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Jolt to Manjhi as Bihar HAM(S) chief, spokesperson resign

(Gns. News) A split appeared imminent in former Bihar Chief Minister Jitan Ram Manjhi-led Hindustani Awam Morcha (Secular) ahead of the Lok Sabha polls, as State president Brishen Patel quit the party on Wednesday. Party spokesperson Danish Rizwan too resigned on Wednesday, alleging "bungling" in party fund. The HAM(S) is a constituent of the Grand Alliance in Bihar. Saying that all is not well in the party, Mr. Patel, however, clarified that he would remain with the Grand Alliance. "At a time when all Opposition parties supported West Bengal Chief Minister and TMC leader Mamata Banerjee on her protest against the CBI, our party president stated that she should not have staged dharna (protest) against CBI... I think it was not the right statement."



Some more leaders likely to quit, say sources; split in party appears imminent

Mr. Patel said. He also criticised Mr. Rizwan's displeasure over mismanagement at the recently held Congress rally in Patna. "It sounds ridiculous when the party president was present in the rally, the spokesperson was pointing fingers at it", Mr. Patel added. Mr. Rizwan had said that the "rally was organised like a novice... they should have invited alliance partners". In a letter to the party president, Mr. Rizwan alleged that "some party leaders have been indulging in anti-party activities and also involved in financial mismanagement of party fund". "Being a true soldier of the party, I cannot be a mute spectator to all this, so I'm resigning from the party post and the primary membership of the party," he added. HAM(S) sources told that a split is imminent in the party as several leaders are set to resign in days to come. The HAM (S) had formally joined the Grand Alliance in February 2018 after its exit from the National Democratic Alliance. Mr. Manjhi, who has so far not commented on the latest developments inside his party, had expressed disapproval of the views expressed by Mr. Rizwan and similar comments by another party spokesman, Vijay Yadav.

Rajya Sabha rises in just 11 minutes

(Gns. News) Taking a stand, Samajwadi Party leader Mulayam Singh Yadav along with party MPs and others protesting outside Parliament on Wednesday. Sandeep Saxena Protests over NRC, cut in faculty positions force Chairman Venkaiah Naidu to adjourn House Protests by Opposition parties on issues such as the National Register for Citizens and a cut in faculty positions for SC/ST and OBC candidates ensured that the Rajya Sabha functioned only for a total 11 minutes on Wednesday. Soon after official papers were tabled in the morning, Rajya Sabha Chairman M. Venkaiah Naidu started to read out names of members who had given notices to raise matters of urgent importance by setting aside rules of business. Even before he could finish speaking, MPs from Assam were on their feet flashing copies of a newspaper. Samajwadi



Party MPs joined them, and Mr. Naidu adjourned the proceedings till 2 p.m. Congress MP

Ripun Bora wanted a discussion on the Supreme Court's remarks on Tuesday, accusing the Home Ministry of delaying the completion of the NRC.

When the House reconvened, members of the Opposition parties, including the Samajwadi Party, the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Rashtriya Janata Dal,

stormed into the well, calling the BJP government "anti-Dalit and anti-reservation". The protests were spurred by the recent change in the reservation policy for faculty positions in universities, following an Allahabad High Court judgment. The judgment prescribed a 13-point roster system, under which the number of vacancies should be considered department- or wing-wise and not as the total number of posts available for recruitment. This results in limited seats available for recruitment to each department or wing under reserved categories. The government filed a review petition in the Supreme Court, which upheld the Allahabad High Court order. The Samajwadi Party alleged that the government had made a half-hearted appeal against the High Court order. "The government had assured that no new faculty will be hired till the old system is restored," Samajwadi Party's Javed Ali Khan said.

Centre bans Kashmir outfit

Spreading terror

The govt. has banned the Tehreek-ul-Mujahideen for radicalising and recruiting youth for terrorist activities

- Mostly well-educated urban youth belonging to the outfit had carried out grenade attacks on checkpoints and snatched weapons from security forces in the past
- Last year, eight members of the group were killed
- TuM played a major role in the commission of terrorist acts and a number of its cadres have been arrested



(Gns. News) Tehreek-ul-Mujahideen banned for "terrorist attacks, besides subversive acts" The Union Home Ministry has banned the Tehreek-ul-Mujahideen (TuM) under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act for promoting terrorism and radicalising and recruiting youth for terrorist activities in India. Set up in the 1990s, TuM claims to be fighting for the "liberation of Kashmir," the Ministry said in a notification announcing the ban. "The TuM carried out a number of terrorist attacks besides subversive acts, namely grenade attacks, weapons snatching incidents, supporting other terrorist outfits such as Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HuM), Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), etc. in terms of financial and logistic support in the recent past," the Ministry said. Last year, eight TuM men were killed in various operations by security forces. Mostly, well-educated and belonging to urban settlements, the "gang" members had carried out grenade attacks on checkpoints and snatched weapons from security forces

in the past. The TuM is headed by Jamil-ur-Rehman of Lajora in Pulwama. The Ministry said the Jammu and Kashmir Police had in the recent past registered a number of cases, in which it found that the TuM had played a major role in the commission of terrorist acts and a number of its cadres had been arrested. "TuM is running terrorist training centres for Kashmiri youth and is likely to recruit more youth from Jammu and Kashmir. The members of TuM are getting financial and logistic support from their handlers based abroad," the Ministry said. "The Central government believes that TuM is involved in terrorism as it has committed and participated in various acts of terrorism in India," it added. A TuM spokesman said the ban would be used as an "election plank" by the Modi government. He said the resolution of Kashmir issue was in India's interest. "I should resolve this issue in the light of UN resolutions. This way this country can get over poverty and hunger," the spokesman said.

No relief for Virbhadra Singh



(Gns. News) HC says it won't interfere with trial court order to frame charges in assets case The Delhi High Court on Wednesday declined to interfere with a trial court decision to frame charges against former Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Virbhadra Singh in a disproportionate assets (DA) case. Justice Sunil Gaur sought the CBI's response on Mr. Singh's plea challenging the trial court order. It then posted the case for further hearing on April 16. The 82-year-old Congress leader and his wife have sought quashing of the December 10, 2018 trial court order directing framing of charges against them and seven others in the case lodged by the CBI. "Let the charges be framed in the trial court. I am not going to pass any interim order," the judge said. The High Court was informed by senior advocate Abhishek Manu Singhvi, representing Mr. Singh, that the matter is listed before the trial court on February 22 for formal framing of charges. During the hearing, the CBI has sought clarification on the nature of sanction needed from a government to probe any offence committed in the State.

ing, CBI special public prosecutor Anil Grover told the court that the agency had already filed an appeal before the Supreme Court challenging a limited part of the High Court's March 31, 2017 order in which it had said that the consent issue will be adjudicated by the trial court and notice was earlier issued to Mr. Singh. In the Supreme Court, the 82-year-old Congress leader and his wife have sought quashing of the December 10, 2018 trial court order directing framing of charges against them and seven others in the case lodged by the CBI. "Let the charges be framed in the trial court. I am not going to pass any interim order," the judge said. The High Court was informed by senior advocate Abhishek Manu Singhvi, representing Mr. Singh, that the matter is listed before the trial court on February 22 for formal framing of charges. During the hearing, the CBI has sought clarification on the nature of sanction needed from a government to probe any offence committed in the State.

Chouhan fails to secure landing pass in Bengal



(Gns. News) Making way: BJP leader Shivraj Singh Chouhan at a rally in Kharagpur on Wednesday. He reached the venue by road. PTI Mamata is doing everything but running the administration. The West Bengal unit of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on Wednesday alleged that it had to cancel a public meeting of former Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan in Murshidabad district after officials denied permission for the landing of his chopper. Mr. Chouhan, who arrived in the city during the day, however addressed another public meeting near Kharagpur in Paschim Medinipur district. Mr. Chouhan, who is also the vice-president of the BJP, reached the venue by road. "West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee is doing everything other than running the administration. All she is doing is obstructing public rallies of the BJP, not allowing the helicopter of Amit Shah to land, trying to pose challenges to the rally of Narendra Modi, not allowing Yogi Adityanath's rally to be held and

preventing my helicopter from landing," he said, while addressing the gathering. "You did not give permission for the helicopter to land but I came by car. If you stop the car we will walk to the venue." Mr. Chouhan also targeted Ms. Banerjee for the three-day dharna at Kolkata's Metro Channel. Mr. Chouhan said that he had been a Chief Minister himself for 15 years and never come across an instance when a Chief Minister sat on dharna to protect a police officer. The West Bengal unit of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on Wednesday alleged that it had to cancel a public meeting of former Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan in Murshidabad district after officials denied permission for the landing of his chopper. Mr. Chouhan, who arrived in the city during the day, however addressed another public meeting near Kharagpur in Paschim Medinipur district. Mr. Chouhan, who is also the vice-president of the BJP, reached the venue by road. "West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata

Banerjee is doing everything other than running the administration. The Trinamool Congress leadership said the permission was denied to the helicopter due to security reasons. In a similar incident, former Jharkhand Chief Minister and BJP leader Arjun Munda said he was denied permission by the administration to hold a public meeting at Bishnupur in Bankura district. The police claimed that the permission was withheld for security reasons as Trinamool leader Abhishek Banerjee had a scheduled public event in the area. Meanwhile, owing to the standoff between the Centre and the State, no Minister from the Union government is likely to attend the Bengal Global Business Summit, which begins in the city on Thursday. Ms. Banerjee said Commerce Minister Suresh Prabhu had sent a video message for the event. "I have no problem. We want to work together, government to government work is different. It is our Constitutional obligation," she said.

Three soldiers under lens in killing of Aurangzeb

(Gns. News) Three soldiers are being questioned over their possible involvement in leaking information about the movement of their colleague Aurangzeb, who was abducted and killed by militants in south Kashmir last year, Army sources said on Wednesday. The three are suspected to have knowingly or unknowingly leaked information, the sources said. However, they made it clear the soldiers in question have neither been detained nor arrested so far. While the police are investigating the case, the Army is providing all possible cooperation so that those involved in the killing are brought to justice, they said. One of the soldiers under the scanner is the brother of Tauseef Wani, who was allegedly tortured by an Army officer in Shadimarg camp, where Aurangzeb was posted, the sources said. Wani is currently undergoing treatment at the SMHS hospital here. Aurangzeb, who was proceed-



ing on leave for Id on June 14, 2018 was abducted and later shot in the head and neck. The body was found by a team of police and Army officials at Gussu village, about 10 km from Kalampora, in Pulwama district, from where he was abducted. Aurangzeb had hitched a ride from a private vehicle outside his camp in Shopian but was being tracked by militants, who stopped the car and abducted him a few kilometres away.

Editorial

Tough-talking: On Taliban reconciliation process



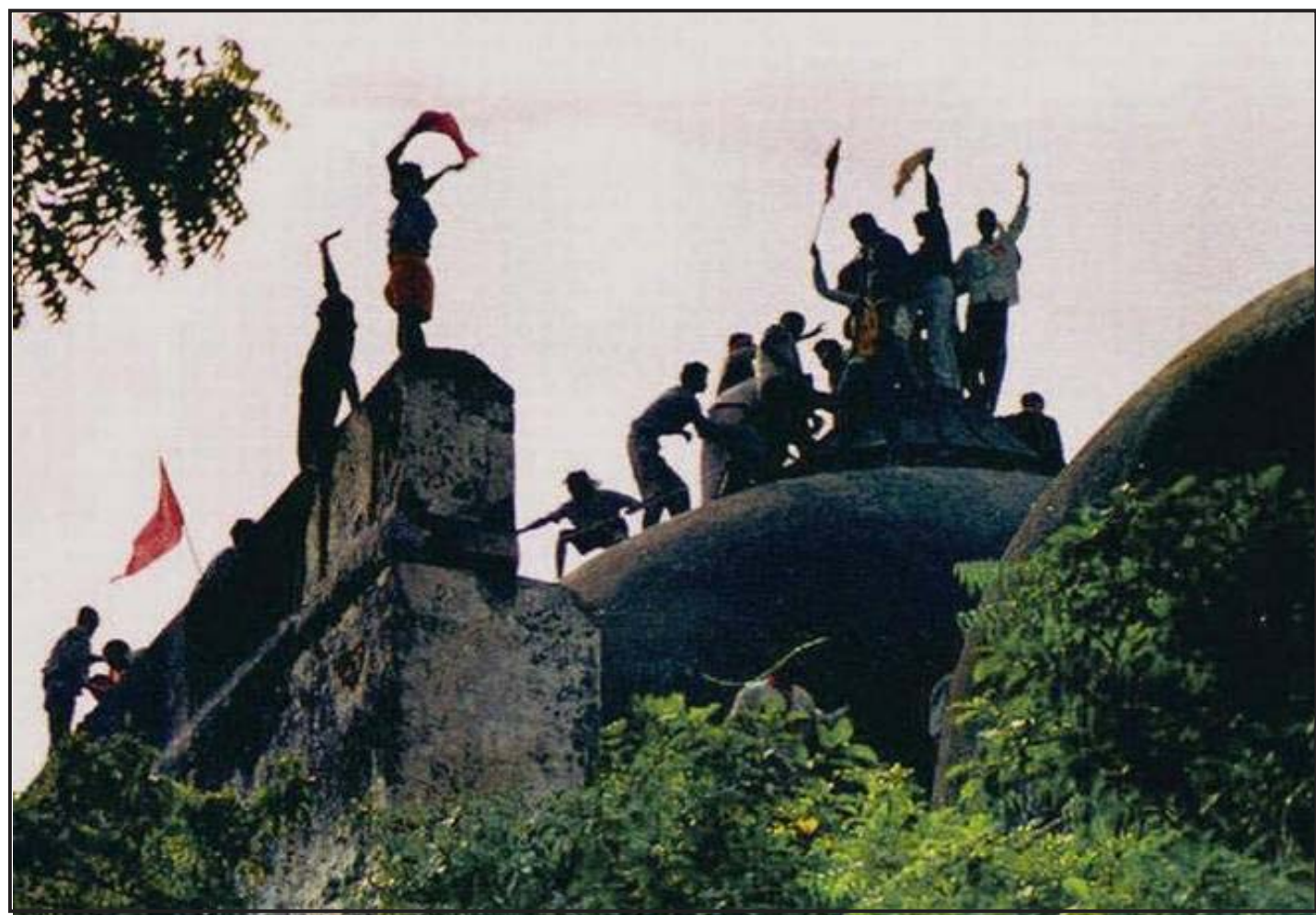
The Taliban reconciliation process is moving at a faster pace than was anticipated. Talks facilitated by Russia in Moscow this week, with mainstream Afghan politicians sitting around the table with Taliban leaders, are similar in their approach to the recent U.S.-Taliban talks in Qatar, though the two are rival processes. The U.S. and Russia have accepted the idea that peace in Afghanistan is not possible without major concessions to the Taliban, including dialogue without insisting on a cessation of violence. In the duration of the Moscow conference alone, Taliban fighters killed 47 security forces personnel in attacks in Kunduz, Baghlan and Samangan provinces. The U.S. and Russia have, in separate processes, agreed to sledge the Ashraf Ghani regime in Kabul, and accepted the Taliban's condition that it will not negotiate with the elected Afghan government at this stage. And both the Russian and U.S. processes are dependent on cooperation from Pakistan, which retains its influence over the Taliban leadership. Clearly, the current talks with the Taliban are not within the "red lines" agreed to by all stakeholders in the past: they are not Afghan-led, owned or controlled, and the Taliban has not abjured violence, or sworn allegiance to the Afghan constitution before joining talks. However, despite the deep and obvious misgivings in New Delhi, it would be pointless to ignore or reject the outcomes of the talks, where some progress has been made. The U.S. has managed to bring senior Taliban leaders to the table, and is discussing the contours of its ultimate withdrawal from the Afghan war. The Taliban has unequivocally renounced ties with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, and committed to preventing Afghan soil from being used by foreign terrorists. For its part, Russia has hosted conferences where Taliban leaders sat down with members of the Afghan High Peace Council and senior Afghan politicians, including some contesting in this year's presidential elections. While India's principled position that it will not directly or publicly talk to the Taliban until it engages the Afghan government remains valid, it is necessary that India stays abreast of all negotiations and isn't cut out of the resolution process. It is hoped that a robust channel is open between Indian intelligence agencies and all important groups in Afghanistan, including the Taliban, in order to ensure that Indian interests, development projects and citizens are kept secure. New Delhi must intensify its dialogue with regional and global stakeholders, and impress upon them that any dialogue with the Taliban must not come at the cost of the hard-fought victories of the Afghan people in the past two decades: on establishing constitutional democracy and the rule of law, and securing the rights of women and minorities.

A series of unfortunate missteps

(Gns. News) The differences between the Kerala and Central governments over the denial of external assistance to rebuild the State after the devastating floods of August last year surfaced again last month, in the Kerala Governor's policy speech in the Assembly as well as the statements of a Kerala Minister at the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas in Varanasi. Governor Justice P. Sathasivam had said that the Kerala government had requested the Centre to enhance its borrowing limit to mobilise additional resources for rebuilding the flood-hit State. "We are still awaiting a favourable response from the Central government in this regard," he added. Minister K.T. Jaleel, who represented Kerala at the conclave, complained that he was not allowed to raise the issue there. The bitterness over the flood money still persists. Competitive federalism, in the context of interaction with foreign countries, promoted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has proved to be a double-edged sword. Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan now stands accused of violating rules regarding the seeking of foreign assistance. He remains unclear on how to make up for the shortfall, of several crores. The Central government is unable to provide the funds while Kerala has been stopped in its tracks from seeking resources from abroad, either from the Kerala diaspora or from friendly foreign governments. The present situation is a result of a series of errors of judgment and misunderstandings on both sides. Mutual political suspicion and a lack of appreciation of the complexities of the international situation have brought about a confrontation. The Chief Minister may have even made diplomatic and tactical misjudgments. India had no qualms about receiving foreign assistance for disaster management till 2004. But when India's aspiration for permanent membership of the UN Security Council met with strong resistance, New Delhi hit upon the idea of forcing a vote in the General Assembly. The game plan was to secure a two-thirds majority and then attempt to embarrass the permanent members into supporting the expansion of the Security Council. The two false presumptions were that India would win the required number of votes and that the Security Council would wilt under pressure from the General Assembly. In fact, many Assembly members were opposed to the veto even for the existing permanent members and had no interest in creating more permanent members with veto. India thought that it could win over the other countries if it was seen to be helping them in emergencies rather than seeking such assistance for itself. The tsunami of 2004 and the threat of piracy in the Indian Ocean provided India an opportunity to test its new posture. Everybody was grateful, but it made no difference to India's claim to permanent membership. There were other factors too which militated against India's claim. The Modi government decided, however, to lay down the rules regarding foreign assistance in order to bring some clarity to the situation. The rules, which were framed in 2016, clarified that India would not solicit any assistance but would receive relief assistance, even as cash, from individuals, charitable institutions and foundations. If cash were to be offered bilaterally by foreign governments, the matter would be considered on a case-by-case basis. Even before the extent of the damage was fully known, I had urged the Central government in early August 2018 to make a suitable amendment to the rule as the damage in Kerala was beyond the capacity to handle it. Needless to say, nobody responded at that stage. The saga of the offer by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) began well when the Prime Minister was informed by the UAE authorities that relief assistance was being put together as a special gesture, which the Prime Minister reciprocated with a warm reply of gratitude. But the Kerala Chief Minister's announcement that the UAE would provide 700 crore, made on the same day as the Central government's announcement of a provision of 7500 crore, opened a Pandora's box. It appeared as though the UAE was more generous than New Delhi was to Kerala and that the Central government was not empathetic to Kerala's plight because of political considerations. Moreover, the source of the information was supposed to have been an Indian businessman in the UAE. An embarrassed UAE government then asked its Ambassador in New Delhi to deny that there was any specific offer of 700 crore.

Ayodhya and the challenge to equality

(Gns. News) The Ram temple issue remains a metaphor for Muslim disenfranchisement in elections to three State Assemblies of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh late last year, candidates of the Muslim faith won 11 of the 520 seats in play. That would seem a modest tally, by no means evidence of disproportionate political influence. The myth of a pampered minority, though, refuses to die. On the campaign trail last November, Prime Minister Narendra Modi accused the Congress party of pressuring Supreme Court judges, on pain of impeachment, to delay a final decision on the Ayodhya title suit. The charge stems from a lineage of propaganda invented by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which holds the Congress guilty of the cynical politics of Muslim appeasement. Secularism in India has been variously characterised, though few of these have done justice to the vigour with which the issue was debated in the Constituent Assembly. In the aftermath of Partition, seen as the outcome of the community-based template of political competition introduced under British rule, secularism was an article of faith across the ideological spectrum, though only in a limited definition as a seamless sense of national identity. Minority representation was discussed at length and set aside as a superfluity. There was no case for assured representation on communal lines, since the guarantees of equality before the law and access to public services and employment would ensure fair outcomes for all. Anantha sayanam Ayyangar put it thus, addressing an interlocutor from the minority community in the Constituent Assembly: "I am a Hindu and if you allow me to represent you, I will come to you at least every four (sic) years. Similarly a Muslim man can come to Hindus. Ultimately, we will all come together." For Sardar Patel, the possibility of both separate communal electorates and assured representation was unthinkable, no less than an incentive for certain citizens to "exclude" themselves and "remain perpetually in a minority". Equality embraced the right to be different, though not a difference in rights. Exceptions would be granted only where classes of citizens were known to have suffered a deficit of social and cultural capital on account of discrimination through history. The construct of a "minority" segued into a notion of social and educational backwardness, remediable over generations through procedures of affirmative action. These were formula-



tions steeped in unwitting upper caste privilege, a sense that the Constituent Assembly — elected on a very narrow franchise and voided of its more eloquent minority spokespersons by Partition — spoke for a true nationalism at risk of dilution by sectarian demands. In the real world of dislocation and trauma, Partition witnessed a number of local vigilante efforts to inscribe a narrower identity on the incipient nation. The surreptitious introduction of idols into the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya, where a dispute over building rights on an adjacent site had simmered since the late 19th century, was one such act, though by no means the only one. It is on record that Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru wrote insistently to the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh at the time, Govind Ballabh Pant, insisting that the idols smuggled into the Babri Masjid should be removed. Less known is his suggestion in a 1949 letter to the Minister, Mehr Chand Khanna, of a wider problem involving the expropriation of a number of Muslim places of worship. Nehru's insistence on the reversal of these intrusions gradually receded from the attention span of governments at the State and local levels. Ayodhya, like numerous other incidents from the time, would have faded into the distant recesses of memory had not the politics of waning upper caste hegemony and the decline

of the Congress provided occasion for it to spark back to life. If equality was a constitutional promise impossible to reconcile with upper caste hegemony, identity was a serviceable alternative. From about the 1980s, the seamless spirit of the Indian nation that was so much a concern of the Constituent Assembly, gave way, at least in electoral competition, to the construct of a nation of multiple identities, fanning for influence over the whole. From its birth in the 1980s, the Ayodhya campaign has been a metaphor for a minority faith's disenfranchisement. And nowhere is this story told more eloquently than in India's largest State, Uttar Pradesh, where Muslims constitute over 19% of the total population, and hold a mere 24 seats in a 403 member Legislative Assembly. This tally from the 2017 election is the lowest since 1991, when Muslim representation in a somewhat larger State Assembly, prior to the hill districts being hived off, stood at 21. That year, when the BJP first won power in U.P., marked the prelude to the climactic act of destruction at Ayodhya. But political energies were spent once the offending 16th century monument was effaced. The BJP was unable to mobilise the same fervour in elections that followed, never gaining a majority of its own till the sweep of 2017. Analysis by the Trivedi Centre for

Political Data, at Sonapat's Ashoka University, shows that the BJP's electoral strategy in U.P. was built on a 60 versus 40 calculation. With Muslims and two other caste groupings — Yadavs and Jatavs — making up roughly 40% of the State's electorate, the BJP strategy targeted the remaining 60%. Key to the BJP's sweep of the U.P. elections was its success in drawing in a critical mass of votes from strata that had reason to feel aggrieved at their exclusion from the dominant coalitions shaping politics post-Ayodhya. The endless turmoil caused by Ayodhya compels a reexamination of other fundamentals of the Constitution. Articles 27 and 28 have been read as reproducing, though in a weaker fashion, the guarantee of secular statecraft of the U.S. First Amendment, which prohibits the establishment of any religion by law. Though the Indian state is enjoined to neutrality, religion is allowed an active role in the public sphere under Article 25, which assures every citizen the freedom to "profess, practise and propagate" any faith. By definition, every religion enters the fray with a claim to universality; no religion is willing to accept a domain of application limited in time and space. The unfettered exercise of Article 25 rights in this sense puts the general will at risk of being bent to a majoritarian assertion. The restraint of "pub-

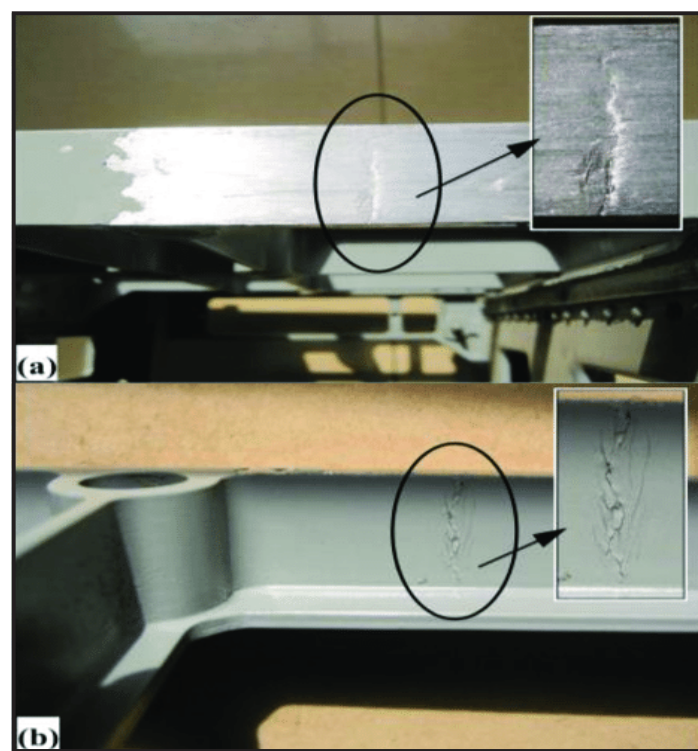
lic order" mandated by the Constitution is too loose a standard to prevent the intrusion into politics of religious majoritarianism. In his recent book, *A People's Constitution*, Rohit De speaks of how in the early years of Indian independence, "electoral minorities", i.e., communities of caste and religion that were unlikely to "represent themselves through electoral democracy", were overrepresented in litigation invoking the writ jurisdiction of newly established constitutional courts. Exceptions would be granted only where classes of citizens were known to have suffered a deficit of social and cultural capital on account of discrimination through history. The construct of a "minority" segued into a notion of social and educational backwardness, remediable over generations through procedures of affirmative action. These were formulations steeped in unwitting upper caste privilege, a sense that the Constituent Assembly — elected on a very narrow franchise and voided of its more eloquent minority spokespersons by Partition — spoke for a true nationalism at risk of dilution by sectarian demands. In the real world of dislocation and trauma, Partition witnessed a number of local vigilante efforts to inscribe a narrower identity on the incipient nation. The surreptitious introduction of idols into the Babri Masjid at

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If equality was a constitutional promise impossible to reconcile with upper caste hegemony, identity was a serviceable alternative. From about the 1980s, the seamless spirit of the Indian nation that was so much a concern of the Constituent Assembly, gave way, at least in electoral competition, to the construct of a nation of multiple identities, contending for influence over the whole. From its birth in the 1980s, the Ayodhya campaign has been a metaphor for a minority faith's disenfranchisement. And nowhere is this story told more eloquently than in India's largest State, Uttar Pradesh, where Muslims constitute over 19% of the total population, and hold a mere 24 seats in a 403 member Legislative Assembly. Clearly, the Ayodhya petition claiming the restitution of a monument commandeered in the name of another faith was one such instance. With electoral compulsions now acquiring increasing urgency, the BJP government has demanded that the Supreme Court unfetter a large part of the land held in trust pending a final settlement of the case. Party spokesmen have also mused aloud about issuing an ordinance as an act of executive will to preempt an adverse judicial finding. This attempt to dismantle the last remaining restraint to the majoritarian will is sure to fuel a new fervour in the upcoming general election, putting further pressure on the institutions of governance and challenging their capacity to uphold constitutional integrity. Sukumar Muralidharan teaches at the school of journalism, O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonapat

Cracks in the framework

(Gns. News) With the systematic weakening of institutions, the government risks pushing all resistance to the streets. The Government of India has reportedly suppressed its own data on current employment, or rather job loss, in the country. It has, thereby, compromised the autonomy and the standing of the National Statistical Commission. This is the latest instalment in the rather sordid story of institutional decay in India, overseen by the leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). This is not to suggest that previous governments did not undermine institutions. The internal Emergency imposed on the country from 1975 to 1977 initiated the process. The government tried to tame bureaucrats as well as the highest court in the land. Postings and appointments were manipulated to suit the ruling dispensation. The BJP government has, however, earned the dubious distinction of sabotaging the autonomy of several political institutions in rapid succession. Institutional decay occasions worry because it affects ordinary citizens in disastrous ways. All governments, even those which have been democratically elected, betray an inexorable will to power. Expectedly, expansion of government power violates constitutional rights to freedom, equality and justice. The only way citizens can be protected against any arbitrary and unlawful exercise of power is by limiting the power of government. Liberal democrats, always sceptical of state power, have tried to contain dramatic surges of power by charting out of constitutions and institutional design. Institutions, as the embodiment of formal and informal rules, assure citizens that the government exercises power according to some norms that



enable as well as regulate state capacity. This makes for good political sense when we remember that most human activity is structured by systems of rules — take the intricate and rule-bound game of chess or cricket. Relationships, households, the economy, society, the games we play and do not play take place and develop within the framework of rules. Human beings are social, but we cannot be social unless we know what is expected of us, and what we should do or not do. Without rules that govern relationships — for example, the norm that friendship is based on trust — we will not know what is worthwhile and what is not, what is preferable and what should be avoided, and what is appropriate and what is expedient. The Canadian political philosopher Charles Taylor has argued in his famous work, *Sources of the Self* (1989), that institutions embody "strong evaluations".

We learn to discriminate between right and wrong, better and worse, and higher and lower. These evaluations are not judged subjectively by our own desires or impulses. Institutions, which stand independently of us, give us standards that allow us to evaluate. Following Taylor, we can rightly wonder why political power should be exercised, implemented and executed without rules. Assertions of political power adversely affect our interests and our projects. We should be in a position to judge when this power is exercised fairly or unfairly. Rules in a democracy assure us that justice is synonymous with fairness. Moreover, rules make our worlds predictable. We know what the boundaries of the freedom of expression are, we know that if the police arrests us tomorrow, we have the right to appoint a lawyer and appeal to the judiciary. Without

institutions and rules our life would be chancy, unpredictable and fickle. We would inhabit a space empty of certainties, expectations, aspirations and evaluations. In a democracy, individuals are governed by institutions, and not by men. If we do not live in an institutional universe, we will be at the mercy of capricious individuals. Democrats would rather be administered by a system of rules we can scrutinise and evaluate. Of course, rules can be, and are, unfair. But at least we can struggle against rules. We do not have to commit murders to get the ruling dispensation out of power. We might have to carry out a thousand peaceful demonstrations, approach the courts, lobby our legislative representatives, engage in civil disobedience, or withhold our vote. In a world stamped by the decline of institutions and the exercise of arbitrary power, the only way to dislodge a government is through violence. The present government has tampered with institutions by appointing its own people to positions of authority, and by using the Enforcement Directorate, Income Tax authorities, the Central Bureau of Investigation and the police as bulldozers to flatten out any site of opposition. In civil society, human rights organisations have been pulverised by blockage of funds, raids and arrests. The shameful way in which human rights activists have been incarcerated without a shred of evidence testifies to the subversion of the rule of law. The ultimate aim of government action is to dismantle institutions, and the delicate relationship of checks and balances among them. This bodes ill for democracy. The development contravenes the spirit of the freedom struggle. As far back as the 1928 Motilal Nehru constitutional draft, the

leadership of the national movement opted for constitutionalism to abridge unpredictable use of power, and grant basic rights to citizens. On November 4, 1948, B.R. Ambedkar, responding to criticism of the draft Constitution in the Constituent Assembly, clarified that the Constitution provided but a framework for future governments. But: "If things go wrong under the new Constitution, the reason will not be that we have a bad constitution. What we will have to say is that Man was vile." The Indian Constitution established major political institutions, Parliament, executive and the judiciary, laid out the relationship between them, provided for judicial review, and codified political and civil rights. The constitutional framework does not provide thick or substantive conceptions of how we shall think, and in what we shall believe. It provides us with a thin framework that guarantees constitutional morality, or respect for the Constitution as the basis of political life. Today the ruling party wants to legislate a thick conception of the good. Relationships, households, the economy, society, the games we play and do not play take place and develop within the framework of rules. Human beings are social, but we cannot be social unless we know what is expected of us, and what we should do or not do. Without rules that govern relationships — for example, the norm that friendship is based on trust — we will not know what is worthwhile and what is not, what is preferable and what should be avoided, and what is appropriate and what is expedient. The Canadian political philosopher Charles Taylor has argued in his famous work, *Sources of the Self* (1989), that institutions embody "strong evaluations". We learn to discriminate between right and

wrong, better and worse, and higher and lower. These evaluations are not judged subjectively by our own desires or impulses. Institutions, which stand independently of us, give us standards that allow us to evaluate. Following Taylor, we can rightly wonder why political power should be exercised, implemented and executed without rules. We are instructed to worship the nation, respect the cow, glorify the coercive arm of the state, and listen on bended knees to leaders. Frankly the discourse is reminiscent of the naïve, and often crude, nationalist scripts authored and acted out by the filmstar Manoj Kumar in the 1960s. We can avoid watching his films without fear of harassment, but we cannot defy the government without being abused and subjected to violence of the pen and tongue.

The government arrests civil society activists who engage with policy, and vigilante groups attack individuals who dare transport cattle, legitimately, from one part of India to another. Immediately the sympathies of the police and magistrates, some sections of the media and public opinion swing towards the perpetrator, not the victim. The leaders of our ruling dispensation seem to have no respect for the rule of law, nor for the rules that regulate speech in public spaces. Ultimately institutionalised power that is subject to regulation, and that can withstand the scrutiny of the political public, is meant to protect citizens. Unfortunately, in the India of today institutions are used to protect the ruling class, and its sins of omission and commission. The people who rule should know that when the relationship between citizens and the state is governed not by institutions but by individuals, politics takes to the streets. And then a thousand revolts happen. We pay heavily for institutional decline.

Stay out of politics, Pak. SC tells armed forces



(Gns. News) Pakistan's Supreme Court rebuked the military and intelligence agencies on Wednesday, asking them to uphold free speech and stay out of politics in a country ruled by the Generals for nearly half its existence. The unusually strong criticism was issued in a judgment released criticising the role of the intelligence agencies in anti-blasphemy protests which paralysed the capital Islamabad for several weeks in 2017. "If any personnel of the Armed Forces indulges in any form of politicking or tries to manipulate the media, he undermines the integrity and professionalism of the Armed Forces," the judgment stated. Pakistan's Constitution "emphatically prohibits" members of the armed forces from "engaging in any kind of political activity", it added, ordering the government and the Chiefs of the Army, Air Force and Navy to take action against anyone found violating their oaths to uphold the document. Videos of the 2017 protests showing what appeared to be soldiers handing out cash to protesters helped fuel speculation that the demonstrators were backed by the military.

Venezuela military blocks aid shipment



(Gns. News) Venezuelan military officers blocked a bridge on the border with Colombia ahead of an anticipated humanitarian aid shipment, as Opposition leader Juan Guaidó stepped up his challenge to President Nicolás Maduro's authority. Earlier on Tuesday, the Opposition-dominated National Assembly warned the armed forces, which make up Mr. Maduro's power base, not to cross a "red line" by blocking aid. Mr. Guaidó claims that up to 3,00,000 people face death if the aid is not delivered. However, Mr. Maduro said humanitarian aid would be the forerunner of a U.S.-led invasion, insisting that "no one will enter, not one invading soldier".

Venezuelan military officers used a tanker truck and huge shipping container to block access to the Tienditas bridge, which links Cucuta, Colombia to Urena, Venezuela.

Cancer care tops PMJAY



(Gns. News) Health first: Medical oncology is the highest utilised package under the scheme in the tertiary care sector. However, healthcare conclave points to low package rate, services below cost Cancer patients are among the topmost beneficiaries of the Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY). Medical oncology is the highest utilised package under the health scheme in the tertiary care sector followed by cardiology, orthopaedics, urology and radiation oncology. The scheme has seen 77% utilisation in tertiary and 23% in secondary healthcare. "There is definitely a lot of utilisation for chemotherapy and services like dialysis," Malti Jaswal, senior consultant with the World Bank, said. She was presenting her observations on Ayushman Bharat at the Confederation of Indian Industry Healthcare, Pharma and Medtech Conclave in Mumbai on Wednesday. "It is believed that the scheme will result in 1.7 crore hospitalisations in the first year. Of the total spending, almost 40% or Rs. 5,260 crore would go to public sector hospitals and Rs. 7,250 crore or 60% to the private sector," she said. Stakeholders in the healthcare industry who gathered at the event touted Ayushman Bharat as a game changer. Yet, many top private players have chosen not to be empanelled because of the low package rate offered under the scheme. "Fundamentally, I do believe that it is a very good scheme. But currently, we are not sure if we can be a part of it," said Dr. S. Narayani, zonal director, Fortis Hospital. She suggested that cost can be brought down significantly if the government thinks on the lines of allowing reuse of consumables. The scheme has seen 77% utilisation in tertiary and 23% in secondary healthcare. "There is definitely a lot of utilisation for chemotherapy and services like dialysis," Malti Jaswal, senior consultant with the World Bank, said. She was presenting her observations on Ayushman Bharat at the Confederation of Indian Industry Healthcare, Pharma and Medtech Conclave in Mumbai on Wednesday. "It is believed that the scheme will result in 1.7 crore hospitalisations in the first year. Of the total spending, the government can think of formalising it," she said. Dr. Shubnum Singh, director of Max Healthcare, also echoed Dr. Narayani's thoughts. "It's a brilliant scheme and universally appealing. But there is a caveat. We cannot provide a service below the cost," she said. Dr. Sudhakar Shinde, chief executive officer of Maharashtra's health insurance scheme for the poor — Mahatma Phule Jan Arogya Yojana — said that there are ongoing discussions on ways to improve the package rates and reuse of devices.

Trump calls for bipartisanship, but holds on to divisive themes

(Gns. News) In the State of the Union address, President presses his hard line on immigration, says he will get the wall built Speaking words of bipartisanship, U.S. President Donald Trump delivered a State of the Union (SOTU) address that suggested he would continue to pursue policies that have most deeply divided the country. Standing in front of Nancy Pelosi, the House Speaker, Mr. Trump delivered an hour-and-twenty-minute speech that exposed, in parts, a chasm between his words and the reality of his governance.

"Millions of our fellow citizens are watching us now, gathered in this great chamber, hoping that we will govern not as two parties but as one nation," he said, adding, "...we must reject the politics of revenge, resistance and retribution — and embrace the boundless potential of cooperation, compromise, and the common good." However, he quickly swivelled to the migrant caravan — a concept Mr. Trump has often used to fire up his voter base and back his claims for a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border. "The lawless state of our southern border is a threat to the safety, security, and financial well-being of all America," Mr. Trump said.

Mr. Trump called on his audience to "defend our very dangerous southern border" and portrayed the issue in class terms. "No issue better illustrated the divide between America's working class and America's political class than illegal immigration." Among the guests at Tuesday's show were the family of a couple who had been killed allegedly by an "illegal alien". Mr. Trump has frequently demonised illegal migrants to get support for his hardline on illegal immigration and his demand for a border wall, this despite data showing that more crimes are committed by native-born citizens than by undocumented migrants in the U.S. Of the border wall, Mr. Trump said: "I'll get it built". His demand for a wall and the Democrats' refusal to allow a physical structure across the 2,000-mile border had shut the government down for a record 35 days



over December and January. The President and Congressional Republicans — not all of whom support his wall idea — will have to come up with a deal by February 15 when key parts of the federal government will run out of budgetary authorisation again. "This is a smart, strategic see-through steel barrier... deployed in the areas... having the greatest need," Mr. Trump said of his proposal, suggesting that there may be scope for an agreement with Democrats who have showed a willingness to consider a "smart wall" and increased money for border security. In what appeared to be a thinly veiled threat to the ongoing Mueller investigation and Democrats who now chair powerful House oversight committees, Mr. Trump said: "An economic miracle is taking place in the United States — and the only thing that can stop it are foolish wars, politics or ridiculous partisan investigations." "If there is going to be peace and legislation, there cannot be war and investigation," he added. At least one part of Mr. Trump's speech had unintended consequences for him. Taking credit for the economy, the President said: "No one has

benefited more from our thriving economy than women, who have filled 58% of the newly created jobs last year," a comment that drew a standing ovation, which was joined by Democratic women dressed in white for the evening to mark 100 years of the women's right to vote. They were elected to the House after November's midterms, a reaction to Mr. Trump's first two years in office. The guests for the evening included two individuals, both African Americans — one a first-time non-violent drug offender pardoned by Mr. Trump and the other, the first person to be released by the First Step Act, a criminal reform Bill passed in 2018 with bipartisan support. In terms of other bipartisan themes, Mr. Trump offered to work together on infrastructure, push to lower prescription drug prices, increase paid parental leave and said he would increase funding for childhood cancer research. The President also said he would ask Democrats and Republicans for more funding for the eradication of HIV in America within a decade. Mr. Trump — in a policy that will particularly hold special appeal to his evangelical base — said

he would ask Congress to prohibit the late-term abortion of children. In terms of foreign policy, there were no major surprises or deviations from his themes: China and trade, Iran being the leading sponsor of terror and condemnation of the Maduro regime in Venezuela. "If I had not been elected President of the U.S., we would right now, in my opinion, be in a major war with North Korea with potentially millions of people killed," Mr. Trump said. On Afghanistan, Mr. Trump said of U.S. negotiations with stakeholders including the Taliban, "We do not know whether we will achieve an agreement... the hour has come to at least try for peace." Mr. Trump's speech dwelt on military themes both at the start and as it wound down. He introduced among his guests, a former American soldier, Herman Zeitchik, who had helped liberate the Dachau concentration camp and sitting next to Mr. Zeitchik, Joshua Kaufman, who had been a child inmate of Dachau at the time of the liberation. Talking of the sacrifices American's had made in this past, towards the end of his speech, Mr. Trump said, "I am asking you to choose greatness."

Nila Vikhe-Patil named advisor in Sweden's PMO

(Gns. News) She will be in charge of handling taxes, budgets, financial markets, housing Nila Vikhe-Patil, a person of Indian descent, has been named political advisor in the Swedish Prime Minister's Office (PMO). Ms. Vikhe-Patil, 32, daughter of leading educationist Ashok Vikhe-Patil, will be working with Stefan Lofven, the Social Democrat leader who was elected the Swedish Prime Minister, leading a Social Democrat-Green Party coalition, last month. "Nila has been appointed as Political Advisor to the PMO in charge of Finance and will handle taxes, budgets, financial markets and housing," Mr. Vikhe-Patil said. She has also been elected to the City Council of the Stockholm Municipal Corporation. Also a Political Advisor in the PMO during the previous government, Ms. Vikhe-Patil has been an active member of the Green Party and is a member of the Election Committee of the Stockholm Green Party, he said. Born in Sweden, Ms. Vikhe Patil spent her early years in Ahmednagar and is the granddaughter of former Union Minister Balasaheb Vikhe-Patil and niece of Radhakrishna Vikhe-Patil, Leader of Opposition in the Assembly. She holds a Bachelor's degree and MBA from Gothenburg School of Business, with Economics and Law and has also studied MBA in University de Complutense in Madrid. Ms. Vikhe-Patil has been a member of the Board of the Green Party, Swedish Young Greens, Green Party Gothenburg, Green students of Sweden, and a member of the executive committee of the Green Party Stockholm, her father said. Sweden has been on a charm offensive towards India, supporting Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'Make in India' manufacturing summit with Mr. Lofven leading a delegation of the Swedish industry leaders to the launch event in 2016. India is also an increasingly important market for Sweden, with over 160 Swedish companies now established in the country, said Mr. Ashok Vikhe-Patil, chairman of the Vikhe-Patil Foundation, which runs 102 educational institutions across Maharashtra.



Livelihood lost, eye surgery patients seek compensation

(Gns. News) Fifty eight-year-old Rafiq Khan, a tempo driver, will never be able to drive again. The sole breadwinner of his family lost his left eye after catching an infection after a cataract surgery at the HBT Trauma Care Hospital in Jogeshwari. The hospital-acquired infection resulted in a corneal melt. Doctors feared the infection would spread to his brain, and had to eventually carry out an evisceration surgery, removing the eye's contents and leaving a hollow cavity. "I don't know what to do for a living now," Mr. Khan, one of the seven patients to have suffered varying degrees of vision loss after being operated at the hospital on January 4, told The Hindu on Wednesday. He has been re-admitted to KEM Hospital in Parel after his sutures

opened. Mr. Khan has been a driver for 40 years. After losing his only son to cancer last year, he provides for his wife, daughter-in-law and three grandchildren. "Now I am nothing but a liability," Mr. Khan said. He wants the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) to take stringent action against those responsible and compensate him for the grievous negligence. "I cannot afford a private hospital. And going to a public hospital has ruined my life," the Powai resident said. Autoric kshaw driver Gautam Gavane (44), who also lost his left eye, has a similar story. The Goregaon resident has two children studying in Class XI and XII. His wife, Kavita, works as a sweeper. "With no vision in one eye, he cannot drive. He will have to start his life all over again," Mr.

Gavane's brother Satish said. Mr. Gavane was discharged from KEM Hospital on January 22, but was admitted to the hospital's intensive care unit on January 25. "He suddenly became disorientated and his hands and legs were swollen. He was shifted out of the ICU two days ago," Satish said. Fatima Shaikh (87) also remains hospitalised after slipping in the hospital's bathroom after the eye surgery. "She is reacting to flashes of light and can see blurry movement. But that's hardly anything," her son Liyakath said, adding that she has been kept in hospital for an orthopaedic surgery. The remaining four patients have gone home, but all have some degree of vision loss. "My mother could cook and move around the house. But now she just sits in one place,"

'Congress's politics in Mumbai is not about just one community'



Weeks ahead of the general elections, Milind Deora, two-time Congress MP from South Mumbai, has red-flagged the direction and the functioning style of the party's city unit led by Sanjay Nirupam. In a statement on Tuesday, Mr. Deora said the Congress's city unit must remain a symbol of its diversity rather than indulge in sectarian politics. After hinting he may even quit as a candidate, Mr. Deora told The Hindu that if Mr. Nirupam's removal could fix the Congress's problems in the city it was born in, then so be it. Edited excerpts: What are the issues within Mumbai Congress that bother you? I don't want to comment on what is happening within the party publicly, but would like to discuss it within the party. Because if me as Milind Deora can't discuss it internally, how can a common party worker do it? Are there some grievances? Yes, there are. I will discuss those internally. Are you threatening to withdraw from the Lok Sabha elections? My family has been fighting elections since 1968. My father fought a corporation election in 1968 and since then, he contested for the MLA seat, MP seat. Irrespective of results, our work continued. People kept on coming and we continue to be involved in various activities of the constituency. So the work and affection continues. I am grateful for the fact that my party has chosen me as an unanimous candidate and people have been calling me to tell that they feel I am the right candidate. It is not a threat of anything, but this is the time when Rahul Gandhi is fighting hard, working hard to expose the government, and you feel, why can't we in Mumbai do the same thing? What are the issues over which Congress leaders are not bonding well? There are political differences which will be ironed out at political level. There are severe differences in any organisation on how things should be done. We can't deny that there are problems in the party's Mumbai unit. Congress's politics in Mumbai is not about just one community. The Shiv Sena, MNS or BJP work on those lines. That isn't Congress and it won't survive with such type of politics. It wasn't that Murli Deora or Gurudas Kamat were tall leaders of their communities. But they had strong leaders from each and every community with them, be it Marathis or Muslims or Dalits or north Indians or any others. There were political differences but they did not antagonise anyone. That was the message of the Mumbai Congress. It was not an identity-driven politics. That has changed and it has suddenly become about identity. This is upsetting leaders and making them sit at home. For Congress to win elections in Mumbai, it needs a coalition of leaders from each and every community. Irrespective of the election result, you don't want your party to look torn apart. When you are going out for a job interview, you don't want your shirt to be ripped apart in five pieces. Are you threatening to withdraw from the Lok Sabha elections? My family has been fighting elections since 1968. My father fought a corporation election in 1968 and since then, he contested for the MLA seat, MP seat. Irrespective of results, our work continued. People kept on coming and we continue to be involved in various activities of the constituency. So the work and affection continues. I am grateful for the fact that my party has chosen me as an unanimous candidate and people have been calling me to tell that they feel I am the right candidate. It is not a threat of anything, but this is the time when Rahul Gandhi is fighting hard, working hard to expose the government, That's how I feel right now. It troubles me now that we are not a united set-up. Is Sanjay Nirupam responsible for changing Mumbai Congress's style of functioning? I am not saying that. What I am sensing is Mumbai Congress is moving away from its style of politics. I don't want to comment on whether it is moving away under his leadership or started before it. I consider Sanjay Nirupam as a friend and I like him at a personal level. He is a warm, friendly, affable man. I wished him on his birthday. It isn't that we aren't on talking terms. Why bring up all these grievances on the eve of elections and not earlier? You are interested in this interview because I am speaking on the eve of elections. That is for you, not for me. I had conveyed my opinion a month ago to senior party leaders. Not yet. I don't know why. I had conveyed that things aren't going as expected. I spoke to [Mallikarjun] Kharge ji. I didn't complain about one person. I conveyed that things are torn apart and the party should fix it. I still have faith in leadership that I will get reply. That has not been my agenda. Even today, I won't have any problem if Sanjay Nirupam continues. But we need to find [a] solution for the problem. [A] political party is like a human body where all leaders are vital organs and if it starts working without head or leg or any other organ, it won't function? Today, it feels that the body isn't fully geared up to contest. That is not good on the eve of elections. It has to be fixed. And if the solution is to replace him, so be it. We will see how to do it, whom to replace, what to do. But there has to be a response. We can't bury it under the carpet and say all is good. It will be discussed, that's my faith. How do you expect the party to face one of the most crucial elections in 2019 with such infighting? Every election is crucial. There is certainly a strong mood against this government and people want change. They are looking for alternatives and we have to present our narrative in an effective manner. Alliances will be formed. But today if you look at Mumbai, people don't even know the names of all six MPs. People don't know about Gopal Shetty or Arvind Sawant. Where is the voice of Mumbai MPs on local issues in Parliament? None of the MPs seem concerned about the Coastal Road, the city's new development plan or development of port trust land. What kind of quality of MPs have we elected? Just because of the Modi wave, the quality of MPs is atrocious. What is the guarantee that quality of Congress candidates will be better? I can't answer that all candidates... Sanjay Nirupam would answer that. I hope we do. Otherwise, we may not be different from the current lot of MPs. There are good people in the fray and I am sure the party will pick the right people for the job. At a time when Congress is accused of playing the soft-Hindutva card, what is it that you are offering to Indian voters that BJP cannot? Congress offers a tolerant society, where your culture, values, ethos, faith are protected. It is wrong to say that we are playing the soft-Hindutva card, just because Rahul Gandhi goes to a temple. As a party, we respect all and they (BJP) don't. What has the party learned in the last five years after being relegated to the Opposition? A lot. The party needed a shake-up for the last 15 years or so. It wasn't happening when we were in power as the primary concern was governance. We survived 2014, though we lost terribly and I assure you that 2019 will be much better, where pundits will be surprised. Back then, people were angry about Congress and hopeful about Modi. It has changed. Now, people know that Congress has learned from its mistakes. We accept our mistakes. One of the major mistakes was we failed to communicate with people. Politics is not just about sitting in a room and working, you have to communicate to people without exaggerating about what you are doing. Your failure to communicate has made middle class professionals drift towards the BJP... Up to some extent. But Congress too is a party of professionals and the middle class. I don't think they any longer remain core voters of the BJP. Traders aren't going to be with them. Professionals did go with BJP, but we are bringing them back.

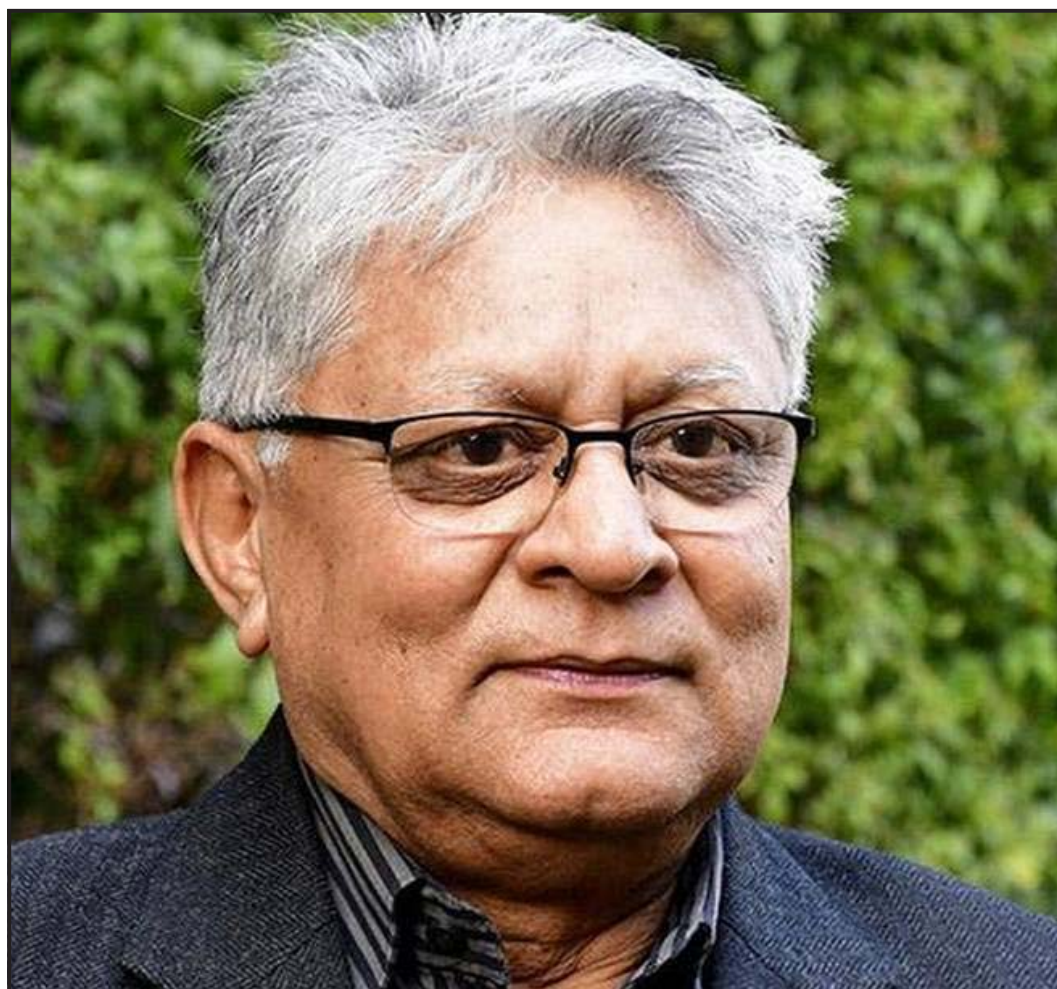
The air hostess who ended a fire



(Gns. News) She ran up nine floors and emptied nine extinguishers in the burning apartment before firemen arrived. Flight attendants are trained to respond swiftly if an aircraft catches fire. Recently, this training proved its worth in an unexpected setting: a Mumbai high-rise. On November 7, 2018, Radhika Ahire, a 25-year-old flight attendant with Jet Airways, put her safety training to perfect use when she noticed smoke coming out of an apartment on the ninth floor of Gokul Panchwati building in the suburb of Andheri. Ms. Ahire ran up the nine floors and broke into the locked apartment with a crash axe before emptying nine fire extinguishers. She managed to successfully douse the fire before the firemen arrived. Ms. Ahire was helped by her brother Rohit and a neighbour, Mahesh Belapurkar. The trio together carried all the fire extinguishers and the crash axe from their own building nearby, Deep Tower. Recalling the incident, Ms. Ahire said that the fire was caused by a stray firecracker that had landed in the ninth floor apartment. "I was stepping out when my attention was drawn to some commotion outside. I noticed that some clothes that had been put out to dry were burning. The fire soon spread into the apartment through an open window and the curtains started burning," she said. Much to the surprise of the crowd that had gathered to gawk at the fire, Ms. Ahire, Mr. Rohit and Mr. Belapurkar ran up the nine floors since taking the elevator was risky. When asked what she was thinking at that time, Ms. Ahire said that her only priority was to save lives. "Fortunately, the apartment was empty at that time. But until I broke open the main door and another one leading to the bedroom, I had assumed that people might be trapped inside," said the flight attendant, who has done her fire-fighting training at Jet Airways twice. "I had to cover my face with a piece of cloth as the fumes were irritating my eyes and nose," she recalled. Ms. Ahire believes that it was the training that helped her to douse the fire. "At Jet Airways, the training was hands-on in a simulated scenario. This was, however, the first time that I faced a real-life scenario of fire-fighting. And if required to step up again, I will gladly do so," said the air hostess. Ms. Ahire's heroics were almost forgotten until recently, when the residents of her building decided to felicitate her for her courage on Republic Day, turning her into a star in the eyes of the neighbourhood kids.

'India doesn't gain from talks with Taliban now'

(Gns. News) India gains little by engaging the Taliban directly at this stage, says Amar Sinha, former Ambassador to Afghanistan and member of the National Security Advisory Board, countering Army chief General B.P. Rawat's call for India to 'join the bandwagon' in talks. On Wednesday, a two-day 'intra-Afghan' dialogue of Afghan leaders and the Taliban, which did not include the Ghani government, ended in Moscow. Has the Ghani government been sidelined in the current talks between the U.S. and the Taliban and in Russia? Frankly, that is the inference anybody would draw. I don't think the U.S. wanted to sideline him and even (special envoy) Khalilzad has said that after the initial talks with the Taliban, there must be a ceasefire and an intra-Afghan dialogue. But this is a fact, that neither the U.S. nor Russia have the Ghani government at the table at present. India has taken a position on standing with the government in Kabul and not engaging the Taliban directly... has it been left out of the Taliban process as a result? I wouldn't say so. Our engaging the Taliban directly adds no value at this stage. Firstly, we lack access and equity with the Taliban. Secondly, the Taliban's policies are too heavily governed by Pakistan and until those ties are loosened, it will be pointless for India to make a move. It will also be pointless to go ahead of the government in Kabul or public opinion in Afghanistan, because our biggest asset is the goodwill India has in the Afghan mind. Even the Taliban recognises that, and said in its statement this week that they will support Chabahar and other Indian projects. Even so, Army chief Bipin Rawat said that India must 'jump on the bandwagon' of talks with the Taliban. "I don't think the Army chief would suggest that in South Asia, where India should have a leadership role, we should jump on to anyone's bandwagon. We must engage Afghanistan through SAARC and



evolve a policy for post-U.S. pullout. You were a part of the Indian non-official delegation that travelled to Moscow to sit at the table along with the Taliban. How far will the Indian government go on this? The general political leadership in Afghanistan now accepts that the Taliban are Afghans at the end of the day, and we should accept that. The issue is, what sort of a government they run, and how they enter it. India would want that the democratic process, which has evolved over these past 10 years, is not jettisoned. That is the only fair way in assessing what the people of Afghanistan want. The Taliban can always take power through a coup or Kalashnikovs, but that doesn't lead to stability. Is there any scope for India to take a leadership role in Afghan reconciliation? My personal view is, yes. Once the Taliban agrees to speak to other groups in Afghanistan, India should be willing to host a Jirga (grand council meet). We are a safe country and a neutral country. We don't pose a threat to either the Taliban or the others, and we don't choose winners or losers. Plus we have a huge Afghan population living in India, especially the younger generation that want their voice heard. So encouraging the population here to meet and voice opinions could provide a good platform. All such Jirgas will begin with grievances, but that is the only way reconciliation can happen. Eventually, the real reconciliation will have to happen outside foreign offices. How can India ensure

then that the situation doesn't return to 1996, when the Taliban took control of Afghanistan with Pakistan's help? I don't think we have to do much to ensure that. The Afghans will ensure that, and even the Taliban will ensure it. It is time for Pakistan to recognise they must let go, and treat Afghanistan as a sovereign country. It may be seen as a great strategic victory for Pakistan for a few years, but the faultline between Taliban and Pakistan will emerge eventually. Afghanistan is a proud nation. So Kabul won't be over-run again as it was in 1996? Well, one must qualify that. If it is just the Taliban versus the ANSDF (Afghanistan National Security and Defence Forces), then I don't think they can beat the Afghan National forces.

No ticket for the tainted: RJD to Cong.



(Gns. News) 'Hope they are sensitive to our concern' In a curious role reversal, the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), often accused of harbouring its share of Bihar's history-sheeters, is pleading with alliance partner Congress not to field tainted candidates in the Lok Sabha election. Several history-sheeters are making a beeline for joining the Congress or as partners in the alliance — prominent among them are Anand Mohan, Anant Singh, and Pappu Yadav, whose wife Ranjeet Ranjan is a Congress MP. Mr. Yadav, leader of the Jan Adhikar Party (JAP) and MP for Madhepura, met Congress president Rahul Gandhi on Tuesday. The JAP has demanded the Madhepura and Purnea seats. RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav has publicly expressed his opposition to some of these characters entering the alliance through the Congress route. "Speculation regarding certain people as potential candidates of the Bihar alliance is disturbing for us. But we are confident that the Congress leadership will be sensitive to our concerns," said Manoj Jha, RJD member in the Rajya Sabha. "The RJD-Congress alliance is not an opportunistic alliance and both parties are clear about the challenge ahead for the country. We are together with a purpose and that glue is very strong," Mr. Jha said. Shaktisinh Gohil, AICC in-charge of Bihar, did not rule out an understanding with Pappu Yadav, but said he was not joining the Congress. "Pappu Yadav is not a member of the Congress, and he has his own party." Several history-sheeters are making a beeline for joining the Congress or as partners in the alliance — prominent among them are Anand Mohan, Anant Singh, and Pappu Yadav, whose wife Ranjeet Ranjan is a Congress MP. Mr. Yadav, leader of the Jan Adhikar Party (JAP) and MP for Madhepura, met Congress president Rahul Gandhi on Tuesday. The JAP has demanded the Madhepura and Purnea seats. RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav has publicly expressed his opposition to some of these characters entering the alliance through the Congress route. "Speculation regarding certain people as potential candidates of the Bihar alliance is disturbing for us. But we are confident that the Congress leadership will be sensitive to our concerns," said Manoj Jha, RJD member in the Rajya Sabha. he said. Mr. Gohil said the Congress alliance with the RJD was moving smoothly. Meanwhile, RJD chief Lalu Prasad is cold to the proposal to field former JNUSU president Kanhaiya Kumar from Begusarai as a CPI candidate.

Minimum income akin to rural job guarantee: Rahul



(Gns. News) Congress president Rahul Gandhi on Wednesday reiterated his party's poll promise of ensuring that every poor person in the country would get a guaranteed minimum income, likening the measure to the employment guarantee available under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). "We have taken a historic decision," Mr. Gandhi said, addressing a public rally in this western Odisha city. "People have been benefited by MGNREGA. But the decision which we are now taking is bigger than MGNREGA. Congress party has been working on a minimum income for all poor for five to six months," he added. "Prime Minister Narendra Modi said he would give Rs. 17 per day to a farmer's family. Congress will guarantee payment of minimum income to every poor person in India," the Congress chief said. "If Narendra Modi could write off loans amounting to Rs. 3.5 lakh crore of 15 industrialists, Congress would make sure that minimum income would be credited into the accounts of every poor person," he asserted. "The time for jokes and deceit is over"

Mr. Gandhi also repeated his poll promises of a crop loan waiver and the revision of minimum support price to Rs. 2,600 per quintal of paddy to win over voters in western Odisha. The Congress leader also promised to make improvements to the land acquisition act that would ensure the return of the acquired land to the landowner if industry failed to use it in five years. He added that land belonging to the poor and the tribals would not be acquired without consulting them. Moreover, land would be acquired at prices that would be four times the existing market value. "People have been benefited by MGNREGA. But the decision which we are now taking is bigger than MGNREGA. Congress party has been working on a minimum income for all poor for five to six months," he added. "Prime Minister Narendra Modi said he would give Rs. 17 per day to a farmer's family. Congress will guarantee payment of minimum income to every poor person in India," the Congress chief said. "If Narendra Modi could write off loans amounting to Rs. 3.5 lakh crore of 15 industrialists, Congress would make sure that minimum income would

be credited into the accounts of every poor person," he asserted. "The time for jokes and deceit is over" Mr. Gandhi also repeated his poll promises of a crop loan waiver and the revision of minimum support price to Rs. 2,600 per quintal of paddy to win over voters in western Odisha. Citing the travails faced by Dana Majhi, a tribal man who had walked 12 km carrying his wife's body, Mr. Gandhi accused Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik of "keeping mum" and not apologising. "Prime Minister Narendra Modi said he would give Rs. 17 per day to a farmer's family. Congress will guarantee payment of minimum income to every poor person in India," the Congress chief said. "If Narendra Modi could write off loans amounting to Rs. 3.5 lakh crore of 15 industrialists, Congress would make sure that minimum income would be credited into the accounts of every poor person," he asserted. Later, addressing a public rally in Rourkela, Mr. Gandhi asserted that Mr. Modi and Mr. Patnaik were hand in glove on the issue of corruption. "Odisha CM is remote-controlled by Mr. Modi. Whatever PM dictates Mr. Patnaik does it here," claimed Mr. Gandhi.

Hiking MSPs distorts agri market: official

A senior Finance Ministry official has slammed a key plank of the government's agriculture policy, saying that raising minimum support prices (MSP) for major crops causes distortions in the agriculture market. This leads to a vicious cycle of over-supply of such crops and a crash in market prices, said the official, adding that cash transfers are a better strategy than increased MSPs. The Centre's 2018 decision to hike MSPs for all major crops to 50% more than the cost of production is a major element of the National Democratic Alliance government's strategy for the agriculture sector; it has also featured prominently in the BJP's political messaging to the farming community at a time of agricultural distress. In the run-up to the last Lok Sabha elections in 2014, the BJP had promised to

hike MSPs to 1.5 times the cost of production in accordance with the M.S. Swaminathan Commission's recommendations. It claimed to have fulfilled that promise in 2018, although there have been disputes regarding the formula used to calculate production costs. The official said increasing MSPs affects cropping patterns as it becomes the basis for farmers to make choices on which crops to sow. In a sector marked by high levels of uncertainty, higher MSPs backed by guaranteed procurement offer the farmer a chance to significantly reduce risk. The officials aid farmers over-invest in such crops, leading to a vicious cycle of over-supply, crashing prices, and increased government intervention and procurement, with burgeoning stocks then leading to a further fall in prices.

Governor's 'don't take Mufti seriously' remark sparks row



(Gns. News) She had sought his intervention in a case of thrashing of a civilian in Pulwama allegedly by an Army officer J&K Governor Satya Pal Malik's remarks on Peoples Democratic Party president Mehbooba Mufti sparked a row on Wednesday, with all major regional parties accusing him of "crossing the line". "Elections are round the corner (in J&K), her (Ms. Mufti's) party is breaking up. It's in a bad shape. She had come to power by stirring anti-India sentiments. Nobody should take her statements seriously," said Mr. Malik in Jammu. The off-the-cuff remarks came after Ms. Mufti sought Mr. Malik's intervention in a case of thrashing of a civilian in Pulwama allegedly by an Army officer. She also labelled both the BJP and the Congress as "political forces driven by Hindutva agenda", while referring to the Madhya Pradesh government's move to slap the stringent National Security Act on three persons held on charges of cow slaughter. "Political lines are getting blurred and

its difficult to differentiate between the Congress and the BJP as Hindutva drives realpolitik in modern India," she added. Ms. Mufti said the Governor's remarks "saddened" her because "a constitutional authority has taken sides so brazenly". PDP spokesman Rafi Mir accused the Governor of "unreasonably interfering in politics". "He is influencing the elections and the electorate against the PDP. It speaks volumes about his integrity and the leftover sanctity of the office he holds. He must desist from exceeding his jurisdiction," said Mr. Mir. Former Chief Minister and National Conference vice-president Omar Abdullah also joined Ms. Mufti in criticising Mr. Malik. "Governor sahib, it's an unacceptable statement and an unnecessary interference in politics. At this rate it won't be long before people stop taking Raj Bhavan seriously, so please consider the office you occupy before you give statements," said Mr. Abdullah. Ms. Mufti, who visited injured civilian Tawseef

Wani in a Srinagar hospital on Tuesday evening, had said: "An Army Major has allegedly beaten him up so ruthlessly that he had to be hospitalised. The irony is that his brother serves in the Army." She referred to the Army Major, who had killed Hizbul Mujahideen commander Sameer Tiger last year after taking up challenge to engage him in a gunfight in Pulwama, as the officer behind the incident. Later, the PDP chief spoke to the Army's Corps Commander to register her protest. According to the family, Mr. Wani was picked up by the Army's 44 Rashtriya Rifles unit from Pulwama's Achgoza village on February 4. "He was asked by the Major to pose with a gun or else get killed in an encounter," claimed Mr. Wani's relatives at the hospital. Mr. Wani's brother is among three soldiers detained by the Army in the kidnapping and killing case of another soldier, Aurangzeb, which took place on the eve of Id on June 14 last year.

BJP attacks Cong. on 'fake' report of 'attempted coup'



(Gns. News) BJP spokesperson G.V.L. Narasimha Rao on Wednesday said that an emergency meeting of the Parliamentary Committee on Defence would be convened after a news report in a weekly suggested that a few Cabinet Ministers in the previous United Progressive Alliance II government had "floated a fake and baseless" story of an attempted coup by the Army. Mr. Rao, a member of the committee, asked if Congress president Rahul Gandhi had any role in the matter. "It was not just a political conspiracy but an attempt to defame the Indian Army," he alleged. "This was a drama, a conspiracy. Via this, a plot was hatched to defame the Army. The country's top intelligence officials, when they tell the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh that it's a hoax, this matter should have ended there. What was the motive behind floating the fake and baseless story about the Army coup," Mr. Rao asked. Asked about the media report, former Defence Minister A.K. Antony said he had given detailed answers on this issue in Parliament.