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Baton passes on

Rahul Gandhi's impending elevation as the Congress president also marks the end of the tenure as party chief of his mother, Sonia Gandhi. That Sonia Gandhi, a reluctant leader to begin with, headed the Congress for 19 years, the longest tenure for a president in the history of the 132-year-old party, is both remarkable and telling. It underlines the centrality of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty in the Congress: For better, and as it often seems, for worse, the family remains the glue that holds the party together. Whether it is sufficient to propel its revival from its prolonged crisis and decline is the question.

As Congress chief, Sonia Gandhi's is a mixed legacy. Party leaders persuaded her to accept the post in a bid to prevent it from imploding after its young and charismatic leader, Rajiv Gandhi, was killed during the general election campaign of 1991. P.V. Narasimha Rao was brought out of retirement to head a shaky government at the Centre. Two significant events when Rao was PM changed the course of the Congress and the destiny of the country. The Rao government's failure in protecting the Babri Masjid paved the way for the rise and spread of Hindutva as a counter narrative to the secularism crafted and nurtured by Jawaharlal Nehru, which the Congress all too often failed to live up to. The Rao government also championed market forces, a departure from the ostensibly "pro-poor" economics projected by Indira Gandhi. When Sonia Gandhi stepped in as party chief, therefore, the end of the "consensus" presided over by the Congress had already begun. She stopped the bleeding of the party and under her, it saw a mini revival in the 2004 general election. She took the initiative to stitch together the UPA, and post-election, she declined the office of the PM. But her decision ended up blurring the lines of democratic accountability.

The setting up of the National Advisory Council turned Sonia Gandhi into a parallel power centre outside the government. It undermined the stature and authority of the PM's office and weakened the Congress-led government. Her failures to more boldly and imaginatively explore avenues to provide the Congress a new leadership model, and reinvent its organisation, are even more enduring for her party.

The charmer

The Russians are under the scanner for allegedly seeding social networks to influence the US presidential election. The Russians are also building a separate internet for the BRICs nations — with its own network of DNS servers, which are the internet's phone books for routing traffic. For some security analysts, this is ironic, and for others, inevitable. Ever since March, when Wikileaks uploaded the Vault 7 documents detailing the surveillance and cyberwarfare capabilities of US security agencies, Russia and China have stepped up demands for more control over the internet's DNS system. The scariest was a vulnerability in Cisco's routers, the switches over which much of the world's traffic runs.

Russia was not soothed when it was told that the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), which maintains the world's DNS system, is a nonprofit, multi-stakeholder organisation. On the plea of cybersecurity, it has created a closed system for its military forces, and now, its security council has mandated a BRICs DNS system, which would wall off its infrastructure against attacks. But the internet is a dual use technology, and the other side of the cybersecurity argument is that a separate DNS would make it easy for Russians to hack the world without being hacked back, leaving its electronic links with political and trading partners patent.

The internet was conceived as an electronic world without borders, which would not fail so long as the last two computers in the world were online and could connect with each other. But China balkanised it with its Great Firewall, and electronic blocs and ghettos were but a step away. When the internet is turning its face away from the extraordinary dream of one electronic world talking in real time, and becoming a force multiplier for frightening demons of the past, we cannot expect better.

Life is one big road with lots of signs. So when you riding through the ruts, don't complicate your mind. Flee from hate, mischief and jealousy. Don't bury your thoughts, put your vision to reality. Wake Up and Live!

Bob Marley

By Peter Wooders & Vibhuti Garg

With a rising population and fast-growing economy, energy demand in India is increasing rapidly. Is the country embarking upon a clean energy or a fossil fuel-dependent approach to meet this rising demand?

The energy path that the country will follow depends on the levers which the Indian government employs to shape its energy mix, including subsidies in the form of fiscal incentives, regulated energy prices and other forms of government support.

Following a recent comprehensive investigation into these policies, we find that central government energy subsidies were worth Rs 133,841 crore (\$20.4 billion) in FY2016. In addition, through the UDAY scheme, state governments were provided a bail-out package for electricity distribution companies worth Rs 170,802 crore over a two-year period in FY16 and FY17.

The biggest subsidies by far still go to fossil fuels and the electricity transmission and distribution system, which is largely used by coal-fired power generation.

But trends are also changing: Renewable energy subsidies tripled in the past three years, while oil and gas subsidies fell by almost three quarters (in part due to policy changes and in part due to low oil prices), and coal subsidies remained largely stable.

This, of course, is the



past and what matters is the future. Will these trends continue? And does it matter, anyway, if a clean or a dirty energy economy develops?

Well -- in addition to representing a big share of taxpayer money -- energy subsidies have wide ramifications beyond government budgets. One of the most important is public health.

The central government actually spends more on fossil fuel subsidies than it does on health: In FY16, it is estimated that for each \$1 of government expenditure on health, \$2.6 went to fossil fuel subsidies.

And yet, air pollution in Delhi and the northern states has been unbearable over the past weeks. Fossil fuels are one of the major causes of air pollution, particularly emissions

from transport and coal-fired power plants. Recent estimates claim that outdoor air pollution caused more than a million premature deaths in India in 2016 and the OECD estimates that the economic cost of India's air pollution is more than \$800 billion.

These health impacts are also unfair. The worst-affected communities are usually those living around the points of fuel production and combustion, who have the fewest options to cope. A report by medical and public health experts of People First Collective India, for example, found serious health problems among residents living around coal mines and thermal power plants in the Tamnar block of Raigarh district, Chhattisgarh.

A study by HEAL estimates that fossil-

fuel subsidy reform in combination with fuel taxation could help India prevent 65 per cent of premature deaths caused through air pollution, which in turn would bring down public expenditure on health and improve national productivity.

Energy subsidies also matter for achieving climate change targets. India's Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), solidified through the Paris Agreement on climate change, aims to cut emissions intensity by up to 35 per cent and increase the share of power sourced from low-carbon sources to at least 40 per cent of the total generation by 2022.

Furthermore, India's leadership in establishing the International Solar Alliance (ISA), launched at the UN Climate Change

Conference in Paris, is betting big on solar and a move away from fossil fuel towards renewables. Energy subsidy policies can make or break the success of these kinds of initiative, for good and bad.

There are, of course, no easy conclusions in a country as large and complicated as India. Some fossil fuel subsidies -- such as for LPG cooking gas -- help to improve public health by moving households away from biomass cooking fuel and so improving indoor air pollution. Some subsidies, particularly for electricity transmission and distribution, are much-needed to enable energy access.

Increased subsidies for renewable energy is not necessarily a good thing in and of itself. It is only worthwhile if India is getting good value for money and

the subsidies encourage competition. Otherwise, they will just undermine the development of the renewable energy market. Subsidies are one policy tool and many others are required to make renewables a success.

These issues confirm the fact that we need better transparency on subsidies and better evaluations of which ones work and which ones don't. Data on state-level subsidies remain poor, and changing policies -- such as the introduction of the GST -- requires ongoing reporting to update decision-makers and the public on what has changed.

China and Indonesia, India's largest peers in Asia and fellow members of the G20, have already opted to prepare self-reports and peer reviews on fossil fuel subsidies. Yet more countries are expected to announce reviews in the coming months. And many others will be encouraged to start reporting fossil fuel subsidies under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a process where India is actively considering how to use and build upon its existing reporting mechanisms.

Now is a good opportunity for India to provide leadership to others by conducting its own voluntary self-report, and peer review, to help cut through the smog obscuring energy subsidies, and promote a domestic energy policy that is aligned with other national objectives.

(Courtesy : IANS)

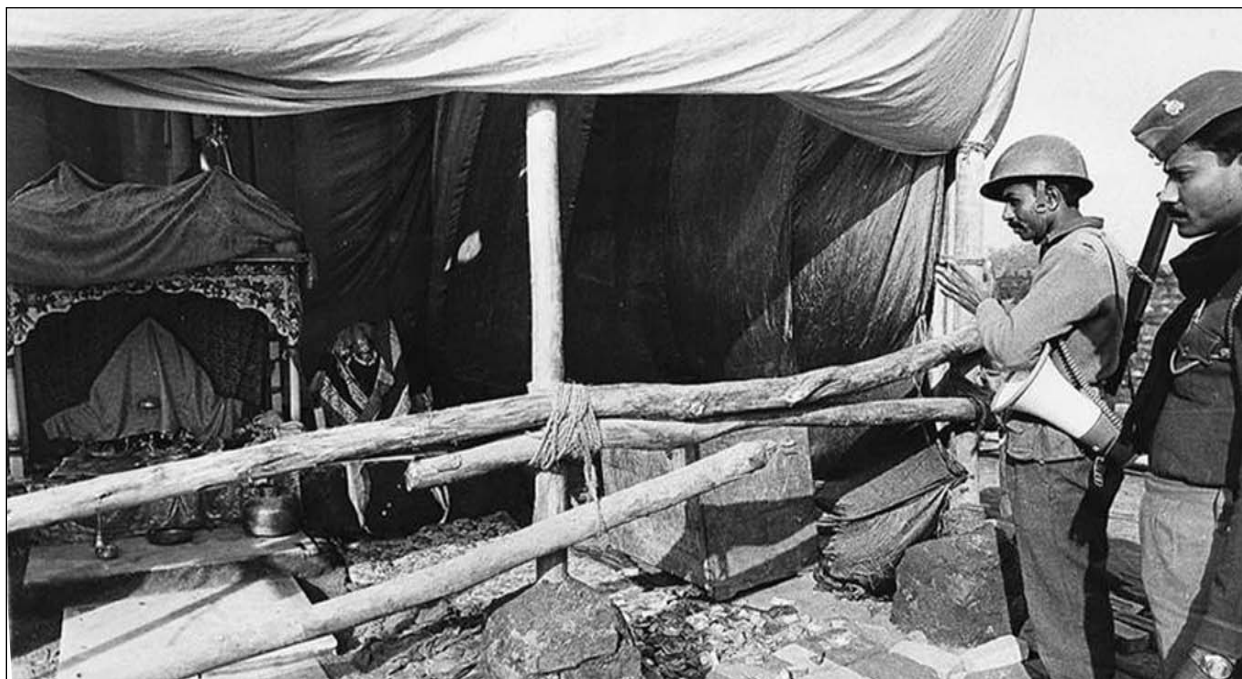
That fateful day

by Pratap Bhanu Mehta

The 25th anniversary of that fateful day in Ayodhya when the Babri Masjid was demolished brings a sense of foreboding. The psychological and historical significance of that day is complex. But when all is said and done, it has to be admitted that the worst of our political tendencies that were on display on December 6, 1992, are now in the ascendant. Open majoritarianism and divisiveness is now a dominant cultural and political sensibility. The nature of the act that brought down the Babri Masjid structure, a form of violent vigilantism, is freely accepted in politics. The idea that something nebulous like community sentiment can trump the Constitution, values of equality and individual liberty, and the rule of law itself, is now considered political common sense.

The sensibility that informed the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, a kind of coarse, mediocre and insecure aggression, has become second nature to politics. The transformation of Hinduism that the events in Ayodhya represented continued unabated. Instead of its highest philosophical aspirations being guided by the plenitude of the world and a blissful realisation of the Self, Hinduism's aspiration became defined by raw assertions of power. Its leadership, if we can call it that, came to be characterised by an odd combination of agitators and new-age hucksters.

Piety was replaced by a will to power. The cultural ideal that Ram constituted was finally reduced to a sin-



gle point. The living reality of Ram, in an effective sense, had till this point never been erased. But by reducing Ram to a crude historical drama, India for the first time assaulted Ram. That fateful day assaulted the Ram of Valmiki, Tulsi and Kamban and countless other real Rams. They replaced it with the Ram of L.K. Advani and Adityanath and Ashok Singhal. Did faith live or die that day?

Then there was the corruption of all political parties under a feigned faith. As the Congress once again does the rounds of temples, it is worth remembering that it was its duplicity, its double-speak on constitutional values, its attempts to run both Hindu nationalism and Muslim identity politics together that brought us to this pass.

Whatever its professed values, its credibility was reduced to a point from which it is still not recovered. The BJP had its ups and downs since the movement, but its

organisation and commitment made sure that its views penetrated across a range of civil society institutions. But it is politically reaching a point where it will be hard for it to deny its core supporters the satisfaction of the temple being built. Almost all the elements of building the temple, creating a political momentum, opening up institutional spaces, are being put in place. We will give in out of sheer weariness. But the scars of divisiveness will continue.

Indian institutions have never been strong, and riot victims from numerous riots, including 1984, still await justice. But the role of non-elected institutions should come under the scanner. Cases were not swiftly disposed of from the early Fifties, keeping the ground perpetually open for facts on the ground to be distorted. Despite the Liberhan Commission, the leaders in that act of vigilantism have, 25 years later, not been called

to account. The psychological message that sends, that you can get away with anything, so long as you can invoke faith, damages institutions. For years, the Supreme Court has tried its old trick of a modus vivendi by deferring the decision. Now the Court has decided to resume hearings in February next year.

It will not be appropriate to speculate how it will rule. But it is a fair institutional point that the Supreme Court has damaged its reputation and credibility so much over the last few months that it will have to go the extra mile of care, fairness and probity to ensure that whatever its judgement, justice is not only done, but seen to be done.

There is no question that on that day, a significant number of Hindus felt, even if briefly, a sense of catharsis. The range of psychological complexes behind that need to be unpacked. At a very immediate level, the rank opportunism of the Congress dur-

ing the Eighties left the country insecure; from Salman Rushdie to Shah Bano, it was easy to indict the Congress. Thanks to the Rajiv Gandhi years, Nehruvian secularism became a byword for opportunism and corruption, not for liberty and rule of law. So the symbolic destruction of the so-called Nehruvian order became a live force in Indian politics.

The demolition of the masjid represented that. Second, as V.S. Naipaul, one of the few writers who has the depth to go to dark psychological spaces, understood, there were too many suppressed histories in India; and the simple-minded historical pieties and institutional control of the Left-Congress alliance on history could no longer cope with these.

The sense that many Indians have, of being denuded of their history and their own power to write it, was and remains widespread. Stories of cultural oppression

win out because there is sometimes a comfort in victimhood; it directs attention away from our failings.

But more deeply, we could never say: It should not matter what the medieval India story is, let the historians argue it out. But we cannot tie the fate of the present to what happened in the 16th century. It binds us to the past more than it liberates the future. Babri Masjid is the symbol of the tyranny of the past over the future.

Hindutva as an ideology was constituted by resentment because it saw Hinduism as constituted by three deficits: It has no political centre, its history has been marginalised by others, and it is internally weak and divided. Ayodhya was the cheap psychological recompense for these deficits. It attempted to give a Hinduism a political identity and centre, it attempted to reclaim history, and one could always have a consciousness of strength by targeting minorities. But this sense of lack, once internalised, cannot be easily satiated because it is a flight from reality.

It does not have the inner cultural resources to make Hinduism creative and progressive; instead, it sees diversity, creativity and plenitude as a threat. It has no ethical mooring, because its idea of strength is a crude masculine assertion, not the power of inner conviction.

The agitators tied themselves to the yoke of the temple, because they felt Ram's presence, his karuna, the least. The events of December 6, 1992 assaulted both secularism and Hinduism, and the consequences are still to play out fully.

(Courtesy : Indian Express)