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## Happy landings

Delhi Education Minister Manish Sisodia has raised eyebrows, hackles, hopes and fears in equal measure by announcing a happiness curriculum for government schools. While the effects of the plan on the future happiness of students will interest everyone, the initial responses hold up a mirror to a society that's fed up. A society which really needs to talk about happiness.

Alarmed people demand to know if happiness can be taught. Specifically, can governments teach happiness? Should they be allowed to? Isn't there any limit to their intrusive paternalism? These questions are symptoms of a society which is tired of being dictated to. It is a restive culture of compliance. Besides, the word "curriculum" had wormed its way into the discussion, and every educated human has a healthy anxiety about what it suggests — study material, courses, tutorials. And what about exams, eh? Imagine exams in being happy. Preposterous! But this is an exam-obsessed country, so exams in happiness are inevitable.

Actually, no one has threatened to either teach or examine school students about happiness. The government is inspired by Bhutan's example. In a clever move to undermine mainstream metrics like GDP and developmental indices, the Land of the Thunder Dragon had promoted a Happiness Index. Apart from the tactical benefit to a nation disadvantaged by history and geography, the idea is attractive in the modern world. When money no longer buys happiness, when geopolitics and market turbulence can strike from afar, when the world changes too fast for human comprehension and the comforts of religion are acknowledged to be illusory, the standard metrics also seem inadequate. And the activity-based pursuit of happiness in schools starts looking like an interesting idea. Except that when it is floated, coincidentally, within days of a slim volume titled Exam Warriors reaching bookstores, primordial fears about curricula naturally arise.

## A narrower field

The sentencing of former Bangladesh Prime Minister and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leader Khaleda Zia to five years in jail is on charges of corruption. In public perception, however, Zia's incarceration paves the way for a further consolidation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's vast political power. If the BNP leader is not allowed to participate in general elections scheduled for December this year, and her party boycotts the polls like it did five years ago in 2013, then Hasina and her Awami League party may accumulate such untrammelled power that, many feel, she may be tempted to transform Bangladesh into a state less democratic.

Of course, that day is still far away. But the fact remains that Hasina's reputation at home has rapidly deteriorated — from the brave courageous woman who returned home despite the fact that her family members, including her father, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, were killed by the assassin's bullet in 1975. The nation was still so young, then, just born of a bloody war. But in the past five years, during her second term as prime minister, Bangladeshis are angry that she has seemingly condoned nepotism, corruption and faction-fighting, and this has contributed to her growing unpopularity. By all accounts, she has not been able to let go of her terrible personal animosity against Zia. She believes the BNP is hand in glove with the Jamaat-i-Islami, several of whose members once colluded with the enemy, Pakistan, in the liberation war. Some of this may even be true. Hasina's enormous trauma and perhaps even a personal desire for revenge may be understandable. But for a prime minister to be seen to stake her country's future at the altar of hate can only diminish her — and drag her country down.

Hasina's inability to create the democratic space that will allow her opponent to be judged by the people of Bangladesh risks undermining the spirit of the liberation war in which most Bangladeshis — including Khaleda's husband, then Major Ziaur Rahman, who read the declaration of independence on behalf of Sheikh Mujib on March 27, 1971 — fought shoulder to shoulder with each other, against Pakistan. For Hasina, otherwise so brave in fighting both terrorists and radical Islamists, to be seen to be actively creating the conditions to bring Zia down, is to sow the seeds of a brittle state. The courts did well to convict Zia for corruption. But Bangladesh's prime minister needs to dig deeper into her reserves to build the sinews of a democratic and compassionate nation today.

*Life lived for tomorrow will always be just a day away from being realized.*

--Leo Buscaglia

# With his Parliament speech, Modi undermined his own case

By Amulya Ganguli

There are three aspects of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speech in parliament -- which was probably his most combative in recent times -- that deserve attention.

First and foremost is the undeniable fact that he is today by far the most effective speaker in Indian politics. His oratory has the potential, therefore, of carrying the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) well ahead of the others.

It is such attributes which can have a seminal impact on events. It may not be inappropriate to mention in this context that but for Hitler's rousing eloquence, the Nazis would not have become -- albeit for a decade -- the force that they were in Germany.

However, the success of such declamation lies in a one-sided articulation of a viewpoint devoid of nuances and marked by a blindness to the possible flaws in the presenter's own case. But more of that later. For the present, it is worth noting the second feature of Modi's speech, which was an unrelenting focus on the Congress to the exclusion of all other parties.

What this approach emphasised is that despite the Congress's present weakened condition, it is still perceived by the BJP as a major threat. A corollary to this perception is that the BJP's dream of a Congress-mukt Bharat or an India without the Congress will not be easy for the party to achieve.



What is more, the Prime Minister's speech was a pointer to the political reality that at the national level, a virtual two-party system has come into being in India. The two leading parties may have their allies but, notwithstanding the latter's influences in their local areas, they are no more than appendages to the two main players with little possibility of replacing the two top parties at the Centre.

However, a caveat is necessary at this point. It is that the clout of today's BJP is entirely due to Modi.

There is no one else in the party who can take his

place. No one can say with certainty how the BJP will fare if he is dislodged. The present primacy of the two parties is heavily dependent, therefore, on personalities (in the Congress's case it is the Nehru-Gandhis) rather than on their respective organisations.

The third aspect of Modi's speech is the stress on the Congress's -- and, as a result, on the country's -- past, since the history of the 132-year-old party is intertwined with Indian history since well before Independence.

As it is, the past played a major role in the BJP's poli-

tics considering that its elevation into the mainstream of Indian political life from the margins was based on raking up the depredations of Muslim invaders in medieval times, including the destruction of temples and the building of mosques in their place such as the one in Ayodhya in 1528 on a site regarded as the birthplace of Lord Ram, venerated by Hindus.

From the 16th century to the 20th was but one step for Modi when he put the onus on the Congress for the partition and all that followed, including the division of Kashmir. Modi's contention that the division

would not have taken place if Vallabhbhai Patel was the Prime Minister in place of Jawaharlal Nehru was no more than a surmise, but what it underlined was the BJP's current game plan of denigrating at every available opportunity India's first Prime Minister.

The disparagement of Nehru began in Ram Nath Kovind's first speech as the President when he omitted the first Prime Minister's name from the list of those he mentioned, which included Deen Dayal Upadhyaya, the Hindutva brigade's latest icon about whom little is known to the average Indian outside the

Sangh Parivar.

However, nothing showed the bias of the saffron brotherhood more starkly than Modi's refusal to credit Nehru with the establishment of democracy in India since, as he said, democratic principles have marked the country's polity since the time of Lord Buddha.

Even if, for argument's sake, this point is conceded, it would have been interesting if Modi had dwelt on the teachings of Buddha's disciple Emperor Ashoka about tolerance -- "one should listen to and respect the doctrines professed by others" -- when a BJP MP, Vinay Katiyar, was reiterating M. S. Golwalkar's diktat about Muslims having no right to live in India when they have carved out of the subcontinent two homelands for themselves -- West Pakistan and East Pakistan (now Pakistan and Bangladesh).

True, the Congress has much to be ashamed of -- dynasticism and corruption being the foremost among them -- but for a Prime Minister to be so ahistorical in his outlook as to believe that the Congress's earlier electoral successes were based solely on the weakness of the opposition and help from the NGOs is odd, to say the least. History is as complex as the reasons for the choice of the people of one party over another.

As a matter of fact, Modi undermined his own case by devoting virtually his entire speech to a party which he thinks should listen to Gandhi's advice to disband itself.

(Courtesy: IANS)

# After reverses in Syria, Afghanistan, a quest for propaganda equaliser

By Saeed Naqvi

Conspiracy theorists, who prove mostly right in the topsy turvy post-9/11 world, are these days busy switching channels -- Syria, Afghanistan, Korean peninsula and, yes, one more theatre which will be in heavy focus in June-July. All these narratives have Russia in them, including, quite surprisingly, South Korea where the media will gloat over the humiliation heaped on Russian athletes.

Intelligence agencies in Washington and Moscow, operating under the universal rubric of Deep State, are circling around in the ring, psyching each other. The US, in this game plan, would be developing an offensive posture pushing the Russians on the defensive. Russians are already reeling from the blow administered by the International Olympic Committee: Its athletes have been banned from participating in the Winter Olympics being held in South Korea.

The assumption in Moscow is that the West would use all the propaganda tools at its command to rub Putin's nose in the mud on the occasion of the FIFA World Cup being hosted in June-July 2018.

As Putin prepares to cope with the World Cup-related security challenges, one image will certainly cross his mind: The furtive visit of Prince Bandar bin Sultan to the Kremlin on the eve of the February 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics.

Prince Bandar offered Putin the "moon" if only the Russian strongman would persuade Assad to



vacate the President's palace in Damascus. Among the gifts he offered Putin was a "terror free" Sochi Olympics.

Why did the Western media ignore the incredible Bandar story? Because ever since the Russians had their boots on the ground in Syria from 2015, they have had a ringside seat on the barely disguised drama of Americans supplying arms to various groups fighting Assad. None of these stories would have been flattering to the US, including the one about Bandar, George W. Bush's sidekick. So the mainstream media, as part of the establishment, had to look the other way.

The rules of the game, according to Russian and Turkish sources, were simple: Groups battling Assad under American guidance would be described as "freedom fighters"; those not serving American inter-

ests were ISIS, Jabhat al Nusra, Al Qaeda. They, each one of them, could change their labels, depending on the dynamics on the ground. The Russians had video evidence on all of this. The Turks too are in the know, first as participants in the battle against Assad and later fighting the YPG, the Kurdish group which has adopted a Syrian name -- Syrian Democratic Forces.

The Turks consider Abdullah Ocalan-led PKK as their existential enemy. The PKK is a "terrorist organisation" by the UN's definition. By Turkish definition the YPG is PKK with another name. This "other name", Syrian Democratic Forces, is a sleight of hand without which the US can't help YPG/SDF. Their original name has the label "terrorist group" attached to it.

The Turks have told the

US that their operation against the YPG in Afrin will continue so long as "one terrorist" remains in the territory contiguous with Turkey. The situation has brought Turkey, Russia and Iran on the same side. Much to the chagrin of the US, the Syrian Democratic Forces too are reaching out to Damascus in their desperation.

Newspapers supporting Erdogan are, in deference to the situation, recommending an Ankara-Damascus rapprochement if not specifically an Erdogan-Assad handshake. An isolated US therefore faces Russia and its cohorts in Syria. The situation is fraught.

Even in the Afghan theatre, the US is not smelling of roses. Russia's Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs Igor Vladimirovich told the impressive gathering at the

Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi recently something of abiding interest to the region: IS fighters were being flown to northern Afghanistan. Iran's supreme leader, Ayatullah Ali Khamenei, told the Friday congregation on January 30: "The US goal of transferring ISIS terrorists to Afghanistan is aimed at creating a justification for its continued deployment in the region."

Pundits took no note of an outrageous proposal for Afghanistan which was under "active consideration of the White House" for weeks last year. Erik Prince, Founder of the world's biggest supplier of mercenary troops, Blackwater, had submitted details on how Afghanistan can be most effectively administered: "Exactly as the Viceroy administered India when it was a British colony." The very fact that

such a proposal reached the highest echelons of American decision making clearly beamed searchlights deep into the caverns of the American mind.

The IS as a Western asset is not a new concept. I have been writing about it at least since President Obama admitted as much to Thomas Friedman of the New York Times in August 2014. Friedman asked why did Obama not bomb IS as soon as it reared its head.

"That would have taken the pressure off Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki", Obama replied. What clearer admission could one seek from a US President that the IS was an asset at that stage. Iraq's Shia Prime Minister was eventually forced out.

After reverses suffered by the IS at Russian hands, there were several reports of IS given safe passage, even air lifted. In October 2017, Robert Fisk, of the Independent, described how hundreds of IS fighters in Raqqa had been given safe passage "to go where they like".

Turkish intelligence has an interesting take on IS being transferred to Afghanistan: These are "upgraded" Taliban after a stint of "Jihad" in Syria. The wide disparity in the wages of the regular Afghan Taliban and those trained in Syria has provoked the home grown Taliban to teach American and their "lackeys" a lesson -- hence the spike in violence. Note American isolation in Kabul too. Aggressive retaliatory posturing by Washington would bring Moscow and Beijing into an even tighter embrace. Interesting Times, as the Chinese proverb says.

(Courtesy: IANS)