

## The Needle's Eye



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As we chatted over our morning cups of tea, glancing at the dailies and their dose of grim news, and trying to balance the latest perfidies visited upon us by pondering over the good things happening in our lives as well, my wife uttered one of her *bon mots*: "Isn't it interesting how we Indians enjoy getting the better of one another?"

Yes we do — in spades. If only it happened in positive, professional and meritocratic ways! Mostly, though, we enjoy doing the other person in. We pat ourselves on our backs when we move up in rankings from the dismal to the mediocre. We are usually not in competition to excel, to do better than everybody else. We are in a race to outdo one another. We need to stop being crabs in a bucket, pulling each other down. As we head into the fifth year of the Narendra Modi era in 2018, we ought to be confident about our place in the world. We need to emit an aura of pride and certitude, not diffidence and defensiveness. Too much of our en-

ergy is expended on finding short-cuts out of the latest jam.

On a recent visit to Sri Lanka, I was struck by how quietly and efficiently life has moved on since my first reporting trip there nearly 35 years ago at the start of the Tamil Eelam uprising. There are few signs of the civil war, whose end was bloody and controversial. The south of the island, which I witnessed had been smashed into smithereens by the 2004 tsunami, has rebuilt itself and its tourist business admirably. The highways are broad, smooth and *swachh*, although the roads, the railways and the ports are in the tight embrace of the Chinese (New Delhi can console itself with Trincomalee while Beijing envelopes Hambantota).

The number of Chinese-language signboards in Colombo is astounding.

Our government has been making strenuous and commendable effort on the foreign-policy front to prise

### STRONG FOREIGN POLICY

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the Chinese grip off our immediate neighbours, and we ought to be proud that we are not beholden to any 21st-century imperialist power for our economic growth.

This week Britain's Centre for Economic and Business Research predicted that India would grow be-

yond France and Britain in 2018 to become the world's fifth-biggest economy in dollar terms.

True, too, that Sri Lanka's population of about 21 million is about the same size and therefore far more manageable than Delhi's or Mumbai's. But let's not forget that



for a long time, despite the unrest, the island republic has fared better than India on important measurements of well-being. India slipped one notch to 131 among 188 countries on its Human Development Indicator in the United Nations Development Program's 2016 re-

port. The HDI measures progress in three areas: a long and healthy life, access to knowledge, and access to a decent standard of living. Sri Lanka, at 73, topped the SAARC countries. And Sri Lanka's per capita GDP at \$3,835 is more than double India's \$1,709.

Again, there is a long list of reasons why we have far to go. But just as we have vowed to make another quantum jump in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business rankings, we must as a nation resolve to top the emerging-markets league on social progress, health-care, and education. The prime minister, after opening the Delhi Metro's newest line to Noida on Christmas Day, said governance cannot happen if the dominant thought-process starts at 'Mera Kya' (what is in it for me?) and ends with 'Mujhe Kya' (why should I bother?).

Which is why I suggest his speech-writers move on from repeating, *ad nauseam*, the evils of the UPA's final three years (leave aside the delicious whodunit on whether there was ever a 2G telecom scandal) and reiterations of the JAM Trinity, and Make, Start-up, and Stand-up, in India, to setting out a crystal-clear roadmap towards the New India that Modi spots in 2022.

The wordsmiths should not forget

that by 2020, India's urban population is projected to have doubled to 600 million since the turn of the century. Which is why I was heartened to see that the Fifteenth Finance Commission, among other things, has been tasked with setting out measurable performance-based incentives for states that demonstrate "Efforts and Progress made in moving towards replacement rate of population growth".

Hurray to that. Although population-growth rates fell in the 2001-2011 decade for the first time in states like Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, they and other states like Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha need to ratchet population growth down sharply before our collective lives improve significantly. It might also help if our junior minister for skill development would focus more on job creation than fulminate about the need to amend our Constitution and the par-

### WE HAVE FAR TO GO



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entage of secular Indians.

Three years ago, I tried, in a David Letterman-ish way, to list the top ten wish-list for 2015. Please spend time over the New Year's weekend to re-read my column. But if you are hard-pressed for time, here is a preview:

"What Good Deeds do you have against your name over the past twelve months? I could give you a multiple-choice list: (a) electing Narendra Modi as prime minister; (b) paying your taxes in full and on time [read the anti-'black money crackdown']; (c) using a new broom to clean the street outside your home and, even better, the neighbourhood you live in; (d) paying for all your purchases against 'pukka' receipts and not with a surreptitious wad of cash [read demonetisation and GST]; (e) helping a blind woman cross the street instead of nearly running her over with your brutish SUV; (f) if you are a businessman, paying off your huge bank loans on schedule so you are not labeled a 'willful defaulter' [read the NPAs crisis], thus preventing a host of deserving smaller businesses from borrowing money [read the absence of capital formation]; (g) practising your religion quietly and privately in your home instead of wondering which gods the other 1,251,999,999 Indians are communing with.... I could go on."

You get my point.