



DAY IN PICTURES

(Left) BSP workers pay tributes to Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar on his 55th death anniversary in Bhubaneswar on Tuesday; (centre) Shi'ites flagellate themselves during Ashura procession in Bangalore. Ashura is observed on the 10th day of the Islamic month of Muharram; Muslims stage a demonstration in New Delhi on the 19th anniversary of the demolition of Babri mosque



analysis

Firdous Syed

Forget economy, who will reform politics?

Multiple corruption scandals, high inflation and sagging economic growth have virtually put the brakes on the Manmohan Singh government's functioning. Adding to the UPA's difficulties, Indian industry's influential voices have publicly started accusing the government for policy paralysis. To dispel the notion of inaction, the government has decided to allow foreign direct investment in the retail sector. FDI stimulating the economy is highly overstated. It is being argued that FDI in retail will help small farmers. Local producers at the end of the chain may benefit marginally. However, multinational companies gaining immensely even at the cost of small shopkeepers is beyond any doubt. Ideal for the government committed towards the welfare of aam admi, badly suffering due to high inflation, should have been to expedite the food security bill. The highly controversial decision has stirred the hornets' nest.

So far, almost half of Parliament's ongoing winter session has been lost to vociferous protests. Ironically, the more India has progressed materially and with the ever-increasing literacy rate, the quality of polity in the country has declined substantially. Over the years, Parliament's working, both qualitatively and quantitatively, has witnessed a downward trend. According to a PRS report, 'A look at the number of hours the Lok Sabha has been meeting over the last 25 years indicates a steady decline in productive time. Further, at its current pace, the 15th Lok Sabha may be the most disrupted in the 25-year period.'

Clearly such rogue behaviour is bound to infuriate the masses. Even though the slapping of Sharad Pawar is highly condemnable act, it only reflects the common man's escalating frustration. The political class condemning the slapping incident in one voice cutting across party lines is remarkable. However, politicians invariably fail to come to the rescue of the citizen, inundated with multiple problems of poverty, inflation and corruption.

Politicians have undergone a dramatic transformation from self-sacrificing agents of social change to petty self-serving entities. The political class losing its moorings further and further with each passing generation scuttles the hope of any change. In the absence of inner party democracy, parties have become cabals only to protect their own interests. The proponents (sycophants) of Rahul Gandhi are busy selling the arrival of next generation leadership. Eventually he might emerge as the Congress's leader despite a huge question mark over his abilities; he may even go on to become prime minister. A product of dynastic politics will hardly be able to clean up a



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well intentioned. The system has become so corrupt and pulverising that an honest politician driven by the concerns of society, in a few years loses all hope of reforming the system; therefore he too became the part of the corrupt system. Singh, a renowned economist, has the reputation of being an honest man. But instead of reforming the corrupt system, he is touted to be heading the most corrupt regime.

Nevertheless, it will be highly illogical to blame the political class alone. Less than a year ago, the Anna Hazare phenomenon evoked keen confidence that finally a true reformer has arrived on the scene. The problems are not colossal but profoundly complex also, beyond the real comprehension of a simpleton like Anna. Hazare's kneejerk reaction of 'only one slap' provides enough evidence about the stuff he is made of. Anna is now threatening to go on another hunger strike. Will that change the system? Politicians have sold their soul, civil society initiatives have proved to be less than adequate, where is the hope for this system to reform?

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Session's life hangs on Pranab's words

UPA's crisis manager has promised to make a statement in the House on FDI

Anil Sharma • NEW DELHI

As parliament reassembles after a four-day gap on Wednesday, union finance minister Pranab Mukherjee holds the key to the fate of this winter session, which has already lost two weeks to disruptions.

On the face of it, some kind of a climb-down is already there on the part of the government as there have been indications of a holdback of the decision to allow FDI in retail. "It is a holdback, not rollback," said Congress general secretary Digvijay Singh who also gave an impression that opposition to FDI will become a major issue in Uttar Pradesh elections. "FDI is going to benefit farmers, and those who are opposing it, specially the BJP, are siding with middlemen," he said.

But the opposition parties have asserted that mere holdback is not enough and they will not be satisfied with anything less than a rollback. "It is in this context that the announcement from Mukherjee would be crucial for the fate of this session. If his statement does not meet the expectations of the opposition, there could be another stalemate," a senior union minister said.

"There is a lot of confusion and propaganda that needs to be addressed to," said a senior party functionary. The government also wants to impress upon the opposition that as it has agreed to an adjournment motion on the black money issue, the opposition should not press for the same on the FDI issue, especially when there is a commitment to put it on hold.

It wants the Lok Sabha to resume the debate on price rise. The government is keeping its fingers crossed not just about Wednesday's proceedings, but also the rest of the session.



Union finance minister Pranab Mukherjee with BJP leader LK Advani and CPI leader D Raja - PTI

Karat warns UPA against taking Opposition parties for a ride

DNA Correspondent • NEW DELHI

CPI(M) general secretary Prakash Karat on Tuesday warned the UPA against operationalising enhanced FDI in retail after the winter session of Parliament. He said the opposition from political parties will only grow if the government resorted to any such move.

Releasing a booklet - Oppose FDI in Retail Defend Indian Livelihoods - at the party headquarters here, Karat said: "If the government thinks it can maneuver to bring the policy back after the Parliament session, it is mistaken."

The CPI(M) and other Left parties are willing to join forces with the BJP and even TMC on

the issue. "We are prepared to work with all forces fighting this decision," Karat said adding that his party wants the new policy "cancelled".

In the booklet, the CPI(M) has highlighted what party insiders called the duplicitous positions of both the Congress and the BJP on FDI in retail. Party sources said the publication was necessary to let people know that the Left was the original crusader against FDI and the BJP jumped on to their bandwagon only later.

"The BJP-led NDA government had initiated the move in 2002 but dropped it under opposition pressure. Not only did the Left parties oppose the move during that time, but also the Congress chief whip in the

Lok Sabha, who termed it 'anti-national'. Later the NDA's vision document released during the 2004 elections advocated FDI in retail," the preface to the booklet reads.

In October 2005, the Left had opposed an "attempt" at FDI in retail during the UPA government's first term. The BJP, according to the booklet, had then "mocked" at the Congress for giving in to the Left pressure against reforms.

"Once FDI is allowed by the Centre (current UPA government), the prohibition by the state governments can be challenged in the courts. FDI in retail is therefore a national issue, on which Parliament must have its way," the booklet reads. The CPI(M) called the government's pitch that states were free either to accept or reject the proposal, "specious".

New Delhi: Walmart, the world's largest retailer, had informed the industry ministry last year that it is comfortable with India allowing 49 per cent FDI in multi-brand retail, in view of "political sensitivity" in the country. The Union Cabinet in its decision of November 24, which has since been put on hold, permitted 51 per cent FDI in the multi-brand retail, well above expectations of Walmart and its Indian joint venture partner - Bharti Group. In its response to a discussion paper by the department of industrial policy and promo-

tion (DIPP), Walmart India President Raj Jain, also MD of its joint venture with Bharti, said the US giant would ideally like 100 per cent FDI. However, for starters, it is comfortable with 49 per cent, he added.

"Bharti Walmart recognizes, however, the political sensitivity around the retail sector. Recognizing the government's stand to adopt a calibrated approach, we would endorse a position where as a first step, multi-brand retail is opened up at 49%," Jain said in a memorandum to the DIPP on July 30, last year. -PTI

AFTER LOSING HIS VISION 62-YEAR-OLD TURNED TO INDIA FOR THERAPY

Stem-cells help American see again

New Delhi: Seven years after he lost his sight following acute illness, it was no less than a miracle for 62-year-old Carl Stevens when he was able to catch a glimpse of the Taj Mahal after treatment by an Indian doctor.

An American citizen, Stevens lost his vision in 2004. He is now recovering his sight in what can be called nothing short of a medical miracle, made possible through stem-cell therapy. "I could see the glitter and glimpse of Taj Mahal, could see its white aura... it is very exciting," he said.

While in his 50s, Stevens contracted pneumonia, which developed into an acute respiratory distress syndrome. He had to be kept on ventilator,

which saved his life, but he lost his vision due to damage to optic nerves, said Himanshu Bansal, the doctor who treated Stevens.

Bansal, a consultant in regenerative medicine at the Institute of Spinal Injury and Stem Cell Research, Rudrapur (Uttarakhand), used stem cells generated from the patient's own body for regeneration of nerves. "He had no perception of light. There was no reaction on his pupil on throwing light," said Bansal.

Several tests confirmed Stevens was suffering from "ischemic optic atrophy", a loss of vision due to damage to the optic nerve from insufficient blood supply. The condition is considered irreversible and

Treated in Delhi for nearly one and half months, Stevens was given four shots of stem cells generated from his own bone marrow and fat

causes permanent blindness. Stevens consulted the best doctors in the US but his condition did not improve.

However, having heard about the potential of stem cells and its ability to restore functions of cells and organs, Stevens sought to explore its possibility and went to China. "He was given multiple shots of stem cells but with no results," said Bansal.

Stevens then turned to India after hearing about Bansal and his research. Treated in Delhi for nearly one and half months, Stevens was given four shots of stem cells generated from his own bone marrow and fat.

After three shots, Steven's pupil started reacting to light. "His pupils had stopped reacting to light ever since he came off the ventilator," said Vicky, Steven's wife.

"He started having perception of movements and shadows. At present his optic disc is looking pink which was earlier pale. All are signs are symptoms of regeneration and rejuvenation in optic tracts," Bansal said. The doctor adds that Stevens may need some booster shots later. -IANS

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Not just the Bustards

There is hope yet for the great Indian bustard. The government has finally woken up and is planning a programme akin to Project Tiger to rescue the bird from the brink of extinction.

The initiative comes not a day too soon. The large bird, once commonly seen on the subcontinent's dry plains, is today down to less than 300 in the wild; some say the number could be as low as 250.

With some luck, Union environment and forests minister Jayanthi Natarajan will act before these last few specimens also vanish.

But must we wait till the very last moment to initiate action to save our vanishing wildlife? The same thing happened with the tiger in 1973, with the magnificent animal on the verge of extinction, when Project Tiger was launched. The project was a big success, largely because prime minister Indira Gandhi took personal interest in it, and despite the crisis in recent years, the tiger still stands a decent chance of survival in India.

More importantly, why can't we have a comprehensive plan for our rich flora and fauna? Yes, there is growing pressure on land and natural resources from our ever-growing population, but that is no excuse to let those we share this earth with to die out. We owe it not just to our tourism industry but also to future generations to at least leave the world as we found it, even if we cannot make it a better place.

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Kapil Sibal could not screen this report

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Sibal met executives from Facebook, Google, Yahoo and Microsoft on Monday, but the meeting was not fruitful, he said. "Three months back we saw that Google, Yahoo!, Facebook had images that could be insulting to Indians, especially the religious," Sibal said. "We told them to see to it that such insulting images are not uploaded. We gave them some time... but there's been no response."

Sibal tried to explain throughout the day that the government did not want to act like a big brother and censor stuff but his statement does throw up certain questions: Does the government have a right to block content the way it proposes? Even if it does, is it possible to regulate content on the Internet? And what about our constitutional right to freedom of speech and expression?

"You cannot censor the Internet in India," said Pavan Duggal, Supreme Court advocate and president, cyberlaws.net. "You can ask social media sites to ensure that they comply with the law, but you cannot look at censorship. Regulating content on the Internet is legally, practically and technologically impossible. At this rate, the chances of the government trying to enforce censorship cannot be ruled out."

Rohan Babu, social media strategist, said it would be silly of the government to even think of censoring or regulating content on grounds of morality. "The government has no right to demand respect for a particular religion, politician or higher authority. If you are in politics, you are bound to be talked about and made fun of."

Sahil Khan, founder, thetossedsalad.com, a lifestyle portal, said Sibal's statement exposes the government's fear. It knows social media can reach out to millions, especially after the Arab revolutions in West Asia and the backlash in the country following Anna Hazare's arrest in August, he said.

Author and entrepreneur Rashmi Bansal said the government was trying to deflect people's attention from important matters. "Millions use the Internet to express their

views," Bansal said. "Those who are advocating censorship are neither aware of Internet culture nor are they in touch with reality."

And is it possible to regulate the Internet? Rahul Roushan, who runs the satire website Faking News, said, "It is funny that they say the Lokpal cannot monitor the lower bureaucracy because of its size, but they think they can monitor each and every Facebook user. Ridiculous!"

Facebook, which has 25 million users in India, released a statement saying it "recognised the government's interest in minimising the amount of abusive content" online and would continue to communicate over the issue. It would remove content that "is hateful, threatening, incites violence or contains nudity".

Google confirmed Monday's meeting with Sibal and said it complies with the law of the land but will not remove any material just because it is controversial. "When content is illegal, we abide by local law and take it down. And even where content is legal but breaks or violates our own terms and conditions we take that down too, once we have been notified about it," a Google spokesperson said. "But when content is legal and does not violate our policies, we will not remove it just because it is controversial as we believe that people's differing views, so long as they are legal, should be respected and protected."

Yahoo! and Microsoft were not available for comment.

Congress spokesman Abhishek Manu Singhvi said the government was only acting "in respect of absolutely illegal, defamatory, pornographic or other similar kind of material". But will such a decision stand in court of law? Harish Salve, constitutional expert, said the government was just saying "listen, you are crossing all bounds of decency". "And if that is what Sibal has in mind, it is not a bad idea," he said.

BlackBerry maker RIM has been embroiled in a similar wrangle with the Centre over access to encrypted email and instant message services. The government feels terrorists could misuse it.

(With inputs from Blessy Chettiar, Renuka Rao & Agencies)