

A THOUGHT FOR TODAY

My secular commitment or economic policies will not be compromised.

DEVE GOWDA

Back to Basics

Regional parties shouldn't forget local concerns

It is not rare for single-state parties to have delusions of ideological grandeur and widespread political influence. Recent remarks of leaders of Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) and Janata Dal (Secular) are symptomatic of this misplaced sense of importance. NCP, which is essentially a party of western Maharashtra, has always thought of itself as a potential alternative to Congress. The party, at its recent national executive meet in Dehradun, called for viable alternatives to Congress, since it was pursuing 'capitalist policies', as well as to a 'communal' BJP. NCP's attempt to rope in DIC(K), a splinter group of Congress led by former Kerala chief minister K Karunakaran, is part of the plan to spread its influence outside Maharashtra. This, the party hopes, would help to pressurise Congress in Mumbai and New Delhi. Similarly, JD(S) chief Deve Gowda's threat to BJP leadership that his party could walk out of the coalition government in Bangalore if Dal's 'secular' credentials were to be compromised is more tactical than ideological. The Dal-led government is under pressure from a section of Karnataka BJP over corruption charges against the chief minister. Gowda has sought to turn the tables on BJP and put on the garb of ideology to gain the moral high ground. Arm-twisting their allies, Congress and BJP, has become necessary for NCP and JD(S) to further their political bases and remain in office. This is more so because NCP and JD(S) have refused to play to their strengths, which are a pronounced regional character and the ability to conduct grass roots politics. In fact, NCP and JD(S) are guilty of letting down their support bases. Gowda has been blamed by many as the singular impediment to Bangalore's development, and thereby Karnataka's welfare. NCP leaders have presided over the decline of Mumbai and the rest of Maharashtra.

It is time that they go back to the drawing board. Regional parties that have focused on their core constituencies have had a long run in Indian politics. The Dravida Kazhagam in Tamil Nadu, Telugu Desam in Andhra Pradesh and Biju Janata Dal in Orissa are examples of parties that have used the language of regional politics and local ambitions to successfully challenge national parties like Congress, BJP and the communists. Despite nurturing national ambitions, NCP and JD(S) continue to be regional outfits and they are better off being so. The likes of Sharad Pawar and Deve Gowda should espouse the interests of Maharashtra and Karnataka in a non-sectarian fashion rather than spout the virtues of socialism and secularism. Right doses of regionalism, in a federal polity like ours, can be a balancing force and ensure even spread of economic resources.

Air Unworthy

Two recent aircraft near-misses highlight perils of air travel

So the government wants to create a clutch of world-class international airports on the lines of Schiphol, Changi and Dubai by the time the Commonwealth Games roll around in 2010. This is great news, but only if it also remembers to address some awkward technical realities on the ground, otherwise the projects might never fully take off as intended. For instance, two major back-to-back air disasters were recently averted, thanks primarily to on-board aircraft avionics and pilot reflexes when neither should have been called into play in the first place. One involved a commercial Boeing belonging to a private airline which, while coming in for a routine landing at Rajkot, suddenly found itself taking part in the Indian Air Force's combat manoeuvres in the vicinity. Virtually face to face with a supersonic Sukhoi 30 barely 150 metres away vertically, a head-on collision was averted only due to the avoidance system alarm in the cockpit kicking in. Some 12 hours later, another packed airliner about to land in New Delhi found an aeroplane already parked on the landing aircraft's assigned runway. The pilot was forced to make a sharp re-claim to avoid a smash-up. Where were the air traffic controllers? What were they doing?

Inept ATCs, however, are only part of the whole malaise affecting the system. With more and more airlines entering the skies and a paucity of resident pilots, local and foreign airmen are often being recruited indiscriminately and cheaply — sometimes without sufficient experience, the required number of flying hours to their credit, DGCA clearance or even a certain minimum level of competency in English, which is the language of aviation. The result: ATCs face a potential communication problem when talking with them, which could lead to catastrophic results. And with traffic volumes increasing all the time these risks can only magnify in the future, considering there are other endemic problems plaguing India's airports too, such as bird-hits and fog. What is being done about the human encroachments around Mumbai airport? When is the upgraded instrument landing system going to be inducted in Delhi's IGI airport? Why are illegal abattoirs and landfills still located around them? Before carrying out cosmetic improvements at the airports, the authorities need to address these basic questions first.

Winds of Change

Malini Sen

It was her first visit outside Anupshahr, UP, but on being asked about her impression of the US, pat came Asha's reply: "I noticed that men and women equally divide the household chores — right from cleaning the house to looking after the baby". She did not mention the Manhattan skyline or the big portions of French fries and colas, or that her hosts had indoor swimming pools. I was struck by her reply. Asha is a student of Pardada Pardadi Girls Vocational School in Anupshahr. The school's mission is to improve the lives of girls from the poorest sections of society. As a reward for her good performance in school, Asha was selected to visit the US. During her five-week trip, she stayed with five American families. She is one of the 10 girls who cleared the Class X UP board exams with a first division. What is so astonishing about their feat is that these girls belong to the surrounding villages of Anupshahr in UP's Bulandshahr district. They have to balance their studies and household chores, including looking after their younger siblings, a common practice in most villages of India. On being asked when they found time to study and get good results, they said, before dawn and after midnight, in the lantern light.

When you meet girls like Asha, you realise the importance of educating the girl child. Education is not only about literacy — learning to read and write — but also about empowerment, to help an individual think critically. Most of these girls are engaged at a young age, and from an early stage in life are taught that they have to do most of work in the house and also help out in the fields. During her visit to another country, Asha got an opportunity to observe gender relations and the status of women in other cultures. It made her even more determined to work as a teacher before getting married. Yesterday was Girl Child Day. We need to reflect on the achievements of girls like Asha. With more such schemes in place to educate the girl child, Asha and her like could bring in the winds of change in their villages.

BRIEF CASE

Back To Square One

Thailand's political future in doubt after coup

Thitinan Pongsudhirak

Thailand's lightning military coup d'etat on September 19 against the government of Thaksin Shinawatra was unexpected but unsurprising. Something had to give sooner or later, as the political confrontation between pro- and anti-Thaksin forces became indefinitely deadlocked. Thaksin was unwilling to step down voluntarily, whereas his opponents, led by the People's Alliance for Democracy, were equally determined to take him to task for his corruption, abuses of power, and overall lack of legitimacy.

The coup resolves the nine-month-old political crisis in the short-term, but much uncertainty and volatility remain in the longer-term, especially as the ousted prime minister lurks in the background, poised to plot a comeback when the opportunity arises. The military junta — the Administrative Reform Council under Constitutional Monarchy — will try to move expeditiously to install a respectable and credible civilian-led caretaker government and put in motion a political reform process revolving around a new constitution, as the 1997 charter has been abolished. The handover of power to a universally acceptable civilian-led government in the interim will be crucial to restore Thailand's international credibility and reassure jittery investors and markets both at home and abroad.

Persistent coup rumours had been swirling for months dating to February-March this year, intensifying in recent days while Thaksin was overseas. The latest putsch represents a pressure cooker that came to a boil. Several contributing factors led to the military takeover. First, Thaksin was involved in an untenable tussle with the army chief, Gen Sonthi Boonyaratglin. They had different approaches towards the management of the southern insurgency. Thaksin and his government categorically rejected negotiations with the insurgents, whereas the army preferred to extend an olive branch to pave the way for

dialogue. The former PM also tried to wrest control of the army by promoting his loyalists and former classmates to key commands, including the position of army chief, in the annual reshuffle. Tinkering with the annual military promotions was part of Thaksin's undoing.

Second, the controversial allegation of a car bomb assassination plot implicated senior army officers. As details of the case simply did not add up, the army saw this as an affront on its institution, a Thaksin manoeuvre to keep the army on its back foot. Third, the PAD was reviving its street protests, and signalled that it was willing to go for broke, possibly resorting to violence to provide a pretext for Thaksin's



demise. The growing likelihood of violence in the streets between the PAD-led and Thaksin's forces was a key consideration in the putsch. Fourth, both sides had their hands forced on the day. Troop movements led to Thaksin's pre-emptive declaration of a state of emergency and removal of Sonthi, who reacted by seizing control. Above all, the growing and defiant challenge that Thaksin and his core supporters posed to the palace and the establishment became unbearable. Deeply royalist, Sonthi acted to stave off Thaksin's challenge and defend the widely-revered king. According to Sonthi's post-coup statement on state-run television network, the defence of the throne and Thaksin's lack of legitimacy due to unaddressed corruption allegations were the twin rationales for the military intervention.

That the coup-makers were able to act so swiftly without palpable opposition in Bangkok

is attributable to Thaksin's eroded legitimacy and his underestimation of the generals' decisiveness and resolve. Thaksin also stayed overseas for too long and deprived himself of the tactical manoeuvrability that could have averted the putsch.

The immediate consequences of the coup are manifold. Chief among them is Thaksin's future. He is unlikely to return to Thailand in the near term as long as Sonthi's forces are in charge. Thaksin would certainly be detained on a wide variety of charges. His assets would come under investigation. He could end up on trial for corruption and mishandling the southern insurgency, potentially landing in jail. His exile in the immediate term is now likely, probably in London where he has purchased and stored extensive assets, thanks to his connections, including the owner of a world-famous department store. And his offspring and school-age in-laws are ensconced in public schools in the UK.

But Thaksin is not completely out of the picture in the longer term. He knows that he can still return and reclaim an electoral mandate if circumstances change. After all, his Thai Rak Thai party won a 57 per cent majority of popular votes in the April 2 election. Thaksin's opponents, on the other hand, will do everything they can to make sure that the legal charges against him are so insurmountable that he will not want to come back.

Another crucial consequence is Thailand's political future. The coup has catapulted Thai democracy back 15 years when the last putsch transpired and ended in disgrace for the military-backed elected government, which was overthrown in a bloody street confrontation in May 1992. Thailand has thus returned to square one, to a vicious cycle of constitution-election-government corruption-coup. Although a new constitution will be drafted between the next six to 18 months and overseen by the caretaker government to be set up by the military's ARC, its contents and enforcement will not ward off the likes of Thaksin unless they incorporate parts of the overthrown leader's legacy that was positive, such as his focus on the rural grass roots and urban poor.

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Dutch diplomat calls Delhi a garbage dump

It's a very warped view

Arnold Parzer, a very senior diplomat at the Royal Netherlands embassy in Delhi, recently told a Dutch newspaper that New Delhi is the most miserable place he had ever lived in. "Anything that can go wrong does go wrong; everyone interferes with everyone else; the people are a darn nuisance; the climate is hell; the city a garbage dump", he said.

New Delhi has reason to feel offended. Parzer's remarks are in extremely bad taste. Even if these are his real feelings about the place, he should have saved it for his memoirs or at least waited till he was posted out of Delhi to make it public. You do not trash the host country while serving there. It's like the guest telling the hostess at the dinner table that the food is awful.

It's not just that diplomats are supposed to be tactful and politically correct. Parzer distorts reality by focusing only on negatives. Indian hospitality and warmth, something most visitors to India can't help talking about, seem to have left him untouched.

Delhi is not the cleanest city in the world,

true. But heat and dust is the lot of the average Delhiite. Diplomats are a pampered lot. They become part of the elite as soon as they land here. The diplomatic enclave where embassies are located are the poshest addresses in town. Their officials have cushy lifestyles. For most of them the huge houses, the battery of maids, cook and driver are unimaginable luxuries back home.

In most western capitals the equivalent may have been in a cramped apartment in suburbia. Their purchasing power, the amenities at their disposal and the preferential treatment they get wherever they go make India a dream posting. Not just diplomats, there are many foreigners who are enamoured of Delhi and have chosen to move here — Mark Tully and William Dalrymple being just a couple of the better-known examples. There are NRIs who having lived abroad for years and are now preferring to come back to Delhi for the amenities it affords. Given all this one wonders what Parzer is complaining about.

TIMES VIEW

Let's call a spade a spade

The average Delhiite does not have a sparkling reputation and we all know it. Delhiites know it, the rest of India knows it, NRIs know it and, all right, now the readers of a Dutch newspaper also know it. No one is denying Delhi's remarkable history or its growing status as a vibrant metropolis, but let's call a spade a spade: Delhi has serious problems. No number of flyovers and metro lines have been able to cure the traffic situation. Delhi remains one of the most polluted cities in the world. Its infrastructure cannot keep up with its rate of population growth, and the proliferation of slums, garbage and human waste in the city is a disgrace.

Certainly, as a diplomat, Arnold Parzer should not have said what he did. He is a guest in this country, living the privileged life India provides to foreign envoys. Moreover, the language he used was coarse and antagonistic. But what he said was not very different from conversations that take place in Indian drawing rooms. If a

bicycle scrapes against a car at a red light, completely uninvolved standers-by will make sure they give both parties a piece of their minds. Yes, everyone does interfere with everyone else and, yes, the people can be a darn nuisance.

Visitors from other parts of India are often appalled by the aggression and lack of courtesy displayed by residents of the capital. Parzer also complained about the climate in Delhi. We cannot deny that Delhi weather is unquestionably harsh. In his book City of Djinns, even someone as fascinated by Delhi as William Dalrymple describes the relentlessness of the loo wind and the severity of Delhi winter in no uncertain terms.

A diplomat criticising Delhi in the manner that Parzer has is undoubtedly bad public relations for the city. We would of course prefer not to have our dirty laundry hung out for us. But while we may not like to call Delhi a garbage dump or a miserable place to live in, someone else may well view it that way.

COUNTER VIEW

Himani Dalmia

Don't blame SIMI

Irfan Ahmad

There is little evidence to suggest that the Student Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) is involved in plotting terrorist attacks. Yet, after the horrendous Mumbai blasts that claimed 200 lives, SIMI is being looked upon as one of the perpetrators.

The media's portrayal of SIMI as a terrorist outfit is misplaced, if not Islamophobic. A closer look at the evolution of SIMI bears this out. In 1996, SIMI had only 413 core members called ansar. In 2002, the number of ansars was well below 1,000. However, the print media, particularly the Hindi papers Amar Ujala and Dainik Jagran, gave the impression that they were in thousands.

Those who call SIMI a terrorist outfit conveniently overlook the anti-Muslim character of Hindu nationalist forces, which pushed SIMI into radicalising itself for reasons of self-defence. SIMI is believed to have links with foreign jihad organisations; the focus shifts to Pakistan, while conditions at home are overlooked. Muslims are stigmatised as quislings of the Indian nation. This is not to suggest that SIMI may not have foreign connections. But the fact is that SIMI's radicalisation — a post-Babri phenomenon — is predominantly indigenous. Radicalisation does not mean acts of violence; rather, it is a radical language of self-defence.

Since its inception in the mid-1980s, SIMI's primary constituency was the student community. The issues it raised were largely educational and religious. From a puritan Islamic framework, for example, it campaigned against immorality, obscenity and use of hard drugs. It also launched campaigns to raise educational awareness. The key catalyst to SIMI's radicalisation was institutionalised riots generated by the Ayodhya movement. State authorities also sided with rioters against Muslims. So grave was the climate that in November 1990, 32 towns of UP were under curfew. It was in this context that in 1991 SIMI organised the 'action for Muslims' conference in Mumbai, and for the first time called for jihad. SIMI argued that jihad was the only option left for Muslims in order to defend themselves against the Hindu nationalist onslaught. After the anti-Muslim riots of Mumbai and

Surat that followed the demolition of the Babri mosque, SIMI added the theme of martyrdom to its call for jihad.

SIMI's radicalisation increased after Hindu nationalists came to power in the late 1990s. SIMI likened L K Advani to Abu Jehel, the man who routinely tortured the Prophet Muhammad. In 2004, I interviewed SIMI's national president who was just released from jail. He stressed the need for jihad on the following grounds: "We have been regularly killed in riots, our property destroyed and chastity of our sisters and mothers violated in broad daylight. How many Muslims were killed in Mumbai, Surat, and elsewhere? Muslims were massacred in Gujarat. What do you expect us to do? We must wage jihad to defend ourselves". As this remark suggests, SIMI's radicalisation bears an organic link to anti-Muslim riots. Nothing demonstrates this more eloquently than the names of organisations Muslims have formed in the last 10 years: Gujarat Muslim Revenge Force, Muslim Defence Force, Islamic Defence Force and so on. Yet the government and media call these organisations, all established in the wake of riots orchestrated by Hindu nationalist forces, terrorist.

Such labelling, however, obscures the fact that these organisations are responses to failures of state in stopping violence against Muslims. This is evident from the link between the geography of riots and that of Islamist radicalism. Over 30 per cent of SIMI's members are from Maharashtra, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh, states with the worst record of riots in the last two decades. In contrast, SIMI has next to no members from Bihar, because the state has not witnessed any riots since 1990.

Alarmist analyses do not take into account the complexity and depth of the phenomenon. Reading the sensationalist headlines that describe SIMI as a terrorist outfit gives rise to a thought: When will we hear the bigger story of virulent Hindu nationalism and state-mediated riots, of which SIMI is only an episode?

To understand the Mumbai massacre, should we not also examine the massive erosion of India's secularism? SIMI is the angry product of that erosion.

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Sacred Space

Don't Worry

He by whom the world is not agitated and who cannot be agitated by the world, and who is free from joy, anger, fear and worry — he is dear to Me.

Bhagavad Gita

The secret of health for both mind and body is not to mourn for the past, not to worry about the future, and not to anticipate troubles, but to live in the present moment wisely and earnestly.

Gautama Buddha

Be careful what you water your dreams with. Water them with worry and fear and you will produce weeds that choke the life from your dream. Water them with optimism and solutions and you will cultivate success.

Tao Te Ching

There is nothing that wastes the body like worry, and one who has any faith in God should be ashamed to worry about anything whatsoever.

Mahatma Gandhi

I believe God is managing affairs and that He doesn't need any advice from me. With God in charge, I believe everything will work out for the best in the end. So what is there to worry about?

Henry Ford

Why Ashrams and Satsangs Have A Different Feel

Discourse: Swami Muktananda

Ashrams are centres of pilgrimage. Those who live in ashrams — for short periods or otherwise — experience shakti, a kind of positive energy field, that seems to envelop them. It works from within, bestowing the highest reward on them.

The character of a place is constantly remoulded by the actions of its inhabitants. A guru's abode is much more than merely the structure of the place, for there is no difference between a holy place and its presiding saint. It is said that where Kakabhushandi, the great devotee of Sri Rama lived, even creatures without devotional tendencies — birds, animals, rakshasas — and hunters and fishermen became spiritually inclined. The entire atmosphere there was surcharged with the power of Sri Rama's name.

Around Gautama Buddha, not only human beings, but even aggressive animals such as tigers and lions became quiet and non-violent. Mahatma Gandhi was a great lover of the truth. In his presence, even the worst liar would confess. In the village of Ganeshpuri, my guru, Swami Nityananda, seldom exchanged a word with devotees who would throw him in large numbers. Swami Nityananda sat in a silent, self-absorbed posture radiating fearlessness. Devotees had one darshan of him and went away feeling satisfied.

In the Mahabharata, Sri Krishna asked Yudhishthara, "O righteous one, how many sinners are there in this gathering?" Yudhishthara replied, "Lord, this is an assembly of fortunate and pious people. How can there be a sinner here?" Lord Krishna then asked Duryodhana the same question. Duryodhana replied, "Vasudeva, everyone here is vicious and without light. I can see only sinners around me

in this court". The viewpoint one adopts shows one's attitude and outlook. In the same way only those who want to do sadhana should come and live in an ashram. An ashram is not a picnic resort. It follows a scriptural code that must be respected.

In an ashram, time is spent on meditation and prayer. Other activities are of secondary importance. Before you enter an ashram, leave your worldly baggage outside. Compose yourself to be calm and humble. Let the mind be free of burdens. Otherwise, it will be no different than going to a railway station, to a club or snack-shop where one makes a lot of noise but comes back feeling empty and dissatisfied.

A great deal depends on the company you keep. A verse in the Ramcharitmanasa says, "The happiness of heaven and of liberation put together is nothing compared to the happiness that one gets from a little satsang. It is for this reason that I urge you to seek the company of great saints".

An ashram or a venue for satsang is not a place for wanton indulgence or argument. If we cannot live quietly, we should not visit these places. My advice to you is: "Don't spend your life in vain. Your transient body is of hardly any use when it deteriorates. Do not allow it to become lazy. Whether you are wealthy or poor, do not give way to lethargy, apathy, sloth and inertia".

No one tells me what to do and yet I lead a most orderly life. I get up early in the morning. I attend to every duty myself. I eat a frugal meal at a fixed time. I attend to the ashram work to the best of my ability. I try to ensure that everyone here lives in peaceful harmony. When one follows this discipline, one achieves Vaikuntha or true paradise.

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MY TIMES, MY VOICE

Pope's Statement

The main import of the Pope's speech was a sharp criticism of the state of affairs in western civilisation, the shield of rational thinking that the West retreats behind and its scepticism where the 'sacred' is concerned. Criticism perfectly justified in most people's minds.

Then why can't Muslims do the same? Why do they find it so hard to look within? To be so volatile and become inflamed by one harsh statement is uncalled for. Is this going to be another example of what happened over the Danish cartoons, in bad taste at worst, but surely no more than that?

Revathy Gopal, MUMBAI

The furore in the Islamic world over the Pope's merely quoting a 14th century monarch should make him realise the fundamental difference between Hinduism and Islam.

His equally unthoughtful remarks on Hinduism not so long ago to an Indian missionary visiting him also raised a furore among the world's Hindus. But that did not draw even a modicum of remorse from him or the Vatican. Naturally, since the Hindus did not use any threatening language or pose any threat to the security of Christians; they merely pitied his being an ignoramus on Hinduism, forgave and forgot.

Hemendra A Mehta, VIA E-MAIL

www.timesofindia.com

Meddling Globocop

The ghost of 9/11 will continue to haunt the West since it keeps interfering in the affairs of Third World countries. US supercop attitude is resulting in discontent among them.

A K Srivastava

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