

The Needle's Eye



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The noise and heat of our politics promise to throw parliament's monsoon session into chaotic paralysis. Our PM, though, continues to show his fixity of purpose.

At times like this, with the air heavier, hotter and wetter than in a sauna, we Bharatvasis long for the cool breeze of reason to blow in soothing gusts across our stressed landscape. It is a good time to dip our toes in the scriptures.

Loaves and Fishes: Modi the 'Sthitaprajna'

Let me start with the Bhagavad Gita, that treasure trove of wisdom on man's frailties, ethical choices, and righteous action. Everything we see around us – greed, avarice, immorality, intolerance, cruelty, dishonesty and disloyalty – finds an echo in this epic poem.

What must Prime Minister Narendra Modi be thinking as he surveys the littered battlefield of this Mahabharata, I wondered. It became clear that, despite the Greece crisis, Moody's warnings on our moribund rural economy, and RBI Governor Raghuram Rajan's gloomy analysis of how, in a knee-jerk bid to stimulate growth, global central banks were caught in a vortex of competitive credit easing and 'musical crises'.

None of this is new. The Greek debt stand-off, which might bring the Eurozone tumbling down, began in 2010. India's rural stagnation has been deepening over the past four years. And Rajan's much-reported London remarks on June 25 exactly reproduced a speech he made in New York on May 19.

No wonder PM Modi stands stoic and silent amid the carnage. He aims to be a sthitaprajna, a wonderful Sanskrit word that the Gita explains so eloquently: "He who draws away the senses from the objects of sense on every side as a tortoise draws in his

limbs (into the shell), his intelligence is firmly set (in wisdom)". This translation is by Dr S. Radhakrishnan, by the way, in case of any demur.

But what about those multitudes that besiege the prime minister; and who want to partake of all the goodies that power has to offer?

The Lalit Modi soap churns out its daily instalment of scandalous mixed with scurrilous. Here we must turn to the Bible, with all due respect to our minority brethren. As Matthew, John, Mark and Luke describe it, Jesus was confronted by 5,000 people clamouring to be fed. He told his disciples to take what a boy had – five small barley loaves and two fish – and distribute the food. It was a miracle, and it is a miracle that our government continues to perform day after day.

At the bottom of this mess is our very fluid definition of conflict of interest. We are outraged by the influence-peddling that is on public view, but we don't stop to think that we get so much done in our daily lives by pulling strings. We are mesmerised by the Niira Radias and Lalit Modis, but we accept everyday enrichment and self-aggrandizement.

Do we even ask how so many of our most powerful politicians see their assets jump several-fold during the five years between elections?

How is it that, election after election, we let ourselves be fobbed off by the publication of the assets of our leading candidates but never question how their wealth keeps multiplying whether they are in power or not? I asked the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), and they had some interesting data.

Between the 2004 and 2009 general elections, the assets of 304 re-contesting Lok Sabha MPs, across parties, jumped by 289 per cent. The assets of 73 re-elected Congress MPs jumped by 340 per cent during the UPA's first term, while the assets of 35 re-elected Bharatiya Janata Party MPs jumped by 199 per cent.

Things slowed down a bit during the UPA's second term, when corruption

became a dirty word. Between the 2009 and 2014 elections, the assets of 396 re-contesting MPs across parties rose by just 145 per cent. Some of the biggest jumps in assets were reported by industrialist-Congress politician Naveen Jindal, who lost his seat but saw his wealth rise by 135 per cent; actor-BJP politician Shatrughan Sinha, whose assets rose by 778 per cent; and Congress minister Kapil Sibal, who lost but grew richer by 258 per cent. The two members of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty who are BJP MPs haven't done too badly either: Feroze Varun Gandhi, who boasted about his collection of more than 2,000 big-name paintings in a recent interview, also boasted a 625 per cent jump in assets between 2009 and 2014. His moth-

er Maneka reported a more modest 105 per cent increase.

Dynasties do well in general. Both Dimple Yadav of the Samajwadi i.e. socialist Party (richer by 210 per cent) is trying hard to keep pace with her father-in-law Mulayam Singh Yadav (up by 613 per cent).

A Right to Information query by the ADR yielded the information that, after the 2004 elections, the Central Board of Direct Taxes launched action against 88 politicians whose declared assets did not match their income-tax returns. In 170 cases, 'remedial action' had been launched because the politicians had not even bothered to pay income tax despite declaring substantial assets. Our elected lawmakers have sat on a simple step that will bring about some transparency: the setting up of a Register of Interests. Despite the Lok Sabha's Committee on Ethics recommending in December 2012 that the lower house should follow the example set by the Rajya Sabha on such a register, no action has so far been taken.

So we have the unedifying spectacle of politicians who take decisions that favourably affect their businesses, or judges openly lobbying for positions after retirement, and of civil, military and police officers who slip effortlessly into politics. BJP MP R.K. Singh comments on the propriety of

BJP ministers but himself joined the party soon after retiring as the top Home Ministry official. Mumbai's police commissioner has a perfectly plausible explanation for a trip to London where he met the exiled cricket czar. The BJP's Mr Fixit, Ram Madhav, got away with deleting offensive tweets that questioned the patriotism of Vice President Mohammed Hamid Ansari.

Madhav, by the way, is a director of the relatively new but increasingly influential India Foundation, a think-tank that boasts three ministers, the chairman of the Prasar Bharati broadcasting authority, and the BJP's national spokesperson on its board, alongside Shaurya

Doval, a young investment banker who happens to be the son of India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval.

The noise and heat of our politics promise to throw parliament's monsoon session into chaotic paralysis. Our prime minister, though, continues to show his fixity of purpose. He is packing his bags for yet another journey overseas, this time to the Central Asian republics of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, sandwiching a BRICS summit in the Russian city of Ufa. India and its problems can wait for his return.



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