

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
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BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Waiting and watching Kabul

Delhi must not make haste, needs to judge the Taliban primarily by their security guarantees



SHARAT SABHARWAL

THE US WITHDRAWAL from Afghanistan under their one-sided deal with the Taliban looked in the end like a rout, evoking the Saigon moment and seriously denting its credibility. Dogged by reports of corruption and desertions, the Afghan army proved no match for the religiously motivated Taliban, folding up in 10 days without much of a fight. The Taliban victory, underpinned by religious extremism and terror, could be a shot in the arm for terrorists across the region. The Americans — and even more the region — continue to pay the price for their imprudence in using religious zealots through Pakistan to dislodge the Soviet Union from Afghanistan. Pockets of protests and resistance, including in the Panjshir valley, have been reported, but there's nothing that looks like a viable challenge to the Taliban for now.

The Taliban had inherited a country in ruins the last time and ruled it with an iron hand, financing it through smuggling and the drug trade. They have now inherited a functional state and economy, with reasonably good infrastructure and an aspirational class. They need qualified persons, wider international recognition and assistance to keep it running. Blocking Afghanistan's access to its assets/emergency reserves by the US and IMF is a sign of the problems that an isolated Afghanistan can face. The Taliban are, therefore, trying to project a softer image by, inter alia, announcing an amnesty for their opponents and protection of women's rights in keeping with Islamic values. However, serious doubts persist about their real intentions because of their track record and reports of reprisals, targeted killings and severe restrictions on human rights.

They have spoken of an Emirate, application of shariah law and an inclusive government in the same breath. Regardless of the gloss of inclusivity that they put on their political set-up by taking on board non-Taliban faces, it will essentially be a Taliban-dominated government with a heavy dose of their brand of the shariah. It is also to be seen how they balance the interests of the various factions in the government.

Concerns have been expressed in India

about a shift in the geopolitical balance in the region in favour of the China, Russia, Pakistan and Iran axis, with China using the opportunity to draw Afghanistan into its Belt and Road Initiative and Pakistan replicating the 1990s scenario of diverting jihadis from Afghanistan to destabilise Kashmir. Though not entirely unfounded, overreading such possibilities ought to be avoided. The Chinese may be averse to bankrolling an isolated Afghanistan. China has called upon the Taliban to adopt moderate and prudent domestic and foreign policies, adding that it will consider recognition only after an open, inclusive and broadly representative government is installed. It has also expressed hope that the Taliban will firmly fight terrorist forces, including the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). The Taliban have all along existed with an ecosystem of extremism and terrorism. Warriors of al Qaeda, ETIM, Central Asian and Pakistani terror groups have fought alongside them. Islamic State terrorists are also present in Afghanistan. Concerns will, therefore, persist in China and Russia about the security and stability of Xinjiang and the Central Asian Republics respectively. Iran, too, will have concerns about the safety of the Hazara Shias in Afghanistan.

Notwithstanding the triumphalism at the Taliban victory, the national discourse in Pakistan recognises the attendant risks of fresh refugee flows, emboldening of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and extremism in general and the problems associated with the Taliban tendency to regard the Pashtun belt on both sides of the Durand Line as a continuum (Mullah Mohammad Omar had declined the Pakistani proposal to recognise this line). However, Pakistan is blinded by the urge to see India out of Afghanistan. Further, faced with threats from the TTP and other groups in its west, broader international consensus against terrorism and the ongoing scrutiny of the Financial Action Task Force, Pakistan may have to think twice before coming out of its current restraint mode on Kashmir.

There is criticism that India did not build bridges with the Taliban even after the US deal with them. There are reports of behind the

scenes contacts with them and the official position is that India is in touch with all stakeholders. Could India have done better? The hand-wringing at our current dilemma ignores certain ground realities. First, the obvious difficulty in building bridges with the Taliban, an outfit dependent on Pakistan for diplomatic support, sanctuaries and their war effort. Second, India has no direct access to Afghanistan. Third, putting Indian boots on the ground in any appreciable number will pit them against Pakistan and its proxies, who have a considerable logistical advantage. Therefore, India has to count on others for security — the American security cover in the last 20 years, which is now gone.

Can India count on the Taliban, whose Haqqani faction is known as a virtual wing of the ISI, for security and do business with them? We will have to look for answers to these questions through quiet contact with the Taliban, because we care for the people of Afghanistan and should not abandon this strategically important space in our neighbourhood indefinitely. Friendly countries such as Russia and Qatar can help. While counselling moderation and promising continued development partnership, we should judge the Taliban primarily by their security guarantees, including not allowing the use of their territory by anti-India terrorists and the ability to deal with us independently of Pakistan.

For now, it is wait and watch for India, as indeed for other countries. The first priority is to get all Indian nationals out of Afghanistan. India should also join any international effort to address the humanitarian crisis that is reportedly brewing in Afghanistan. Going forward, if the Taliban act wisely and build an inclusive and stable system, they may be able to win international recognition and reduce their dependence on Pakistan. If, on the other hand, they stick to their old ways, they may end up generating opposition, violence and instability in the country, heightening concerns among Afghanistan's neighbours. Each scenario will hold openings for India.

The writer is a former High Commissioner to Pakistan. Views are personal

MANAGING THE PLAN

Success of ambitious asset monetisation programme will depend on institutional capacity and continuous monitoring

ON MONDAY, UNION Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman unveiled the broad contours of an ambitious asset monetisation programme. The National Monetisation Pipeline involves leasing out central government assets valued at around Rs 6 lakh crore over a four-year period ending in 2024-25, with the government looking to mop up Rs 88,000 crore in the ongoing financial year. At its core, the idea is to lease out brownfield projects, proceeds from which can be used to finance greenfield projects. The ownership of the assets monetised, though, will remain with the government, with the private players taking on the operational risk. While roads, railways and power account for around 65 per cent of the proceeds of the programme, the list of assets detailed is spread across sectors such as telecom, aviation, mining and warehousing, suggesting a more wide-ranging programme. While the targets are aggressive, a four-year roadmap, providing in detail the assets the government intends to lease, should provide clarity to investors and generate interest. However, considering the regular shortfalls in the government's dis-investment collections, the programme's success will require careful and continuous monitoring, and addressing of concerns raised by private players.

The transactions are likely to be structured through either public-private partnerships, concessions or instruments such as infrastructure investment trusts (InvTIs). However, considering the experience of private players with PPPs, their comfort level in participating in these transactions is likely to depend on a host of factors, such as operational flexibility, regulatory framework, dispute resolution mechanism, etc. To ensure a smooth rollout, some experts have suggested that the government should look at addressing the concerns raised around PPPs. The recent experience of the Indian Railways when it invited private players to run passenger trains has not been encouraging — reportedly, only two players participated in the process, one of which is a government entity. Thus, how these agreements are structured will be central to their success as that will determine the extent of private sector participation. It will require institutional capacity to draft such attractive agreements across multiple sectors and settings.

The central government is also incentivising states to participate in this programme. After all, states, like the Centre, have assets that can be monetised, creating a lucrative revenue stream for them. And considering that states drive general government capital expenditure, this channel could provide them with the additional resources needed to sustain public investment during this period of stressed public finances. On its part, the Centre has come up with financial incentives to encourage states to follow its lead. But in the current atmosphere of strained Centre-state relations, fructification of such plans would require deft political management.

VACCINATING CHILDREN

EUA for Zydus Cadila vaccine opens up possibilities. Centre must carefully address challenges of expanding programme

THE INDIAN DRUG regulator's emergency-use authorisation (EUA) to Zydus Cadila's Covid-19 vaccine, ZyCoV-D, is a welcome development. The second homegrown vaccine to receive an EUA can be administered to children above 12 years, raising the possibility of extending the vaccination project to the country's adolescent population. For children waiting for classrooms to be unlocked, the company's announcement that it can provide the jabs to schools by mid-September is heartening news. Union Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya has spoken of the Centre's eagerness to begin vaccination for children at the earliest. The Centre's talks with the Ahmedabad-based company slated for later this week will, therefore, be keenly watched. They are likely to be centred on vaccine pricing and supplies. The decision to extend the inoculation project beyond the adult population must, however, factor in other imperatives, especially logistical challenges.

According to the government's projections, the country's vaccination drive is set to undergo a massive ramp-up from September onwards. More than 120-crore shots must be administered in the last four months of the year to attain the target of inoculating the country's adult population by December. Independent studies — including the Fitch Group's India Rating last week — have expressed doubts about the feasibility of this target. The government, however, maintains that vaccine supply will be increased from next month. If its claim is to hold up, an average of one crore shots will be administered every day till the end of the year — currently, the country averages less than 50-lakh shots daily. The spurt in inoculation could tax the energies of vaccinators and will require state governments to increase the number of vaccination centres. It is not yet known if the plan to increase vaccine supplies has a chapter on augmenting the teams of vaccinators. Inoculating children will, in any case, demand a further upscaling in the logistics of vaccine delivery. The government will, therefore, do well to conduct a thorough audit of the resources at its disposal before deciding to use the three-dose ZyCoV-D to expand its inoculation drive.

Trial results show the new vaccine's efficacy against the variants driving the pandemic currently. The DNA-based jab does not require ultra-cold storage facilities and is reported to be cost-effective. A spring-powered device delivers the shot as a narrow streak of liquid that penetrates the skin — a big positive given that the fear of needles is known to be a major cause of vaccine hesitancy. But is the government better off, for now, harnessing these advantages for the adult vaccination project? Or does it have the wherewithal to do more? Its decision should be a carefully calibrated one.

THIS LAND IS HER LAND

The birth of an Afghan baby in the midst of an American evacuation attempt shows up the lies of nationalism

THE MAIN FACTS in human life are five: birth, food, sleep, love and death," said the novelist E M Forster. Isn't it a wonder, then, that the fictions of humankind so easily make us forget such primal realities? It is a question that follows, not just from bloody imperial wars and the fratricide of nations — but the birth of a child.

A baby was born in the cargo bay of an US aircraft carrying out evacuations from Afghanistan, a country bled by a thousand cuts of the American "war on terror". The mother, an Afghan woman, went into labour mid-flight and delivered a girl after landing at a German air base.

The bureaucracy of nationalism promptly busted a fuse. Is the little girl a German citizen since she was born on German soil? Is she a citizen of the "land of the free", since her mother went into labour on an American flight? But what if she is born outside US airspace? Does the fact that her mother is a refugee of a torn land catapult her into the community of the stateless? The ideology of nationalism is about two centuries old, but its apparatus of borders and belongings continues to produce the exhausting tangles that led Manto's character in *Toba Tek Singh* to lie down between India and Pakistan "on a piece of land with no name". Worse, it continues to push humans into peril, whether it is the potential "non-citizens" cast out of Assam's NRC or the three-year-old Aylan Kurdi, fleeing from Syria, who drowned while crossing from Turkey to Greece.

The idea of "nowhere people" is a cynical fabrication. Humans belong — to each other, to expanding circles of family, community, country — unless structures of power and money decide to cast them away. The little baby girl, cast out of her homeland by such a great game of geopolitical cynicism, has scraped past death. May she find food, sleep and a land — and, above all, a love to which she belongs.



SWATI NARAYAN

EARLY THIS month, the Uttar Pradesh government informed the Allahabad High Court that the order for a re-inquiry against Dr Kafeel Khan had been withdrawn. But the doctor remains under suspension due to disciplinary proceedings in another case instituted by the state health department.

On the night of the tragedy in August 2017, the good doctor had moved mountains to procure oxygen cylinders for his encephalitis patients, whose lives hung by a thread. But 63 innocent toddlers suffocated when the government hospital in Gorakhpur ran out of oxygen. If only the government had carefully listened to, instead of arresting, Dr Khan, maybe, the chronic oxygen crisis plaguing Indian hospitals would have been resolved before the pandemic.

Now the health ministry has claimed in Parliament that only Punjab has reported four "suspected" deaths during the second Covid-19 wave due to lack of oxygen. This contradicts every news report. Patients gasping for breath on stretchers, testimonies of relatives running from pillar to post for oxygen refills, gurdwaras installing oxygen langars, televised SOS pleas of hospitals, appeals from state governments, overcrowded crematoriums and bodies floating on the Ganges. But in Delhi, the Lieutenant Governor has twice rejected proposals by the state government to commission committees to investigate oxygen deaths. Instead, the volunteer-run "Oxygen Shortage Deaths" group has documented at least 629 oxygen-related deaths since May 2021 nationwide.

LESSONS FROM PANDEMIC

Post Covid, India must invest in an NHS-like health model

Even after the pandemic, the Indian government continues to budget less than 1 per cent of GDP for healthcare, one of the lowest in the world. In contrast, China invests around 3 per cent, Britain 7 per cent and the United States 17 per cent of GDP. So, 62 per cent of health expenses in India are paid for by patients themselves — one of the main reasons for families falling into poverty especially during the pandemic.

Even before the pandemic, similarly horrific healthcare tragedies occurred every single year. In 2017, 800 children died in Jharkhand of suspected encephalitis. In 2015, 18 patients died in a Chennai hospital, due to power failure after the floods. In 2014, 13 women died after illegal sterilisation at an overcrowded government health camp in Chhattisgarh. These tragedies recur, but the sorry state of healthcare persists.

On a personal note, across the oceans, my sister has been battling encephalitis for the last two years. But though she is on a delicate road to recovery, there is no doubt that Britain's National Health Service (NHS) government hospitals have saved her life repeatedly.

Every year, Britain's legendary health network cures 15 million patients with chronic ailments, at a fraction of the cost spent by the US. The NHS funded by direct taxes is also the fifth largest employer in the world, after McDonalds and Walmart. One of every 20 British workers is employed as doctor, nurse, catering and technical personnel. As true successors of Florence Nightingale, the compassionate nurses after the pandemic have been hailed as superheroes by graffiti artist Banksy. After all, in a rapidly ageing society, for Britons, "the NHS is the closest thing to religion".

On the other hand, in India, hospitals are beleaguered with absentee staff. As per a Niti Aayog database, in the worst state of Bihar in 2017-18, positions for 60 per cent of midwives, 50 per cent of staff nurses, 34 per cent of medical officers and 60 per cent of specialist doctors were vacant. Those on the job,

despite being handsomely paid, are chronically overworked.

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The Covid-19 oxygen crisis could certainly have been prevented. But the central government delayed by eight months a Rs 200-crore tender to build oxygen plants across 150 district hospitals. In contrast, pre-scient district collector Dr Rajendra Bharud set up multiple oxygen units in Maharashtra's Nandurbar before the second wave. Kerala, the only oxygen-surplus state, also increased production capacity in 2020 in anticipation of a demand surge.

Before the NHS was established, George Orwell in his stinging 1946 essay *How the Poor Die* painted a tragic portrait of state-run hospitals with, "a seeming lack of any perception that the patients were human beings".

In the 21st century, not much has improved in India's public hospitals. Still, in India doctors are often equated with gods. But, without basic medicines, equipment and oxygen, can even Dr Khan be expected to perform miracles?

The writer is with NIAS



AUGUST 25, 1981, FORTY YEARS AGO

URS OFFERS TO QUIT

CONGRESS (U) PRESIDENT Devraj Urs bowed to the wishes of a powerful section of the party leadership when he offered his resignation at a meeting of the working committee. The committee has, however, put off a decision on Urs's offer for a day. Though the anti-Urs lobby in the working committee is in favour of electing an acting president, a section of the party leadership would want Urs to continue until the next AICC(U) meet in October. Urs, who had sensed the mood of many members, took them by surprise by his offer. He read out a statement in which he said that there was a feeling in the party that he should step down.

MAIL TAMPERING

SEVERAL OPPOSITION MEMBERS both in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha expressed concern at the tampering of their mail. In the Lok Sabha, they wanted to know the Speaker's decision on the privilege motion on the question. The Speaker Balram Jakhar told Subramaniam Swamy (Janata) that he has got some facts about the charges made in the motion. If these charges came under the purview of breach of privilege, he would admit the motion, he said.

US ARMS TO PAK

INDIA HAS CONVEYED its concerns to

America about Washington's decision to supply sophisticated arms to Pakistan and the dangers of the great powers' rivalry being brought to the neighbourhood. The Indian concern was conveyed to the US representative to the United Nations, Jeane Kirkpatrick, at the meetings she had with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and External Affairs Minister P V Narasimha Rao.

BOEING SUED

THE BOEING COMPANY is being sued for \$100 million in a suit filed as a result of the 1978 New Year's Day air crash off Bombay. 213 people died in the crash.

9 THE IDEAS PAGE

Gandhi Ashram of the future

India has a chance to ensure that the place where the Mahatma walked and worked, and where one can still feel his spirit, remains a living, breathing means for the world to understand Gandhi's message



THOMAS WEBER, CHARLES DISALVO AND DENNIS DALTON

DURING THE PREVIOUS several decades, as scholars interested in the life and thought of Mahatma Gandhi, we have had the privilege to work in the archives of the Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad — the most important repository of the correspondence to and from Gandhi — and to walk around the hallowed ground of the Ashram, the residence of the Mahatma and his wife Kasturba, from 1917 until he departed from there on the historical Salt March to Dandi in 1930.

We have wondered what direction the Ashram could take in the 21st century. Over the years we have imagined, in particular, what the Sabarmati Ashram might become and how it could play its role in spreading the message of Gandhi, how it could be ensured that the most effective use is made of this unique world-significant location. Of course, it has a large role to play as one of India's most historical sites, as a museum and as a pilgrimage place that inspires the quest for truth and teaches the observant visitor about the value of nonviolence and simplicity in a period of threatening environmental collapse and very present economic inequality. For these reasons, the lessons taught by Gandhi, and embodied in the Ashram, are just as important now as ever before.

The ethos of the Ashram is conducive to the higher-level ways of thinking and being that Gandhi modelled. So powerful are the present simplicity and orderliness of the surroundings that they cannot but affect the thoughtful visitor. In the late 1970s, the revolutionary thinker Ivan Illich, talking of Gandhi's hut at Sevagram, noted, "This hut of Gandhi demonstrates to the world how the dignity of the common man can be brought up. It is also a symbol of happiness which we can derive from practising the principle of simplicity, service and truthfulness." Of course, he could just as easily have been talking about Hriday Kunj, the basic but inspiring home of Gandhi and Kasturba at the Ashram. But such happiness requires time, a slower than usual pace, and quiet reflection — something impossible among huge crowds.

It seems to us that there are two possible ways to make sure that the Ashram remains relevant into the future. One of them seems obvious, but we feel would create more loss than gain. If the press reports of the proposal to redevelop the precinct are accurate, the Ashram could become a mass tourist hub, with a large car park, food court, shops, a VIP lounge, that could reclaim the "visual wholesomeness, tranquillity and uncluttered environment of 1949," while becoming a "world-class" tourist destination. This would generate money for the state and, perhaps, make the Mahatma known to a far greater number of people.

One must ask, however, whether there is not a higher purpose in preserving the



CR Sasikumar

Ashram in its striking simplicity and as a relatively hard-to-access place without food outlets on the grounds, and without lounges for "important" visitors (what would Gandhi say about this!).

A potential Disneyesque Gandhi theme park (and what would Gandhi say if he could re-visit Dandi?) may be popular among those wanting to take a selfie and tick a bucket-list box. However, there may be another approach, one that allows the Ashram to become (or, indeed, remain) something harder to envisage but where one can feel the Gandhian ethos. It was here that Gandhi conducted his experiments to observe and infer ethical action, where communal living and dining meant that caste divisions were done away with, where ashramites learned that they could take on the might of an empire.

Would the proposed makeover not end up obliterating Gandhi's ideas and message? Would one still be able to feel Gandhi's spirit? The loss would be intangible, but huge. When Gandhi was asked why he did not visit America, he expressed the fear that people would come to see him out of idle curiosity: "Let's see this animal in the Indian zoo". He wanted those who had an interest in him to really understand what he was trying to do and invited them to come to the Ashram and make a detailed study of his teachings.

Instead of a tourist hub where Gandhi could become a mere tourist attraction, here is a chance for India to ensure that the Ashram where the Mahatma walked and worked, and where one can still feel his spirit in the gardens, homes, and prayer ground, remains a living, breathing means for the world to understand Gandhi and his message.

Of course, as scholars of Gandhi, we may have a narrow perspective. In addition to attracting true seekers, could the Ashram

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also be positioned so that it ensures that its outstanding collection of Gandhiana is shared by scholars and peace workers in a way that helps to promote first-class Gandhi scholarship and considered Gandhian praxis, and possibly to help create a worldwide community of like-minded Gandhi inspirees? While the Gandhi Heritage Portal of Gandhi-related documents and information is provided electronically by the Ashram, could the Ashram be the site of an international Gandhi research hub in India? It could become the most important place in the world for scholars and seekers to come and work, to meet other scholars and seekers, to share information and discuss ideas. It could foster greater contact among Gandhi experts and ensure that Gandhi scholarship is carried out at the highest level and that an understanding of a Gandhian ethos is not lost. Could it be a place where Gandhi scholars and sincere seekers from around the world come and work with the best of local scholars and activists who could inspire each other?

Having access to documents, whether in hard copy or digital form, is not the same as having a group of like-minded people working in one place. And if the place had a Gandhian atmosphere (such as the Ashram could provide, but simple academic libraries and archives, no matter how good they are, cannot) it would be a wonderfully unique atmosphere and, through the Sabarmati Harijan Ashram, India could serve the entire world as a beacon for the seeker of truth and nonviolence.

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WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The prospect of the Taliban wielding an effective veto on this matter, while the west haplessly ponders its options, is a measure of the stunning strategic failure that has taken place." — THE GUARDIAN

On population, let facts speak

Population laws are a travesty at a time of sharp decline in fertility rates. Instead, India needs policies that ensure dignified lives for all its people



MOHD SHAHID AND MANOJ JHA

THE OLD SLOGAN, "Hum do hamare do, woh panch unke pachchees (We are two, we have two; they are five and have 25)" is probably still potent enough to appeal to popular perceptions of "uncontrolled" Muslim population growth — despite scientific evidence to the contrary.

At a critical juncture, when the states and Union territories in India are experiencing a sharp decline in fertility rates, population laws are back in the conversation. Though there is nothing on "record" that these are specifically for Muslims, the writing on the wall is clear. And it is a travesty, given the facts and figures available from government agencies.

The recently released empirical data from the National Family Health Survey 2019-20 (NFHS-5) for 22 states and Union territories provides that except for three states — Bihar, Manipur and Meghalaya — the fertility rates have gone below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman.

The total fertility rates (TFR) in the Union territories of Lakshadweep and Jammu & Kashmir, which have sizeable Muslim populations, have gone substantially below the replacement level with 1.4 children per woman. In Jammu & Kashmir, this is on account of a modest percentage of women with 10 or more years of schooling (51.3 per cent), fewer women marrying before the age of 18 years (4.5 per cent), declining infant mortality (20 per 1,000 live births) and more current users of family planning methods (59.8 per cent).

In all the seven Northeastern states, the fertility rates range from 1.1 in Sikkim to 1.9 in Assam, except Manipur (2.2) and Meghalaya (2.9). In nine out of 10 states, fertility rates range from as low as 1.3 in Goa to as high as 1.9 in Gujarat. Among populous states, the TFR has gone down to 1.6 children in West Bengal. It is only 1.7 each in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Himachal Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh. In Telangana and Kerala, the fertility rate is getting stabilised at 1.8 children per woman. Even in Bihar, where the TFR is 3, there is a relative decline in fertility from 3.4 in NFHS-4 (2015-16). In NFHS-4 itself, as many as 23 states and Union Territories, including all the states in the south region, showed fertility below the replacement level. In Uttar Pradesh, too, there is a declining trend in TFR from 3.8 in NFHS-3 (2005-06) to 2.7 in NFHS-4 (2015-16).

In West Bengal, the figures for women with 10 or more years of schooling (32.9 per cent) and women marrying before age 18 years (41.6 per cent) are almost similar to Bihar and worse than Uttar Pradesh. But it seems that West Bengal reached a TFR of 1.6 on account of sharply declining neona-

l mortality rate (15.5 per cent), infant mortality rate (22.0 per cent) and high contraceptive prevalence rate (74.4 per cent). In brief, the probable fruit of better health facilities and wider contraceptive choices.

If an alarm bell is to be pressed, then it is not for population laws but for declining fertility. Replacement level fertility demands heavy investment in education, health and employment opportunities so that the "limited working population" in the near future is robust and skilled enough. What is needed is a comprehensive policy ensuring dignified living — easy access to quality education, better health services and sound livelihood opportunities.

Let the data speak on the "need" for population laws. The NFHS-4 (2015-16) shows interesting linkages of fertility with education and economic well-being. For example, women with no schooling have an average of 3.1 children, compared with 1.7 children for women with 12 or more years of schooling. Among Hindus, TFR was 2.1 and among Muslims it was 2.6, that is a difference of 0.5 children. For the same period, the most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, had a TFR of 2.7; in the case of Muslims, it was 0.6 points more than that of Hindus. In some states with high Muslim populations, the TFR of Muslims was little more than that of Hindus — 0.6 in West Bengal, 0.8 in Assam and 1.0 in Bihar (NFHS-5). For sure, this difference in TFR does not support the charge that Muslim population will overtake Hindus.

Let there be any doubt left, one must understand that there is a steep decline in the fertility of Muslims from NFHS-1 (1992-93) to NFHS-4 (2015-16) (by 1.78 in comparison to 1.17 for Hindus). There is also a continuous decline in the population growth rate over decades. The decline in decadal growth rate was sharp in Census 2011 and sharper for Muslims. The decadal growth rate (2001-2011) for Muslims was 24.6 per cent in Census 2011. Though high, it marked a sharp decline from 29.5 per cent, which was registered in Census 2001. This decline of 4.9 per cent among the Muslims is higher than the corresponding 3.1 per cent decline for the Hindu community, whose decadal growth percentage declined from 19.9 (1991-2001) to 16.8 (2001-2011).

Before we forget the propaganda of Muslims "having more wives", last available figures from Census 1971 provide that the incidence of polygyny (two or more wives) is highest among Adivasis (15.25 per cent) followed by Buddhists (7.9 per cent), Jains (6.27 per cent), Hindus (5.80 per cent) and Muslims (5.70 per cent).

Fertility rates are reflective of the progress in respective states on schooling, income levels, decline in neonatal and infant mortality rates and increase in the contraceptive prevalence rate. States with relatively higher TFR like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh need to work on these fronts. Hence, any talk of population laws in India at this juncture would at best be like putting the cart before the horse.

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What India must remember

Pratap Bhanu Mehta is wrong to frame it as a choice between freedom and Partition



VIJAY CHAUTHAIWALE

IMAGINE A SITUATION: In a joint family, a baby is born and on the same day, the eldest and most respected person in the family is brutally murdered. While everyone will still celebrate the arrival of the newborn, will do everything to nurture him/her in the best possible way, will anyone argue that in this celebration, everyone should simply forget the murder — not even mourn, forget about wiping the tears, of close ones in the family?

This is precisely what Pratap Bhanu Mehta is trying to argue in his column, 'At 75, will India embrace the logic of freedom or Partition?' (IE, August 15). He doesn't want us to shed a tear for the deceased. The primary fallacy of his argument is the choice between freedom and Partition, which essentially means denying history. The operative word in the subtitle "or" means, somehow, we Indians were given a choice between freedom and one side opted for Partition while the other opted for freedom. On the contrary, history states that freedom and Partition were offered to India as a "package deal". There would not have been freedom without accepting Partition. Partition was the pre-condition for India's freedom, the condition which India's top leadership in that critical period accepted for one reason or another. Therefore, Mehta starts his argument on the wrong foot from the very first sentence and continues to do so till the end.

He continues "mission whitewash" with his skilled vocabulary and selective, convenient historical references. He also has selective amnesia when he doesn't mention "Direct Action" by M A Jinnah on August 16, 1946, which resulted in the genocide of Hindus, culminating in the greatest migration of population in modern history, that can be compared only with the ISIS-induced migration a few years back. Unfortunately, there was no live TV coverage in 1946, but images and first-hand accounts of those affected by the violence and migration are vivid enough to understand the gravity of the situation. However, Mehta conveniently ignored this.

The core of his argument is that India has chosen a path of freedom, democracy and progress, forgetting Partition. He would like India to forget the deaths of millions of innocent Hindus and Sikhs, the uprooting of more than 15 million people, caravans of walking migrants that stretched hundreds of miles, trains arriving in Delhi filled with dead bodies, not to mention the rape and molestation of thousands of women.

But Mehta doesn't stop here. He concludes that remembering the tragedy of Partition is somehow antagonistic to the development of a modern, progressive, all-encompassing India. Going back to the hypothetical point at the beginning of this article, he would like to say that if we mourn the tragic murder in the family, we would

forget nurturing a newly-born infant. This is convoluted logic.

Post-Independence history shows that liberals like Mehta repeatedly tried to use this trick. On the one hand, they ignored the massive human tragedy during Partition, opposed any reasonable inquiry into the reasons for it and errors committed during that period. On the other hand, the same cartel played vote-bank politics by creating a fear psychosis in the minds of minorities, especially Muslims. By opposing the elimination of repressive customs like triple talaq, they further hindered social transformation among Muslims.

Therefore, Mehta's argument that a remembrance of the horrors of Partition is somehow against building a modern, just India, is not only baseless but also a skillful "whitewash project". He doesn't want to face an inconvenient truth and would like to shrug it off under the guise of progress and development. As if, once we forget Partition, India would instantly overcome all her socio-economic issues. But history gives us precisely opposite lessons. Repeated attempts to wipe out these memories by liberals have resulted in vote-bank politics, corruption, dynastic loyalties, a denial of inconvenient chapters of our history, and converting India into a soft state, devoid of self-confidence and a nation with a confused identity.

In the last few years, India has been

making concerted efforts to overcome this defeatist mindset. Today's India is not shy of accepting past errors and that too without playing a blame game. Horrific scenarios created by the same defeatists at other instances such as the elimination of Article 370 or building the Ram temple in Ayodhya were proven wrong, reflecting the new and positive mood in today's India. While doing so, India has also embarked on a long journey of progress — Atmanirbhar Bharat, social justice, lending a helping hand to those who need it most, systemic reforms in every sector — resulting in it becoming a resilient and self-confident nation.

Indian values teach us to be grateful to every animate and inanimate object that has contributed to our personal and social lives. Once a year, we offer few drops of water to all our ancestors, worship rivers and trees, salute the martyrs of our country on Republic Day. The declaration of August 14 as "Partition Horrors Remembrance Day" follows the same tradition.

Today's India is confident enough to recognise past errors, not whitewash them. It is willing to remember the victims, pay tribute to them and move on to build a modern, progressive and resurgent India. These two are not contradictory as Mehta would like us to believe.

The writer is in charge, Foreign Affairs Department, BJP. Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

CHEQUERED CAREER

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Mandal in Kamandal' (IE, August 24). The adulation accorded to and the honours bestowed on his funeral for Kalyan Singh by the BJP are overdone. As against his acquiescence as chief minister of UP to the demolition of the Babri Masjid, his subsequent role diminished his image. He could not check the growth of crime during his chief ministership and had to be replaced. His public spat with Atal Bihari Vajpayee and his choice of epithets for the latter betrayed his bitterness and disrespect. It was an irony of political compulsion that Vajpayee conceded to his re-entry in the party, but he was ousted again.

YG Chouksey, Pune

WISHFUL THINKING

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'In post-pandemic classroom' (IE, August 24). The author's idea, invoking the experience of Santiniketan, is laudable. It is also wishful thinking. She argues that the context of pandemic is used as the starting point for inquiry-based learning with a vision of transforming the education of children. But you cannot create mainstream institutions any more that thrive on lofty ideals which are exploratory, stimulating and, inter alia, in harmony with nature. On the contrary, one can build on fear of the pandemic by orienting the efforts to contribute to the interest of the market.

G Javaid Rasool, Lucknow

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HARDLY CREDIBLE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The lost decade' (IE, August 24). Like any loyalist, the writer's glorification of his party's achievements has contradictions and chinks. The BJP-led NDA government's credibility is so low that it has utterly failed to get foreign investment despite its high ranking in the World Bank's Ease of Doing business list. No wonder, the government has to monetise its assets. True, the government has opened bank accounts under the PM Jan Dhan Yojana with great fanfare but most of them have zero balance. Its other welfare schemes like Ujjwal Yojana and Swachh Bharat are good only for garnering publicity as they are not functioning well.

Tarsem Singh, Mahilpur