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## In free fall

Kanthi Dakshin, an assembly constituency in South Bengal, has never been a stronghold of the Left Front (LF) — it has lost every election from this seat since 1987. However, the results of the recent bypolls here have special significance for the Left. The LF candidate, a CPI leader, finished third behind the BJP nominee, while the winner, the Trinamool Congress candidate, bagged over 56 per cent of the votes polled. Last year, the same CPI nominee had finished as the runner-up to the Trinamool candidate, with 34 per cent votes while the BJP finished with just over 8 per cent. This time, the BJP polled nearly 30 per cent votes, pushing the LF share down to 10 per cent. While it indicates the fast rise of the BJP as a major player in Bengal politics, it also reveals that the saffron outfit seems to be growing at the expense of the Left. The decline of the Left that set in following the 2011 Bengal assembly election and the 2014 general election only seems to have gathered pace in recent months.

The Left's crisis is not limited to Bengal. If it is battling long years of incumbency in Tripura, headed for polls next year, the record of the CPM-led government in Kerala has also been uninspiring. Appointments by Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan and highhandedness of the state police have triggered bickering within the Left Front. The CPI, the second largest constituent of the LF, has been unsparing in criticising the government's failures. Kerala's complex social matrix calls for deft and delicate political leadership, while Vijayan refuses to shed the style and image of a party apparatchik. This could cost the Left in the long run as the state heads for a triangular contest: The BJP bagged nearly 15 per cent votes and a seat in the last assembly election and has been building a third front by roping in communal groups that have failed to find space in the Congress and CPM-led fronts. The political scenario in Tripura too is fast changing with the BJP focused on riding the tailwinds of its recent success in other states of the Northeast.

Ironically, the Left is on unsteady ground even in its strongholds at a time when the opposition to the BJP, at least on the university campus, increasingly speaks in an idiom once associated with it. Lacking in energy and ideas, the Left seems set to let go of yet another opportunity to reinvent itself as a relevant political player.

## Culture vs Strategy

Infosys is making an effort, it seems, to address the concerns raised by its promoter, N.R. Narayanamurthy. On Thursday, it announced the appointment of its independent director of six years, Ravi Venkatesan, as a co-chairman. Murthy had recommended Marti Subrahmanyam. That apart, the company also announced it would spend Rs 13,000 crore in dividends or share buyback during 2017-18. Two ex-CFOs of Infosys had made a strong pitch for buyback pointing to cash reserves of Rs 40,000 crore that have been lying idle in the company's books. Clearly, the board led by its chairman R Seshasayee wanted to buy peace and minimise distractions that CEO and MD Vishal Sikka talked about in his email to the company's 2,00,000-plus staff. But it is not clear if Murthy's concerns on falling standards of corporate governance — high severance packages, CEO compensation — have been addressed. The company had engaged law firm Cyril Amarchand Mangaldas in February this year to take inputs from the promoters, evaluate them and then make recommendations to the board.

The ongoing confrontation between the founders and a professional board-led company may be far from over. Proxies representing the founders have already complained the Rs 13,000-crore payout is not good enough. While Murthy himself has remained silent, the appointment of Venkatesan as a co-chairman has also been taken with a pinch of salt by those backing the founders who prefer to wait and see if the core issues of transparency and disclosure raised by Murthy are indeed attended to by the board led now by two persons — chair and the co-chair. In this melee, the company's results have been disappointing, Sikka's variable pay has dropped as a consequence, even as the entire information technology sector braces for new challenges in a rapidly changing external environment.

Given this backdrop, where Sikka is strategising to reinvent the company that was once the toast of India at every global forum, and Murthy is trying to preserve its culture, it looks like the board and the founders are fighting the wrong battle. Management guru Peter Drucker said culture will eat strategy for breakfast. But it is also true that culture needs to be refined and tuned for gaining competitive advantage. The new management is doing that, and as it does, trying to take the culturally-rooted founders along. Having taken a remarkably bold decision to walk out of the board, founders, including Murthy and Nandan Nilekani, can offer their ideas and advice if they feel compelled, but they must let the management take a call. That will let the company focus on growth and building shareholder value.

*Some people think that religion is not essential to society. I do not hold this view. I consider the foundation of religion to be essential to the life and practices of a society.*

----- B. R. Ambedkar

# Not 'BJP lite', Congress must become a modern, liberal party

By Amulya Ganguli

Having failed to delineate a cogent and credible line on secularism, the Congress will have to articulate a new position to find its way back into political reckoning.

For a start, the party will have to realise that its efforts to delink religion from politics, or the church from the state — the essence of secularism — went off track because it identified the "church" too closely with Hinduism and did not pay enough attention to keep Islam also at a distance from the state.

Because of this tactical error, the Congress played into the hands of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which made no secret of its closeness to Hinduism and accused the Congress of being partial to Islam for the sake of Muslim votes. This is a factor which A K Antony, among others in the Congress, acknowledged in a report on the party's defeat in the last general election.

However, the report banked on run-of-the-mill explanations for the party's setback such as infighting, demoralisation among the workers, the absence of pre-poll alliances, the party's corrupt image and communal polarisation orchestrated by the BJP.

While much of this may be true, the report



did not spell out how the Congress could recover its earlier prime position. A suggestion which has been floated in recent weeks is that the Congress can try "soft" Hindutva as a means of wooing voters. This is a line which has long been prevalent in the Congress with V N Gadgil (1930-2001) being one of the early proponents.

For Congress MP Shashi Tharoor, however, "for Congress, peddling 'BJP lite' is like Coke Zero. It will get us zero". Instead, the former Minister of State for External Affairs wants his party to be demonstratively uncompromising on secularism.

Apart from the pursuit of secularism in its

pristine form which keeps religion, in all its manifestations, at a far distance from governance, what the Congress can do is to reboot itself as a party of the 21st century which rejects the superstitious medievalism of the saffron brotherhood with its propagation of a milk-drinking Hindu deity — Ganeshji doodh pi rahein hain -- or the conjuration of a patently fictitious past when Indians were said to have invented everything from stem cell research to cars to planes to television, or astounding claims about cows exhaling oxygen and cow dung providing protection against nuclear radiation.

To rescue the country

from such outrageous, antediluvian ideas, the Congress has to present itself as the exact opposite — a forward-looking, progressive party committed to the development of a rational, scientific temperament so that the common man will not be prone to sectarianism based on hate and prejudice.

To achieve this objective, the Congress itself will have to shed some of its present inhibitions such as disinclination to take a forthright stand on the crucial issues of the day. These include the country's economic direction to which the merit versus quotas debate is related and the question of bans.

To start with the last, the Congress will have

to set its face against bans of all kinds — on books, thereby acknowledging that it made a mistake in banning Salman Rushdie's "The Satanic Verses" in 1988 (P Chidambaram has done so, though only in 2015); on films; on liquor and on beef. It has to be remembered that the Congress was the first to ban beef in Madhya Pradesh in 1955 when it was in power and the BJP was not even formed. Moreover, even today it is in favour of a nationwide ban on beef, as its senior general secretary Digvijay Singh has said, in line with R a s h t r i y a Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat's views.

Yet, this pandering to

the Hindu cause has led it nowhere, just as its propagation of "socialism" — subsidised food under the Food Security Act, doles for the rural unemployed under MNREGA — has been of little help to the party.

The reason is the inherent insincerity in these gimmicks which are seen as populist, vote-catching manoeuvres by an outfit clutching at straws to hold on to power. In contrast, the steps by the BJP against books such as Wendy Doniger's tract on Hinduism or on beef are seen as driven by convictions even if they are ill-conceived in the eyes of the liberals.

The latter cannot but be disappointed by the palpable cynicism of Jawaharlal Nehru's party. What is worse for the Congress is that these duplicitous ploys do not deceive anyone. Even if the Congress calls for a nationwide ban on beef, the political advantage will still be the BJP's just as Rajiv Gandhi's shilanyas (foundation) for the Ram temple did not fetch the Congress any votes in the 1989 election that it lost.

Instead of indulging in such deceit, the Congress will have to underline its adherence to the principles of liberalism which believe in a free, open society where there are no constraints on what a person reads or eats, or who he or she chooses as a life partner.

(Courtesy: IANS)

## Sinking Valley

by Pratap Bhanu Mehta

It is an unmistakable sign of the corrosion of Indian democracy that an odd combination of illusions and nauseating bravado is being spun in Delhi around the grim political situation in Kashmir. Every element of Indian policy in Kashmir lies in tatters. And yet, instead of asking forthright questions, our denial goes deeper. Kashmir now seems to be going from a deep and violent conflict to a state where there seems to be a death wish all around: Security forces with no means to restore order other than by inflicting death, Indian nationalism now more interested in showing machismo than solving real problems, increasingly radicalised militancy with almost a touch of apocalyptic disregard for life, foreign powers fishing in troubled waters, scores of young men and children even, who are making a statement that courting death seems a better option than what they regard as suffocating oppression. They are all feeding off each other.

The roots of the Kashmir problem are deep, and the point should not be to gloat at one government's failure. The deep gulf between what the Indian state wants and what Kashmiris in the Valley want has always been unbridgeable. But over the last decade and a half, beginning with Vajpayee, there was an



attempt to create at least some kind of modus vivendi that had three elements: Containing insurgency, relying on local political forces and elections and reaching out under some nebulous appeal to "insaniyat" or humanity. What has transpired in the last few months has made it clear that every shred of Indian policy is now ineffective even to produce a modicum of a modus vivendi in Kashmir. Whatever our counter-insurgency, or counter-militancy policy is, it is backfiring profoundly: Kashmir is more in the grip of militancy and radicalisation than at any point in the last 15 years.

Whatever our hope that some modicum of local democratic process can create a sense of participation has been belied by the single-digit turnout in the Srinagar by-polls: A stinging rebuke to faith in Indian democracy. Admittedly, the fear of violence and threats by

militants contributed to this stunning debacle. Let us for a moment assume that it is just the threat of violence that kept people away. But isn't that supposed to be the point? Why, after three years of this government's strategy, are we less able to protect Kashmiri voters? What does that say of our counter-insurgency strategy?

It's a fool's errand to think that coercion alone will win India Kashmir. But more deeply worrying is the fact that the legitimacy of almost all conventional political actors on whom we have relied, from the PDP to the National Conference, is dipping rather than increasing. Their hold was always very tenuous. But it should be obvious now that they are not even remotely plausible instruments of placating Kashmiris. What other political interlocution will there be? And there is no space left for a dialogue outside of the realm of politics, a dialogue that can

address the almost unbearable suffering this conflict has produced. We have regressed to a new and, even by Kashmir's standards, a frighteningly low, in Kashmir, pure and simple.

But the disquieting thing is that no one in Delhi wants to face this truth squarely. The Indian emperor has no clothes. I am trying to imagine what the headlines would have been on Kashmir five years ago. This column was often critical of Manmohan Singh. But on Kashmir and Pakistan, he was wise, and it is a pity that we frittered away a slender historical opportunity to make progress on Kashmir. Yet, I can imagine, if the current catastrophe we are seeing in Kashmir had occurred under the UPA, Manmohan Singh would have been roasted and held to account. But we dare not say the truth that, for the moment, Kashmir has been lost on Modi's watch.

The point is not to

blame. Maybe there is an overdetermined futility about Kashmir. But we are doing ourselves a disservice by engaging in a politics of diversion. More than militant propaganda, the way we talk about Kashmir does more harm to India's cause in Kashmir which desperately requires breaking the cycle of othering and humiliation that has marked this conflict. It creates difficulty even when groups in the Valley do this. But it is inexcusable when those more distant wage their bravado wars of revenge to perpetuate this cycle, as if we were not talking about fellow citizens.

We do this by making territory efface all considerations of the people: The militants did this by forcing out Pandits; but we risk doing the same by not recognising the core issue is not holding territory, it is giving people confidence in the Indian project.

Second, we are gullible enough to buy diversionary tactics. At the height of this unfolding catastrophe, what was most of Delhi discussing: Were some stone pelters paid to throw stones? The faux outrage at what might be true of some stone pelters completely obscured the larger question of why our Kashmir strategy is a failure, pushing us to new lows. Our discourse on Kashmir is enough to convince anyone that if the Indian state needs this much propaganda and

diversion to convince people in Delhi not to ask hard questions, it must surely mean that it has lost the plot. Even our jawans will be better served if, instead of fantasies of revenge, we asked hard questions about why we have put them in this situation in the first place. But treating a serious situation as a farce does not do our credibility any good.

The quality of Indian democracy may not be sufficient to enable an opening in Kashmir. But surely it is a necessary condition. It is difficult to shake off the sense that as Indian politics continues on its pathway of jeopardising individual liberty, and finding proxies for targeting minorities, whatever toehold Indian democracy hopes to have in Kashmir will erode even further.

There is a long and arduous summer ahead. The international environment is turning against India: China is more aggressive; our obsessive desire to get aligned with the American military industrial complex will not yield dividends on Pakistan. In short, Pakistan's strategic space has increased, not decreased. But we are looking at a situation where our strategy of containment by force has failed, our political instruments are hollow, and there is a deepening death wish in the state. Kashmir is looking at an abyss. Who lost the plot this time around?

(Courtesy: IE)