



Cutting the captain

The Congress might have ended one crisis in Punjab only to set off a bigger one

Amarinder Singh's ouster, and the selection of his bairer Charanjit Singh Channi as Chief Minister of Punjab was scripted in Delhi by the Congress high command, which in effect is party MP Rahul Gandhi and AICC general secretary in charge of Uttar Pradesh Priyanka Gandhi Vadra. They pushed for the change of guard only months ahead of the next Assembly election tenaciously. Punjab is one of only three States where the party is in power. The party MLAs had turned against Captain Amarinder, but not before the Gandhis made it clear that they wanted him out. Capt. Amarinder, 79, had said of the 2017 Assembly election that it was the last in his career, and the party should identify his successor ahead of the next election which is now due in months. While the Gandhis appear to have taken it too seriously, Capt. Amarinder, as those in power often do, went back on his words. Capt. Amarinder says the reason for his change of mind – he now says his retirement is not imminent – is the choice by the Gandhis of Navjot Singh Sidhu as the party State president, whom he considers as anti-national and mixed up with the Pakistani establishment. The incoming Chief Minister, a Dalit Sikh, and the party chief have been acting in tandem to unseat Capt. Amarinder.

It is one thing to push for new leadership in the party and quite another to create a crisis in the process. The cost of this change for the Congress will be clear only in the coming days, but it is already evident that getting the party back in fighting shape will be an uphill task. Capt. Amarinder is exploring political options outside the Congress. While it may not be easy for him to build something new, he could queer the pitch for the Congress. His absence itself could be a drag on the feet for the party. Though admittedly inaccessible to ordinary workers and even party leaders, his sense of the people's pulse in the communally sensitive border State has been critical for the party. His moderate image, secular approach, and nationalist rhetoric fit the Congress well. Mr. Sidhu and Mr. Channi have been making provocative appeals to Sikh religious grievances, in their efforts to outsmart the opposition Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) and the outgoing Chief Minister. His propensity for communal appealing, and his unstable temperament make Mr. Sidhu a sinister joker in the Congress pack. Should the Congress win, he will claim the Chief Minister's post. With the SAD on the back foot for being part of the Union government when it enacted the three farm laws that the State's farmers are up in arms against, and the BJP friendless and faceless, the Congress had appeared poised to retain power. Perhaps such advantageous circumstances emboldened the Gandhis to go for the jugular in Punjab. But the SAD might have got a lifeline, and the Aam Aadmi Party new hope while the Congress deals with its internal crisis.

A spike

India must prioritise vaccines to States and districts that are at greatest infection risk

India on September 17 administered a record 2.5 crore vaccine shots, which an ebullient Health Ministry said was the equivalent of the populations of the whole of Australia, two-thirds of Canada and five times that of New Zealand. The only other comparison would be China's pace of vaccination – 2.47 crore shots on a single day. Thus, 2.5 crore means 62% Indian adults have now got at least one dose and one in five fully inoculated. Friday's drive was part of a concerted push by BJP-ruled States to boost vaccination numbers as a birthday gift to Prime Minister Narendra Modi. But to encourage a behavioural nudge when supply is abundant and demand is not commensurate – as in the U.S. – and have a marked supply shortage even as vaccine production continues – as in India – are two different things. Bharat Biotech was supposed to be supplying 6.7 crore doses a month from July-August and 10 crore doses a month from September, according to a Department of Biotechnology statement in April. This would mean at least 52 crore doses from July-December, of which 40 crore is to be supplied from September-December. Since the vaccination drive began, only nine crore doses of Covaxin have been administered as of last week – at least three crore short. Several cabinet Ministers, in summer, had boasted that India would inoculate its adult population (about 94 crore) by the year end. This will require over 185 crore doses, or close to one crore inoculations a day; India has now crossed the 80 crore mark. Before the birthday drive, India's most recent seven-day average was 0.6-0.7 crore. Bihar, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, which saw among the highest vaccination spikes on September 17, delivered 6-10 times their previous seven-day average.

India is once again on a downswing as far as daily coronavirus numbers go, but at close to 30,000 cases a day is nowhere near the all-time low of nearly 10,000 daily cases in February which preceded the catastrophic second wave. The globally most prevalent Delta variant may have already washed over large swathes of India, but waning immunity and the emergence of variants capable of immune escape are thriving too. With educational institutions set to open in a big way during the winter and crores of unvaccinated children vulnerable, the imperative should be to boost daily supplies. India is lucky that there is so far no discernible vaccine scepticism and hesitancy and it has only to really bother with producing and delivering the jab painlessly. Instead of positioning vaccine drives as opportunities to set vacuous records, the Centre must prioritise vaccines to States and districts that are at greatest infection risk and follow up with vaccine makers to speed up and make good on their commitments.

A one-party juggernaut and its feeble challengers

With no glue still to bond the Opposition, the non-party movements of resistance could offer hope for change



HARBANS MUKHIA

The political Opposition in its entirety appears to have decided this – that each party would rather contest and lose to a smaller local adversary than challenge the one bigger, common and more ominous adversary. And win (or lose) the forthcoming Assembly elections, and more importantly, the crucial general election of 2024 together. The writing has been on the wall ever since 2019, reaffirming the urgency of the good old saying, "united we stand/wind, divided we fall".

Some stirrings

Only one leader with credible bona fides – the inimitable fighter and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee – appears to have recognised this and is striving to forge a united front to challenge the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Indeed, she had sounded out the Opposition on this even before 2019, but it was ignored then as it is being ignored now. Nationalist Congress Party leader Sharad Pawar, the veteran, is also one leader sensitive to the nuances of the present scenario and did take some initial steps towards forging a common front to take on the strong adversary. It ended with an online conversation, with a prepared sermon by Indian National Congress chief Sonia Gandhi on how India must be saved. Period. The writing on the wall remains unread. Mean-

while, every party is busy finalising its list of candidates for the forthcoming Assembly elections and issuing statements to the press asserting its own invincibility in the forthcoming battle. The year 2024 is still too far on the horizon to exercise one's mind. Never mind the link between the two.

A contrast lies in strategy

It is hard for an outsider to ignore the distinct modes of election management, one that the BJP has introduced especially over the past decade and that of the other established parties. The BJP prepares for an election at the ground level at least two years ahead by activating its cadres, especially cadres from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, in establishing personal contacts with potential voters, collecting information about the local issues that might motivate voters to its side, the caste/subcaste/community profile of each constituency to cohere with grandiose calls for Vikas, and Hindu Rashtra from the top-level leadership, not to forget the ever active BJP IT cell forging and spreading questionable material every day on social media.

In other words, the BJP is forever preparing for an election. This is in contrast to the Opposition parties which get into action a month or two before election dates are announced, their chief concern being to usually nominate candidates with their own resources for winning. The leaders contribute their mite to the process by making speeches at election meetings. The BJP also learns quickly from its defeats and victories and does take immediate remedial action. The recent quick change of



RETULBAI KONWAR

governments in several BJP-ruled States is a good example. The party also changes its tactics keeping in mind the lessons learnt. The contrast, of the energy of the BJP and the lethargy on the other side, is striking.

The BJP and the Opposition rely largely on attacking each other. This suits the BJP more because the Opposition earns credibility only if it posits an alternative economic, political and social programme to the electorate that carries conviction, for which it has to be formulated long before the elections are seen on the horizon. Before 2019, the Congress did posit an attractive economic alternative by promising ₹6,000 per month to poor farmers, but it was formulated a few weeks before the elections, announced from electoral daises by Congress leader Rahul Gandhi with no groundwork to prepare the audiences for it, and thus, carried no conviction. Since then, no Opposition party has challenged the Government by positing an attractive alternative slogan.

As of now, the reluctance of the Opposition parties to come together for the decisive fights ahead, and the absence of any evidence of serious preparations, do seem to indicate a willing walkover to the

ruling party.

The Congress's problem

It is easy to pin the responsibility for this denouement on the Indian National Congress. As the country's second largest party in the Seventeenth Lok Sabha, with footprints around the country (besides being the oldest and the most experienced political party), the responsibility devolves upon it squarely to forge a vision and a programme which would accommodate most if not all the others into a single conglomerate (though preferably not a single unit), for the battles ahead.

But it is this status it has that fills it with an arrogance to claim the unshared leadership of any possible combination of parties, expressed in the following formula: come and support us and we shall fight together. There is no need for discussion, for discussion involves sharing. Just listen to either Ms. Sonia Gandhi or second best, Rahul Gandhi, and do as they say and demand. This is contrary to what his high status should imply: openness, liberalism, generosity and a vision for India beyond a vision for the present party leadership.

Its exclusive concern looks like retaining the three Gandhis (Ms. Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Vadra) at the top even if the bottom keeps floundering and withering away. It is not only the pleas from leaders of a much higher stature such as Mr. Sharad Pawar but also pleas for the reinvigoration of the party from its own senior-most and most committed leaders (the G23, or 23 of them) that are perceived as a threat to Gandhis and thus sidelined.

There has been nil "introspec-

tion" within the party after each stunning political defeat. There is no sign of the party being a living organism capable, or at least willing, to rectify its errors and move on. This is in contrast to its chief rival. The grimness of the situation is highlighted by the sterling fact that the Opposition cannot go forward without the Congress either. What more could make the BJP happier?

A new brigade

Paradoxically, the only avenue of political change through the elections that lies open, if at all, is in the non-political movements of resistance such as the farmers' agitation. The farmers, who have withstood the indifference and the assaults of the Government show no sign of backing off. They have kept almost all political parties away while also shouting from the rooftops that their mission is to defeat the BJP in the elections by mobilising farmers around the country. That they do have the capacity to mobilise themselves has been demonstrated repeatedly, most recently in Muzaffarnagar (Uttar Pradesh) and Karnal (Haryana). The mahapanchayat at Muzaffarnagar has also cautioned farmers against the BJP's use of the so-far successful strategy of divide and rule along communal lines, and the Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister has already announced his intention to go the whole hog along this path. A major communal conflagration may also be in the offing. The results of these elections will decide the future of India to a large extent.

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The relative income, subjective well-being connect

A key policy lesson would be to pursue a strategy of shared growth through remunerative employment



VARSHA S. KULKARNI & RAGHU GAIIHA

"Well-being is attained little by little, and nevertheless is no little thing itself," pronounced philosopher Zeno of Citium. While the centrality of the notion of well-being is hard to dispute, its measurement is far from straightforward. There are two distinct approaches to measurement of well-being: one is the conventional approach of measuring it in terms of objective criterion such as income/expenditure; and the second is the growing consensus around a measure of subjective well-being/SWB/life satisfaction/happiness that takes into account not just objective criteria such as income but also individual characteristics including age, gender, schooling, religion, caste, marital status, health, employment, social networks, and the overall economic and natural environment. The intuitive appeal of SWB measures is that these are influenced not just by objective criterion of income/expenditure but also by perceptions of individuals about their experiences of whether they are better-off, just the same or worse-off.

In a previous OpEd article, Kulkarni et al. ("Money vs. happiness" – Subjective well-being and income are intricately linked, *The Hindu*, February 18, 2021), it was argued that subjective well-being

varies with level of income but at a diminishing rate. Here, however, our focus is on whether relative income (i.e., relative to that of a reference group) matters more than the level of income and, in that case, whether a shift in policy is necessary to enhance SWB. Our analysis draws upon the two rounds of the nationally representative India Human Development Survey (IHDS), conducted by National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) and University of Maryland, covering the years 2005 and 2012. The data were released in 2015. Its salient features are: it is the only all-India panel survey; apart from the wide coverage of demographic, health, economic, and social variables, it asks a question on SWB. The question is: compared to seven years ago (2005), would you say your household is economically doing the same, better or worse today (2012)? Specifically, therefore, it is a measure of change in SWB, but for convenience of exposition we refer to it interchangeably as SWB, or SWB outcomes. Admittedly, a broader coverage of both economic and social aspects (such as questions about the best possible life on a scale) would have been more helpful for comparisons with studies conducted using the Gallup World Poll.

SWB and income/expenditure are positively related but at a diminishing rate. Besides, the association is weak and arguably transitory. These findings are not surprising. First, we find that the relative income effect (actual per capita income/expenditure as a fraction of the maximum in the primary sampling unit) is much



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larger. This is consistent with the relative income hypothesis formulated by Duesenberry (1949) and the famous Easterlin paradox (1973). This paradox states that at a point in time, SWB/happiness varies directly with income both among and within nations, but over time, happiness does not trend upward as income continues to grow.

Indeed, rank in the income distribution influences life satisfaction. As a society becomes richer, the average rank does not change and thus average life-satisfaction remains stable despite income growth. The relative income hypothesis cannot by itself explain why a permanent increase in an individual's income has a transitory effect on his/her well-being, as relative standing would increase. However, the increase in relative standing can be offset by change in the reference group: with this increase, the new peers serve as a reference point, and the previous peers lose salience.

On material goods

Second, individuals adapt to material goods, and these goods yield little joy for most individuals. Thus, increases in income, which are expected to raise well-being by raising consumption opportunities, may in fact have minor lasting effect because consumption of ma-

terial goods has little effect on well-being above a certain level of consumption or because of hedonic adaptation (<https://bit.ly/3zrIPNA>). This has been questioned on the grounds that there is no income threshold at which SWB diverged. Instead, higher incomes are associated with both feeling better moment-to-moment and being more satisfied with life overall. While there may be some point beyond which money loses its power to improve well-being, the current view is that the threshold may be higher than previously thought (<https://bit.ly/3nQEYX8>).

Income changes

We further analysed how relative income changed during 2005-2012. We classified relative income/expenditure into three intervals: 0-25%, >25-50% and above >50% in both 2005 and 2012. The cross-tabulation unravels sharp changes. Consider the first interval with lowest relative income, 0-25%, in 2005. About 40% remained in this interval, while about the same proportion experienced a sharp increase in relative income (by moving to the interval, >25-50%), and above a fifth a substantial increase (by moving into the interval, >50%). The next interval with higher relative income, (>25-50%), revealed a different pattern. While about 40% remained in this interval, more than a third ascended into the highest relative income interval, >50%, implying substantial narrowing of the income/expenditure disparity. However, a distressing feature was that well over one fourth experienced a marked increase of this

disparity or lower relative income (i.e., by moving into the interval 0-25%). In the third interval, >50%, about 51% remained in it, while about one third experienced a marked reduction in relative income (by moving into the lower interval, >25-50%) and a considerably lower proportion (over 16%) registered a sharp reduction (by moving into the highest relative income interval, 0-25%).

Going forward

So, to recapitulate, the lower the relative income, the lower is SWB. What our analysis shows is that a large majority of those with lowest relative income experienced substantially higher relative incomes; also, a large majority of those in the next higher range (>25-50%) recorded significantly higher relative incomes; and, nearly half of those in the highest range of relative income (>50%) recorded lower relative incomes in 2012. During a period of steady growth of per capita income (just under 6% annually), the benefits in terms of higher relative income accrued largely to those in the lower intervals.

In sum, the important policy lesson is that, instead of relentless pursuit of income growth, more attention must be given to a strategy of shared growth through remunerative employment in order to enhance well-being.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Change in Punjab

Amarinder Singh stepping down as Punjab Chief Minister on Saturday is nothing short of a dramatic move by the 'people's maharaja' (Page 1, "Amarinder quits amid turmoil in Cong.", September 19). The writing was on the wall when the younger Gandhis appointed Navjot Singh Sidhu as the State party chief. On the whole, the developments in Punjab must make the Bharatiya Janata Party rub its hands in glee.

N.J. RAVI CHANDER, Bengaluru

■ The proverb, it never rains but it pours, sums up the crisis in the Grand Old Party (GOP). With the exit of Captain Amarinder along with existing problems in the

Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh party units, also compounded by the exit of Jyotiraditya Scindia, the writing is on the wall. The GOP is in deep trouble. It is rather disturbing to realise the Indian National Congress (INC), nourished and brought up by the greatest stalwarts, patriots of exceptional calibre, is moving toward a state of oblivion. There is hardly any need now for the BJP to keep citing the phrase "Congress Mukh Bharat" when the INC is presenting on a platter reasons for the Bharatiya Janata Party to continue its rule. It is disappointing that vested interests are calling the shots in the principal Opposition party, totally demoralising its grass-root workers. When will the party realise the need to set its

house in order before making futile attempts to challenge the Narendra Modi regime?

S. SESHADRI, Chennai

■ The Congress is in power in only a handful of States and the development comes as a tragedy at a time when there is turmoil in every State it controls. That the dissenting Assembly members have suddenly found out at the fag end of the party's term the presence of unfulfilled election promises is strange. Considering the administrative experience of Amarinder Singh, Navjot Singh Sidhu or any other leader cannot do justice to the post. Criticisms against the policies of the BJP government will not be effective unless the Congress

manages to sort out its troubles. It is pathetic that the national Opposition party is being run by an interim party president which makes other leaders and party workers lose confidence.

D. SETHURAMAN, Chennai

■ The inability of the Grand Old party to keep its flock together is glaring. It is disappointing to see the Congress party failing to honour the people's mandate in various States as a result of factionalism. The 'tall leadership' of the party is in slumber as far as maintaining a coherent leadership is concerned. The Congress is charting a course of its disintegration.

J. ANANTHA PADMANABHAN, Tiruchi

■ Capt. Amarinder Singh is ready to salute but is definitely not prepared to kowtow to incompetent people. He did as much good for the State of Punjab as he possibly could. A disciplined military person like Capt. Amarinder could not have swum for long in a cesspool of politics. A lion has been made to vacate the throne to make way for a circus.

M.R. ANAND, Vrindavan, Uttar Pradesh

Harmony in Kerala

It is rare to find the kind of religious cohesion one has in Kerala anywhere else in the country. The cent percent educated population speaking the same one language yet tragically falling prey to divisive forces must be reversed. Nothing must disturb this cohesion

(Editorial page, "A dark cloud in Kerala's sky of communal harmony", September 18). Keralites themselves need to restore harmony.

MOHAMMED IKRAMULLA, Hyderabad

Exit Ford

The decision of American car maker Ford to close its manufacturing base in India is a bolt from the blue – to its customers, employees and dealers. It is a matter of concern that the plants which helped the manufacturer establish a niche for itself may stop. Ford's exit from the Indian market is also a huge loss for Chennai, the Detroit of India. RAJAMANI CHELLADURAI, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu



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