

# A madrasa student made to 'pay' for protesting abuse

*Punish the attackers and instigators*

WE are speechless with shock at the brutality inflicted on a female madrasa student in Feni, for refusing to withdraw a case she filed against the madrasa's principal who had sexually harassed her. The antecedents of this heinous crime make it clear that this young girl was the victim of a diabolical conspiracy. The fact that possibly her fellow female students were the ones to lure her to the terrace and then douse her with kerosene and set her on fire makes this crime all the more horrific. This young girl who was about to take her Alim (equivalent to HSC) exams had to be taken to hospital with 75 percent burns on her body. How can fellow students be so barbaric? Who instigated them to carry out this abhorrent act?

According to a news report in this paper on March 27, the victim was called to the principal's room by a peon of the school. When she went there the principal started sexually harassing her. She later told her family who lodged a protest at the madrasa. As suggested by teachers and the management committee, her family lodged a case against the principal and he was arrested. But a section of the madrasa has been demanding his release. It was because the victim refused to withdraw the case that she was subjected to such ghoulish violence.

The incident points out to the vulnerability of young students in these institutions who become victims of sexual or other kinds of abuse at the hands of those who hold high positions. It is commendable that in this instance, teachers and the management committee supported the student and advised her to file a case. Unfortunately, this was not enough to protect her. If the madrasa had been united in condemning the initial crime, this innocent student would not have been targeted and assaulted later.

We demand that the perpetrators and the masterminds of this horrible crime be identified and given exemplary punishment. The government must also set up a monitoring system of all these institutions to make sure other female or male students are not subject to such abuse and in the unfortunate event that they are, they will not face such devastating consequences when they lodge official complaints or cases.

# People left high and dry by medical bills

*Experts blame our flawed healthcare system*

RISING healthcare costs have become a major cause of pushing people deeper into poverty. According to a 2015 study by the health ministry, out-of-pocket (OOP) health expenditure in Bangladesh is as high as 67 percent of the total healthcare cost—the global average is only 32 percent—and is the highest in South and Southeast Asia. Another study by the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh found that OOP expenditures push four to five million people in the country into poverty every year.

Although the feeble state of our public healthcare system is mainly to blame for these alarming figures, what has become difficult also is accessing even that. Over 63 percent of households seek healthcare services from the private sector, according to Transparency International Bangladesh. And while a fraction of households does so willingly, the majority is simply forced into it because public hospitals are ill-equipped to treat various diseases and are often riddled with corruption. Even when they can treat patients, our public hospitals afford very little benefits compared to those in other countries. One example is the lack of free cancer medicines in all hospitals but one—opposite of what is standard practice in most countries. Aside from that, patients get further ripped-off by corrupt doctors, health workers, medicine sellers and brokers, colluding to squeeze every penny possible out from patients.

The government should fix the standard cost of critical tests and treatment so that patients no longer have to endure such abuses. It should establish specialised hospitals in all divisional states that treat non-communicable diseases which account for approximately 59 percent of total deaths in the country, and consider other measures that can give some relief to the population—especially the poorer sections of it—that is being overwhelmed by increasing medical costs.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### BRT: Blessing or curse?

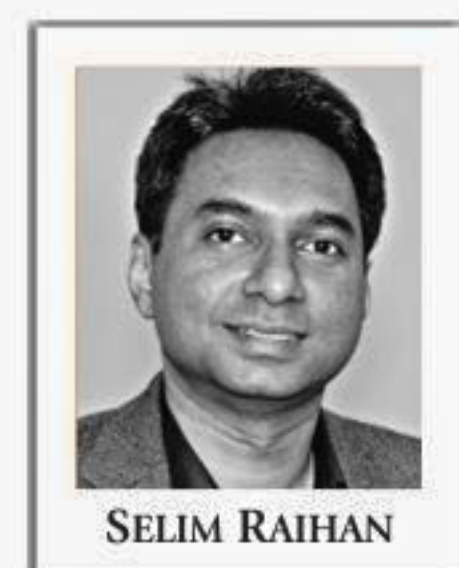
Though the construction progress of Dhaka BRT Line-3 (Gazipur to airport) is at full swing now, it is still not up to the mark. In the last six years, progress has been only 20 percent while the budget cost, revised several times, has doubled. As this is the country's first BRT, there is a lot of enthusiasm among the citizens of Gazipur and Dhaka. But the sufferings of the people are increasing day by day, and the construction project now seems rather like a curse than a blessing for them. As the rainy season is knocking at the door, the situation may worsen.

Authorities do not properly plan how to control the traffic during the period of construction. In addition, the air is filled with sand and dust, making breathing impossible from dawn to dusk.

We all know about the importance of this mega project. But if the project is not completed in the estimated time, not only will it increase the costs but also the sufferings of the people.  
**Jubaed Akram, By e-mail**

# Hiccups of 'Development Surprise'

*Improvement of formal institutions crucial for our development goals*



SELIM RAIHAN

BANGLADESH'S economic growth and development performance over the past two decades have been impressive. With the poor quality of institutions, such a performance has often been termed as a "development surprise" or the "Bangladesh paradox". But is it at all a "surprise" or a "paradox" (anything beyond any reasonable explanation can appear as a paradox)? Is Bangladesh's development performance beyond any "reasonable" explanation?

If we look at the quality of institutions in Bangladesh, the performance has been very poor. According to the World Governance Indicators (WGI), in 2016, out of 156 countries, Bangladesh ranked 114 in terms of "Voice and Accountability", 101 for "Political Stability", 138 for "Government Effectiveness", 114 for "Regulatory Quality", 101 for "Rule of Law", and 117 for "Control of Corruption". Other indicators of institutional quality also portray similar pictures. For example, in the case of the World Bank's Doing Business Index of 2019, out of 190 countries, Bangladesh's ranking was 176. With respect to Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index of 2018, Bangladesh's ranking was 149 out of 180 countries. In the case of the Global Competitiveness Index (GCI) of 2017-2018, Bangladesh's ranking was 99 out of 137 countries.

Against the aforementioned poor quality of institutions, the average GDP growth rate in Bangladesh increased from 3.7 percent in the 1970s to 6.6 percent in the 2010s. Bangladesh has been able to increase the average GDP growth rate by one percentage point for each decade since the 1990s. The country cut down the poverty rate from as high as 71 percent in the 1970s to 24 percent in 2016, became the second largest exporter of readymade garments in the world, and registered some notable progress in social sectors.

How do we reconcile the two above-mentioned contrasting scenarios? Difficulty in such reconciliation perhaps has led to the emergence of the ideas of "surprise" or "paradox". However, we can try offering some reasonable explanations to this so-called "surprise" or "paradox". We also argue that, without significant improvements in the quality of institutions, such "surprise" will continue to lead to periodic "hiccups" like the accidents in the RMG sector (several fire incidents, Rana Plaza incident of factory collapse); frequent road accidents; frequent fire incidents in the residential and commercial areas; repeated scams in the financial sector; serious environmental degradation in cities, rivers and forest areas; periodic labour unrest; uncontrolled scams in public examinations; social disintegration among youth in the form of extremism and substance abuse.

Now, coming back to some reasonable explanations of "surprise" or "paradox", if we look at some well-known institutional indicators (WGI, Doing Business, Transparency International, and GCI), all refer to the quality of formal institutions. However, in countries like Bangladesh, placed at the lower level of the development spectrum, what governs is a host of informal institutions, and the development of formal institutions is weak and fragile. There are some interesting political economy frameworks to understand the importance of informal institutions in developing countries. For example, Mushtaq Khan's framework of "growth-enhancing institutions" in contrast to "market-enhancing institutions" elaborates how the role of informal institutions can be critical in developing countries. Some developing countries, especially East and Southeast Asian countries, have been successful in steering unconventional institutions to drive growth. Another framework, proposed by Lant Pritchett, Kunal Sen and Eric Wrecker, relates to the idea of "deals space". Deals (informal), in contrast to rules (formal), among the political and economic elites, are prevalent in developing countries. Deals can be open (access is open to all) or closed (access is restricted), and also they can be ordered (deals are respected) or disordered (deals are not respected). According to this view, countries are likely to exhibit high growth when deals are open and ordered.

Informal institutions can have two distinct roles with

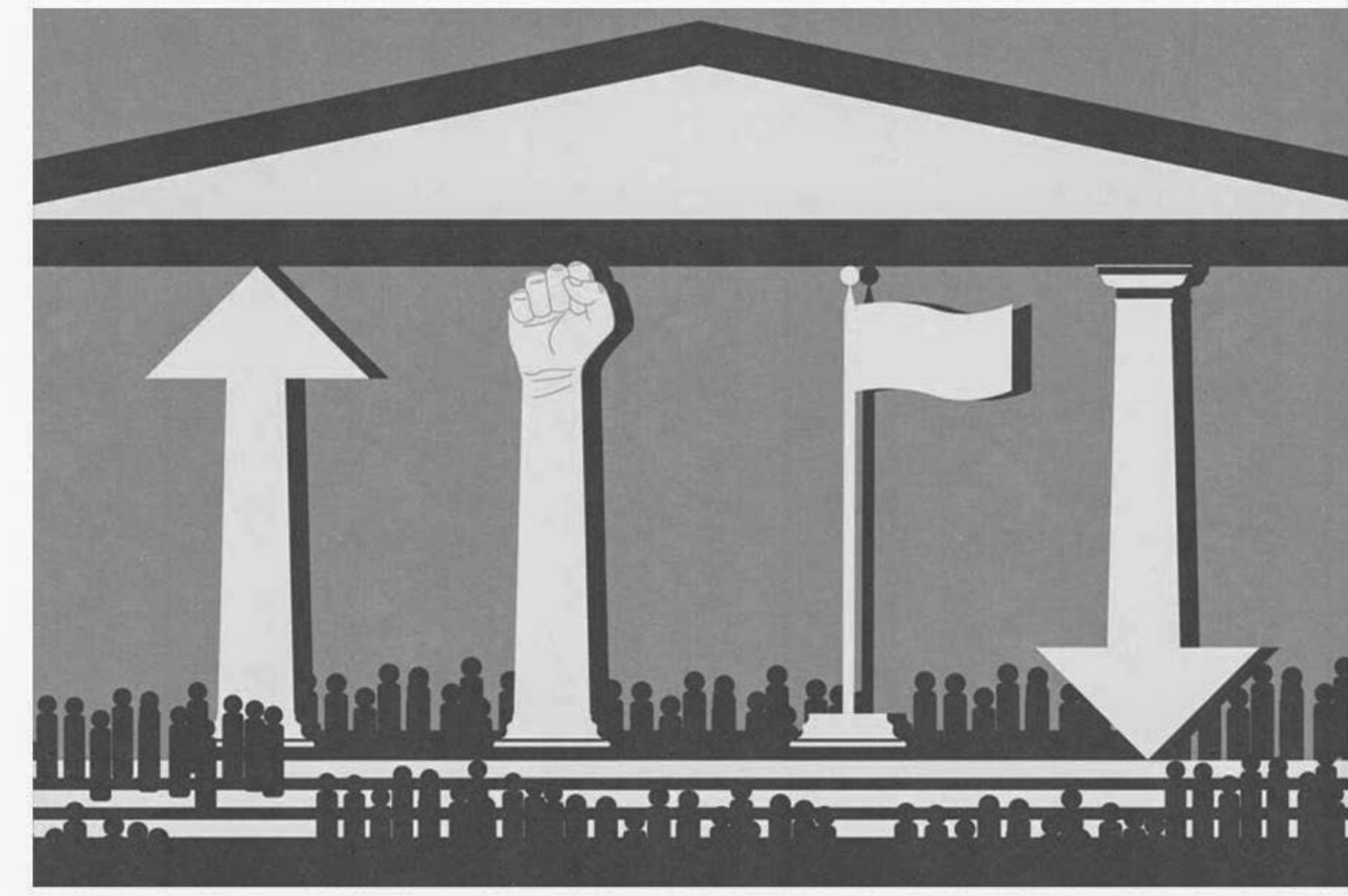
respect to the stages of development. At the early stage of development, if countries can steer the informal institutions to the extent they are "growth-enhancing", and if the "deals space" is more ordered (either open or closed), countries can manage a regime of strong growth rate and can also achieve some improvements in the social sector. However, for the transition from a lower stage of development to a higher stage, whether the country can maintain the high growth rate and achieve bigger development goals, depends on the dynamics of how the informal institutions evolve and formal institutions become stronger and functional. Not many developing countries have been able to do this. Certainly, the East Asian and most of the Southeast Asian countries are the success stories in using the informal institutions efficiently at the early stage of development as well as having some notable successes in the transition towards functional formal institutions.

In contrast to many other comparable countries of Asia and Africa at similar stages of development, least developed countries, in particular, Bangladesh has been successful in creating some efficient pockets of "growth-enhancing" informal institutions against an overall distressing picture of formal institutions. This is how the "Bangladesh Surprise" story unfolds. The examples of "pockets of efficient informal institutions" in Bangladesh include the well-functioning privileges and special

of subsidies, tax exemptions, a suppressed labour regime, and weak compliance. Through large-scale employment generation in the RMG sector and its induced effects of poverty alleviation and female empowerment, the elites were also able to draw support from the non-elites for this sector. The second event relates to the experience of the 1974 famine, which led the elites to realise that a country like Bangladesh, with a huge population in a small piece of land, cannot afford anything like this in the future. Therefore, subsequent governments focused on the development of the agricultural sector to ensure food security. All these also helped achieve some notable progress on the social fronts.

Despite the aforementioned achievements, the fundamental question is whether Bangladesh can continue its trajectory of success and achieve bigger development goals with the business as usual processes. There are concerns that the weak institutional capacity of the country may work as a binding constraint as the country eyes stiff targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set for 2030, aspires to become an upper middle-income country by 2031, and has a vision to become a developed country by 2041. Dividends from the existing "pockets of efficient informal institutions" are on a decline, and the elites have not been able to create any such new "pockets" apart from the ones mentioned above.

How is Bangladesh performing in terms of the



arrangements for the RMG sector, promotion of labour exports, agricultural research and development related to food security, and microfinance.

However, the next question is: how can Bangladesh create such "pockets of efficient informal institutions" and make the "best" use of them? The explanations include both historical and political economy perspectives. Two historical events strongly influenced the mindset of the political and economic elites in Bangladesh. First, the 1971 Liberation War led to the emergence of an independent Bangladesh state which gave unprecedented, enormous and first time independent power to the burgeoning political and economic elites of the Bengali nation of this part of the world. Also, the citizens, in general, enjoyed some benefits of such power. Largely, the entrepreneurial nature of the people of this country is deeply rooted in this feeling of power. The reflection of successful entrepreneurship is seen in the cases of the RMG sector, labour migration, and microfinance. As Bangladesh is not rich in natural resources, elites found the RMG sector as a basis of generation of substantial rents. The sources of rents in the RMG sector include the Multifibre Arrangements (MFA) quota (which no longer exists) and the Generalised Systems of Preference (GSP), different forms

transition from some "pockets of efficient informal institutions" to well-functioning formal institutions? This can be answered by looking at how well the formal institutions are taking shape. The trends in the quality of formal institutions between 1996 and 2016, as are manifested by the movements of the World Governance Indicators, suggest that, with some fluctuations, there are deteriorations in the cases of "Voice and Accountability", "Political Stability" and "Government Effectiveness", and some trivial improvements in the cases of "Regulatory Quality", "Rule of Law" and "Control of Corruption". As the country is faced with a number of challenges related to slow progress in structural transformation, lack of economic diversification, high degree of informality in the labour market, slow pace of job creation, poor status of social and physical infrastructure, slow reduction in poverty, and rising inequality, such poor pace of improvement of formal institutions will make hiccups of "development surprise" a rule rather than an exception.

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## PROJECT SYNDICATE

# A Battle for India's Soul



SHASHI THAROOR

AS India gears up for its general election, one must not lose sight of the sheer size of the exercise, which has been described as the "biggest humanly managed event in the world." Starting on April 11

and ending on May 23, 900 million eligible voters (including 15 million first-time voters) will decide the fate of nearly 10,000 candidates representing over 500 political parties vying for the 545 seats in the Lok Sabha (House of the People). Every Indian general election beats its predecessor's record to become the largest in world history. And none of the preceding 16 Lok Sabha elections has been as politically momentous as the coming one.

The election is staggered across seven phases that will take place between April 11 and May 19, with all ballots counted by May 23. Larger states such as Uttar Pradesh in northern India, which sends 80 MPs to the Lok Sabha, vote in each of these phases, while others finish in a day. My own constituency of Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of the southern state of Kerala, where I am campaigning for a third term, will vote in the third (and largest) phase of the election on April 23, along with 114 other constituencies from 14 states.

The Election Commission of India (ECI), the body tasked to carry out this monumental project, will set up one million polling stations and 2.33 million ballot units. They will be manned by over 11 million staff (many of whom will be drawn from various government agencies across the country) who will travel by

whatever mode of transport—from buses and trains to elephants and camels—to reach the last voter. The ECI's own stipulation that no voter should have to travel more than two kilometres to reach a polling station can give rise to some remarkable situations. In the last election, a polling booth had to be set up in a forest in Western India to cater to one resident voter. Another was set up in the Himalayas at 4,500 metres (15,000 feet) above sea level—the highest polling booth in the world.

Despite the exuberance, expenditure,

India's voters are inadvertently abdicating their role and responsibility in deciding the country's political destiny—and at a time when the stakes are too high to be ignored.

Over the past five years, India has borne the weight of the government's misconceived policies and airy speechmaking. For all the lofty talk by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) about bringing about *achhe din* (good days) and a New India, prosaic reality bites: Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration in New Delhi has failed to address

unemployment has reached a 45-year high has fuelled widespread scepticism about official GDP growth figures. After the failure of the authorities' demonetisation scheme in 2016, followed by its poor implementation of a cumbersome five-rate Goods and Services Tax, the economy has entered a tailspin, and no amount of data chicanery would make a good case for giving the BJP another chance.

The government has entered panic mode and announced a slew of freebies—including an income support programme for farmers and an increased tax exemption limit on income levels—in its last budget. But it has been too little, too late.

So now the BJP is seeking to capitalise on the recent terrorist attack by Jaish-e-Mohammed in Pulwama, which killed 40 Indian paramilitary troops, and stoked tensions with Pakistan (where Jaish-e-Mohammed is based), by portraying itself as the most effective defender of India's national security. In its unseemly effort to distract the voters from their failures in office, the party is hoping to turn the upcoming election into a khaki referendum, in which cross-border violence and national security supersede the daily terror of poverty, economic distress, and communal tension.

Indian voters must make two decisions. One is of course which candidate they want to represent them in the Lok Sabha. But voters face a more fundamental choice: Do they want an inclusive India that embodies hope, or a divided country that promotes fear?

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India's PM Narendra Modi (L) and Indian National Congress Party President Rahul Gandhi.



PHOTOS: REUTERS/AFP

and all-encompassing nature of India's quinquennial festival of democracy, voter participation remains a key concern. The 2014 elections recorded the highest turnout since 1952, but even this only amounted to 66.4 percent of the electorate. This is similar to the findings of an informal poll I conducted on Twitter: only 66 percent of the 15,000 respondents said that they were registered and intended to vote in the coming elections.

This is worrying. By consciously abstaining from the process, one-third of

ordinary people's real needs. Results from recent state assembly elections, where the BJP was shown the door, have made that much clear.

There is no shortage of reasons for voters' unhappiness with the current state of affairs. Across the country, agrarian distress has been immense: suicides are at a record high, and farmers across the country have risen in protest against the government's inept approach to solving their problems. Similarly, the revelation that the government consciously sought to bury a report showing that