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T.N. GOVERNOR 'DISMISSES' MINISTER, BACKTRACKS LATER



There are reasonable apprehensions that continuation of Thiru V. Senthilbalaji in the Council of Ministers will adversely impact the due process of law, including fair investigation that may eventually lead to breakdown of the Constitutional machinery in the State

RAJ BHAVAN STATEMENT



R.N. Ravi communicates to CM's office that his order on Senthilbalaji has been put on hold with immediate effect; Stalin had earlier said that Governor did not have authority to dismiss Minister

In an unprecedented move, Tamil Nadu Governor R.N. Ravi on Thursday evening unilaterally "dismissed with immediate effect" arrested Minister V. Senthilbalaji from the Council of Ministers, only to hurriedly backtrack his decision late in the night.

Sources in Chief Minister M.K. Stalin's office told The Hindu that Mr. Ravi had communicated that his order dismissing Mr. Senthilbalaji was being put on hold with immediate effect. "The Governor said his decision was being kept in abeyance," a source privy to the development said. Earlier, Mr. Stalin told journalists that the Governor does not have the authority to dismiss a Minister. "We will face this legally," he had said.

Mr. Senthilbalaji was earlier this month arrested by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) in an alleged money laundering case. The DMK leader, who was hospitalised after his arrest, underwent a beating heart coronary artery bypass surgery recently.

On Thursday evening, a Raj Bhavan press release said, "There are reasonable apprehensions that continuation of Thiru V. Senthilbalaji in the Council of Ministers will adversely impact the due process of law including fair

investigation that may eventually lead to breakdown of the Constitutional machinery in the State. Under these circumstances, Honourable Governor has dismissed Thiru V. Senthilbalaji from the Council of Ministers with immediate effect."

No legal provision cited

The release did not specify the legal provision under which the Governor took the decision.

Incidentally, nearly a month ago, the Chief Minister had rejected Mr. Ravi's demand to drop Mr. Senthilbalaji, who was then holding the Electricity and Excise and Prohibition portfolios from the Cabinet. At that time the Supreme Court had cleared the decks for the police and ED to proceed with their respective investigations against the Minister.

Besides, while reallocating Mr. Senthilbalaji's portfolios to two other senior Ministers following his arrest and hospitalisation, the Governor had "disagreed" with Mr. Stalin's decision to retain him as a Minister without portfolio. The Raj Bhavan on Thursday said that Mr. Senthilbalaji, abusing his position as a Minister, has been influencing the investigation and obstructing the due process of law and justice. Pointing out that Mr. Senthilbalaji was "facing serious criminal proceedings in a number of cases of corruption including taking cash for jobs and money laundering", the communication said the Minister was in judicial custody in a criminal case and being investigated by the Enforcement Directorate.

Some more criminal cases against him under Prevention of Corruption Act and the Indian Penal Code are being investigated by the State Police, it added. Incidentally, two petitions were filed in the Madras High Court challenging Mr. Senthilbalaji's continuation in the Cabinet after his arrest.

During the course of hearing in the case earlier this week, Chief Justice S.V. Gangapurwala wondered whether the High Court could interfere in such issues by exercising its powers under Article 226 (writ jurisdiction) of the Constitution when the Governor had only expressed his dissent and not passed any positive order dismissing or removing the Minister from the Cabinet. "If there is an order by the Governor and the Minister was still continuing in the post, then there might be some justification for the court to interfere," he told the counsel for a petitioner. The Chief Justice also pointed out that Article 164 states that the Governor shall appoint Ministers on the advice of the Chief Minister and does not speak about the power of dismissal.

At the time of going to the press past midnight, the Raj Bhavan did not issue any media communication on its subsequent decision to keep the "dismissal" order in abeyance.

INDIA'S LARGEST RADIO TELESCOPE PLAYS VITAL ROLE IN DETECTING UNIVERSE'S VIBRATIONS

India's largest telescope, the upgraded Giant Metrewave Radio Telescope (uGMRT), near Narayangaon in Pune district. PTI

India's Giant Metrewave Radio Telescope (GMRT) was among the world's six large telescopes that played a vital role in providing evidence confirming the presence of gravitational waves using pulsar observations, said scientists on Thursday.

An international team of astronomers from India, Japan and Europe has published the results from monitoring pulsars, called 'nature's best clocks', by using six of the world's most sensitive radio telescopes, including India's largest telescope, the Pune-based uGMRT.

"These results provide a hint of evidence for the relentless vibrations of the fabric of the universe, caused by ultra-low frequency gravitational waves. Such waves are expected to originate from a large number of dancing monster black hole pairs, crores of times heavier than our sun," said a statement issued by the city-based National Centre for Radio Astrophysics-Tata institute of Fundamental Research (NCRA-TIFR).

The team, consisting of members of European Pulsar Timing Array (EPTA) and Indian Pulsar Timing Array (InPTA) consortia, published their results in two papers in the



Astronomy and Astrophysics journal on Thursday and shared that their results hint at the presence of such gravitational waves in their data set. A time aberration was observed in the signals emerging from these pulsars, their studies suggest. Pulsars are a type of rapidly rotating neutron stars that are essentially embers of dead stars which are present in our galaxy. A pulsar is like a cosmic lighthouse as it emits radio beams that flashes by the Earth regularly

akin to a harbour lighthouse.

As these signals are accurately timed, there is a great interest in studying these pulsars and to unravel the mysteries of the Universe. In order to detect gravitational wave signals, scientists explore several ultra-stable pulsar clocks randomly distributed across our Milky Way galaxy and create an 'imaginary' galactic-scale gravitational wave detector.

SPIRALLING FOOD PRICES

Polymakers must guard against inflation to ensure sustainable growth

Indian households find themselves yet again struggling to cope with a sharp surge in the prices of essential kitchen staples — ranging from tomatoes, onions and potatoes to tur dal and rice. Tomato prices have more than doubled month-on-month with the all-India average retail price as on June 29 soaring to ₹53.59 a kilogram, from ₹24.37 on May 29, data from the Consumer Affairs Department's Price Monitoring Division show. And while the rise in onion and potato prices over the same one-month period is a seemingly far more benign 7.5% and 4.5%, respectively, the overall trajectory in price gains across the wider food basket is symptomatic of the unsettling build-up of underlying inflation pressures in the economy. For instance, the price of tur dal, a key protein source in the diets of vegetarian households, continues to keep rising; it had climbed 7.8% month-on-month to ₹130.75 a kilogram on June 29, as per the government's data. Official retail inflation data for May, released earlier this month, had shown that prices of pulses, which includes tur dal, had quickened by 128 basis points year-on-year to a 31-month high of 6.56%. The government's imposition of stock limits on urad and tur on June 2 seems to have so far done little to cool price gains in lentils.

To be sure there is a seasonality component to the prices of farm

produce and their supply is largely determined by factors including timing of the harvest and the prices prevailing at the mandis when the farmers transport their crop to the markets. Just last month, tomato growers in rural Maharashtra had dumped sizeable quantities of their produce on the roads after being offered unremunerative prices. However, prices of several of these food items, including tomatoes, are still substantially higher than even the same time last year with the modal daily weighted average arrival prices at the mandis as per the government's agmarket website revealing tomato prices almost tripled year-on-year to ₹5,579 a quintal as on June 29. The same arrival price data show a 35% jump in tur dal and a 19% increase in common paddy (rice). With the monsoon rains 13% in deficit so far this year, and the outlook for spatial and temporal distribution in the coming months clouded with uncertainty by the El Niño, there is a real risk that food prices could cause retail inflation to accelerate again. Policymakers need to walk the talk and retain laser focus on taming inflation. After all, as the Reserve Bank of India's economists noted in the latest bulletin, "the path to high but sustainable inclusive growth has to be paved by price stability".

EXPLORING ASSAM'S DELIMITATION DRAFT

On June 20, the Election Commission (EC) released a draft proposal on the delimitation of the Assembly and Lok Sabha constituencies in Assam. The number of Assembly and Parliamentary seats remains unchanged at 126 and 14 but many constituencies were proposed to be reshaped and the number of reserved seats has been increased. This has led to a churning among various organisations and political parties, including the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies, with the fortunes of many MLAs likely to be affected.

How did the delimitation exercise come about?

Delimitation is the process of redrawing boundaries of Lok Sabha and State Assembly constituencies based on a recent Census to ensure each seat has an almost equal number of voters. It is ideally carried out every few years after a Census by an independent Delimitation Commission formed under the provisions of the Delimitation Commission Act. Such panels were set up in 1952, 1962, and 1972 before the exercise was suspended in 1976 due to the family planning programme. Before the exercise of the next panel could be completed in 2008, the delimitation of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Jammu and Kashmir, Manipur, and Nagaland was deferred due to "security risks" through presidential orders. In the case of Assam, many entities including the BJP wanted the delimitation done only after the National Register of Citizens (NRC) was updated to weed out "illegal immigrants". The Centre reconstituted the Delimitation Commission for the four north-eastern States and the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir on March 6, 2020. The EC notified the initiation of Assam's delimitation on December 27, 2022, following which four districts were re-merged with the ones they were carved out of.

How would the proposal pan out?

If the draft is accepted, 24 Assembly seats would be reshaped and renamed while the number of reserved seats for the Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Scheduled Castes (SC) would be increased from 16 to 19 and eight to nine respectively. The reserved seats would also be juggled — six each for the SCs and STs would become unreserved while nine ST and seven SC general seats would become reserved. The number of reserved Lok Sabha seats (two ST, one SC) would remain the same but Silchar would become reserved for SCs in place of Karimganj. The draft has erased the seats of Assembly Speaker Biswajit Daimary (Panery), ministers like Chandra Mohan Patowary (Dharmapur), and Parimal Suklabaidya (Dholai), ally Asom Gana Parishad MLAs Ramendra Narayan Kalita (West Guwahati) and Pradip Hazarika (Amguri), Congress MLAs Bharat Narah (Naoboicha), Sherman Ali Ahmed (Baghbar), and Rekebuddin Ahmed (Chaygaon), and All India United Democratic Front's Aminul Islam (Dhing) and Rafikul Islam (Sarukhetri). Among the parliamentarians whose seats would have a different name and shape are Gaurav Gogoi of Congress (Kaliabor to Kaziranga) and the BJP's Dilip Saikia (Mangaldoi to Darrang). Altogether, 39 MLAs and five MPs would lose their seats.



Tribal men and women wait in queue to cast their votes in the district of Assam. File | RITU RAJ KONWAR

What is the Election Commission's draft proposal on delimitation? Why are people opposing it? Who is going to get affected by the exercise? Why do some parties want the delimitation done after the National Register of Citizens is updated? Is there a possibility of the proposal being redrafted?

Why are many opposed to the proposal?

There have been protests across Assam since the EC announced the draft proposal. Ethnic groups such as the Ahoms are disappointed with the number of Assembly seats reduced from eastern Assam and increased in western Assam. Rajior Dal MLA Akhil Gogoi has questioned the EC for citing Section 8A of the Representation of the People Act, 1950, to initiate the delimitation exercise. Section 8A only allows the reorientation of seats without any change in the total number. The use of the 2001 Census data has also raised hackles; Congress and AIUDF sniffed a sinister design especially after the EC used the 2011 Census for completing the exercise in Jammu and Kashmir, where the number of seats increased. AIUDF's Badruddin Ajmal said Assam's

delimitation could have been carried out along with the rest of the country in 2026, instead of rushing it through ahead of the 2024 Lok Sabha polls. "Some seats have been reshaped to scatter the Muslims voters to ensure their representation in the Assembly and Parliament reduces," he alleged. Other parties said delimitation should have waited for the exercise to update the NRC, to be completed. Meanwhile, people across the Bodoland Territorial Region are happy with the proposed increase of Assembly seats there from 16 to 19.

Can there be further changes?

The EC said the proposal was based on suggestions from 11 political parties and 71 other organisations although Congress skipped a meeting with the

election panel team that visited Assam a few months ago. The EC has sought "suggestions and omissions" by July before visiting the State again for meeting various stakeholders. The AIUDF has threatened to go to court if the draft is accepted. The insistence of Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, whose Assembly seat Jalukbari would also be affected by the delimitation, to safeguard the rights of the indigenous people in view of "demographic changes" indicates that there may not be significant changes. He also advised political leaders not to worry about losing out if more seats are reserved for the SCs and STs in the "greater interest of the State".

THE CONCERNS ABOUT INDIA-U.S. DIGITAL TRADE

What is the Open Market Sale Scheme and how does it work? Why has the government made changes to the OMSS? Why has the FCI discontinued the sale of grains under OMSS to States? How have the states reacted?

States have been looking at alternative ways of procuring wheat and rice in the after the Food Corporation of India's (FCI) imposed quantity restrictions followed by the refusal to allow States to procure the two food grains through its Open Market Sale Scheme (OMSS). The Centre has made it clear that the reason for restricting supplies per bidder and eventually excluding states from procuring through auctions was to curb inflation and regulate supply, States such as Karnataka and Tamil Nadu have criticised the government for engaging in "politics" at the expense of marginalised beneficiaries of State welfare schemes.

What is the Open Market Sale Scheme?

Under the Open Market Sale Scheme, the FCI from time to time sells surplus food grains from the central pool especially wheat and rice in the open market to traders, bulk consumers, retail chains and so on at pre-determined prices. The FCI does this through e-auctions where open market bidders can buy specified quantities. States are also allowed to procure food grains through the OMSS without participating in the auctions, for their needs beyond what they get from the central pool to distribute to NFSA (National Food Security Act) beneficiaries.

This year's OMSS was operationalised by the FCI in January. According to the latest press release of the Food Ministry, six weekly e-auctions of wheat had been conducted by FCI till March 15, 2023. "The total quantity of 33.7 LMT wheat was offloaded and the prices of wheat came down by 19% due to this massive intervention in a span of 45 days," noted the release.

The next e-auction for wheat under OMSS will start on June 28 and the bidding for rice will commence on July 5.

How has the Centre revised the OMSS?

The Centre decided to restrict the quantity that a single bidder can purchase in a single bid under the OMSS. While the maximum quantity allowed earlier was 3,000 metric tonnes (MT) per bid for a buyer, it will now range from

10-100 metric tonnes.

The FCI claims that the quantities have been reduced this time "to accommodate more small and marginal buyers and to ensure wider reach of the scheme". The objective behind the move is also to curb retail prices as allowing smaller bids should ideally break monopolies of bulk buyers, allowing more competitive bids by small buyers.

First, the Centre had decided earlier this month to reduce the quantity a particular bidder can purchase under the OMSS, but on June 13 in a notification sent to the States, it stopped the sale of rice and wheat from the Central pool under the OMSS to State governments, also disallowing private bidders to sell their OMSS supplies to state governments.

Chairman and Managing Director of the FCI Ashok K.K. Meena, said the Centre was already meeting its obligations to distribute grains to 80 crore marginalised beneficiaries under the NFSA, and also had an obligation to the 60 crore common consumers who are affected by retail prices.

How have States reacted?

In Karnataka, the Anna Bhagya scheme to give rice to marginalised families was a part of the Congress government's poll promise.

The leaders of Congress accused Centre of conspiring to "fail" the State government's poll guarantee by ensuring the State did not receive the required amount of rice to implement the scheme.

Tamil Nadu is trying to purchase 50,000 tonnes of rice from government agencies other than FCI. "We give rice to all ration card holders. To manage the supplies, we were buying from OMSS at a rate of about ₹35 for a kilo of rice and then subsidising it. Now, the Union government has stopped the supply under OMSS. We have to find an alternative now," a senior government functionary of Tamil Nadu told The Hindu.

INDIA, PHILIPPINES TO EXPLORE SCOPE OF JOINT SALES, PATROLS TO BOOST DEFENCE PARTNERSHIP



S Jaishankar

There is lot of scope for expansion of defence cooperation between India and the Philippines, especially in maritime security, including the potential for joint sales as well as joint patrols, diplomatic sources said, as the Philippines Secretary for Foreign Affairs Enrique A. Manalo held bilateral talks with his Indian counterpart S. Jaishankar on Thursday. Mr. Manalo is on an official visit in India from June 27 to 30.

A joint statement issued after the 5th meeting of the Joint Commission on Bilateral Cooperation said that both Ministers expressed keen interest to continue to work together on defence cooperation, including through the regular or upgraded official-level interaction among defence agencies, opening of a resident Defence Attaché office in Manila, consideration of India's offer for concessional Line of Credit to meet Philippines' defence requirements, acquisition of naval assets, and expansion of training and joint exercises on maritime security and disaster response, among others.

"Maritime cooperation can take the shape of exercises related to Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). This could be a combination of many activities," a diplomatic source said, stating that defence cooperation will continue to grow and will not be limited to equipment sales.

Cyber security

Sources said Mr. Jaishankar and Mr. Manalo also discussed domains including cyber security, artificial intelligence, and space cooperation. "A new issue that was discussed was cyber trafficking," the source said.

On defence cooperation, the key dialogue was not only in terms of weapons, but cooperation through training courses, greater military exchanges and in future joint exercises, the source added. On economic cooperation, diplomatic sources said that the two sides discussed improved access to the Philippines' markets. The statement said the Ministers also underlined that both countries have a shared interest in a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region.

RUSSIAN OFFICIAL BRIEFS NSA ON REVOLT, HOLDS TALKS ON ISSUES IN TIES

In the first such New Delhi-Moscow contact since the failed mutiny in Russia, National Security Adviser Ajit Doval spoke to his counterpart Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of Russia's Security Council, on Thursday. They discussed the developments as well as bilateral and multilateral ties.

"The current issues of Russian-Indian cooperation in the field of security and the prospects for their deepening within the framework of bilateral and multilateral formats were discussed in detail," the council said.

"[Nikolai] Patrushev informed A. Doval about the latest events in Russia," it added, indicating that Mr. Doval was briefed about events since June 24, when the chief of the Wagner militia group Yevgeny Prigozhin took over a Russian town, and marched his forces towards Moscow before abruptly calling them off and fleeing to Belarus.

"The interlocutors agreed to continue a confidential dialogue," the council added in its statement. Setting aside protocol, Prime Minister Narendra Modi met Mr. Patrushev during his visit to Delhi in March, while President Vladimir Putin had held talks with Mr. Doval in Moscow.

The call by Mr. Patrushev was part of a number of conversations the Kremlin has had to brief allies and partners after the short-lived rebellion, and reassure them about the situation in Russia.

Over the past few days, Mr. Putin has spoken to Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Central Asian leaders, including Kazakhstan President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and Uzbekistan President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, and Saudi Arabia Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman.

Mr. Patrushev's call to Mr. Doval comes a week ahead of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit, which Mr. Modi will host virtually. Mr. Putin and leaders of China, Pakistan and Central Asian countries are expected to attend the summit.

Speaking about the "unique" strength of India-Russia ties on Wednesday, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar said ties had "been held steady" despite turbulence in the world.

He said that it was a mistake to "dumb down" the India-Russia relationship by speaking only of India's considerable defence dependencies on Russian military supplies, and pointed to the "geopolitical logic" of steady security cooperation and the growth in bilateral trade, which has been boosted by Indian oil imports from Russia.



Ajit Doval

SRI LANKAN CENTRAL BANK MOOTS RECAST OF PENSION FUNDS, HAIRCUT ON BONDS



Nandalal Weerasinghe

Sri Lanka's Central Bank has proposed restructuring the beleaguered nation's debt by recasting the outgo on the country's pension funds and offering international sovereign bondholders a repayment plan that entails a 30% haircut.

Addressing a media briefing in Colombo Thursday morning, Central Bank Governor Nandalal Weerasinghe unveiled the Ranil Wickremesinghe government's domestic debt restructuring plan that seeks to protect local banks, while effectively transferring the burden to superannuation funds, including the Employees' Provident Fund (EPF). The Central Bank will convert treasury bills and exchange superannuation funds' treasury bonds to longer-term maturity treasury bonds at a lower interest rate. On the decision to exclude local banks from the restructuring plan, he said: "It is vital to protect the banking sector, as a collapse [of it] would have a catastrophic consequence for some 57 million depositors."

The plan for domestic debt restructuring, cleared by the Cabinet on Wednesday, will be debated in Parliament the coming weekend, ahead of a vote. Amid some speculation of a bank run, the government announced a five-day banking holiday beginning on Thursday. "The holiday is mainly to prevent any market-panic [around the parliamentary debate]," Mr. Weerasinghe said, as he sought to allay fears.

IMF facility

The government's latest move is part of its efforts to restructure both its foreign and domestic debt, in line with the expectations of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that extended a nearly-\$3 billion External Fund Facility in the wake of Sri Lanka's economic crash last year. As of March 2023, the country's foreign and domestic debt were estimated at about \$41.5 billion and \$42.1 billion, respectively. Earlier this week, President Wickremesinghe said his government hopes to restructure \$17 billion of its foreign debt in five years. After indiscriminate borrowing for years, and spending beyond its means, Sri Lanka is now aiming to reduce its public debt to GDP ratio from 128% to 95% by the year 2032.

Key bilateral creditors, India and Japan, along with the Paris Club group of creditors, have set up a common platform to jointly evolve a debt restructuring plan for Sri Lanka, based on the

principle of creditor parity. All eyes are on China, Sri Lanka's largest bilateral creditor, which is yet to officially join in the process.

Meanwhile, Mr. Weerasinghe said Sri Lanka would ask its private creditors, holding International Sovereign Bonds and the largest chunk of the nation's foreign debt, to take a 30% haircut. "It is still under discussion," he said.

The government expects its Domestic Debt Restructure programme to

offer an impetus to its ongoing foreign debt negotiations. However, the decision to have pensioners bear the cost of the country's domestic debt restructuring, that too during a persisting crisis, has sparked criticism, despite the Governor assuring that the existing EPF funds will remain untouched, and guaranteeing a minimum 9% interest.

'AI IS A GROWTH OPPORTUNITY FOR TCS'



Future growth: TCS is best placed to help companies in their transformation journeys, says Chandrasekaran. Paul Noronha

The impact of AI and Machine Learning is going to be profound, says TCS Chairman N. Chandrasekaran; he adds that the global energy transition is accelerating and that businesses are making clear commitments towards a sustainable future

Three fundamental transitions that the world is currently navigating through--namely digital & AI transition, energy transition and the transition towards a global sustainable value chain--require significant investments in technology and innovation and offer tremendous growth opportunity for the company, Tata Consultancy Services Ltd. (TCS) Chairman N. Chandrasekaran told shareholders at the company's Annual General Meeting on Thursday.

"The impact of AI and Machine Learning is going to be profound. There is a transition already underway from predictive AI to generative AI," he added.

Stating that majority of businesses were still adopting predictive AI and were on the journey of capturing large volumes of data, he said varying levels of adoption were underway in companies across sectors. "Generative AI would further require technology investments and innovation," he said.

Mr. Chandrasekaran said the global energy transition was accelerating and businesses were making clear commitments towards a sustainable future.

"Every industry is focused on innovation across sustainable products, services, manufacturing, and delivery. New business models are emerging. Again, this transition requires a large investment in technology, including electric mobility, renewable power, hydrogen, and sustainable fuel," he emphasised.

Highlighting that geopolitical shifts were altering the established supply chains, he said companies were rebalancing their supply chains for resilience and efficiency.

U.S. BANK STOCKS RISE AFTER LENDERS SAIL THROUGH FED'S STRESS TESTS

U.S. bank stocks rose in pre-market trading on Thursday after the Federal Reserve's stress test showed the lenders have adequate capital to survive an economic slump even though analysts doubted if that would lead to higher returns for shareholders.

The test showed the average capital ratio for the 23 banks was higher than last year when the central bank had reviewed 34 lenders against a slightly easier scenario.

This year's test, which was devised before the latest banking crisis, checked if banks would stay above the minimum 4.5% capital ratio during economic stress and macroeconomic instability.

Shares of the top performer in the test, Charles Schwab, gained 2.2%. JPMorgan Chase, Wells Fargo, Morgan Stanley, Goldman Sachs and Bank of America also gained between 1.2% and 1.9%.

Of the six regional lenders that were part of the test, Bank of New York Mellon and US Bancorp added 1.5% and 0.8%, respectively.

RBC Capital Markets analysts said though the largest U.S. banks remain strong even in a severely stressed scenario, management teams would likely be prudent on capital.

Citizens Financial dropped 2.2% after the regional lender came in last in the stress test.





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GREEK RECOVERY

Mitsotakis made the best of bad times to emerge stronger in Greece

There was a festering scandal about wiretapping Opposition politicians, military figures and journalists that put the Greek government under pressure; 57 people were killed in a train crash, in February, which included many students, triggering mass protests, and more than 200 migrants drowned off the coast in a boat tragedy just before the elections. But none of these developments dented the public perception about Kyriakos Mitsotakis, the 55-year-old conservative leader whose centre-right New Democracy had a resounding victory in the June 25 parliamentary elections. This was the second election in Greece in less than two months. In May, New Democracy emerged as the single largest party but was short of securing an absolute majority. In the second vote, held under a different electoral system, Mr. Mitsotakis's party won 40.55% of the votes or 158 seats in the 300-member Parliament, while the main Opposition Syriza secured 18% votes (48 seats). The centre-left PASOK, which once dominated Greek politics, ended up with 12% votes (32 seats), while the newly formed far-right Spartans, which has been endorsed by Ilias Kasidiaris, an imprisoned former leader of the fascist Golden Dawn, made a surprise entry into Parliament with 4.6% of the vote.

Mr. Mitsotakis, who came to power in 2019, ran a campaign focused on his policies aimed at economic recovery, his government's handling of the

coronavirus pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis in Europe. Greece's economic recovery is still an ongoing story. After the depression and acute debt crisis of the 2010s, which pushed the country to the brink of exiting the eurozone, Greece has seen stable growth in recent years (now above the EU average). Investment and exports have improved, thanks to EU funds, and its credit is close to regaining an investment grade credit rating. GDP, despite its high growth rate, is still 20% smaller than in 2008, before the global financial and debt crisis. Mr. Mitsotakis's biggest achievement and promise was relative economic stability. He blended his message with a hardline immigrant policy that often saw authorities sending asylum seekers back to Turkey (the Greek coast guard was also blamed for not doing enough to avert the boat tragedy), and a tough foreign policy that kept tensions with Turkey in the Aegean Sea high. This conservative nationalism helped him emerge as Greece's most powerful politician since the economic crisis. Mr. Mitsotakis should now make bold decisions in the economic and social realms. He has to continue the journey of economic recovery and also get back the country's investment grade credit rating. But he should also take a more humanitarian view of asylum seekers and improve the overall relationship with Turkey to reduce geopolitical tensions.

BETWEEN TWO BOOKS, A REVELATORY SOCIAL HISTORY

Academic studies of social change in India have, by and large, followed the conceptual guidance of modernisation theory. It focuses on the deeper effects of technological change, social and political movements, and increase in participation in the modern economy and education. Indian sociology produced several classics that continue to provide useful insights to university-level students. A parallel documentation of social change was attempted by journalists who travelled and gleaned from their brief interactions with ordinary people how the bigger changes in economy, technology and politics were affecting their lives. Journalism is itself a major part of modern India's history. Though journalists are now facing new kinds of difficulties in practising their profession, they bring in the kind of news about life that academic inquiry cannot afford to offer due to its methodological constraints.

Tracking change in rural and urban India

In the mapping of social change over the last half century, two books written by journalists stand out. One is Kusum Nair's *Blossoms in the Dust: the Human Factor in Indian development*. First published in 1965, it is based on Nair's journey to villages across 14 States. The second book, *Dreamers: How Young Indians Are Changing Their World*, by Snigdha Poonam, documents her journey and stay in provincial towns in eight north Indian States. It was published in 2018. Read together, the two books show many aspects of socio-cultural change in rural and urban India that we may not notice living our daily lives in the third decade of the 21st century.

When Kusum Nair was writing her book, the big question facing political leaders and intellectuals was how to deal with rural poverty. The memory of Gandhi's ideas and his vision of India as a society that cared for its rural civilisation was still fresh. Nair wanted to find out how villagers in different parts of the country were responding to the state's efforts to help them through economic and social planning. How to change beliefs and entrenched norms of behaviour was perceived as a major challenge. Programmes of 'community development' were focused on improving people's access to new knowledge about sanitation and health, irrigation and manure.

The Green Revolution was a decade away. The emphasis was on using available resources and information in the best possible way. Nair was looking for signs of change in old attitudes and ways of living. She found such evidence in every region, but in varying amounts. In some parts, there were 'blossoms in the dust'; in others, there was stirring, but also a lot of inherent resistance that looked like inertia. She drew a gently dynamic portrait of a highly diverse nation, literally at a turning point — i.e., before India had to face China's aggression. When we read Nair's book today, it evokes nostalgia for an era when the 'human element' took precedence in the dream of development. Complications and compulsions arose before long.

The new landscape

The social landscape that Snigdha Poonam draws in her book is complex in every sense. As you start reading her account of a slow, patient

journey through the provincial towns of northern India, you are struck by the paradoxical reality of the young from non-elite strata. They feel let down, but are ready to fight for themselves. They are 'unsatisfied, unscrupulous, unstoppable', says the author. These three words capture the complex make-up of the entrepreneurial spirit they display in every sphere. Their pursuit of wealth and power recognises no impediments, social or moral. They see copious examples of the advantage that this reckless approach to success offers. With little patience for moral choices, they believe that whatever works is the best. So, any and every enterprise looks fine. Coaching, fixing deals, and pushing files are all ways to create a livelihood. But the magic of call centres beats everything.

It is demanding work though not exactly social. Manufacturing spam, disinformation, dissonance, and swindling are all part of the game of success. Faced with circumstances that any observer would declare impossible, the youth that Snigdha Poonam meets are forging ahead with no inhibitions. Some opt for politics, and face tragic failure despite total commitment to democratic vision. Unlike Kusum Nair, Snigdha Poonam maintains firm impartiality throughout her long account. Despite her openness and neutrality, she cannot help giving her verdict. At the end of her book, she says that many of the young people she met do not evince a sharp dichotomy between right and wrong.

Decoding the change

Read together, the two books convey the broad current of an acquisitive culture that has mercilessly rocked old beliefs and values. Several eminent sociologists have tried to capture India's tryst with modernity, tracing the multiple paths along which social change has occurred. Many of these portraits dwell on value shifts, but few discuss the loss of values. Perhaps one can appreciate why the subject does not receive much attention. Change in values is a part of broader economic and political processes. It also reflects demographic shifts, most importantly the growth of urbanised communities, often at the expense of rural communities. The rural-urban distinction is not easy to maintain or explain, and technical differences serve little other than an official purpose. What we learn from Kusum Nair's epic journey through rural India in the 20th century is that the village was the locus of belonging. It served as a living, and for many an inspiring, memory.

Going through Snigdha Poonam's reflective memoir of her meetings with provincial youth years ago, one is struck by the erosion of an ethical frame that belonging to a village might give. Some of the young men and women she meets are based in bigger-size villages, but their social constructions are of a chaotic, competitive world. She is right in making us realise that her interlocutors know what they have to deal with in their life. The subtext of her lengthy travelogue is inescapable. Economic and social change have missed the centrality of meaningful education and work. If growth of the market and infrastructure are unaccompanied by an educated imagination and the prospect of employment, the social ethos cannot sustain the norms and morality it once prized.



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