

Politics of substance

Make politicians deliver on real issues

PRATEEK RAJ

There are two key challenges India faces today: an economy that is not growing fast enough, and its Hindi heartland stuck in a rut – its youth demotivated and at risk of dabbling with extremism.

While it is reassuring that the Indian economy is one of the fastest growing and will become the fifth largest in the world this year, at no point has it been so weak relative to its neighbour. A GDP growth of 7-8 per cent is not good enough, especially when our neighbour China has been growing at higher rates for many years.

Today, the Chinese economy (\$13.4 trillion) is five times larger than India's (\$2.7 trillion) even though the population size in both the countries are almost similar. The other problem that India faces today is regional inequality. The last three decades of economic growth has largely been spear-headed by the south and the west, symbolised by cities like Bengaluru. Today, these cities are home to people across the country and are expanding faster than they can cope. Hence, balancing growth across India is essential. The northern and eastern regions of the country, where a large fraction of the population resides (especially the Hindi heartland), is lagging behind. The region's population is young, and they need jobs. But the region lacks growing towns and cities that can attract capital and talent.

The worry is that if the region's youth – whose aspirations were once raised by the rhetoric of 'India Shining' – fail to see their aspirations getting fulfilled, their frustration and disappointment can push them into extremism. India's economic growth will be badly hit especially if extremism takes root in cities – it will make them less cosmopolitan and hence less attractive to a diverse talent pool.

For growth to flourish, India not only needs more competitive markets but also a growing cosmopolitan culture – extremism is an existential threat to both. Economically stunted but aspirational regions like the Hindi-belt run the risk of getting trapped in a vicious cycle where lack of growth could fuel extremism, which in turn would stunt the economy further.

Given the urgency of the situation, it is important that politicians prioritise economic issues over jingoism and cultural politics. Politicians from across parties need to start finding solutions to the above challenges. The politics of "us versus them" needs to end. Most Indians are grappling with similar issues and needs, regardless of the imaginary boundaries that politicians and the media create. The issues that voters actually

care about (as per the ADR voter survey) are a desire for jobs, better healthcare, basic amenities, a cleaner environment, and an improved agrarian sector.

Voters need to confront the politicians on a regular basis about these issues. Politicians and the media need to start talking about universal issues like pollution and civic/infrastructural amenities rather than divisive topics like religion.

As India should have a stable government for the next five years, hopefully reforms in the areas of land, labour and local governance will gather pace. However, with extremist candidates too winning elections, there is a threat that India could take to parochialism, with a significant segment of the youth (especially in the North) investing time and energy in divisive activities and not in skill development. Rhetoricians cannot deliver growth, just good speeches. Rationality, policy, and enlightened ideas matter, even more so today.



The writer is an Assistant Professor of Strategy at IIM Bangalore