

The reality of an India at the crossroads



Faced with the perception of the country becoming a 'diminishing democracy', policymakers must take note of the drift

Individual events are often an indicator of broader trends. Any vision of the future is again significantly linked to what is taking place in the present. For now, most if not all, of what is taking place does not seem to hold out any great promise for India. Policymakers need not take public opinion as the sole indicator of what is likely to happen, but it is important to acknowledge public fears and reassure people, especially in periods of uncertainty. Increasingly, in recent weeks, India has begun to resemble a war zone, but neither any reassurance nor any attempt at building a 'consensus' addressing current concerns is taking place.

Meanwhile, the world press is replete with stories of India's 'diminishing democracy' in which, apart from the organs of state, even India's highly regarded criminal justice system and the courts have come in for a share of criticism. This is beginning to shake the confidence of even the most diehard supporters of Indian democracy, who are beginning to look inward to try and ascertain if Indian democracy is more fragile than is apparent.

STATE OF ECONOMY, WORLD TIES

India cannot afford to ignore the reality of the situation in which it finds itself. The Indian economy is in recession, and is among the worst performing among major nations. Among key currencies, the Indian Rupee is one of the very few which is depreciating, while the Euro, the Australian and Canadian Dollars, the South Korean Won and the Swiss Franc have become much stronger recently. India also claims to be among the worst affected by ransomware attacks. Meanwhile, India is turning increasingly protectionist, coming up with banal explanations to explain this away, contrary to conventional wisdom.

In the meantime, the atmospherics surrounding India's external relations are quite depressing. China remains intransigent and has made known its unwillingness to reach a reasonable settlement of the Line of Actual Control dispute. India Pakistan relations could hardly be worse and China has chosen at this moment to sign a new Military Memorandum of Understanding to boost the China Pakistan relationship. India's forays in its Near Abroad in West Asia are yet to yield results, even though, on the surface, relations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia are better. The reality, nevertheless, is that India does not have enough traction to be able to manoeuvre between different power centres in West Asia which are at various times in conflict. Consequently, India will find it increasingly difficult to steer between

the Scylla of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt on the one hand and the Charybdis of Turkey, Qatar and Iran on the other.

SIGNS OF RIGID POLICIES

Far more serious, however, are concerns being voiced about India's democratic credentials both within the country and abroad. India might well claim that the numbers of terror attacks have reduced, levels of Maoist violence have come down, and the situation in India's Northeast is much better than before, but many people across India are seeking proper answers to the question as to whether India is forfeiting its democratic visage for a more doctrinaire and a more rigid set of policies. In August-September last year, this issue had briefly surfaced when Delhi decided to dilute Article 370 of the Constitution, and restructure Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) and Ladakh into two Union Territories. It possibly passed muster at the time as something that was already included in the ruling party's manifesto.

Concerns, however, began to be felt soon after, in the wake of the clampdown in Kashmir, and the incarceration of almost the entire top leadership of the Peoples Democratic Party and the National Conference party. The anti Citizenship (Amendment) Act protests across the country thereafter seemed to confirm such fears. Compounding this situation lately has been the attempt to impose a sort of 'guided democracy' in J&K, through the instrument of elections to the District Development Council, in the course of which the Opposition Alliance has been smeared with epithets such as "unholy global gath bandhan" working against the national interest, etc.

ELECTORAL WINS AT ANY COST

What is evident today is that every election — whether to State Assemblies, District Councils, or even local panchayats — are turning into conflict zones, leading to extremely tense situations. In many instances, they have become tinderboxes for communal, caste, political and other forms of violence. Winning at any cost has become the sole motif of certain parties, especially India's principal political party. While States such as West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh feature prominently in the media in relation to cases of communal and political violence, the reality today is that no State is exempt from this pattern of aggressive electioneering.

Apart from political polarisation, arousing feelings of majority versus the minority have become the stock in trade of some parties in elections. Encouraging majoritarian attitudes obscuring ground realities, has hence, become a pernicious trend. The recently conducted elections to the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation was a classic example. Employing majoritarianism as a tactic, incidentally leading to a polarization of votes, did produce electoral dividends — but it comes at a high cost. Such tactics cannot but have serious consequences for India as a secular democratic republic.

The coarsening of India's democratic fabric is again well evident in several other areas. Constitutional protection and principles of natural justice as also freedom of the individual, all seem to be coming under strain lately. One bizarre aspect is the current campaign against 'Love

Jihad', a term which finds no mention in any lexicon. On the pretext that 'Love Jihad' is a euphemism for conversion, and some States have taken legal steps to prevent it. New laws have also been enacted to enforce this diktat. All this despite the existence of judicial pronouncements declaring the inherent right of any individual to choose whom to marry, irrespective of caste, religion or creed.

Equally worrisome is the extent to which India seems to be regressing when it comes to the treatment of political prisoners in jails. The plight of Jesuit priest, Father Stan Swamy, a victim of Parkinson's disease, which made the headlines is only one instance. Many other cases have come to light, demonstrating an increasingly indifferent and disdainful approach towards political prisoners, especially those perceived to oppose the prevailing order. Labelling dissenters as urban naxals and the like, and being indifferent to their plight when in custody, marks a sharp decline from past democratic practices.

SOCIAL MEDIA CLAMPDOWN

India may not be the leading country when it comes to disinformation threats, but under the label of fighting fake news and the social media's pernicious use of fake news, India is beginning to clampdown on social media platforms and enact draconian laws towards this end. Kerala, a Left bastion, even sought to introduce an ordinance mandating a jail term for any offensive social media post, making the police the arbiter to determine the nature of social media abuse. Fortunately, this has been withdrawn, but the genie is out of the bottle and quite a few States appear to be contemplating similar measures against fake news.

FARMERS' PROTEST

If the perception that India is becoming an illiberal democracy where dissent is at a discount needs any reinforcement, one has only to look to the groundswell of protests against the new Farmers' Bills. This has galvanised a very substantial segment of farmers across the country and also provided an opportunity to Opposition parties to combine and back the nationwide Bharat Bandh by farmers on December 8. This is yet another instance of imposing a measure without due discussion and acceptance by those affected. The most vivid images flashed across India today are those of farmers from the Punjab and nearby environs, laying a near siege to the National Capital.

The farmers' protest has become a cause célèbre today. Initially, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau expressed sympathy with the Punjab farmers, but adding further grist to this was the joint letter signed by 36 British Members of Parliament to the U.K. Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab and the comment by Stéphane Dujarric, Spokesperson for the Secretary General of the United Nations that "people have a right to demonstrate peacefully, and authorities need to let

them do so". The Indian diaspora in the West is currently backing the farmers' movement. Far more than how matters turn out is the impression this conveys of an India that is intent in pursuing its predetermined course of action, paying little heed to peoples' demands and protests, much in the nature of autocratic and dictatorial regimes rather than a democracy.

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