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Before the dawn

Just when researchers the world over had agreed on the origin story of the human race, remote prehistory may have to be revised. Archeological remains found in an abandoned mine at Jebel Irhoud compare very well to modern humans, and are 1 lakh years older than the oldest human fossils found in south and east Africa. In addition, the finding of flint tools knapped by the Levallois technique suggests that sophisticated tool-making was common in some parts of Africa 3,00,000 years ago. The classical picture of the early human race is based on the work of the Leakey family at Olduvai Gorge and other locations in east Africa, and starts with the famous discovery of the fossil named Lucy — only because the researchers were playing Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds when her bones were freed from the rock. Finds in South Africa followed, and a clear line of descent was established from Lucy, the original archaeological Eve, to all the modern human races. In recent times, other finds were incorporated into this picture. For instance, the Neanderthals were originally believed to be more primitive than humans. But this was a misunderstanding — the first specimen studied was arthritic and could not walk erect. They are now recognised to have evolved along with humans and interbred with us. In fact, all of us have some Neanderthal DNA. The compound family tree which evolved traced our common origin to a Garden of Eden in east Africa 2,00,000 years ago, from where the many human cultures radiated out into the world.

Now, the findings at Jebel Irhoud have pushed back the dawn of humanity to 3,00,000 years ago, and far to the west of Eden. The bones of five individuals have been found, and researchers note that while they are distinctly human in aspect, the cranium is not of the human form. From this, it may be surmised that the distinctive human brain is peculiarly human, and not inherited. However, errors of dating and stratigraphic context are common in this field. So, it will take years of work yet to confirm if Jebel Irhoud indeed signals a new dawn for the human race, or a false dawn.

May's hubris

The UK has experienced an election of surprises — which also wasn't. The swings surrounding personality politics was perhaps the biggest surprise of the 2017 general elections. Conservative Party leader and current prime minister, Theresa May, whose party won 318 seats, short of a majority 326, suffered the hardest blow. Her challenger, Labour Party leader, Jeremy Corbyn, gained the most, with Labour increasing its vote-share by 10 points to 40 per cent, at 261 seats. May had called the election when Labour looked staggeringly weak. Observers suggested May was using Brexit negotiations — coming up in 10 days now — as a cynical way to secure a victory for her party and her own leadership.

But events preceding the election provided a typical British rain-shower on May's plans, for as the pound collapsed and the country was hit by terror attacks, May's ineptitude — she was home secretary, in charge of police and counter-terrorism, before becoming PM — showed. As May began fumbling, Corbyn gained stature. Using wide rallies, in contrast to the PM's often sparse target group meetings, Corbyn sparked the imagination of younger voters particularly. Thus, Labour gained from younger, well-off, urban professionals — earlier considered Tory voters. And it mopped up enough UKIP voters to decimate the far-right party's share from 13 per cent in 2015 to two per cent now. The Tories offered a surprise too: They wrested crucial seats in Scotland away from the Scottish National Party (SNL). Reports now suggest May will form a coalition government with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) which holds a crucial 10 seats; the DUP demands Northern Ireland receives no special EU access in Brexit talks. The DUP won't support Corbyn owing to his prior support to Sinn Fein and the IRA. Sinn Fein performed well in Ireland, winning seven seats, but this will give Corbyn little comfort as the Irish party will continue its tradition of abstaining from the British parliament.

But even as ground-level equations change, what is certain is that Britain is still headed towards Brexit — with considerably weaker leadership. May's plans for a "hard Brexit" might need tempering: The hung verdict indicates that Brexit is still a contested issue. Older demands, of total withdrawal from the European single market, strong immigration curbs, etc., may need fresh thinking. But while the future looks shaky, what stood out firmly now is the passionate involvement of the young British voter in her nation's political life.

The goal of education is the advancement of knowledge and the dissemination of truth.

—John F. Kennedy

Why Modi avoids the media

By Amulya Ganguli

In another two years, Narendra Modi may well enter the Guinness Book of Records for failing to hold a press conference. In that event, he will be the first Prime Minister of a democratic country who has avoided meeting the media at a large televised gathering.

It is not that he hasn't met newsmen at all. But these meetings have been with a select few who are known to be partial towards the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) — the "North Korean TV", as Arun Shourie, a former BJP minister, has said. Even then, the interactions weren't live. Apart from these occasional, choreographed, generally one-sided pow wows, what Modi favours is a monologue — whether at public rallies or at indoor functions with an invited audience where no questions are allowed, or over the radio.

Why this reticence from an otherwise voluble Prime Minister when his far more reserved predecessor held at least two major press conferences in addition to having prolonged engagements with the journalists travelling with him on his foreign trips?

As is known, Modi's aversion towards the fourth estate stems from the aftermath of the Gujarat riots when he apparently felt that he could not afford to be interrogated closely on what transpired. Once he even walked out of a one-to-one chat show when



asked about the riots. One of his first steps after becoming the Prime Minister was to dispense with the convention of journalists accompanying the PM when he went abroad. Only the official media were given the privilege.

There is also a belief in the saffron camp that the so-called mainstream media, especially the English ones, harbour the Left-Liberals who look upon the BJP with a jaundiced eye and have had a special antipathy towards Modi since the riots. Hence, the Prime Minister's reluctance to reach out to them although the BJP does allow its spokespersons to present the party's case before the television cameras, an unavoidable aspect of democratic functioning.

One explanation for Modi's unwillingness to take part in an exercise which is routine in a democracy is that his answers to probing questions can reveal a worldview which is alien to the narrative which has guided the country's politics till now.

Nothing exposed this difference between the BJP's perceptions and the rest of the country's more starkly than Atal Behari Vajpayee's 1996 decision to put on hold the three key issues on the Hindutva agenda — the Ram temple, Article 370 of the Constitution and uniform civil code — in order to woo the "secular" parties to his side.

Since Vajpayee's time, more issues marking out the BJP's distinctive position

from that of the other parties have come to the fore. These are myth vs history, faith vs the inviolability of protected monuments, vegetarianism vs non-vegetarianism, astrology vs astronomy, Hindi vs English, and so on. The gulf between the two worldviews makes Modi something of an outsider in Lutyens Delhi. It also probably makes him wary of baring his soul to a large media gathering lest his answers create problems for the saffron brotherhood by sowing confusion among the BJP's core supporters.

It may not be besides the point to note that another outsider — this time from the Washington beltway — Donald Trump is also highly critical of the mainstream media although he does not

shy away from press conferences.

If Modi does so, it is because he is still hovering between the two diametrically opposite worlds. While his government has vowed to crack down on gau rakshaks (cow vigilantes) and other militants, the latter have persisted with their acts of depredation because they apparently believe that these are in line with the saffron brotherhood's outlook.

For the BJP, the moderate vs extremist dichotomy in its own ranks has been complicated by the fact that India's diversity allows one or the other view to prevail in different parts of the country. Thus, while the death sentence is prescribed by the party's Chhattisgarh Chief Minister for those

who kill cows and the Gujarat Chief Minister vows to persuade everyone in his state to turn vegetarian, beef "festivals" are held in Kerala and Tamil Nadu and the BJP's office-bearers in the north-eastern states stridently emphasise their preference for the forbidden meat.

It is obvious that the absence of a clear line makes it virtually impossible for the party to articulate a credible position on various issues.

Since there are no differences either inside or outside the BJP on the Prime Minister's developmental thrust — although the protectionist lobby in the saffron camp is opposed to the introduction of genetically modified foods — Modi will be at ease in accepting questions at a press conference on his Make in India, Digital India and other similar projects and even on demonetisation although it is now seen to have led to a slowing down of growth.

But it is the activities of what is known as the "fringe" which can be problematic. Moreover, these groups are unlikely to fade away because of the inspiration which they derive from the saffron brotherhood's interpretation of history as a period of constant conflict between the native Hindus and the invading Muslims with their iconoclastic approach to faith and diet. It is the BJP's present tightrope walk between moderation and extremism which makes Modi avoid large press meets.

(Courtesy : IANS)

No proof required: Just why are farmers rioting?

by Surjit S Bhalla

Is it political, or is there a socio-economic explanation for the farmer unrest (and riots) in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh? According to some, this unrest is liable to spread across the country. Hence, it is imperative that policymakers and analysts understand the causes behind the riots in order to best insure society, and farmers, from economic doom.

The socio-economic explanation, according to experts, is that nobody wants to be a farmer anymore. And why? Because it is unremunerative, and relatively hard physical work. The children of farmers aspire for a well-paying urban job. This is a universal and "natural" phenomenon, which is why social scientists (and economists) have stressed that it is incumbent for policymakers to be forward-looking and prepare the "ground" for this change.

But the economy is not producing enough jobs to accommodate the migrants from farmer families. This leads to frustration, despair, unrest. Hence, the riots.

A related explanation for farmer unrest, according to the "experts", is demonetisation. The "reasoning" is as follows. Demonetisation was, like a hurricane, an all-round destructive force. The poor farmers (are these the ones who are rioting?) need cash to transact sales, but there is no cash in the system. Hence, the farmers are rioting.

And committing suicide. Just look at the data on suicides for confirmation. As TV anchors and journalist experts (in print and TV) will constantly remind you,



there are over 12,000 farmers committing suicide. As one politician recently reminded me, he was concerned about the plight of farmers because he was in touch with some families where there had been a suicide. He believed that by talking to them (and even invited me to come along), I would correct my "inhuman" attitude towards farmers.

What exactly is my insensitive, inhuman view of farmer suicides? That the suicide of a loved one is one of the most inexplicable and depressing occurrences for any family member, or friend, to experience. That most of us, beyond a certain age, have known a dear one to have committed suicide. That suicide is a much-studied problem and that poverty is not known to be one of the major causes of suicide. And that one should not demean a highly tragic personal experience in order to score narrow political points. Finally, appealing to suicides to address public policy is nothing short of emotional blackmail.

Citing the numbers of farmers who have committed suicide does not add much knowledge to understanding why farmers are

rioting in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. For starters, farmer suicides, while numbering 12,600, have declined, from a peak level of 18,241 in 2004, and 17,368 in 2009. Notably, 2004 was a good agricultural year, 2009, a drought year. Housewife suicides stayed in the 23,000 range for the last decade. Student suicides have risen by over 60 per cent since 2001, and now number 8,900. Suicide is a complex social and cultural phenomenon. Let us not reduce it to a political soundbyte.

Coming back to the mystery of farmer agitations circa 2017. Is this economic, or political? The answer is that it is heavily political. Allow me to reject the economic explanation. Recall that what we are trying to explain are 2017's farmer riots. Indian farmers faced two consecutive years of drought in 2014-15 and 2015-16. Such an occurrence — two droughts in a row — only happened five times since 1870, and on three occasions in independent India: The mid-sixties, the mid-eighties and now. Despite this rare farmer tragedy, we did not observe any farmer riots during the recent drought years.

We read a lot about collapsing food prices and the lowering of farmer incomes as identifiable causes of riots (and suicides). How have food prices performed over the last three years? The table documents the course of prices of six food items. Two dominant conclusions are, (i) producer prices (whether minimum support prices of the government of India or wholesale prices) have risen by about 5 to 10 per cent over the last year; (ii) at the same time, consumer prices of selected and volatile food items (fruits, vegetables and pulses) have stayed broadly constant over the last three years. (RBI, MPC and other inflation experts, please note this constancy over three years!).

One constant refrain is that pulse prices have gone below their MSPs. While no doubt this occurred for selected items, in the aggregate, procurement prices of pulses have risen an average of 11 per cent in each of the last two years; the wholesale price of pulses is up a hefty 52 per cent since 2014-15.

Incomes have also increased, and sharply, in this post-drought (but riot-prone?) year. Pulse produc-

tion is up 30 per cent, providing the farmer with an income gain of more than 40 per cent in 2016-17. Wheat farmer incomes are up at least 10 per cent. So, where is the problem, or, as the Americans say, where is the beef? There is an additional dimension to the story that farmer riots are politically motivated. Reports suggest there is a lot of looting, and stealing of liquor. By farmers, or who?

As a social scientist, I have been taught that who gains and who benefits is a useful starting point for most questions about policy, and politics. So, who benefits from stirring up riots? Let us examine what has happened politically over the last three years. First, politicians outside the BJP have been badly hurt. There is little likelihood of an opposition party, or an opposition alliance, coming to power in 2019. Note how experts no longer talk about a week being enough time for politics to change course. Now, even five years (let alone the two years till the next election in 2019) may not be enough for an opposition force to arrive.

More bothered than the

opposition outside the BJP tent is the opposition inside. Just look at how the Shiv Sena is running scared. Even after Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis promised a loan waiver, benefiting the vast majority of the indebted poor, farmer riots have continued.

Also, for political inferences, a dissection of the "beef ban" is necessary. Maybe the Supreme Court has more to do with the beef ban injustice than any politician. In any case, the beef ban, and the rank anti-Muslim communalism associated with it, does not benefit PM Modi or the BJP. It does not garner any new votes, and it loses some old votes. So, if Modi/BJP lose from the beef ban, who gains?

A parallel phenomenon to the rise and fall of PM Modi is the fall and rise of the influence of the RSS. Prior to the UP election, there was a lot of talk about the RSS cadres being essential to the BJP; in my travels in UP and discussions with several expert commentators, the near-universal conclusion is that the UP vote was for Modi, not for the BJP, and definitely not the RSS.

The support for Modi is among the vast majority of the emerging and emerged middle class. This large group has aspirations for a modern India, complete with education, jobs and freedom of thought and action. No modern country, and certainly no diverse country like India, can afford to restrict the young and the old in their freedom to choose. Does the RSS think that it can gain credibility, and support, by harking back to its own imaginary Hindu era?

Food for thought. (Courtesy : IE)