

# The Resurgent India

A Monthly National Review

February 2021



*“Let us all work for the Greatness of India.”*

– The Mother

The Resurgent India English monthly published and printed by Smt. Suman Sharma on behalf of The Resurgent India Trust Published at C/o J. N. Socketed Cement Pipes Pvt. Ltd., Village Bhamraula Post Bagwara, Kichha Road, Rudrapur (U.S Nagar)

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Printed at : Priyanka Printing Press, Hotel Krish Building, Janta Inter College Road, Udham Nagar, Rudrapur, Uttarakhand

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Successful Future

(Full of Promise and Joyful Surprises)

*Botanical name: Gaillardia Pulchella*

*Common name: Indian blanket, Blanket flower, Fire-wheels*

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## A DECLARATION

We do not fight against any creed, any religion.

We do not fight against any form of government.

We do not fight against any social class.

We do not fight against any nation or civilisation.

We are fighting division, unconsciousness, ignorance, inertia and falsehood.

We are endeavouring to establish upon earth union, knowledge, consciousness, Truth, and we fight whatever opposes the advent of this new creation of Light, Peace, Truth and Love.

— The Mother

(Collected works of the Mother, Vol. 13, pp. 124-25)

## UNION BUDGET 2021-22: A PERSPECTIVE

A few years back, in 2017, to be exact, we had published a series of articles entitled “The Truth About Economic Development”, which elaborates in length, in the light of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, the reality - or the myth - of the notion of ‘economic development’, or the so-called ‘Vikas’. In it, we explored all the hidden aspects of the “modern materialistic concept of Development or Progress (‘Vikas’) and how an exclusive focus on it is swiftly leading humanity towards its seemingly unstoppable extinction in the near future”. It was pointed out that “the pursuit of the modern gospel of Economic Development (‘Vikas’) is leading us towards a precipice and still, because of the progressive westernization of our hearts and minds we have never ever been able to give any serious consideration to (or even suspect) the dangers underlying such a pursuit, contrary to the genius and the soul of this country.” Now, after the coming in 2014 of the Modi government, which is being seen, more or less, as a nationalistic government, it seems that the Indian policy-making is trying to transcend the contours of corruption ridden myopic growth-driven economic vision -- which with the coming of the PVN Rao government in 1991, after the USSR’s disintegration, shifted from being an exclusively socialistic, restrictive model to a more and more capitalistic and liberal model.

### THE UNION BUDGET 2021: KEY HIGHLIGHTS

This is reflected in the Union Budget 2021. A Budget is simply a document of vision or intent – an indicative framework – which signals the larger policy direction that the government of the day will follow through its allocative priorities. The present Budget rests on six stated pillars of the government viz. health and well-being, physical and financial capital and

infrastructure, inclusive development for aspirational India, human capital, innovation and Research & Development, minimum government and maximum governance.

<b>Sector</b>	<b>Allocative change</b>
Health	A jump by 137% compared to last year’s budget
Expenditure budget	A jump of 34% compared to last year’s revised estimates
Taxation	No changes – except exemption of pensioners aged 75 and more from mandatory filing of Income Tax returns
Disinvestment	Privatization of 2 PSUs and 1 insurance company
Bank recapitalisation	20,000 crore allocation
Infrastructure	Special infrastructural projects for poll-bound states
National Infrastructure Pipeline	Expanded to cover 7400 projects by 2025 and the establishment of Development Finance Institution
Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)	FDI in insurance to be raised from 49% to 74%
Agricultural credit	Allocation of 16.5 lakh crore for agrarian credit schemes
Fiscal deficit	It is 9.5% of GDP for current financial year and set at 6.8% for 2021-22

The Budget marks a welcome break from the Modi government’s singular focus on social sector. The dual key

points for which this Budget is seen as marking a break from the past stand out in the form of,

First, giving a boost to private sector, including privatization of Public Sector Units (PSUs), monetization of government holdings, disinvestment, breaking power distribution monopolies and limiting the general role of the state.

Second, expansion of fiscal deficit target, with the intent to accelerate spending, especially in areas like healthcare, infrastructure, research etc., and a general emphasis on capital formation. The 9.5% fiscal deficit for the current financial year is the most liberal since at least 1991. It has not imposed any additional tax burdens on individual taxpayers but has not relaxed the existing tax slabs either.

The significant changes in the Budget indicate that the government is sensitive to adopting a practical approach to immediate management problems. They come in the backdrop of major agricultural and labour reforms already initiated. The hard trade-offs made in the Budget in terms of prioritizing the private sector and manufacturing instead of social sector (such as agriculture, NREGA etc.) and of prioritizing areas like environment and sanitation which do not cater to any particular vote-bank lobbies, mark a tough and welcome change from the political economy of easy populism. This was done with full knowledge that the government will eventually face massive protests from various public sector unions, along the lines of farmers protests.

While the Budget does mark a step forward in India's cleaning up of the shadows of a socialist past, yet how well the current approach of the government coheres with the future remains to be seen. From a deeper perspective, true well-being, which is the stated aim of economic policy, can



be captured not by the current measures of GDP (which captures deprivation more than well-being, by focusing purely on expenditure yardstick), but by the extent of individual and collective fulfilment that is rarely quantifiable. While the current economic policy-making marks baby steps from a worse past, real judgment of national progress will rest on the parameter of true well-being. It is here, at a deeper level, that the field is still necessarily<sup>1</sup> murky for the Modi government, despite its best intentions.

The Union Budget 2021-22 actually is, in most parts of it, infested with the materialistic utilitarian spirit. It's obsession with the numbers of GDP or GNP and its growth rates or of the size of the economy is overwhelming. However, there are some cues in it which when seen in the light of some of the earlier initiatives such as the introduction of the new education policy and few bills introduced and passed in the earlier sessions of the parliament, indicate that perhaps India's soul is trying to wake up after a long and deep slumber and slowly making some inroads into the heads of our policy makers, though still in disguise.

## HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Because of the so-called pandemic scenario, it was not a surprise that one of the main focus points of the budget was 'health and well-being'. This is clear from the allocation of Rs. 64,180 crores to new health schemes in addition to Rs. 35,000 crores to the covid vaccine. It is supposed to give a boost to the healthcare infrastructure. The emphasis is on developing primary, secondary and tertiary healthcare systems.

We have already elaborated at length, in our past issues, how the 'pandemic' has been given 'out of proportion' and

<sup>1</sup> Because of its materialistic utilitarian spirit.

undue importance by the whole world, including India and the WHO and some of its influential members. Besides, it is obvious that if we have to allocate ever increasing amounts of funds to the health segment without not only any perceptible improvement but even deterioration in health, it only means that we are getting ever more 'ill'. And this cannot be the progress, the 'Vikas', if we have to spend ever increasing amounts without any positive result.

The government is very sensibly giving push to traditional Indian wisdom in this area and the Indian medicine system, the Ayurveda. The parliament passed in September last year a couple of bills for setting up a National Commission for Indian System of Medicine and for rejuvenating the Indian Medicine Central Council. The presence of two cabinet ministers when Baba Ramdev re-launched Patanjali's Coronil, an Ayurvedic supportive medicine for dealing with Coronavirus Disease or Covid, further gives a glimpse of the government's intention to further Indian traditional medical systems. The government's active push for 'Namami Gange', cleaning our rivers, 'swachh bharat abhiyan' etc. which may not boost the numbers of 'GDP' that much but certainly contribute to people's health and well-being, may be looked upon as giving a clue that the Modi government is not so blind as to go exclusively after the 'elusive' Vikas. *The focus on 'Health and Well-being' instead of 'the disease and dealing with it' is in itself a very refreshing change.*

## INFRASTRUCTURE

Another focus is on Infrastructure. The push is indicated by big plans in the field of infrastructure such as roads, highways, railways, ports, gas pipelines and so on. Other important measures are: the production-linked incentive schemes (PLI)

for 13 sectors to give a push to an ‘Atmanirbhar Bharat’ scheme; the launch of seven Mega Textile Investment Parks over the next three years and the measures to give a boost to start-ups and so on. And Modi’s slogan, ‘Zero Defect and Zero Effect’ – that produce must be excellent and at par with the best while having no deteriorating effect on the environment or the ecology – also gives an indication of the vision in this respect. Nitin Gadkari, the Union Minister for Road Transport & Highways, who is also the Minister of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, has shown a stupendous vitality in pushing India’s infrastructure to its acme.

We think this stress on infrastructure is a must. An opulent India with a state-of-the-art infrastructure, – as India actually was in its glorious past, when it was looked upon as the Golden Bird – and standing strong on its roots, is a must if it is to contribute to the redemption of the world from its present ‘sorry’ state, and once more assume its role of the spiritual ‘Guru’ of the world. After all, who ever listens to a poor, pale and misery ridden State.

## EDUCATION

For the first time since independence, in a policy document, the National Government is seen taking pride in ancient Indian knowledge and its Dharma, when it proclaims that ‘the rich heritage of ancient and eternal Indian knowledge and thought has been a guiding light for this policy’. This shows that something is changing in an otherwise doomed scenario. At present, we see that education, along with health and justice – which are in themselves sacred services in any humane society – are completely rotten and rusted with what we may call the materialistic utilitarian spirit. Even in such a time, if the new education policy could at least talk of “an

education system rooted in Indian ethos that contributes directly to transforming India, that is Bharat.”, then it certainly gives some hope and strengthens our faith that the divine hand is there and we may not remain for long in the trap of this all pervasive utilitarian spirit.

In the Budget 2021, the FM has announced that more than 15,000 schools will be qualitatively strengthened to include all components of the National Education Policy. They shall emerge as exemplar schools in their regions, hand holding and mentoring other schools to achieve the ideals of the Policy. This clarity and resolve in implementing the new education policy is welcome.

### **POLICY ON DIVESTMENT**

The announcement of a policy on divestment of the Government’s shareholding in Central Public Sector Undertakings (CPSUs) that aims at selling all CPSUs in “non-strategic” sectors and restricting its presence in “strategic” sectors to the bare minimum has been in the works for nearly five years. It was initiated by NITI Aayog which will now have to work on the details.

This encouragement to the private sector and free market and minimising the interference of the corrupt and huge bureaucracy with colonial mindset, the Macaulay’s putra, and the government’s willingness to be out of business and even allow a lateral entry of private sector even into the traditional Indian public sector is a welcome step. Putting more confidence and less suspicion in the entrepreneurial spirit of India’s business community must be encouraging for the private sector. India is awakening and gaining vitality which is expressed through its enterprising and creative people around the world. The present government is also giving it a helping

hand. 'Atmanirbhar Bharat', 'Make in India' and other such schemes seem to be doing just the right thing.

## CONCLUSION

In essence, the new avenues and right direction heralded by the present Budget reveal that the intent of this government is well-placed.

The present Budget heralds the first big shift in India's economy since 1991. For, the 1991 economic reforms were accompanied by the rise of regional, coalition politics based on cultivation of vested interests/vote-banks, and, with few cautious budgetary exceptions, this political format has dictated economic visions as espoused in successive Budgets. For instance, the UPA era Budgets were overwhelmingly guided by the vision of 'inclusive growth' – based on lavish farm loan waivers, subsidies etc. – based on holding practical and real economic logic (and sacrificing environmental and other tough steps) hostage to political slogans (ignoring environmental and other issues requiring tough steps) of bridging a purported 'gap' between 'two Indias' (of the rich and of the poor respectively). The Budgets of the time had converted everything into an 'entitlement' – education, food, jobs etc. – to which the poor had the 'right'. Private sector did function well, but the language and culture of the day was to vilify it.

While the Modi government, in its first term, attempted to take baby steps towards dismantling this structure by institutional changes (such as dismantling Planning Commission), it did not work out, as the practical political compulsion of vested political vote-banks continued to dominate the system. Modi's social sector push, endearing him to the poor, was one of the reasons for his 2019 victory,

among others. **Even as the BJP or rather, PM Modi, has been endeared to the poor and the marginalized across castes and classes over the years, the party has used this opportunity to gradually unite these sections of society through the narrative of Hindutva. Otherwise, it would never have been possible to ensure this firm unity of the majority Hindu community that we see today merely through the vacuous and empty narrative of social-sector development.**

The results are visible now – in elections and otherwise. Having secured a visible change in the national character and with a standing on a firm political footing, it is only now in the Modi government's second term that we see a real economic break from the past. The present Budget stands out for its unique, single-minded emphasis on the potential of free markets. **Unlike the previous Budgets of the Modi government – and of previous Congress-led governments – the historic legacy of uncertainty and of dallying between socialism and capitalism has been abandoned for a firm, unidirectional policy.** There was no appeasement of historic vote-banks in the Budget – such as, farmers (despite the raging 'farmers' protests) and low income tax payers.

**From this Budget as well as from the other actions of this government over time, it is visible and hoped that the emphasis on capitalism is not just a simplistic imitation of western capitalism or a glorification of capitalism as a system.** Rather, capitalism is conceived as a technical, convenient framework, at the present time, and given its past legacy, within which only the immediate practical economic decisions could be taken. The Budget, even while giving a boost to the private sector, nowhere glorifies the capitalistic mode of development. It simply signifies a break from Modi's intensive

focus, in the past, on social investment – for farmers, for pro-poor social infrastructural and jobs schemes etc. Now this past social focus is not abandoned but coupled with a long-term vision for entrepreneurial freedom in the country.

However, **had the focus of this government been simply and exclusively on a visionless private sector-led growth or capitalistic economic management it would have been worrying. Instead, as we have seen in certain aspects of the Budget and in practice, the government, with whatever limited understanding, does have its sight on the far-off vision of the revival of India's global position as a 'Vishwaguru' (as, Modi has mentioned several times in his various speeches) in line with a modern revival of India's past ethos and culture.** This fact alone is what makes the Budget and this government's overall long-term approach stand-out from that of its western democratic counterparts and from other capitalist countries.

Very few countries – even when they have nationalistic leadership – have leadership that recognizes that economic systems – capitalism or socialism or socialistic/democratic capitalism etc. – are simply frameworks/outer instruments which do not and should not be allowed to overshadow the real collective growth issues. As Sri Aurobindo had said, **“This erring race of human beings dreams always of perfecting their environment by the machinery of government and society; but it is only by the perfection of the soul within that the outer environment can be perfected. What thou art within, that outside thee thou shalt enjoy; no machinery can rescue thee from the law of thy being.”** (CWSA 12, 1997, p. 468).

For the hold of materialism is so strong, the 'spirit of materialistic utilitarianism' is so encompassing, that at the moment, even if our assessment that the soul of India is

awakening is true, it doesn't apparently seem strong enough to break the vicious circle or, as the logic of things goes, stop the near certain annihilation of the human race. But then, the Divine Mother works in mysterious ways which are beyond the grasp of human intellect. And we have full faith in the Master's decisive words, **"Whenever the first play of energy is exhausted and earth grows old and weary, full of materialism, racked with problems she cannot solve, the function of India is to restore the youth of mankind and assure it of immortality."**(CWSA 07: 1086) and further, **"The sun of India's destiny would rise and fill all India with its light and overflow India and overflow Asia and overflow the world. Every hour, every moment could only bring them nearer to the brightness of the day that God had decreed."** (CWSA 08: 17)



# HIGHLIGHTS

## GUJARAT LOCAL ELECTIONS RESULTS

### MUNICIPAL CORPORATION RESULTS

Elections were held on 576 seats across 6 municipal corporations in Gujarat – Rajkot, Ahmedabad, Bhavnagar, Jamnagar, Vadodara and Surat. BJP won all 6 municipal corporations, with a total of 483 seats. Congress was reduced to a tally of just 55 seats, while Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) opened its account with 27 seats in Surat. AIMIM won 7 out of the 8 seats held by Congress in Ahmedabad’s Muslim-dominated areas. Congress did not win any seat in Surat.

The results are significant, as the BJP increased its tally from 390 in 2015 to 483 in 2021, improving its share in every corporation. Congress fell from 175 in 2015 to 55 in 2021.

### MUNICIPALITY, DISTRICT PANCHAYAT AND TALUKA PANCHAYAT RESULTS

BJP swept the Panchayat and Municipality election results, maintaining the winning streak from the earlier Municipal Corporation results.

Party	Municipality		District Panchayat (Total: 31)		Taluka Panchayat (Total: 230)	
	2015 (56)	2021(81)	2015	2021	2015	2021
BJP	40	77	06	31	77	196
Congress	09	04	21	0	151	33

The takeaways from these elections are significant. The elections come in the backdrop of nation-wide discontent over fuel price hike and GST rules that have been troubling the people, especially the urban populace. Yet, this background – though completely genuine – has not become a voting issue,

indicating that the politicization of technical developmental initiatives may be reaching its precipitation. Some of the takeaways are:

First, local elections – based on performance of candidates and rarely on personality cult of national leaders – are more indicative of dynamism within political parties at the ground level. In that sense, BJP's performance in Gujarat local elections indicate the government's strong footing in the state, and the, more or less, natural process of decimation of the Congress party.

Second, the fact that BJP improved its performance compared to 2015 across all categories of local elections show that the party has a strong hold in both urban and rural areas. It is also a big blow and final nail in the coffin of the caste-based politics of Patidar agitation endorsed by the Congress in 2015. The result of Surat municipal corporation result proves this point, as the entire Patidar vote of Congress shifted to the AAP.

Third, the performance of AAP in Surat is not impressive and does not automatically mean that it has made inroads in Gujarat. It has come a distant second in Surat, on the back of Congress. More importantly, the vote for AAP was a really a vote for disgruntled (with Congress) Patidar leaders who had jumped the ship – AAP is merely a banner under which they contested. Had the same candidates contested on a Congress ticket or independently, it is possible that AAP may not have been able to even open its account – as in the case of rest of the state. An indication of AAP entry in Gujarat can only be reasonably established if it had won any seats in any other corporations or in rural election results, which is not the case.

Finally, the elections results are a vindication of the

growing nationalistic spirit that is steadily taking root all over the country, overriding petty and divisive differences based on developmental freebies, caste and regional politics and other factors that have been leveraged by politicians in the past to divide this country. Every indication of the growth and nurturing of this spirit is a welcome movement in the direction of a united and unassailable India.

### **PUDUCHERRY POLITICAL CRISIS:**

A major development has been the political crisis in the Union Territory (UT) of Puducherry. The Congress witnessed the falling of its only government in southern India after its Chief Minister tendered his resignation, prior to the floor test, where he clearly no longer enjoyed a majority.

The crisis began after the Union government removed the LG, Kiran Bedi. Ms. Bedi's confrontational attitude with the Congress government in Puducherry had been exploited to the hilt by the Congress to create an anti-BJP sentiment in the UT, for the last 3-4 years. This development occurred merely 2 months prior to the state assembly elections in Tamil Nadu. The time period of Bedi's removal had coincided with 6 resignations by Congress MLAs in Puducherry (including 1 from DMK). Last year, the party had disqualified an MLA for anti-party activities.

This had reduced the strength of the 33-member assembly to 26. The ruling coalition had a total of 12 MLAs – 9 of Congress, 2 of DMK and 1 Independent. The Opposition had 14 MLAs – 7 of the All India NR Congress (AINRC) led by former chief minister N. Rangasamy, 4 of the AIADMK and 3 nominated BJP MLAs.

The reason BJP engineered these carefully crafted

developments are many-fold:

First, BJP has virtually no presence in Puducherry. It had nothing to lose. Its decision to appoint Tamilisai as a Governor in place of Bedi worked in BJP's and AIADMK's favour, as the former is a Tamilian and people may be more favourably disposed towards her.

Second, the fall of the Congress government was symbolic for Puducherry, but it may have consequences for Tamil Nadu elections. The entire shoddy episode revealed the Congress in a weak light – as a spent force. This may be an important public perception during the Tamil Nadu elections. It is already having some impact on the differences between DMK and Congress on seat-sharing. Much like other regional parties, DMK has started perceiving Congress as a liability.

Third, the decision to go for President's rule rather than an alternative government was a clever move, as Congress was prevented from exploiting the situation claiming its victimhood in the aftermath of its fall in Puducherry.

Finally, Puducherry developments have a national resonance in strengthening the narrative of a weakening Congress party, making it more unpalatable to regional allies, as well as dissenting members within its own fold.

### **PUNJAB LOCAL BODIES ELECTIONS**

Results of the Punjab local body elections marked a clean sweep by Congress party. Elections were held in 117 urban local bodies, including 8 municipal corporations and 109 municipal councils and nagar panchayats. While Congress could make its board in all the 8 corporations, it won 77 municipal councils. SAD has clear majority in 5 councils, CPI in 1 Council while 26 councils don't have clear majority of any party. Following table

details party-wise seats won:

Party	Municipal corporation		Municipal council		Total seats won
	2021	2015	2021	2015	2021
Indian National Congress	317	68	1115	253	1432
Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD)	33	167 (BJP+SAD)	251	870	284
AamAadmi Party (AAP)	18	NA	51	NA	69
Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP)	20	167 (BJP+SAD)	29	248	49
Independent	12	NA	352	NA	364
Others	0	NA	17	NA	17
Total	400	301	1815		2215

The election results have given a boost to the Congress. It reflects the following immediate trends,

First, Congress is getting the votes of both Hindus and Sikhs in Punjab. This is a good news, as it indicates that, despite best attempts at Sikh radicalization by Khalistani elements based abroad through the farmers’ protests, the Sikh community is not really swayed. While the Sikhs are angry with the BJP over the farmer’s issue due to a serious misinformation campaign by vested interests, yet they have chosen to vote for Congress rather than AAP – the latter being a party that openly propagates the Khalistani agenda in Punjab. They have also chosen to not go for SAD, as SAD has nothing to offer and had been with the BJP till last year.

Second, Congress has wrested votes from the traditional BJP strongholds of Gurdaspur, Pathankot, Hoshiarpur, Moga

and others. This again reinforces the fact that Hindus do not trust either AAP or SAD, and see the Congress as a moderate option that can stem the possible tide of Sikh radicalization by anti-national khalistani elements and forces like AAP. Hindus comprise around 40% of Punjab's population.

Third, AAP has been completely decimated. In Municipal Corporation results, it won even less seats than BJP. On the other hand, SAD has not even come second. Coming third, it has performed worse than independents in terms of total seats won, while AAP has come fourth.

Finally, BJP may have come last, but considering the virulent anti-Modi agenda unleashed by alleged farm protests, the BJP's numbers don't look bad at all. Prior to elections, some BJP members resigned and some faced physical violence at their offices and death threats. Given all this, BJP's position is commendable. As per BJP leaders, the atmosphere was so negative that they could not even freely file nominations or campaign on the ground.

Indeed, prior to farmers' protest, the Congress in Punjab was facing the problem of infighting. Voices had started speaking against the Chief Minister. However, the protests turned the tide. Arguably, Congress's victory was more due to its adversaries' extremely weak position and predicament. Whatever the reason, in a way this was good, for, a Congress victory would keep negative Khalistani forces and AAP at bay. In sum, election results show that Punjab is still searching for an alternative in the darkness.

### **INDIA-PAKISTAN CEASEFIRE AGREEMENT:**

For the first time since 2003, India and Pakistan agreed to observe the ceasefire along the Line of Control (LoC), with

effect from February 25th,2021. The sudden agreement is supposedly a result of back-channel talks between the two sides, the details of which have been kept a secret. However, significantly, the agreement comes in the backdrop of the following,

First, it comes in the backdrop of India-China disengagement deal along Pangong Tso, with the understanding of it being replicated along other areas of India-China border. After nearly a year of face-off and low intensity clashes, this was significant. The disengagement also proceeded smoothly. More than anything, this has sent out a message to Pakistan that China continues to seek good relations with India and that India is also a strong power that doesn't back down in face of conflictual situations. More significantly, the heavy economic costs imposed by India on China, especially permanent app bans sent out the message that India is a power that executes its vision.

Second, India is firmly within the circle of US and its allies, especially with formations like QUAD (Australia, India, Japan and US, with even UK contemplating joining it) and Indo-Pacific which are gaining ground. The new Biden administration has nearly the same approach as Trump's. Indeed, Pakistan could see that despite worst global non-state provocations over farmer protests, none of the Western governments had made any comment about India (except Canada – that too in a muted voice, which had to be moderated after domestic political backlash and vaccine requisition from India). Pakistan now sees an India that severely takes anyone to task for meddling in its internal affairs and is extremely aggressive in global for a change. Gone is the India that could be bullied on human rights etc. by Pakistani or other machinations.

Third, Pakistan itself is in a very tight spot globally. The counter-terrorism watchdog, FATF, has retained it on the grey list. This continuous state of semi-sanctions is depriving Pakistan of investments and other legitimate sources of funding. Its relations with Saudi Arabia and UAE have also soured, as they have cultivated closer ties with India. Turkey is of no use to it financially, except giving occasional moral sermons in its favour on Kashmir. But even Turkey is striking a balancing act with India. This has isolated Pakistan, and China has not been an all-weather friend in these trying times.

Fourth, the domestic situation is equally bad. Not only is there domestic disgruntlement and protests, but terrorists are targeting Pakistan, in the aftermath of bleak protests of the Afghan talks in the wake of the skepticism of the Biden administration. India has already fortified its security set up in Kashmir since last year, after the revocation of Article 370, thereby insulating India from Pakistan-Afghanistan developments and their fallout.

All these developments have left Pakistan in a virtual echo chamber. Prior to this agreement, Pakistani Army Chief had already signaled that Pakistan was ready to move beyond Kashmir to cultivate ties with India. For all practical purposes, Kashmir issue has been reduced in Pakistan to a mere ploy to keep its domestic Islamic clerics and their vast followers appeased – a tool to satisfy their bloodlust and anti-Hindu, anti-India hatred – nothing more.

For now, more than this technical ceasefire, it is these developments that forced Pakistan to come to this that are more significant. The question is not whether the ceasefire will hold or not – with Pakistan, nothing can be trusted – but of what more lies in store for our Islamic neighbour.



## THE NEW DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA CODE

The Centre released new rules for regulating social media, digital news media, and over-the-top (OTT) content providers. The rules have come in the backdrop of an ugly spat between the Indian government and Twitter following the Red Fort violence on Republic Day and the global conspiracy to defame India coordinated through Twitter. For a long time, Twitter, in the name of free expression, refused to yield to government demands to ban certain mischievous social media handles that were spreading fake news and inciting unrest in India. Ultimately, when Indian government moved to an India-made social media app, Koo, and threatened to take action against Twitter, that the company finally complied with the government. It couldn't afford not to, and lose one of its biggest markets.

It was also noted with concern, globally, how crassly Twitter had banned the former US President, Mr. Trump, and his supporters. Twitter was also accused of interfering in Ugandan elections, and was banned in Uganda along with the Facebook.

It was under this backdrop that the government hastened and implemented the new digital and social media code. However, the code has been under consideration for the last three years. Under the new code,

- Currently, under Section 79 of the IT Act, intermediaries (like social media companies) are exempted from liability for the actions of their users if they adhere to government-prescribed guidelines. These have now been moderated, and if the companies do not exercise due diligence, they would cease to be exempt from liability for the content hosted on their platform.

- They have to establish a grievance redressal mechanism for receiving and resolving complaints from users. These platforms will need to appoint a grievance officer to deal with such complaints, who must acknowledge the complaint within 24 hours, and resolve it within 15 days of receipt.
- There are 10 categories of content that the social media platform should not host. These include content that “threatens the unity, integrity, defence, security or sovereignty of India, friendly relations with foreign States, or public order, or causes incitement to the commission of any cognizable offence or prevents investigation of any offence or is insulting any foreign States”; “is defamatory, obscene, pornographic, paedophilic, invasive of another’s privacy, including bodily privacy; insulting or harassing on the basis of gender; libellous, racially or ethnically objectionable; relating or encouraging money laundering or gambling, or otherwise inconsistent with or contrary to the laws of India”, etc.
- If the government flags concern about such content, it should be removed within 36 hours. Violations of the code will be punishable under penal sections of the IT Act.
- Streaming services like Netflix and Google’s YouTube must self-regulate and classify content in categories according to age. The draft rules say that OTT players must take into consideration, “India’s multi-racial and multi-religious context” when featuring content relating to any racial or religious group.
- Stand-alone digital entities must disclose information

related to their ownership details etc. in a prescribed format to the government, much like the print and television news media. They also need to follow the code of journalistic ethics laid down by the Press Council of India and the Cable and TV Regulation Act.

The rules are an important step forward in regularizing the digital and social media industry, which has evaded accountability for long. The manner in which these companies have begun to influence politics in countries especially through the use of fake news and malign elements, this was much needed. These codes have predictably met with opposition from privacy and freedom activists and lawyers, who have raised objections pertaining to rising governmental surveillance. The Supreme Court, on the other hand, has decried the lenient code and asked the government to frame more stringent rules for regulation.

Indeed, the framing of these rules should also pay attention to how to curb fake news in print media as well. The use of promotional, paid advertisements masquerading as news is a misleading phenomenon that needs to be seriously tackled by the government.

## THE FUTURE ECONOMIC SYSTEM

“...money would no longer be the sovereign lord; individual worth would have a far greater importance than that of material wealth and social standing. There, work would not be a way to earn one’s living but a way to express oneself and to develop one’s capacities and possibilities while being of service to the community as a whole, which, for its own part, would provide for each individual’s subsistence and sphere of action.”

– The Mother  
(CWM 12 : 93-94)