

PM's 'Vision 2024'

Prime Minister Narendra Modi today spelt out his government's vision 2024 at the NITI Aayog's fifth governing council meeting at Rashtrapati Bhavan—the first since he took over as the Prime Minister for his second term. In his opening remarks, Modi said the goal to make India a 5 trillion dollar economy by 2024, was challenging, but achievable. He also underscored the role of state governments in developing the economy, saying their focus should be on the promotion of export, stressing that both the centre and the states should work towards growth in exports to raise per capita incomes. At the same time the Prime Minister also announced the setting up of a high-level task force for undertaking structural reforms in agriculture, including the strengthening of logistics, the marketing of farm produce, food processing as well as changes to the Essential Commodities Act. In other words, Modi pitched for foundational reforms in the agri-economy, the aim being to bring about a complete transformation of the agriculture sector in India.

The meeting was attended by chief ministers, lieutenant governors of union territories, union ministers and senior government officials. Three Chief Ministers - Mamata Banerjee, K Chandrashekar Rao and Amarinder Singh—for different reasons skipped the occasion. The Punjab Chief Minister, however, sent a copy of his speech, expressing concern over the water crisis in Northern India, demanding the upgradation of his state's water distribution infrastructure, while calling for a fresh river waters tribunal to address the disputes among neighbouring states. He cited ill-health as the reason for which he did not attend even the meeting of Congress Chief Ministers, called by Dr Man Mohan Singh to brief them on the stand to be adopted at the NITI Aayog's governing council get-together. Modi also spoke about water conservation and management, sought the states' cooperation in the efforts and said that the aim was to provide piped water to every rural home by 2024. On health front, he urged states that have not implemented the central government's health insurance scheme to come on-board.

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Jagan Mohan Reddy used the occasion to reiterate the State's demand for Special Category Status (SCS) for his state—the denial of which forced his predecessor Chandrababu Naidu to quit the NDA. "It is disheartening when we hear several rumours and excuses for not granting special category status," lamented Jagan Mohan Reddy. There was a voice of dissent too when Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said at the meeting that 'NITI Aayog in the present form has not played the much expected role of a facilitator in the last four years. There is growing realisation that it is perhaps not a substitute for the erstwhile Planning Commission.' Didn't Mamata Banerjee cite a similar reason for her boycott of the meeting?

SNIPPETS

At a press conference Mamata Banerjee appealed to the doctors to resume duty, that all their demands have been conceded and that no harassment would be done. But will the doctors, who have been insisting on her apology first, relent?

Mamata at one stage was expected to visit the injured doctor in hospital. But before she could do that, West Bengal Governor Keshari Nath Tripathi, as Head of the State as well as being a representative of the BJP Government at the Centre, went to inquire the welfare of the injured medico. What will she say to that?

Earlier, the AIIMS doctors appealed to Mamata to concede all demands of the doctors or else their agitation will take a more nasty form all over the country. Why will Mamata bother about their threat?

By the way, the AIIMS and all-India medical associations are concerned with the welfare of a few hundred doctors. That is perfectly justified. But what about the millions in hospitals all over India who are being neglected? Some of them could be in a very critical condition as well!

It may as well be asked: If patients start dying in Delhi and Mumbai, how will Mamata be held responsible for that? Shouldn't the Centre consider it to be its prime duty to intervene so as to protect the interests of the ailing millions outside Bengal?

UP (Rly) police brutally thrashed a journalist for reporting against their questionable acts of omission and commission, took off all his clothes and urinated in his mouth! Isn't that barbarism at its worst?

But when the video showing the journalist being thrashed went viral, all that the UP police did was to suspend them! Don't they deserve to be jailed?

Credibility of journalism cannot be frittered away

Credibility is the soul of journalism. Crisis of credibility is bound to put journalism in great peril. The journalism in India, as elsewhere, is undergoing metamorphosis, thanks mainly to the explosion of social, digital and electronic media. Recently two cases relating to freedom of speech and expression and personal liberty of individuals have come up to the Supreme Court. The first one was of Priyanka Sharma, a BJP Yuva Morcha Lader, who was arrested on May 10 by the West Bengal Police under section 500 (defamation) of the IPC and other provisions of the Information Technology Act on the complaint of a local Trinamool Congress leader, Bibhash Azra because she had re-tweeted a meme about Mamta Banerjee, the Chief Minister of West Bengal. The Supreme Court granted her the relief of bail firstly; with the direction that she would apologise for re-tweeting but subsequently on her application the order to apologise was waived.

There was, however, another case of arrest of one social media activist Prashant Kanojia by the Uttar Pradesh police, which though dissimilar from the earlier case, has drawn nation-wide attention for two reasons. Firstly, the social media journalist made a video of a woman, outside the house of the UP-Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath detailing her love affairs and secondly; the mainstream media lapped up this the matter, which was projected as a sex scandal involving the high constitutional authority of the state. More so, because Yogi is a celibate Sanyasi, so it became a hot cake for selling. In both cases the Supreme Court has given more importance to Article 21 than Article 19(1) and (2) of the Constitution of India.

Here the vital question arises that if journalists themselves do not come forward to stoutly protect the core of journalism i.e. objectivity and impartiality then who in the public will fight for their cause? There is no doubt, that the life and the liberty of any individual are the cornerstones of the fundamental rights as enshrined in the Constitution of India as while Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution provides that 'all citizens shall have the right of the freedom of speech and expression' but immediately thereafter, in the subsequent clause 19(2), the constitution imposes reasonable restrictions on freedom. Needless to say, that the freedom of speech and expression (not the press or the media) is a very hard-earned one and therefore, it cannot be allowed to be frittered away by unscrupulous and irresponsible persons, who think that purveying the false, fake and unverifiable news will provide them instant stardom. They fail to realise that journalism is not a non-serious profession and the rights and responsibilities of journalists are inextricably attached to each other.

Incidentally, both cases of Priyanka Sharma and Prashant Kanojia have been decided by the same bench of Justices Indira Banerjee and Ajay Rastogi

in a span of less one month. The bench, while passing the release order of Kanojia, observed that the arrest and remand were illegal, resulting in deprivation of personal liberty. Even though the UP

for the redressal of their grievances and journalists report them. Nevertheless, when it comes to the character of the Chief Minister, or for that matter anybody, journalists are expected to, and they

'Judicial Panorama' appears every fortnight, wherein important legal issues are discussed and analysed by Parmanand Pandey, an Advocate-on-Record in the Supreme Court of India - Editor



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Government submitted through Additional Solicitor General that arrest was necessary 'to send a message' that provocative tweets cannot be tolerated, the bench rejected it, choosing to bat for personal liberty.

Several tweets by Kanojia from as early as December 2017, which were insulting gods, religious sentiments and community practices. Therefore, he submitted that the arrest was made for public mischief, and Section 505 IPC was added in the FIR later, but the bench was not convinced and said that 'we do not appreciate his tweet or post but how can he be put behind bars for that? The bench was not to be moved by these technical objections of the ASG and used Article 142 of the Constitution, which empowers the SC to do 'complete justice'. 'If there is glaring illegality, we cannot fold our hands and ask to go to lower courts', the bench said.

It was pointed out by the petitioner, Jagisha Arora, the wife of the arrested Kanojia, that the arrest was made by policemen in plain civil clothes, without serving an arrest memo, and without telling her the reasons for arrest and therefore violated the mandatory procedure before arrest as laid down by the SC in D K Basu case. There was no transit remand obtained by UP Police for taking Kanojia from Delhi. He was not produced before the local Magistrate before taking him out of State. The continued detention is therefore illegal. Apart from Kanojia, two more journalists have also been arrested by the UP Police over these comments. They are Ishika Singh and Anuj Shukla, channel head and editor respectively of a news channel Nation Live, which elaborately discussed the news in its programmes about a woman claiming to be having a relationship with the UP CM. Massive outrage poured in social media against the arrests. Even the Editors Guild of India, which normally remains a moribund organisation, issued a statement saying that the police action was high-handed and arbitrary, and amounts to an authoritarian misuse of laws.

Although the woman in the video did not say that there was even any hint of love towards her by Yogi Adityanath. But she certainly tells that she is a divorcee and a highly depressed woman. She claimed that she had met Yogi sometimes at Gorakhpur to seek some assistance. So, the element of obscenity was deliberately brought in, obviously to assassinate the character of Yogi by lowering down his image in the public gaze. All sorts of people go to the Chief Minister's residence, some sit on dharna, some demonstrate and some scream

usually verify the truth before publishing or disseminating by other sources. But in this case, the unverified the unedited version of the lady's fulminations were telecast by an unknown T.V. channel and Mr. Kanojia also made it viral through his Facebook post.

It will be worth mentioning here that before the independence of the country, the journalism was considered to be more a 'mission' than a 'profession'. Most of the journalists, working for the nationalist newspapers were expected to go to jails and work without any expectation for wages. Many of them had actually undergone jails and suffered excesses of the British Government. In those days there was no concept of objectivity. Journalists were supposed to be only fiercely nationalists. A large number of journalists were politicians as well as freedom fighters. Some of them, not in active politics, were furthering the cause of the freedom struggle by their writings. However, when India attained freedom it was realised by the top leadership of the country that the freedom of the press must be given primacy, but it should not be allowed to be errant and anarchic.

Article 19 and 21 of the Constitution is complete but are also intertwined to each other. Therefore, none of the articles can be jettisoned at the cost of the other. The Hon'ble Supreme Court though discussed the issue of only personal liberty but has completely glossed over Article 19 (2), which should have been dealt with in detail so as to strike a balance between both articles.

But more than the Supreme Court, it is the mainstream of the media will have to come forward to ensure that in the name of freedom of speech and expression, blackmailing and perverse is not encouraged as that will be highly detrimental to the free, fair and independence of journalism. Freedom of speech and expression are two sides of the same coin. It is an oft-repeated saying that your liberty ends where my freedom begins. Here, in this case, Prashant Kanojia has not only transgressed his own limits of the freedom but has also badly damaged the image of the Uttar Pradesh's Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath by forwarding the video. One often wonders, what was the 'news' in the video, which was made on the basis of the incoherent rantings of the lady?

Democracy can die in daylight too

Modesty is not a virtue of the media in the pixel age, in which preening is a 24x7 pastime. There is neither a demand for it from consumers, nor a supply of it from the practitioners. Equilibrium has been achieved in the marketplace of the mind. Even so, while print, electronic and digital news purveyors use the benefit of hindsight to retro-fit Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "stunning" victory into a grand narrative arc, it should not escape the attention of the discerning that an otherwise boastful section of the media is uncharacteristically, modestly, not acknowledging its own not insignificant part in paving the way for India's precipitous lurch to the right.

Whilst any number of 'ex post facto' rationalisations may be adduced to explain the Bharatiya Janata Party's logic-defying triumph, it is impossible to ignore the elephant in the room: a large and influential part of the news media which blithely abdicated its role as the eyes and ears of the people—and turned into an undisguised, unthinking and unquestioning mouthpiece of the reigning ideology. That the same boosters are now blowing about India's future as a secular, liberal democracy and offering gratuitous advice to the Opposition is, at best, a self-fulfilling prophecy. At worst, it is a parody. Notwithstanding Mr. Modi's advertised disdain for journalists, making the media forget their core tasks—to witness, to verify, to investigate, and to make sense, in the words of the British media scholar George Brock—was always a vital weapon in the manufacture of consent for the 'Gujarat Model'. Despite early failures as Chief Minister, Mr. Modi deftly achieved this goal. Established media houses were tamed by patronising their competitors. Some pesky editors were reined in or eased out by intimidating owners. Advertisements were turned off and on to let the bottom line send signals to managers. Result: by 2014, without being explicitly coercive, Mr. Modi was able to manage the headlines, craft respectability and plug himself into the consciousness of the bourgeoisie as the poor, incorruptible, reformist Hindutva icon—the son of the soil who was a victim of the liberal English media. During the 2017 Assembly election campaign in Gujarat, a BJP TV commercial unwittingly reminded voters of how the Modi machine viewed the media. Two young men are discussing Mr. Modi in a barber shop. One of them calls him a "dictator" and says he has harassed them a lot. They are interrupted by a third person who is awaiting his turn and is listening in on the conversation. "You look like reporters," says the man who identifies himself as 'Vikas'. In other words, journalism—asking, criticising, digging, unearthing—is an obstacle in the grand project.

Inasmuch as this is revealing of a cultivated anti-media mindset—cultivated, because Mr. Modi, the 'pracharak', would often wait outside newspaper offices in Ahmedabad in the 1990s, well past midnight, to have a cup of tea with useful reporters on the political beat—it is the ease with which he, the 'pradhan sevak', was able to negotiate a 'with-me-or-against-me' arrangement

across the landscape that staggers the mind, and serves as a sobering reminder of the limits of the free press. "Democracy dies in darkness" is the Washington Post motto. Here, it would appear, it died in broad daylight.

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From North and South America (Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro) to West and East Asia (Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Rodrigo Duterte), the playbook of the 21st century populist-nationalist politician contains the same to-do list: a) turn the public against the media by berating them as an "enemy of the people"; b) delegitimise the media by ascribing motives, calling them news traders, "presticides"; c) choke the media by limiting access; distorting the discourse with fake news, alt-right media; d) intimidate the media with draconian laws; by trolling, doxing, threatening journalists; and e) bypass conventional media using one-way radio addresses, made-for-TV events and social media. As the results of the 2019 election show, the best student in the class—



the "first Prime Minister in 70 years to know where the camera was", in the words of one political scientist—was able to alternately emasculate and weaponise media, and turn it into a force multiplier at the ballot box. The searing commentary in the foreign media of what is in store shines the mirror on the below-par inquiry by some of our own. And the decision of the Congress, Samajwadi Party and Janata Dal (Secular) to keep their panelists out of partisan TV debates puts the stamp on the perfidy bordering on complicity. When the Conservative Party unexpectedly came to power in Britain in 1992, Rupert Murdoch's mass-selling tabloid The Sun proclaimed on its front page, "It's The Sun Wot Won It", to lay claim to its contribution. It is nobody's case that the BJP won the 2019 election because of the media. India is larger, its democracy more layered, and the media mosaic vastly heterogeneous for such a glib conclusion. But a closer examination of the last five years will reveal the insidious role some in the media played in conditioning minds,

building myths, deflecting attention, normalising the abnormal, and poisoning the pool. Precisely how this was achieved by a provincial leader, a self-declared "outsider" in Lutyens' Delhi, is difficult to put a finger on. Certainly, home-grown tactics—bogus FIRs, criminal cases, arrests, IT raids, monitoring—were improved upon. Antagonism became the bedrock of the relationship. There was no media interface in the Prime Minister's Office, just a PRO. The Prime Minister's plane was off-bounds for hacks. There were no press meets. Journalists' deaths were not counted. Targeted tweets crowned the new courtiers. In ways subtle and brutal, the message was conveyed and received that hagiography had to replace scrutiny. In retrospect, the move to allow the Finance Minister to also handle the Information and Broadcasting portfolio after Mr. Modi formed his Cabinet in 2014 will probably go down as a masterstroke in taming the circus, top-down. Dodgy corporates and media houses lived in dread of the taxman. Media licences and clearances were difficult to come by. Using carrot and stick, the circuits of news flow were rewired, the trammels laid out on who could be attacked and who couldn't be touched. Still to recover from the economic downturn that began in 2007-08, a media aching for 'achhe din' fell in line. Self-censorship, co-option, and a free ride followed. From Aadhaar to Electronic Voting Machines, and from Doklam to Pulwama with Rafale in between, the biggest scandals lay buried. From LPG to GDP, from missing planes to missing jobs data, the grandest claims lay unexamined. The fake, the frivolous and the frothy—anthem, flag, beef, love jihad, JNU, urban naxals, azaan—got more air time than subaltern protests of farmers, weavers and workers. And agenda-setting studio warriors flayed minority ghosts each night—"Hindus in danger", 'illegal immigrants'—fostering a siege mentality that reeked of victimhood. In the post-truth world, where social media takes propaganda into the pockets of voters without filter, there is nothing to suggest the election verdict would have been the other way round had mainstream media been less dormant. But when a former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court says the media should not forget that its primary responsibility is to be a watchdog, not a guard dog for those in authority, or when a former Chief Election Commissioner warns that "the fourth estate has become the fifth column of democracy", it is useful to wonder if they are seeing the cracks in the pillar with greater clarity. When the media's darkest days—the censorship under Indira Gandhi's 21 months of Emergency—are invoked, L.K. Advani's quote that the press crawled when asked to bend is airily recalled. But at least the media of the time was adhering to a formal order which had a start date and an end date. In the 21st century, it didn't take a presidential order for the 'feral beasts' to suspend their instincts, to look the other way, to stoke majoritarian fires, to fearlessly question not the ruling party but the Opposition, and usher in Modi 2.0.