

The big scold

The Election Commission must maintain perspective, for its own sake

EVEN as the election finally brings us some real drama, the Election Commission is wringing its hands like an overburdened chaperone, telling all parties to behave. The commission has installed video cameras all over the country, and spends much of its energy analysing purportedly offensive material and recommending action. "With each passing day, the Commission is being flooded with complaints of violation of the provisions of the model code of conduct and commission of electoral offences and corrupt practices under the law, particularly by important leaders and office bearers of political parties", it laments.

Certainly, the Election Commission has enough on its hands trying to run the largest, most complex election exercise in the world. The model code of conduct has seven broad categories dealing with general conduct, meetings, processions, polling day, polling booth, observers, and party in power. General conduct is, obviously, hardest to effectively monitor, and the commission has already trod dangerous ground over the Varun Gandhi hate speech incident, when its gratuitous advice to the BJP was roundly ignored. This is precisely the kind of situation that

must be avoided, for an institution with no direct punitive powers in these matters. And let's face it, elections in India are noisy, incoherent affairs — they are bound to generate some less-than-decorous debates. But it's not for the Election Commission to jump in everywhere and tut-tut at these vulgar displays: they can safely leave it to the voters to exercise their judgment about which speech-acts they consider unacceptable, and for courts to act on matters that have been declared criminal.

The Election Commission is one of our most respected, robust public institutions; in the last few decades, even as the executive and legislature dimmed in stature, India has looked to these constitutional authorities with great belief. Even as other countries routinely grapple with anxiety over stolen elections and counting shenanigans, India has reposed full trust in the independence and credibility of its own election authority. Its reach must not, however, exceed its grasp or it risks undermining its own power. Involving itself too directly in the fray could demean the Election Commission's standing and leave it open to destructive suspicions of bias, not to mention looking prissy and tone-deaf.

Awe JEE

Why the IIT entrance exam is a benchmark for all others

ACROSS the world, the lure of high finance and of banking as destinations for the brightest young men and women is fading. Standing ready to pick up the slack are public-sector jobs — and, of course science and engineering. And, once again, India seemed to be ahead of the curve by actually being behind it: this country never really got over its obsession with engineering as a destination for its young. Over the past weekend, in the greatest annual expression of that obsession, four lakh students took the Indian Institutes of Technology's Joint Entrance Examination, or IIT-JEE.

Many of those who did were discommoded by the structure of some of the papers: they didn't quite conform to expectations. More of the questions than expected were "subjective". (Awaited: a book-length examination of why any answer longer than multiple-choice is denied, in Indian English, the right to be considered objective, and of what this implies for the Indian psyche.) And negative marking was introduced for multiple-choice questions, which naturally cut down on everyone's ability to guess their

way through the test. And in the IIT-JEE's ability to make these large changes, without long prior public discussion and warning, reveals why it — the exam, specifically — remains among the finest of Indian institutions.

Morphing methods in this manner would be considered unacceptable were it done by a state school board exam or an end-of-year honours paper in an Indian university. There would be protests in the street at the "unfairness" of it all. Why? Because those examinations aren't really supposed to get at some sense of how certain students are better with the subject than others. They're there, or so both exam-givers and exam-takers seem to accept, as the fulfilment of a contract: read and learn this boring material and, if you do, you've earned reasonable return on your investment. But the IIT-JEE and its sister exams are exempt from this belief: they can get away with changing things midway and being "fair" because JEE-takers are encouraged to believe that something else has been tested. That's a spirit we need to see replicated across the board.

Candidate Lone

Sajjad Lone's decision to contest polls confirms a change in J&K

NOW that he's finally announced the plunge, there appears to be an inevitability about Sajjad Lone's candidature from J&K's Baramulla-Kupwara constituency. Lone, inheritor of his father Abdul Gani Lone's moderate mantle within the Kashmiri separatist camp, has been in the process of striking out for a while. It was widely believed that he was keen to break the Hurriyat's boycott of the election process and test the vote in the recent assembly elections in the state. Eventually he adhered to the boycott call; but many candidates who did stand were said to be proxies. But he revealed his mind most unequivocally when he responded to the massive voter turnout during the assembly elections by saying the old strategy of boycotting elections needed to be assessed.

Many curiosities are thus attached to a key "separatist" leader's participation in the election process. Were he to be successful in the elections, for

instance, he'd have to take an oath under the Indian Constitution. While announcing his bid, Lone tried to explain why this would be in the larger common interest, by asking that this be deemed a change in strategy, not ideology. Yet, it is too early to determine whether this development will remain confined to Lone's People's Conference patch of the separatist camp, or whether it propels the rest to follow. But it is instructive to recap what made the development inevitable.

The Jammu and Kashmir assembly elections saw turnouts remarkable by any standard, with even the Srinagar area, where the militants hold most sway, registering higher numbers than before. This may not mean that the Valley has changed the subject and is abandoning the concerns of the last two decades. What it does show is that the people are investing in the democratic process as an arena for their concerns to be debated.

Philosophy of poverty

Forget SP's mess, take the three main manifestos, and the overlap is frightening



BIBEK DEBROY

BLESSED are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." With apologies to Matthew, India's poor are destined to inherit the Indian economy. These general elections reflect glorious uncertainty. However, there is certainty that one of three coalitions — primary, secondary, tertiary — will shape the Centre's economic policies for the next few years. There is also certainty that the core of these three coalitions will be the Congress, BJP or CPM. Thus, manifestos of these three merit attention. Not only can these three manifestos be contrasted, one can also contrast 2009 manifestos with 2004 victories.

In the 2004 versus 2009 face-off, the CPM is consistent and let's not forget Oscar Wilde, "Consistency is the last refuge of the unimaginative." However, both the Congress and BJP have moved to the left in five years. Indeed, there is a blurring of differences across the three 2009 manifestos in economic content. Therefore, this sinister development augurs our future. Sinister is the word to use, because it actually means on the left, not baleful or malign. True, there are differences between manifestos, such as in the case of the demographic dividend. The Congress thinks 70 per cent of the population is under 35, the BJP thinks two-thirds. Both are right. 69.8 per cent is for 2001, while 67.5 per cent is for 2006 (latest data). It is interesting that the Congress has chosen figures from an NDA era and the BJP has chosen from an UPA era. Or if generalised, perhaps it is simply the case that the BJP has more up-to-date data.

However, these are minor differences. In substance, all three manifestos have similar positions, demonstration of India's version of Gresham's Law — bad policies drive good policies out of circulation. Take the question of subsidising the poor, that's a good policy. The Congress 2009 states, "This will require that all subsidies reach only the truly needy and poor sections of our society. The Indian National Congress will continue its efforts to create and implement a

national consensus on this issue." Excellent and there will be medical insurance for unorganised sector BPL (below the poverty line), old age pensions for BPL elder citizens, subsidised food-grains for BPL families and health insurance for BPL. And what kind of national consensus has the UPA worked out on identifying BPL in five years? If we haven't been able to do it in five, what is the guarantee we will be able to do it in another five?

The consensus implicit in the manifesto is NREGS (self-identification), single-woman headed households, disabled and elderly, urban homeless, released bonded workers or collective (SCs, STs, OBCs, minorities). There is no quarrel with self-identification, sin-

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gle-woman headed households, disabled and elderly. But for the rest, we have no consensus at all. Both BJP 2004 and 2009 mention BPL, but less than Congress. In 2009, we have subsidised food-grains for BPL (with the good idea of food coupons and private outlets thrown in), subsidised pensions and interest rates for aged, bank accounts for BPL women, subsidised bicycles for BPL girls, and subsidised school education for girls from "disadvantaged families". As with the Congress, we haven't licked the problem of identifying BPL. BJP 2009 also has a curious figure. But before that, BJP 2004 said, "In the past six years, the number of Indians living below the poverty line has diminished significantly." Absolutely right and this is

NSS data for 1999-2000 to 2004-05, two points when we had large samples. The next large sample data won't be available till 2011. So we don't quite know what has happened to poverty since 2004-05.

Last year, a World Bank report did talk about 130 million people having been pushed above the poverty line because of food and fuel crises and this may have been compounded by a financial crisis. However, we don't know. BJP 2009 states, "It is a telling comment on the UPA's performance that a whopping 55 million people have been pushed below the poverty line over the past five years. This is according to a study by the Indian Statistical Institute." Since reading this, I have been trying to track down the ISI study,

which must perforce be based on an NSS thin-sample.

Moving on to the CPM, it doesn't believe in BPL. In both 2004 and 2009, it wants universal PDS (public distribution system), no targeting. And stated it more strongly in 2004 — "BPL cards should be available for all those who are not income-tax payers." It is thus a bad idea to pay income taxes, rich farmers included. Since policies are always based on the lowest common multiple of bad ideas, we can arrive at only one conclusion. India is a poor country and everyone in India must be poor. Everyone must be entitled to subsidies. Before mentioning the issue of resources, let's flag another odd development.

Ask any economist what India's

interest rate should be and there will be no answer. However, economists rarely have answers. Politicians have answers, even if those are cooked up by defunct economists. For instance, CPM 2009 wants credit at 4 per cent for agriculture and self-help groups (SHGs). The manifesto doesn't specify whether this is a real or nominal rate of interest. But it must be nominal, party manifestos really talk about real matters. Since the manifesto also questions government figures about an inflation rate of 4 per cent, the CPM clearly wants a negative real rate of interest, something that will make even defunct economists scratch their heads over. Congress 2009 doesn't mention a specific figure. However, small and marginal farmers must have credit at "lower rates" and all farmers will be waived interest if they repay bank loans. Since those who don't (or can't) repay will also be waived interest and principal, we have 0 per cent interest for farmers, something bank managers will scratch their heads over. The BJP also wants 4 per cent for agriculture, educational loans, spliced with higher interest rates on deposits by elder citizens. Let's not forget the CPM's insistence on EPF rate of more than 8.5 per cent, something other two parties don't mention, but won't contest.

With small savings and government borrowing thrown in, banks will borrow at 8 per cent and more and lend at 4 per cent and less. Now we know why PSU banks can't be privatised and why loss-making private banks must be nationalised.

The CPM is most honest in demanding the FRBM Act and fiscal restraint be scrapped. There is an African proverb, "When a poor man goes to the market, often he comes home with only tears," a proverb likely to be quoted several times in present global environment. However, given our legacy of government intervention, the Indian version is — when a poor man goes to the state, or even to vote, often he comes home with only fears.

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RIKHIL R. BHAVNANI

Can reserving seats 'work'?

Looking for a third alternative in a polarised debate

AFTER the drama of elections is over, NGOs and the leaders of the women's movement are likely to push for women's reservations in our national and state legislatures. If the debate proceeds like those over most social justice issues in India, little of the discussion will be based on hard evidence.

This need not be the case, however. We already have 15 years of experience with women's reservations in our local legislative bodies. Any discussion over whether to expand women's reservations to the state and national levels should start with a hard look at whether that policy has worked at the local level.

What that evidence shows is remarkable. When women compete against men for an unreserved seat, a female candidate has a five-fold better chance of winning if her seat was reserved in the previous election cycle. (These are results, from a study by Bhavnani examining the impact of reservations in Mumbai's 1997 municipal elections on the chances of women winning office in 2002 and were published recently in the *American Political Science Review*.)

Reservations guarantee a minimum representation of women in legislatures. For reservations to "work," however, they need to achieve more than that minimum.

The reservations policy is rationalised as a temporary measure, used to right historical wrongs until women can "take care" of themselves; reservations are put in place so that they can someday be removed. The policy's success, therefore, hinges on its ability to continue boosting representation after they have lapsed.

Assessing success in this is particularly important because the policy is so controversial. After all, despite intentions to the contrary, reservations are rarely withdrawn, making it difficult to analyse what happens once they are removed. Efforts to understand reservations are fur-

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ther complicated by the behaviour of incumbents, whose incentive is to implement reservations only in areas where target groups would anyhow do well. In those cases, simply comparing seats with and without reservations would not help us understand the role reservations play in the electoral success of the targeted group.

The municipal elections in Mumbai provided a unique opportunity to circumvent those obstacles. First, seats were reserved for women on a rotating basis: a group of seats were reserved for women in 1997 but not in 2002.

Second, reserved seats were randomly chosen. This made the comparison of reserved and unreserved seats akin to comparing treatment and control groups in a medical trial. In this case, the only difference between the groups was whether or not they had been reserved for women in the previous election cycle; they were otherwise, on average, the same. We therefore know that all differences between these two groups were caused by reservations. This level of certainty is rare for a social scientific study.

The analysis of Mumbai's election data shows that a woman's

chances of winning office, when competing against men for an unreserved seat, were quintupled when that seat had been reserved for women in the prior election. While women have an approximately 4 per cent chance of winning an election in seats that didn't have reservations, their probability of winning jumped to 20 per cent for seats that had been reserved for women previously. Although a woman's chances of winning are obviously greater when reservations are in place (a hundred per cent), the implementation — and rapid removal — of reservations

greatly improves women's chances of winning an election as compared to the status quo.

Why is this? By opening the door to women candidates, reservations introduce into politics women who are able to win elections even after reservations are withdrawn. Reservations also allow parties to "learn" that women can win elections. Indeed, parties are the main bottleneck for women coming to power. Boosting the representation of women in our legislatures must therefore involve convincing parties to nominate women for office.

Reservations set in motion a process that ensures the fairer representation of women even after reservations are removed. Our founding fathers seem to have been aware of this possibility. The electoral reservations that they provided were intended to have expired in 10 years, although they have been renewed multiple times since.

The results of this research create space for a third position between the fiercely pro- and anti-reservation camps. One can support reservations yet also advocate for their efficient withdrawal.

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Hardly 'incompatible'

The four largest Muslim nations have recently held peaceful elections

ISLAMOPHOBES in the West (and they are invariably in the West) who boldly state that Islam and democracy are incompatible cannot continue with this patronising lie. They should know the political picture today across the Muslim world is of democracy growing and strengthening.

Yesterday, Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim nation, went to the polls. Apart from an odd incident, the elections were peaceful and the turnout was impressive. This is only the third time that Indonesians have elected a Parliament and it is only ten years since real democracy was introduced in the country. Yet it is clear that it has put down roots.

Last year saw elections in Pakistan and Bangladesh, the second and third largest Muslims nations. In both, the pundits' warnings about the dangers of the door being opened to extremists were confounded. Traditional political parties won. As for Turkey, the fourth largest which had a general election the previous year, no one can have any doubts about

the Turks' attachment to and respect for democracy.

That is not to say there are not issues. Democracy is no guarantee of political stability in Pakistan or other places (and not all of them Muslim). But the problem is invariably with the parties and their leaders. It is certainly not the people's readiness for democracy.

Invariably, there are those who try to twist the system to their advantage. In Algeria, which also went to the polls yesterday in presidential elections, the opposition, both secular left wing and the Islamists, boycotted the ballot.

...What political parties get up to in places such as Algeria or Pakistan does not mean that Muslims understand or respect democracy any less than Americans or Germans or Britons. Parliamentary democracy may be a Western invention but the idea of electing leaders is as old as mankind itself.

From an editorial in the *Jeddah 'Arab News'*

To encourage quality reader intervention *The Indian Express* offers the Letter of the Week Award. The letter adjudged the best for the week is published every Saturday. Letters may be e-mailed to editpage@expressindia.com or sent to **The Indian Express**, 9&10, Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, New Delhi - 110002. Letter writers should mention their postal address and phone number.

The winner receives books worth Rs 1000.

Letters to the EDITOR

To reform CBI

■ THIS refers to Justice J.S. Verma's very instructive column "Incredible CBI" (IE, April 10). To come to the heart of the matter, there are only two institutions which function with both autonomy and freedom — the country's higher judiciary and the UPSC. Lately, the Election Commission has joined them. The CBI's tragedy is that it does not have statutory status, being a creature of the Delhi Special Police Establishment Act, even given its very vital function of checking corruption and investigating crimes of the most atrocious kind, like the 1984 Sikh riots. Autonomy can make a vital difference to its functioning. Governments have changed; different parties have ruled from the Centre, yet, not one of them has attempted to ensure that this vital investigative agency be placed on a statutory footing. As for Verma's point that "reaching the top of the profession should be considered sufficient reward and lifetime achievement", would it not be better if the appointment of the director, CBI, is entrusted to a small committee in which the second person should be the leader of the opposition in the Lok Sabha? — **Prasad Malladi**
Nidadavole

Is it real?

■ AMULYA GOPALAKRISHNAN'S "Caught or Not" (IE, April 10) highlights an interesting paradox of postmodern public life which is bound to come increasingly into play. Whereas the omnipresent gaze of the camera has made the public figures more conscious and responsible about what they say and do in front of others, the same technology (digital image processing) is the means of undermining the veracity of the image. The simplicity of "seeing is believing" getting transformed into "seeing and maybe not believing" is an interesting complication. I am reminded of the film 'Camera Buff' by Kieslowski, in which a simple documentary made by a hobbyist plays havoc with the management of an organisation. Modern digital technology and pixel churning in all their refinements shall give ever new dimensions to the race between gaze and reality, and engender innovative ideas and aspects of dissimulation from our politicians and other public figures. And like the race between the police and the thief, it should be never-ending. Or all the fun of the game will be lost. To maintain a straight face and composure in the face of visual evidence requires transcendental forms of audacity and obstinacy. — **Jagrut Gadit** Vadodara

Language issues

■ THIS is with reference to your editorial "Translate this" (April 13) on the Samajwadi Party's antiquated worldview as manifested in its poll promises. By putting curbs on English medium education and computers and opposing mechanised farming and stock trading, aren't the SP leaders taking people back to 18th century? — **K.P. Rajan** Mumbai

Well done

■ THE emphatic victory of the Indian team in Azlan Shah Hockey Tournament clearly shows that they are capable of achieving great success in international tournaments. — **Vinay Kapur** Ahmedabad