### PROJECT **■** SYNDICATE

# India's vote-buying budget



THAROOR

NE sign that an Indian general election is imminent, and that the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is readying its campaign pitch, is

the government's final pre-election budget. By tradition, it is an "interim budget"—a modest rollover of expenditures to see the government through for a few months until a new government is elected and presents its own budget. But, in issuing its last budget at the beginning of February, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government went much further than its predecessors, by including farreaching proposals for tax concessions and giveaways.

The budget reveals three things. First, the BJP has not lost its talent for making promises it can't possibly fulfil. Second, the government will attempt a last-minute appeal to every constituency it has failed to address in its five years in power. And, third, Modi's team still does not grasp the most important challenge facing the country.

The most important of interim Finance Minister Piyush Goyal's announcements was a Basic Income Support scheme for farmers, predicted by pretty much every analyst. But it turned out to offer a grand total of 6,000 rupees (roughly USD 84) per year—just 500 rupees a month—to a segment of society whose members have been committing suicide in record numbers. Would a farmer in the throes of existential despair find relief in a



India's Interim Finance Minister Piyush Goyal with his budget briefcase.

500-rupee note? Would salvation come to him in the form of 16.5 rupees (USD 0.23) a day?

India's government missed an opportunity to rise to the challenge posed by Congress Party President Rahul Gandhi to devise a serious minimum income guarantee that would actually provide a living wage to the poorest of India's poor, including by subsuming some of the existing subsidies. Worse still, its subvention would only go to landholding farmers with two hectares of fields or less, not to the landless peasantry or farm labourers, and not at all to the urban poor.

Although the scheme would make absolutely no difference to recipients' lives, it would be provided in three equal instalments starting immediately. In other words, it would allow the government to transfer 2,000 rupees of taxpayers' money into each farmer's bank account just in time to reach them before the Lok Sabha elections. One may as well name the programme the Prime Minister's Re-Election Subsidy.

The other major announcement was a doubling of the tax exemption for lower-middle-class taxpayers to 500,000 rupees (USD 7,000) of annual income. This overdue gesture is indeed welcome—all the more so from a government that has been regularly dipping its hands into middle-class pockets with an array of measures, ranging from a 20-rupee per litre excise duty on gasoline to an unreasonably high Goods and Services Tax (GST) on staple consumer items.

But these sops were overshadowed

by Goyal's startling omission: jobs. India's unemployment crisis is the elephant in the room that the manager of the menagerie refused to see.

The BJP has plunged India into a jobs crisis. Modi's reckless and illconsidered demonetisation (which eliminated 500- and 1,000-rupee banknotes in an effort to curtail the black economy), the GST's botched and hasty rollout, and five years of macroeconomic ineptitude have robbed India of millions of jobs. Modi promised during his 2014 election campaign to create 20 million jobs per year. Instead, either 11 million jobs were lost last year (according to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy), or, more conservatively, 3.5 million in two years (according to the All India Manufacturers' Organization) The Modi government tried to

suppress official figures revealing a 6.1 percent unemployment rate, the highest in 45 years. Worse still, youth unemployment among urban males aged 15 to 29 is 18.7 percent and among females has collapsed to a staggering 27.2 percent. The unemployment rate for rural males between 15 and 29 soared from 5 percent in 2011-12 to 17.4 percent in 2017-18. Rather than dealing effectively with India's youth-employment problem, as Modi had promised to do in his 2014 campaign, his government has made it worse than ever.

Modi's foreign admirers, believing that he represented India's best hope for economic reform, were willing to overlook his government's disgraceful record of minority-bashing and tolerance of the bizarre phenomenon of "cow vigilantism" (in which mobs routinely savaged innocent civilians in the name of cow protection). Modi talked a good game, pledging to restructure India's political economy, remove the dead hand of regulation throttling the private sector, and increase productivity. This budget is the last nail in the coffin for those hopes.

"The government has no business to be in business," Modi once blithely declared, before failing for the next five years to get the government out of any business it was in, from running hotels and airlines to making consumer goods and condoms. With the exception of a handful of crony capitalists who bankroll the BJP, the private sector is frustrated, investment is stagnating, and corruption is rife (symbolised in the shenanigans around India's biggest defence deal, involving the purchase of 36 French Rafale fighter jets). No one believes official data any more, after two of the government's top three statisticians resigned in protest at Modi's attempts to manipulate figures. Modi himself no longer talks of reform.

That is why the sops and giveaways in this budget were necessary. They seek to mask the Modi government's comprehensive failure to manage the Indian economy by appearing those sections of society, from farmers to the middle class, most hurt by its misrule. It remains to be seen whether Indian voters will be as easily fooled as Modi's minions hope.

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## The Inevitable Second Gear



**EMEMBER** that story where the resident on the ground floor (let's call him "A") would be woken up in the middle of the night every night by two successive "thud"

sounds? The tenant upstairs (let's call him "B") would come home late, sit on a chair and then first take one shoe off and throw it on the floor with a thud. That wakes up "A" with a start. "A" then anxiously waits for "B" to take off his other shoe and throw it on to the floor. Once done, "A" knows he can finally go back to sleep without (hopefully) any further disturbances.

One night, "B" returns home late as usual and takes off his first shoe, again, as usual. But this time, there is an indefinite wait for the second shoe's lunar landing as "B", perhaps from being a little intoxicated, is simply toying around (or even talking) with the shoe without (yet) throwing it on to the floor. And remember, this is TUI, Talking/Toying Under the Influence, hence plenty of spit being showered on to the lone shoe, being treated as heaven knows what through the blurry vision of a blurry mind, but I'm sure with lots of smiles, slurry sentences, or should I say "a" slurry sentence, being repeated ten times.

But this is torture for "A". Oh come on, just throw the darned shoe on the floor and get it over with! But that never happens, and he is too stressed to go back to sleep, fearing being woken up again at a time unknown to any (sober) person.

This is what I call expecting the second gear after the first one. I know this is foreign to many in the age of vehicles with automatic transmissions. But those old or enthusiastic enough to

remember, the transmission of the manual car has to shift from first gear to the absolute must second gear without delay in the case of an engine revving up fast.

Now, life comes with many such first and second gears. Case in point, the tenants "A" and "B". When there is the first gear, the antennas are up in anticipation (or fear) of the second one. The classic "waaaaakkkhhhh" (first gear) is usually followed by a "thooo!" (second gear), not to mention the devastation and havoc the latter causes to those around with even an iota of sense of hygiene and propriety. And so, the when-will-the-second-shoe-bethrown panic surfaces in me as I am working at my ground floor home office and the guard outside executes his first gear of "waaaaakkkhhhh" but with the second gear ("thooo!") missing, or worse, already executed in stealthy silence. There goes my work as I

Never have I found myself in a situation where I am actually waiting for the power to go out. Maybe just to get the suspense out of the way, I myself should turn the main switch off ...

rush out to see the environmental damage. The guard grins wide, knowing why I came, assuring me the second gear is inside his digestive system. I am not totally convinced as I am sure the damage caused by the second gear is likely to be discovered sometime later,



the hard (slimy) way.

Coincidentally right then, another first gear takes place. The old fashioned broadcasting is in the air—one rickshaw, one rickshaw puller, one passenger and one PA system tearing down the neighbourhood with a high pitch announcement (its only other competition being the round the clock construction noise): "Bhaishob, agamikaal, shokal noyghotika hoitey, baro ghotika porjonto..." from 9:00 am to 12:00 noon the following day, there will be no electricity.

Now, there is ample time to prepare before the second gear strikes almost a day later. Good. Thank you for the heads up. The buckets are being filled, the ironing is being done, etc. as we don't have a generator and the IPS is in its death bed. Even I go to bed early knowing that I can't sleep beyond 9:00 am when my sleep apnoea machine would turn off and I'd better get the

mask off in a jiffy without getting suffocated.

As it happens, I am up way before 9:00 am in anticipation of the second gear. At least I got my beauty sleep. I also know that my laptop will hopefully survive those 3 hours on battery power.

9:00 am: all the lights and fans are on. It's the same at 10:00 am, 11:00 am, 12:00 noon ... At 4:00 pm sharp, the internet goes down, while the electricity is still up. So, when did electricity become Ethernet?

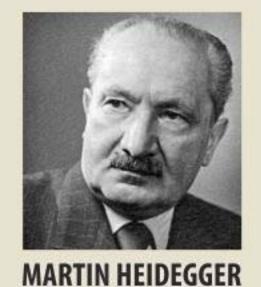
Time continues. 5:00 pm, 6:00 pm ... the rest of the day, the following day and the one after. Oh come on! I can't take this!! Second gear! Where art thou? This suspense is killing me! What is wrong? Is power outage now also stuck in traffic? Or is this just a drill, and only a drill, to rehearse for the upcoming summer? Or maybe this was the signal of some future time when the electricity WILL actually go when I'm the least prepared. Or is it that the

man pulling the lever, singing Preity Zinta style, "It's the time to DESCO!", isn't up yet? No, it's not April, else I'd suspect an April Fool's prank. Or is this the characteristic "nothing starts on time"? Or is this a "gujob" (rumour)? Or, was the rickshaw manned by the weather man?

Never have I found myself in a situation where I am actually waiting for the power to go out. Maybe just to get the suspense out of the way, I myself should turn the main switch off ...

No, I will wait, but with Pohela Falgun ushered in with fanfare, the wait may not be that long. For the fans have started and soon will be the ACs, thus denoting February 13 the official start of bad weather lasting for a good eight months ...

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(1889-1976) German philosopher and a seminal thinker in the Continental tradition and philosophical hermeneutics

Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man.

## **CROSSWORD** BY THOMAS JOSEPH

39 Student of Socrates

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president 6 Focused beam 11 Turning point 12 Rust, for one 13 Visibly sad 14 Doorstop shape 15 Pub brews 17 Snaky fish 18 Pointer on a poster 22 Molokai neighbor 23 Drinks noisily 27 Printer's need 29 Minister to

30 Method

33 Cat-footed

35 Maple fluid

32 Nick and Nora's dog

**ACROSS** 

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7 Firefighting tool

10 Country dance

Write for us. Send us your opinion pieces to

dsopinion@gmail.com.

8 Flank

9 Border

16 Slalom section 18 Diamond workers 19 -- a one (zero) 20 Pool sticks 21 Ones who work on walls 24 Take a breather 25 Trail 26 Order to Spot 28 Begins

31 -- culpa 34 Stand 35 Unwanted email 36 Alan of "M\*A\*S\*H" 37 Aspirin target 40 Summer shirt 42 -- Angeles 43 Genesis woman 44 Cowboy nickname

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER GAMES STRAP GENT Α CR EME TER TOSCA SOT ON S SOTHERE PER CREASE E S HOTL Y TOUPEE ROBBERS E T D R H O ART SCARED OWING MEANT Р E N I O R CE PR E DG



TOGETHER.

WE ARE.

### by Mort Walker BUT I DON'T THINK IT'S GOING TO IMPROVE HIS PUTTING ONE BIT 認能

## I THOUGHT YOU AND HAMMIE WERE BUILDING THE MODEL AIRPLANE

by Kirkman & Scott

