

The Hindu Editorials & Words

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Capital shame



Tuesday's violence in Delhi de-legitimises the protests against farm laws and must be condemned

India managed to pull off an impressive pandemic-time Republic Day parade with no less pomp than normal times. If one's chest swelled with pride at seeing the smart uniformed men and women march smartly down the Rajpath, one squirmed just minutes after as hordes, better described as hooligans and hoodlums than farmers, invaded the capital and attacked these very same men and women in uniform. What unfolded across different parts of Delhi, within minutes of the parade ending, is despicable, disgusting and condemnable. It's a surprise that the day ended with only one casualty from the images of hoodlums brandishing swords, iron rods and sticks and chasing the woefully outnumbered policemen that came alive on television and social media posts. The "humble farmer", who was supposed to ride through the capital in his tractor peacefully, turned it into a weapon racing down streets in an attempt to plough through contingents of policemen. Everything suggests that the violence was not spontaneous.

Conspicuous by their absence were the farmer "leaders". The likes of Yogendra Yadav and Hannan Mollah, who have been all over television guiding the protests, were nowhere to be seen as the mayhem unfolded. It is evident that they have lost control over the protesters and anarchy reigns now. The visuals of the hallowed precincts of the Red Fort being desecrated by a mob hoisting a religious flag on the mast reserved for the Tricolour must be upsetting for even those most well-disposed towards the protesters. Surely, these are not peaceful, poor farmers protesting the loss of their livelihoods. They appear more the rich landlords out to teach a lesson to the government for daring to usher in reforms to make the lot of the real poor farmer better. Through the 65-plus days of carnival that has been on at the outskirts of Delhi in the name of protests,

the question to answer is: How is all this being financed? A poor farmer could not have funded all this and in such style for so long. Either these farmers are rich and want to protect their wealth from competition or there are other sources of funds.

Tuesday's events have completely de-legitimised the protests and eroded whatever little public sympathy that was there. It is unacceptable for a group of people to hold an elected government to ransom through the kind of sit-in protest that we have seen at Delhi's borders. Yes, the government bungled badly in hustling the farm legislation through without consultation with stakeholders or a debate in Parliament. But when the same government offered to keep the laws in abeyance for the next two years, which effectively kills it for now, the protesters turned it down. Now, the onus is on the "leaders" who stoked the protests to explain to the protesters that it is time to accept the government's offer and return home. Anarchy is not the solution to government incompetence, talks and negotiations are. The government should engage with the real leaders of farmers, listen to their grievances and, where genuine, gracefully accept and amend the laws. The protest has gone on for too long and it's time to end it.

Taxing clunkers: On raising tax on older vehicles

Raising tax on older vehicles will help shift to cleaner ones, but some sections will need help

The Centre's proposed policy to **raise road tax on vehicles of a certain age** from April 1 next year has the potential to renew a big part of India's vehicular fleet, reducing air pollution, raising fuel efficiency, and improving safety standards. It has taken the government years to finalise a "tax on clunkers" proposal, under which commercial transport vehicles will have to pay 10%-25% extra on road tax after eight years when renewing the fitness certificate, and, similarly, personal vehicles after 15 years; public transport is given concessions, while hybrids, electrics and farm vehicles are exempt. A higher tax in the most polluted cities, and on diesel engines is also on the cards. States, which enforce motor vehicles law, now have to weigh in on the proposed changes. Unlike similar programmes, such as the post-2008 recession CARS rebate plan in the U.S., India's scheme relies on penal taxation to persuade owners to scrap their old vehicles, with no cash-for-trade-in arrangement. For this approach to work efficiently, the additional tax proposed should exceed the resale value of the polluting motor, making its disposal more attractive, with enough safeguards to ensure that it is indeed scrapped and recycled under a monitored system. Equity features can be built into the scheme, offering a discount to income-vetted marginal operators such as autorickshaw drivers, on the lines of the 2009 stimulus given under the JNNURM scheme for buses. This should ideally be part of a green post-pandemic recovery plan, with an emphasis on electric vehicles.

When the scrappage policy was on the drawing board last year, Road Transport Minister Nitin Gadkari envisioned a reduction in automobile prices of 20% to 30%, driven by recovery of scrap steel, aluminium and plastic, all of which would be recycled. Now that he has a better-scoped plan, the focus must be on building capacities in the organised sector to manage the task of efficient materials recovery. Provisions will have to be built in to see that the sudden demand stimulus available to the auto industry does not disadvantage consumers, particularly those selling junk vehicles. The vehicle registration database for all States also requires updating, to reflect true numbers of old vehicles on the road, eliminating those scrapped; a significant number, more than 15 years old, still run. Such data will help target scrappage policy benefits better. Moreover, many transport vehicles are operated by small entrepreneurs who lack the resources to transition to newer ones and need help as loans and grants. India's policy to eliminate polluting fuel guzzlers has had a long gestation, and States should see the value of operationalising it as planned. New vehicles and cleaner fuels should help clear the toxic air in cities and towns and make roads safer.

Many vulnerabilities: On using blockchains in electronic voting

The robustness of blockchains in electronic voting is, as yet, suspect

The much discussed and debated Electronic Voting Machine in India has survived intense scrutiny over its use largely because of one strong reason — the fact that this standalone single-chip device is not connected to any network. This is besides several technological and administrative safeguards to ensure that the machine is not tampered with. With the addition of the Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) to the EVM, “audit-ability” was added to the process even as the machine has suffered glitches, which the Election Commission of India (ECI) has managed to tackle reasonably well. The ECI should definitely seek solutions to make the EVM more robust even as it must reject calls for a return to paper balloting — which experienced malpractices such as ballot stuffing and booth capturing. That being said, the announcement by Chief Election Commissioner Sunil Arora that the ECI is commencing trials of a “remote voting project” is sure to bring back scrutiny. ECI officials have not elaborated or released any detailed document, but have **mentioned that the system, being developed by IIT-Madras, uses the blockchain method** for “two-way remote voting” at designated centres.

Remote voting, as an option, has gained some priority during the **COVID-19 pandemic** in order to address social distancing. In the U.S., the **mail-in ballot system**, where registered voters received ballots and returned it via post or dropped it off at secure “drop boxes” or voting centers, was widely used, but this was entirely paper based. The blockchain method implements an online public bulletin board that allows for a linear ordering of data to which a user can only further append data. The board itself is public and available for anyone to read and verify. The technology has been put in use for cryptocurrencies — the Bitcoin blockchain records a list of transactions that can

be read to find out who owns which bitcoins without any centralised authority. In the case of a blockchain-based voting system, the voting authority will have to authenticate this bulletin board in which users sign in using cryptographic signatures to register their votes in a ledger. While this system, with its cryptographic features, promises data security and verifiability, the fact that it will depend upon a network and devices could introduce vulnerabilities that are present in any Internet-based system. A draft paper by MIT and Harvard researchers, in November 2020, has raised concerns about the designs of a remote block-chain-based voting system and pointed to serious vulnerabilities in some instances where it was tried out. The paper also points out that beyond the vulnerabilities faced by any Internet-based system, blockchains also introduce issues related to complexity and their management. The ECI would do well to exercise caution before deploying this method in elections, besides subjecting it to a rigorous public appraisal.