of its most awkward member, making the EU easier to lead and be more effective".

Britain will have to secure bilateral Free Trade Agreements (FTA) with the existing trading partners of the EU after Brexit. The United States had earlier indicated that it would not be keen on pursuing a separate FTA with Britain.

The reduction in red tape associated with EU regulations would create more jobs and that small to medium-sized companies who trade domestically would be the biggest beneficiaries.

The opposition by two of the constituent countries of UK, i.e. Scotland and Northern Ireland to leave EU will cause a serious risk to the unity of the United Kingdom.

The UK universities rely on the EU for around 16% of their total research funding. Similarly, the EU pays British farmers up to £3 billion a year, of which £600 million (20 per cent) for environmental protection. There are questions being raised about how such funding would be affected by a Brexit.

The supply of workforce will get adversely affected as the movement of migrant labour from the other European nations will get restricted due to control on free movement within Euro zone.

Consequently, taxes which were being collected from the immigrant workers that provided a boost to public funding will naturally diminish.

However, reduced immigration would ease pressure on public services such as schools and hospitals, as well as provide British workers with more jobs and higher wages.

Similarly, for the Brits living abroad in the EU could lose their residency rights and access to free emergency health care. Besides, if UK opts to impose work permit restrictions on EU nationals, then other countries could reciprocate, meaning Britons would have to apply for visas to work.

The pound has remained around 15% lower against the dollar and 10% down against the euro since 23 June last year. The immediate implications of the same are that the Britons travelling to Europe are finding their purchasing power has declined and the cost of imported stuff in UK is seeing a sharp surge.

The inflation figures in UK rose to 2.3% in February 2017, which was the highest rate since the previous three and a half years. However, unemployment rates have continued to fall and stand at an 11 year low of 4.8%.

Notwithstanding, the UK economy is estimated to have grown 1.8% in 2016, second only to Germany's 1.9% among the world's G7 leading industrialized nations.

Implications of Brexit for India

It is believed that Brexit, may have some positive implications for India. Existing from EU will compel UK to develop closer bilateral economic ties and Free Trade Agreements with emerging economies of Asia, like India and China.

United Kingdom is believed to be relatively more flexible and commercially open when compared with the highly regulated EU. Thus, bilateral trade will have greater scope and lesser encumbrances.

Conclusion

The British PM Theresa May will issue an official notice under Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty, which will be delivered to the European Council president Donald Tusk later by British ambassador to the EU, Sir Tim Barrow at 12:30 BST on 29 March 2017.

Meanwhile, the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh on 29 March 2017 has approved plans to request a referendum to obtain independence from UK that could take place just before Britain completes its withdrawal from the European Union.

Similarly, Northern Ireland has projected serious reservations towards Brexit.

It is believed that with such strong opposition from two of its key components, the United Kingdom is likely to see many roadblocks on its way to negotiations for Brexit.

27) Operations of a shell company for money laundering in India

Introduction

The arrest of the real estate firm Unitech's Managing Director (MD) Sanjay Chandra, by the Economic Offences Wing on 31 March 2017, has once again brought up the subject of money laundering through 'shell companies' located in tax heavens abroad.

It is alleged that Chandra was duping buyers who had booked flats in his real-estate project in Greater Noida. He fraudulently took money from his clients and parked it in a shell company, thereby laundering it abroad.

What is a Shell Company?

A shell company is a company based out of a tax heaven like Mauritius or Singapore and has the "outward appearance" of being a legitimate running business.

The tax havens, offer a great deal of banking secrecy and very low or non-existent taxes on financial transactions.

Its management is made up of lawyers, accountants and other administrative staffs, who does little more than sign documents and allow their names to appear on the letterhead.

Shell companies can also be called "letterbox" companies, as they consist of no more than an address to post documents to.

Some of the other such offshore financial centres include the British Virgin Islands, Macao, the Bahamas and Panama.

The conduct of financial services in such centres is done as per the law of the land; it is just the secrecy which makes them very attractive to the tax evaders from all across the world, especially, if the regulators are weak or they turn a blind eye to the operation of these shell companies.

How Does a Shell Company Operate?

In order to protect their clients, the shell companies operate using bearer shares and bonds, rather than currency. The same is a very handy method to move vast amounts of money around the world and can easily deny ownership if caught by the authorities.

The drug dealers, fraudsters or corrupt businessmen/ politicians who have amassed a lot of cash through illegal means, which they cannot disclose or hide and want to stash it away for a rainy day, without giving away their identity, look for such shell companies.

In order to clean this dirty money, they ship it to a dodgy firm in an offshore financial centre, which helps them to convert it into bearer bonds, owned by a shell company that no one knows about.

The bearer bonds can then be used to purchase overseas property, pay the kids' school fees in fancy universities or fund family shopping trips to Paris, etc.

Exploitation of Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement (DTAA)

India has had a bilateral treaty, with countries which are tax heavens, like Mauritius and Singapore, called the Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement (DTAA).

As per the provisions of this agreement, only Mauritius/ Singapore had the right to levy tax on capital gains by companies investing in India from that country, which was actually negligible.

The exploitation of the DTAA is primarily being done through a process called “round tripping”. The process entails investment of large sums of money by residents of India (money launderers) into Mauritius / Singapore, and then bringing the original investment again back to India, thereby avoiding tax.

In other words, “round tripping” entails, investors showing investments made from India into ‘shell companies’ (which exist only on papers) in Mauritius / Singapore, with whom India has a bilateral tax avoidance treaty.

Now, this money is treated as capital of a registered corporate entity (Shell Company) based out of Mauritius/ Singapore. The investor once again invests this money back into an Indian company as foreign direct investment (FDI) by buying stakes or invests it in Indian equity markets.

Since, the investor would have paid the tax in Mauritius/ Singapore; he would cite the DTAA, to be exempted from taxation in India again and would get away with paying a negligible tax in Mauritius/ Singapore being a tax heaven.

Thus, through this entire process of “round tripping” or “treaty shopping”, the investors simply window-dress their own money as foreign capital and then bring back their original money that they had taken out from India for investment into Mauritius/ Singapore.

Similar method was also being adopted by investors to stack black money ‘legitimately’, as has been revealed by the Panama Papers leak.

Repercussions of Exploitation of DTAA

Mauritius has been the largest FDI source for India, accounting for 34% of total FDI into India between 2000 and 2015.

The revenue department has unearthed tax evasion of nearly Rs 50,000 crore in indirect taxes and undisclosed income of Rs 21,000 crore.

The other major tax haven is Singapore, which is also being used for tax evasion. The statistics reveal that 50% of the total inflow of FDI into India over the previous 15 years has been from these two countries combined.

Thus, it implies that what we were calling foreign investments coming into India was actually our own money that was been routed back through “round tripping”.

Amendment to India-Mauritius Tax Treaty

In a major push by the government to check money laundering, protracted negotiations on the subject led to, India and Mauritius agreeing to amend the old tax treaty in Port Louis on 11 May 2016.

The amendments to the treaty will enable India to levy capital gains tax on investments routed through Mauritius from 01 April 2017 at the rate of 50% of the domestic rates of taxation and at full rate of taxation after 31 March 2019.

The above said amendment to the tax treaty will also automatically apply to the India-Singapore tax agreement.

Conclusion

The government of the day has been fairly proactive towards checking the flow of black money in the country. Whether it is a push for digitalization or the jolt through demonetization the black marketers have been kept on their toes.

I am sure the cautions imposed and a more regularized tax regime will not only prevent hoarding of black money, but expand the tax base to generate greater revenue for social welfare and infrastructure development schemes in the country.

28) Implications of adopting the new emission policy Bs-III to BS-IV to BS-VI by 2020

Introduction

The Supreme Court, citing the reasons of public health has banned the sale and registration of Bharat Stage III (BS-III) vehicles with effect from 01 April 2017.

Notwithstanding, the hue and cry being raised by the automobile manufacturers, asking for more time to dispose of their existing stocks of BS-III vehicles, the SC ruled that from 01st April, only BS-IV emission norms compliant vehicles can be bought/ registered across the country.

India's Commitment to Curb Pollution

It is estimated that 1.2 million deaths take place every year due to air pollution in the country and hence, certain drastic measures are required to be taken to tackle this serious hazard.

Besides, India had pledged during the Paris Climate Summit to cut down its carbon emissions levels by as much as 33%-35% by 2030.

It had further pledged to create an additional carbon sink of 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide through additional forests and tree cover.

In order to meet this explicit requirement, besides drastically reducing dependence on fossil fuels and the use of alternative sources of energy, it is imperative to lay down clearly defined policy on vehicular pollution control regime.

National Auto Fuel Policy

Emission norms were introduced in India in 1991 for petrol and 1992 for diesel vehicles. Thereafter, the use of catalytic converters for petrol vehicles was made mandatory and unleaded petrol was introduced into the market.

Supreme Court, on 29 April 1999, ruled that all vehicles in India must comply with Euro I or India 2000 norms by 01 June 1999 and EURO II norms was made mandatory in NCR by April 2000.

Since, a lot of car manufactures were not prepared at that stage to make the transition to EURO II norms; in a subsequent judgement the implementation date was postponed.

Mashelkar Committee, which was formed by the Government to propose a road map for implementation of Euro based emission norms for India, submitted its report in 2002.

The Committee recommended a phased implementation of future norms with the regulations being implemented in major cities first and extended to the rest of the country after a few years.

Consequent to the recommendations of the Committee, the National Auto Fuel Policy was announced officially in 2003. The policy also created guidelines for auto fuels, reduction of pollution from older vehicles and R&D for air quality data creation.

The Auto Fuel Policy initially enunciated the roadmap for implementation of the Bharat Stage norms till 2010.

Bharat Stage Emission Standards

The Union Government instituted certain emission standards to regulate the output of air pollutants from all types of internal combustion engine equipments, including motor vehicles. These standards are called Bharat Stage Emission Standards.

The standards required to be adopted and the timeline for its implementation has been set by the Central Pollution Control Board under the Ministry of Environment & Forests and Climate Change.

These standards are based on the European regulations, which were first introduced in 2000. All new vehicles manufactured after the implementation of the norms have to be compliant with the regulations.

Bharat Stage III norms were enforced across the country with effect from October 2010. The emission norms for two and three wheelers are more lenient.

Up till early 2016, BS-IV auto fuel was being supplied to only 13 major cities of North India, while the vehicles in the rest of the country ran on BS-III grade fuel.

It was committed that by April 2016, Goa, Kerala, Karnataka, Telangana, Odisha, Daman and Diu, Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Andaman and Nicobar will also start getting BS-IV fuel.

Living up to its assurance of supplying BS-IV fuel to the entire country by April 2017, the stage was now set for implementation of the BS-IV compliant vehicles.

Impact of Switching Over from BS III to BS IV

The above said SC ruling has served as a bolt from the blue for the auto industry. Though, their representation seems to be unjustified, as the transport ministry had issued a notification regarding the transition to BS-IV two years ago, and they had sufficient notice to switch over production to BS-IV and reduce their BS-III inventory.

It is estimated that around 6.71 lakh two-wheelers, 97,000 commercial vehicles and over 40,000 three-wheelers are affected by the ban.

The auto firms are presently holding a stock of over 8 lakh such vehicles, which are valued at up to Rs 20, 000 cr. Besides, upgrading engines, so as to comply with BS IV norms will further add to the manufacturing cost.

The switchover from BS III to BS IV emission norms may have caused a one-time material impact on the auto industry; however, in the long run it will be a profitable exercise.

The reason being, that the next transition from BS IV to BS VI is also around the corner and the auto manufacturers better get their act together, if they wish to remain competitive in the global market.

Switchover from BS-IV to BS-VI by April 2020

The government displaying its unequivocal intention to curb vehicular pollution had earlier announced on 13 January 2016, that India would skip BS-V and directly switch from BS-IV to BS-VI norms by 2020.

The reason given by the Oil Ministry was that there is not much difference between BS-V and BS-VI fuel and this transition would turn out to be more economical in the long run.

The BS-VI norms is said to be equivalent to the Euro-VI norms.

The switchover to BS-VI would require the vehicles to be fitted with DPF (Diesel Particulate Filter).

Implications of Adopting BS-VI Norms

Fitting of DPF inside the engine compartment will require major re-engineering effort and would also incidentally result in an increase of the length of the car bonnet.

The small car segment falls in the four meter length category, the increased length of the car bonnet is likely to put the present small cars into the higher excise duty bracket, thereby increasing the cost of cars.

It is estimated that the petrol cars will be costlier by Rs 10,000-20,000, diesel cars by Rs 80,000-1.2 lakh and by trucks 1.5-2 lakh.

Besides, skipping of BS-V will put extra pressure on auto manufactures to produce complaint vehicles with significantly higher technological enhancement.

In order to switch to the BS-VI norms, oil refineries will require substantial investments to upgrade refineries to supply fuel types that match the BS-VI standards.

This switchover from BS-IV to BS-VI is likely to cost the oil companies between Rs 50,000 cr to Rs 80,000 cr.

Conclusion

It can be well understood from the reasons given above that the industry is resisting the proposed changeover. However, the automobile industry must cooperate in the larger interest of the country and also to remain globally competitive.

Another point that needs to be highlighted here is that vehicular pollution contributes towards less than 10 percent of the overall pollution index of the country.

The two major factors which adversely impact the environment, besides the others, are the unethical practice of fuel adulteration and the uncontrolled usage of fossil fuels / conventional high polluting fuels by a host of small scale industries.

Therefore, along with the adoption of the new emission norms for vehicles, it is imperative that the menace of fuel adulteration and the type of energy resource being employed by small scale industries, especially in the unorganized sector, is strictly monitored to maximize the benefits of implementation of the new emission policy.

29) The Fundamentals of Goods and Services Tax (GST) Regime

Introduction

The four supplementary Bills of Goods and Services Tax (GST) were passed in Lok Sabha on 29th March and were tabled for discussion in Rajya Sabha on 05th April 2017.

The four supplementary Bills include the Central Goods and Services Tax Bill (CGST), the Integrated Goods and Services Tax Bill (IGST), the Goods and Services Tax (Compensation to States) Bill and the Union Territory Goods and Services Tax Bill (UTGST).

The CGST and SGST would be levied at rates, which will be mutually agreed upon by the centre and the states and the IGST would be levied on inter-state supply of goods or services.

Being a Finance Bill, Rajya Sabha can only hold it back for 14 days and then with or without incorporating the proposed suggestion, the Bill will be deemed to be passed to become the GST Act-2017.

The GST is a significant step towards indirect tax reforms, which will amalgamate a large number of central and state taxes into one tax and prevent double taxation to pave the way for a common national market.

The first country that introduced GST was France in the year 1954. Presently, there are 140 other nations that follow the GST system.

The Finance Ministry is targeting the date of 01 July 2017 for the final implementation of the Goods and Services Tax in the country.

Background Information about GST

The idea of GST was first mooted in the year 2000 by the NDA government, by setting up an empowered committee, which was given the task of designing the GST model and overseeing the IT back-end preparedness for its implementation.

Later, the UPA government took it up and the Union Finance Minister, Mr P Chidambaram, announced the setting up of a Joint Working Group on May 10, 2007, to prepare a road map for introduction of GST in India.

The Joint Working Group, after intensive internal discussions as well as interaction with experts and representatives of Chambers of Commerce and Industry, submitted its report to the Empowered Committee on November 19, 2007.

On the basis of this discussion and the written observations of the states, certain modifications were made, and a final version of the views of Empowered Committee at that stage was prepared and was sent to the Central government on 30 April 2008.

It was initially proposed that the GST would be introduced by 01 April 2010. Since some of the states were opposing the GST, as they feared that it would result in loss of revenue to the states, the introduction of GST kept getting postponed.

The introduction of GST mandates a Constitutional Amendment, as it requires assigning concurrent jurisdiction to the centre and state for levy of GST and hence, this unique mechanism requires a constitutional force.

The Constitution Amendment Bill for GST was originally introduced in the Lok Sabha in March 2011 by the UPA government and was also examined by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Finance, which subsequently submitted its report.

However, due to certain observations made by the Parliamentary Standing Committee and amendments recommended thereto, besides, the inability of Parliament to function due to various disruptions by the opposition, the Bill could not be passed.

The 122nd Constitutional Amendment Bill

The Union Cabinet after due deliberation approved the Constitutional Amendment Bill for the roll out of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) on 17 December 2014. This was a crucial step before it could be introduced into the Parliament.

The Cabinet's decision came after the centre and states reached a consensus on the broad contours of the proposed tax on 15 December 2014.

The **122nd Constitutional Amendment Bill** for approval of the GST was introduced and passed by Lok Sabha in May 2015 and subsequently in Rajya Sabha in August 2016.

A constitution amendment requires support of two-third of members present and voting, separately, in both the houses of the Parliament.

Finally, the Constitution Amendment Bill was passed in the Parliament on 08 August 2016 after approval from both the houses of the Parliament.

The amendment was thereafter required to be approved by 50 per cent of the total state assemblies of the country.

A total of 19 states out of the 29 ratified the Bill in a record 23 days and the Bill got Presidential accent on 08th September 2016.

The passage of the Constitution Amendment Bill paved the way for setting up a decision making body for the GST, called the GST Council.

Formation of GST Council

The government notified 12th September 2016, as the date from which the procedure for setting up of the GST Council was initiated. The GST Council was constituted under the 101st Constitutional Amendment.

The Council is headed by the Finance Minister Arun Jaitley and comprises of a Minister of State for Finance and representatives from all 29 states and two union territories.

The Council has the mandate to decide upon the following major aspects:

- GST rates to be imposed.
- Taxes to be subsumed under GST.
- Goods and Services to be covered under GST.
- Model laws to be passed by Parliament and state assemblies to enable implementation of GST.
- Apportionment of IGST for inter-state movement of goods.
- Special provisions for the North-Eastern or Himalayan states.

Approval of the Final Draft on GST

The GST Council unanimously approved the final draft of CGST, IGST law and draft of state-GST (SGST) in its 11th meeting on 04 March 2017.

The CGST law requires approval by the Parliament, while the SGST law will have to be cleared by respective state legislatures.

The Centre agreed to 26 recommendations of the states before the aforesaid draft legislation was approved by the GST Council.

The Last Lap after Approval of GST Bill in Lok Sabha

The Lok Sabha passed all the four supplementary GST Bills on 29 March 2017. The Bill was passed after negating all the amendments put forward by the Opposition.

As brought out above, being a Finance Bill, the GST Bills will be deemed to have been passed after 14 days of it being tabled in the upper house and is well within reach to meet the 01st July deadline for its implementation.

Examining the GST

At present, tax is collected through a tax credit mechanism on value-added goods and services at each stage of sale or purchase in the supply chain i.e. tax is paid during the procurement of goods and services and subsequently, again value added tax is paid while selling the goods or services to the end user.

Thus, the consumer bears this cumulative tax burden as he is the last person in the supply chain.

The implementation of GST will lead to the abolition of other taxes such as Octroi, Central Sales Tax, State-level sales tax, entry tax, stamp duty, telecom licence fees, turnover tax, tax on consumption or sale of electricity, taxes on transportation of goods and services, etc, thus avoiding multiple layers of taxation that currently exists in India.

Since, multiple layers of taxation will be subsumed into the GST; it will reduce the overall tax burden of goods and services on the consumers from the current 25% to 30% to an average of around 18% to 20%. Consequently, the end user will have to pay lesser cost comparatively.

Besides, the reduced cost would make our products more competitive in the national and international market. Therefore, the new tax regime is likely to spur economic growth and it is estimated to increase the country's GDP by 1.5% to 2%.

The GST Council has finalised a four-tier GST tax structure of 5 per cent, 12 per cent, 18 per cent and 28 per cent, with lower rates for essential items and the highest for luxury and de-merits goods, including luxury cars, SUVs and tobacco products, that would also attract an additional cess.

Moreover, with a view to keeping inflation under check, essential items including food, which presently constitute roughly half of the consumer inflation basket, will be taxed at zero rate. The cess is expected to provide additional resources to the central government to compensate states for losses incurred in revenue after GST is implemented.

Salient Features of GST

The proposed mechanism which will be implemented entails a dual GST system. Under dual GST, a Central Goods and Services Tax (CGST) and a State Goods and Services Tax (SGST) will be levied on the taxable value of a transaction.

The CGST and SGST would be levied at rates, which will be mutually agreed upon by the centre and the states, through a body called the Council of GST, comprising of concerned representatives from states and centre.

All goods and services, barring a few exceptions, will be brought into the GST base. There will be no distinction between goods and services.

GST would be applicable on **supply** of goods or services as against the present concept of tax on the **manufacture** or on **sale** of goods or on provision of services, e.g. a supplier of raw materials, which may be required for the manufacture of certain goods by a company, will have to pay his share of the tax. Subsequently, when the company pays the tax on the supply of the finished product to the retailers, it can claim for deduction of the tax already paid by his supplier of raw materials.

It is in effect a self-collecting tax, since every company will get a deduction on the taxes already paid by its suppliers. Hence, the buyer more or less will force his supplier to pay his part of the tax to claim his (buyer's) deductions.

A common threshold exemption would apply to both CGST and SGST. Companies with an annual turnover of less than Rs 20 lakh will be exempted from paying GST. This threshold will be Rs 10 lakh for special category states (i.e. Himalayan and North-Eastern states).

Every business entity will have to self-assess and file tax returns on a monthly basis by submitting: (i) details of supplies provided, (ii) details of supplies received, and (iii) payment of tax. In addition to the monthly returns, an annual return will have to be filed by each taxpayer.

The GST Council has laid an upper cap on the tax rates, e.g. for each CGST and SGST the tax rate will not exceed 20% and the tax rate of IGST will not exceed 40%.

The Central GST Bill allows certain taxpayers with turnover less than Rs 50 lakh to pay CGST at a flat rate on turnover (composition levy), instead of the value of supply of goods and services.

The liability to pay GST in relation to supply of goods and services will arise on the date of: (i) issue of invoice, (ii) receipt of payment, whichever is earlier.

An Integrated GST (IGST) would be levied on inter-state supply of goods or services, which would be collected by the centre and after deducting the CGST rate, the balance revenue would be transferred to the state where the goods or services were eventually consumed.

Import of goods or services would be treated as inter-state supplies and therefore, would be subject to IGST in addition to the applicable customs duties.

In order to compensate the states for loss in revenue generation accruing out of implementation of GST, a cess on certain luxury goods like tobacco, high-end cars and aerated drinks will be allowed to be levied by states on certain goods and services for five years from the date GST Act comes into force. After five years, the cess will be shared between the centre and states.

Alcohol and petroleum products have been kept out of the ambit of GST in the initial year. However, entry tax (Tax paid while getting product into the state boundary) will be included in GST.

All offences relating to GST, like mis-reporting of goods and services supplied or details furnished in invoices, will be a punishable offence and a defaulter can be fined, imprisoned, or both, by the CGST Commissioner. Such orders can be appealed before the Goods and Services Tax Appellate Tribunal, and further before the High Court.

The central government is planning to set up an anti-profiteering authority by law to ensure that the reduction of tax rates on account of implementation of GST results in a commensurate reduction in prices.

Benefits of GST

The implementation of GST will improve tax collections and boost India's economic development by breaking tax barriers between the states and integrating India through a uniform tax rate. It is estimated that the country will gain \$15 billion a year by implementing the Goods and Services Tax.

The overall taxation burden will be divided equitably between manufacturing and services, through a lower tax rate by increasing the tax base and minimizing exemptions.

It will build a transparent and corruption-free tax administration, by simplifying procedures of taxations and reducing the tax burden, though increasing the ambit of taxation.

The ease of doing business will improve after cumbersome layers of taxes are removed and business deals will become more transparent as various hidden taxation will not be present.

Since, both Centre and State GST will be collected at the place of **sale of a product**, it will be charged on the **manufacturing cost** only, and hence, the cost of the product will come down. Lower price (approximately 5%-7% for consumer goods) will attract more consumption and thereby help both the manufacturer and the consumer.

The four-tier GST tax structure and the upper cap laid on the tax rates, will ensure that the essential commodities of daily use and food items will be placed at minimum tax rate or even exempted from tax. The same will immensely benefit the common man.

To safeguard the interests of the states, in terms of revenue collection, Alcohol, tobacco, petroleum products have been kept out of the GST regime. Besides, provision of additional cess for the next five years to compensate for their revenue loss.

Lastly, greater clarity in the taxation system through GST is likely to expand the tax base and incentivize foreign investments into India.

Consequently, it will generate greater revenue for the government to put into social and infrastructure development projects. The same will serve as a catalyst to attract more domestic and foreign investments, thus providing a boost to the economy.

Downside of GST

Smaller companies with turnover less than 20 lakh will not fall in the ambit of GST. So, these companies will continue to pay excise or value added tax, the rate of which is higher than GST. Hence, big companies will get benefit of deductions paid as taxes (at a higher rate) by their small suppliers.

The key beneficiaries will be big companies from the organized sector, as their overall tax liability will reduce. However, the small players, mostly from the unorganized sector will perhaps be affected adversely. It needs to be seen that unorganized sector in India constitutes 30% to 75% of the market size.

Since, unorganized sector will get adversely affected and lose its competitiveness, there is a fear of higher attrition rate of workers or layoffs by such small companies to cut cost.

The small companies to remain profitable will have to boost their sales to cross the 20 lakh threshold to come into the folds of GST; there is a likelihood that short term increase in prices of products may take place.

The GST Council has finalized four-tiers of GST tax structure at the rate of 5%, 12%, 18% and 28%. Though it stands to reason that luxury items must be taxed at a higher rate as compared to the regular items being used by ordinary citizens, but assigning different items to different categories will make the structure of the GST highly complex and difficult to execute and monitor.

Some economists are saying that GST is nothing more than 'old wine served in new bottle' and the rates of taxation will not change substantially.

Lastly, GST may be fundamentally considered as anti-federal, as the states will be unable to increase or reduce taxation, as hitherto to suit the socio-political specific requirements during certain special and unforeseen circumstances.

Conclusion

The new tax regime will be an effective step towards improving revenue generation by increasing the tax base and reducing the tax liability. It appears to be a 'win-win' situation for the government, businesses and the consumers.

Since, government will have higher revenue collections and encourage foreign investors to "Make in India"; it will improve the fiscal deficit state of the country.

A calibrated introduction, hi-tech cyber backend support and judicious implementation of this biggest tax reform since independence, will be required to ensure its flawless and smooth functioning

30) Reason for China's Sensitivity towards Losing Claim over Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh

Introduction

The 81-year-old Nobel laureate and Tibetan spiritual leader, Dalai Lama's visit to India's north-eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh, has snow balled into a major diplomatic row between India and China.

The advent of this discordant chapter goes back in history to 1959, when Dalai Lama, along with tens of thousands of his disciples, had escaped Chinese oppression by fleeing from Tibet to India and India had agreed to provide asylum to the Tibetans.

The People's Liberation Army had captured Tibet after defeating the Tibetan army in 1950 and subsequently forced the Tibetan representatives to sign a 17-point agreement with the Chinese Central People's Government affirming China's sovereignty over Tibet and its incorporation into China.

Although the 17-point agreement had provided for an autonomous administration in Tibet led by the Dalai Lama, but he rejected the unacceptable agreement and fled to India.

The Dalai Lama, who had initially fought for a "Free Tibet," realized that this demand was virtually impossible for China to accept. So, he softened his stand and has been demanding for 'real' autonomy for Tibet under Chinese sovereignty.

Though, a Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) was established in 1965, but it is essentially equivalent in status to any one of the Chinese provinces⁷.

There is some level of autonomy provided to the region in the areas of education and language policy, but in practice the region is ruled by a Communist Party appointed cohort that is largely Han Chinese.

The existing arrangement is completely unacceptable to the Tibetan people and their spiritual leader Dalia Lama and hence their struggle for self determination goes on till date.

Emergence of Tibet Issue

Historically, India and China have had cordial relations for more than 2,000 years. The traditional Silk Road not only served as a route for trade, but also promoted the spread of Buddhism from India to China.

The People's Liberation Army defeated the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party) of China in a civil war and established the People's Republic of China on 01 October 1949.

India was amongst the first countries to end formal ties with the **Republic of China (Taiwan)**, and recognize the **People's Republic China (PRC)** as the legitimate government of Mainland China in 1950.

Mao Zedong, the Commander of the Liberation Army and the Chairman of the Communist Party of China viewed Tibet as an integral part of the Chinese State and was determined to bring Tibet under its direct administrative and military control.

Tibet serves as a buffer zone between India and China. India regarded the Chinese forceful occupation of Tibet as an act of aggression, while China considered India's posture on the issue as interference in the internal affairs of the People's Republic of China.

In order to avoid openly antagonizing the People's Republic of China, India brokered an agreement between Tibet and China, where, Tibetan delegates signed a 17-point agreement in May 1951 recognizing PRC sovereignty but guaranteeing that the existing political and social system of Tibet would continue.

Tibet - at the Core of Worsening Indo-China Ties

In April 1954, India and the PRC signed an eight-year agreement on Tibet that set forth the basis of their relationship in the form of the Panchsheel or the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence.

The critics of the Panchsheel Agreement call this as a naïve act of Indian PM Nehru, that, in the absence of a credible military wherewithal or a clear policy for defense of the Himalayan region, he saw this as India's best guarantee of security, by way of establishing a psychological buffer zone in place of the lost physical buffer of Tibet.

The trigger for Indo-China ties to worsen was the decision taken by India to provide asylum to the Tibetan head, Dalai Lama and thousands of refugees, who sought sanctuary in Dharamsala and in Indian North East states in 1959.

Consequently, the People's Republic of China started accusing India of expansionism into Tibet and throughout the Himalayan region. China claimed 104,000 km² of territory over which India's maps showed clear sovereignty, and demanded "rectification" of the entire border.

The deterioration of diplomatic ties resulted in the Indo-China war on 20 October 1962. The border clash resulted in a crushing defeat of India as the PRC pushed the Indian forces to within 48 km of the Assam plains in the northeast and also occupied strategic points in Ladakh.

However, under pressure from the world community, China declared a unilateral cease-fire and withdrew 20 km behind its contended line of control on 21 November 1962.

India Toughened its Stand on Border

In late 1967, there were two skirmishes between Indian and Chinese forces in Sikkim. The first one was dubbed the "Nathu La incident", and the other the "Chola incident", where exchange of heavy fire took place at the Sikkim outpost.

During the whole conflict Indian losses were 88 killed and 163 wounded, while Chinese casualties were 300 killed and 450 wounded in Nathu La, and 40 in Chola.

In 1980, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi approved a plan to upgrade the deployment of forces around the Line of Actual Control to avoid unilateral redefinitions of the line. India also increased funds for infrastructural development in these areas.

In 1984, squads of Indian soldiers began actively patrolling the Sumdorong Chu Valley in Arunachal Pradesh (formerly NEFA), which is actually north of the McMahon Line as drawn on the Shimla Treaty map.

Statehood to Arunachal Pradesh

India granted statehood to Arunachal Pradesh (formerly the North-East Frontier Agency) in February 1987. This development caused both sides to increase the troop deployment along the border, raising tensions and fears of a new border war.

The PRC relayed warnings that it would "teach India a lesson" if it did not cease "nibbling" at Chinese territory. However, by the summer of 1987, both sides had backed off from the conflict zone.

In order to find a mutually agreeable solution to the problem, six rounds of talks by the Indian-Chinese Joint Working Group on the Border Issue were held between December 1988 and June 1993.

However, no major breakthrough was ever made to break the impasse. China has off and on raked up the border dispute and has often represented against the official visits of Indian dignitaries to Arunachal Pradesh.

Arunachal Pradesh is strategically important to India as it provides a natural Himalayan boundary that protects India from China. In winter South Tibet Himalaya becomes very inhospitable and disables Chinese to hold any part in Arunachal Pradesh. This is one of the reasons why China vacated this territory even after winning it from India in the 1962 Sino Indian war.

Reason for China's Sensitivity towards Losing Claim over Tawang

The Tawang region in Arunachal Pradesh happens to be the birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama, who was born in 1683, and is considered to be a major centre of Tibetan Buddhism.

The present Dalai Lama has visited the state six times previously, the last being in 2009. Chinese protest to his visit has been the strongest this time around.

As brought about above, Tawang happens to be one of the most significant centres of Tibetan Buddhism. It is widely conjectured that the Dalai Lama, because of his advancing age, may anoint his successor from Tawang.

In order to have a tighter control over Tibet, China wants to control future reincarnations of the Dalai Lama and in case the Dalai Lama's reincarnation is found in a traditionally Tibetan area, like Tawang, which lies outside China's control, they fear that there could be another generation of Tibetan opposition to the Chinese rule in Tibet.

China disregards the Mc Mohan line as the legal delineation between India and China. It says that this was a demarcation agreed upon between erstwhile British Raj and Tibet.

It claims sovereign rights over the state of Arunachal Pradesh and calls it South Tibet. Most importantly, it is sensitive to losing Tawang for the reasons stated above.

The Chinese foreign ministry has now sent out feelers to India indicating that, if New Delhi agrees to concede only Tawang (and not their earlier claim of the whole of Arunachal Pradesh), Beijing can consider handing back over 30,000 sq km of land in Aksai Chin.

As a consequence of the Dalai Lama's nine-day visit to Arunachal Pradesh starting from 04 April 2017, Beijing has threatened to take "necessary counter measures" and has said that this visit has "seriously damaged" Indo-China relations.

Competition between China and India to Assume Regional Leadership

China sees India as its major competitor that can assume the role of a regional leader and hence it wants to intimidate and isolate India in the region.

China has highly developed surface and air communication facilities all along the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), especially, opposite Arunachal Pradesh and is in the process of preparing a dozen more airfields in Tibet.

Indian side on the other hand, is highly under developed with difficult terrain and therefore, builds up, movement and reinforcement of troops will be laborious and time consuming.

Assertive stance of China on the border is an indicator that it wants to stake its territorial claims and also dissuade India from building up infrastructure along the border.

Also, by slowly biting into pieces of Indian Territory through continuous intrusions, the Chinese are observing how India's political leadership and its security forces react to such provocations.

The People's Liberation Army of China is training for a short and swift conflict preceded by a cyber-offensive. An offensive could involve the use of missiles, anti-satellite weapons, overwhelming firepower and control over the air space. The extent and scale of conflict would depend on Chinese motives and intent.

China's larger strategy is to isolate India and keep it confined to the back waters of South Asia through its policy of establishing a '**string of pearls**' by increasing its influence over all neighbours of India, like, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Maldives, Bhutan and of course with its all-time ally Pakistan.

It is indulging in full scale 'infrastructure diplomacy' by enhancing its connectivity to our buffer states of Bhutan and Nepal, forging better economic ties with Myanmar by assisting in its gas exploration and infrastructure development in Sri Lanka and Pakistan by building ports, economic corridors etc.

Pakistan – a Dog on Chinese Leash

The major idea behind supplying Pakistan with all the hi-tech military hardware and support all its unethical actions at the global forums is to ensure that it continuously degrades India's might and depletes its resources by fighting the unconventional low intensity war with Pakistan.

Pakistan on the other hand, has been devising innovative strategies to pitch China against India to strengthen its position against India.

In 1963, Pakistan signed a border agreement with China to illegally cede the Shaksgam Valley in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK), around 5,180 sq km, to China.

China has constructed the Karakoram Highway linking Kashghar in Xinjiang with Gilgit and Abbottabad through the Khunjerab Pass in POK.

In the more recent times, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is being developed to link Xinjiang province of China with the Gwadar port in Balochistan through POK. Besides the rail-road connectivity, oil and gas pipeline is also being laid to meet China's express needs of energy.

On 13 November 2016, CPEC became partly operational when Chinese cargo was transported overland to Gwadar Port for onward maritime shipment to Africa and West Asia.

Originally valued at \$46 billion, the value of CPEC projects is now worth \$54 billion and will help both parties in a major way economically. Thus, China has major economic stakes in Pakistan now and will go to any extent to protect its interests.

Global Geo-political Dynamics and Regional Alliances

The recent surge in the economic and military ties between India and USA has global ramifications. Besides, India's growing closeness with China's arch rival, Japan, has also upset Beijing.

The Indo-US joint strategic vision for the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean region that was enunciated by the Indian PM and the previous US President had oblique references to China's aggressive stance in the South China Sea, which invited unsavory responses from China.

The Trump administration has an even more rigid view about China's unethical economic policies and maritime aggressive posture in the South China Sea.

Therefore, China has slowly drifted towards the countries which are currently on the hit list of US, like Russia, Iran and Pakistan. This alliance is also being viewed as a counter weight to the improved Indo-US relationship and the hard-line stand of US towards China.

Similarly, Russia is looking for new trading partners in Asia after being severely hit economically by the crippling sanctions imposed by USA and Europe.

Moreover, Europe, which was the major buyer of Russia oil & gas, has now turned towards Africa and countries like Azerbaijan where abundant gas reserves are available.

Under the prevalent circumstances, energy hungry China is its best hope and is being wooed by Russia by laying gas pipelines right up to China. This critical interdependence is likely to bind these two nations more closely.

Conclusion

China's role in blocking India's membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group, its rigid stand against giving permanent membership to India in the UNSC, putting a technical hold on India's bid to designate the Pakistan-based chief of Jaish-e-Muhamamd (JeM) Maulana Masood *Azhar* as a terrorist, its pro-Pakistan position on the Kashmir issue and supplying Pakistan with military hardware are all indicative of China's cynicism towards India's growing influence in the region.

Notwithstanding the geo-political equation, both China and India are deeply bound together through economic interdependence. China is India's single largest trading partner, the bilateral trade during 2016 stood at \$70.08 billion.

The bulk of trade was driven by Chinese exports to India, largely comprised of electrical machinery, power equipment and telecom exports, which reached \$58.32 billion, accounting for around four-fifths of the total trade.

Hence, contrary to the fears of military escalation due to Dalai Lama's visit to Tawang, the situation is likely to return to normal in due course. It was very encouraging to see that the Indian government stood its ground and did not bow down to China's intimidation.

31) Syria – The Living Hell

Introduction

The Syrian military has suspected to have dropped chemical agent on 04 April 2017 into the rebel held town of Khan Sheikhoun, located in the north-western province of Idlib.

The attack killed 86 people, including at least 10 children and left civilians and rebels convulsing, foaming at the mouth and unable to breathe. It was further reported that the airstrikes continued in the area even on 05 April 2017.

While Russia standing in support of the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad's action, admitted that the Syrian military had conducted the strike on April 04th, but said that it had hit a weapons depot holding "toxic" weapons, which resulted in the toxins to spread in the air and cause the deaths.

However, the international powers, such as the US, Israel, Turkey, France and Britain, did not buy this argument and accused the Syrian regime of targeting civilians with chemical weapons.

The UN Security Council decided to vote on a resolution against the Syrian regime. The US President Donald Trump cancelled the vote, instead opted to order strikes against a Syrian military airfield near the central city of Homs.

The US, in its first direct military action against forces loyal to the Assad regime launched 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles, which, according to the Syrian military killed six Syrian soldiers and destroyed nine jets.

The US designated the attack to serve as a deterrent towards the future use of chemical weapons against civilians by the Syrian forces. The Syrian government on the other hand called the attack an act of "blatant

aggression,” one that was aimed at undermining the efforts of Syria and its allies (Russia) to fight against extremists in the country.

There are multiple stake holders in the Syrian conflict with varied interests and at the receiving end are innocent civilians who are caught up in this power struggle of ‘the devil and the deep blue sea’.

Let us briefly understand the complete issue that has converted Syria into a living hell, where debris of ghost towns tell unimaginable stories of gross human rights violations.

Background Perspective

The unrest in Syria began as a part of the popular movement referred to as the ‘Arab Spring’ that started from Tunisia in 2010 and then swept across the Middle East and North African countries like Egypt and Libya, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, and several other countries.

The demand of the protestors was to end the many decades’ long autocratic and undemocratic regimes of the likes of Muammar Gaddafi of Libya, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, etc.

The power vacuum that was so created after the removal of the authoritarian rulers of these countries; lend itself to political instability that provided a safe haven to terrorist groups like Al Qaeda that found an opportunity to acquire greater strength by:

- Firstly, absorbing the elements of terrorist syndicate that had fled from Afghanistan-Pakistan region to escape the American led coalition forces.
- Secondly, after US attack on Iraq and subsequent change of regime from Sunni ruler Saddam Hussein to a Shiites government, which started committing atrocities against the Sunni population, resulted in large number of Sunni’s to join the militant cadres of Al Qaeda.

In March 2011, scarcely a month after Mubarak was deposed; anti-government demonstrators in many cities across Syria started protesting against the authoritarian rule of President Bashar al-Assad, whose family has ruled Syria for more than 40 years.

Contours of Syrian Conflict

Syria became an independent republic in 1946 and has had a history of military coups, with short spurts of democratic rule after a popular uprising from 1958 to 1961. Thereafter, the Parliamentary system was replaced with a highly centralized Presidential regime.

General Hafez al-Asad, the Minister of Defense seized power and declared himself President in March 1971. His rule lasted till his death in 2000 and was automatically succeeded by his son, the present President, Bashar al-Assad.

Sunni Muslims constitute three fourth of the population of Syria. The ruling Assad family comes from a minority Alawite religious group that is an offshoot of the Shiite Muslim faction. This 12% strong community has had a tight control over the Syrian military services and constitutes the ruling elite.

Discontentment against the government progressively grew owing to inequality in the distribution of resources, rampant corruption, curbing/ violation of human rights, poverty and widespread deprivation. The strongest protest came from Syria's poor areas, predominantly among conservative Sunnis.

The first protests started on 15 March 2011, when protesters marched in the Syrian capital of Damascus demanding democratic reforms and the release of political prisoners.

The Syrian security forces retaliated with disproportionate force causing a huge collateral damage thus further instigating the rebellion.

The consequent unprecedented civilian casualties drew a lot of flak for the Asad regime worldwide.

On 29 July 2011, seven defecting Syrian officers formed the Free Syrian Army (FSA), composed of defected Syrian Armed Forces officers and soldiers, aiming "to bring this regime (the Assad government) down" with united opposition forces.

The rebel forces grew in strength over the years and were covertly supplied with sophisticated weaponry from US by Saudi Arabia, the closest US ally in the region and the biggest Sunni country of Middle East that wants to see the ouster of the Shiite regime of Assad.

In the meanwhile the most dreaded militant organisation that has designs to form an Islamic Caliphate in the region, The Islamic State saw an opportunity to garner support by getting into the fray.

As Islamic State started gaining territory in North and Eastern Syria, the conflict in Syria became more than just a battle between those, for or against President Assad.

In September 2014, US, UK and some other countries joined forces to air attack ground forces of IS.

Russia has had strong traditional ties with President Assad's Syrian government and has helped Syria in the past by supplying weapons. However, Russia physically joined into the fight by end of 2015 and launched air strikes against the rebels with devastating effects.

Events Leading up to the Present Chaos

The 'Arab Spring' protests descended into a civil war in Syria in 2011. Aleppo, an ancient city of 2.3 million people, which was once Syria's main industrial and financial centre, assumed great significance as it was a key base for a number of different rebel factions opposed to the Assad regime.

The rebels operated from Aleppo with impunity till the summer of 2015 and Assad was widely understood to be losing ground around the country, and possibly his grip on power.

However, in response to his call for assistance from his international patrons, mainly, Russia and Iran, he was able to mount a consequential offensive against the rebels.

Russia sent warplanes, attack helicopters, artillery pieces, and significant numbers of military advisers. Iran sent in paramilitary operatives and battle-hardened fighters from Hezbollah, its Lebanon-based proxy.

The pro-government troops had made significant advances around the city by end December 2015 and, by February 2016, had nearly surrounded it.

The Assad regime, with significant support from Iran, imposed a blockade on rebel areas, cutting off supplies to some 320,000 people. The rebels briefly broke the siege in late July 2016, but Assad's forces re-imposed it in September 2016.

It is believed that the pro-government forces launched a campaign to systematically destroy the medical facilities in rebel-held parts of the city, killing or wounding many of its remaining doctors and nurses. The destruction left more than a quarter-million people in eastern Aleppo without hospital care.

Finally, by mid of December 2016, Assad's forces have taken 90 percent of rebel holdings in eastern Aleppo, reducing the city to rubble with unspeakable devastation and gory tales of disaster etched on its backdrop.

Syria: a Battle Ground for a Proxy War between US & Russia and Saudi Arabia & Iran

The Syrian war has three separate dimensions:

First: Ouster of President Asad and Change of Regime

The two opposing sides comprise of the following:

- The Syrian security forces, with the support of one of the largest Shiite country of the Middle East, i.e. Iran, Lebanese Shiite militant group, Hezbollah and is being physically assisted by Russia and morally by China.
- The Syrian rebels, with the tacit support of the largest Sunni country of Middle East, i.e. Saudi Arabia, Sunni militant factions like Al Qaeda and are being supported by US and its European allies.

What needs to be understood here is that while US and Russia stand united on the fight against IS, they are on the opposing sides on the issue of toppling President of Syria, Bashar al-Asad.

The entry of Russia into the Syrian conflict further intensified the proxy war between US and Russia.

United States and its Arab allies, mainly Saudi Arabia are known to have be supplying large numbers of hi-tech weapons like the TOW missiles to the rebels, who are striking at the Russian made vehicles being driven around by the Syrian forces and their Arab allies, like Iran/ Hezbollah.

US has been accusing Russia of targeting Western-backed moderate rebels and not the IS targets alone to prop up the Asad regime. However, Russia has negated US claims and President Putin blames US for not sharing the list of targets with Moscow.

The recent chemical attack by Syrian forces on the rebel held town, followed by the US military intervention against Syrian military, is likely to only escalate and confuse the overall political aims of the participants in that conflict.

Second: Fight against the Islamic State

The Islamic State militant outfit is being countered by the Arab Coalition Forces led by Saudi Arabia, supported by US and its European allies and also Russia.

The reason for US and its allies not sending ground troops to fight IS, is that, it fear that the same may escalate the situation by providing cannon fire to the highly effective Islamic State propaganda machinery.

The anti-West propaganda is likely to unite the Arabs world and it is likely to lead to an all out West vs. Arab conflict. Perhaps this is the broader strategy that Islamic State has been working on, while it is often seen mocking the West, provoking and daring them to attack.

Third: Turf War between Sunnis and the Shiite Muslim Factions

The two heavy weights of the Middle East, i.e. Saudi Arabia (Sunni) and Iran (Shia) are fighting for dominance by aiding their own factions of militant outfits operating in the region.

The Shiite militant groups like Hezbollah of Lebanon and Houthis' of Yemen are being supported by Iran, while the Sunni militant groups like the Al Qaeda and ISIS is being supported by Saudi Arabia.

Aleppo, a Synonym for Hell

This unfortunate struggle for dominance by various forces operating in the region has already led to an estimated 300,000 deaths, about 4.8 million refugees and another 6.1 million displaced within Syria (50% of Syrian population).

The United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on 16 December 2016 referred to Aleppo, as a "synonym for hell."

Russia, with virtually no losses of its own troops, has helped Assad retake vital ground like Aleppo while pushing his opponents closer toward near-total defeat. However, Assad's victory has no bearing on the sufferings of the common people in Aleppo.

UN had brokered a peace deal for evacuation of civilians from the besieged territory and nearly 100,000 have fled the violence hit area.

Notwithstanding, the misery of millions of people continues unabated as the bombs rain-in, not sparing anyone, including the ongoing humanitarian efforts.

Major Reasons for the Recent Chemical Attack on Khan Sheikhoun

It is believed that a large number of rebel fighters may have escaped the city of Aleppo to seek refuge in and around Idlib province, which is to the south-west of Aleppo.

In case more time is given, the rebels with continued external support could rest, recoup and reorganise themselves and take on the pro-government forces with greater resilience.

In order to maintain the momentum of their success in Aleppo and to consolidate its gains the government and its Russian backers chose this region as their next major battleground.

The Assad regime, in its exuberance to finish fast, allegedly used chemical weapons, which has brought unprecedented flak from the world community and embarrassed their all time ally Russia.

Though Russia still maintains that the chemicals were dispersed when Syrian warplanes bombed a facility where rebels were building chemical weapons.

The Assad regime as per record and as per an agreed UN resolution of 2013 is supposed to have declared and destroyed all its chemical weapons.

The UN resolution had come in the wake of the most deadly chemical attack conducted by the Syrian military on 21 August 2013 on two rebel controlled areas in the suburbs around Damascus, Syria. Rockets containing chemical agent Sarin were launched resulting in a death toll range from at least 281 to 1,729 people.

Subsequently, US - Russian negotiations led to the 14 September 2013 "Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons," which called for the elimination of Syria's chemical weapon stockpiles by mid-2014. The UN Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) confirmed on 04 January 2015, that the destruction of chemical weapons by Syria was completed.

Notwithstanding the claims and counter claims, chemical agent was used during the April 04th attack, which resulted in many slow and brutal deaths of innocent civilians. It is imperative that the world community unites against the use of all forms of chemical weapons and ensures that similar incident is never ever repeated again.

Conclusion

I feel that the Assad regime on the behest of their trusted ally Russia has made a strategic blunder by using the chemical weapons.

The visuals of distressed civilians and suffocating children have highlighted the sufferings of the common people of Syria caught up in the conflict zone.

The incident has only robbed the pro-Syrian government coalition of the readily available support from US and other European allies who are fighting the Islamic state alongside them. Besides, the US military retaliation against the Syrian military has further confused the overall politico-military aims of the forces participating in the conflict.

Lastly, the incident will further strengthen the resolve of the hard-line Islamists/ ISIS fighters in the garb of rebels and help them to garner greater sympathy and the much needed moral and material support.

