

## The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

## SHE'S A WINNER

PV Sindhu's second Olympics medal is only the latest success in a larger story of striving and achieving by India's sportswomen

MEN'S SPORT IN India may be in need of urgent bucking up — an Olympic medal has not been won since London 2012. In this period, spanning the Games in London, Rio and Tokyo, Indian sportswomen have added seven medals across four sports. PV Sindhu has now become the first Indian woman to win a medal at successive Games. The success of women at the Olympics has meant a broadening of the pyramid base from the traditional hubs. It isn't just the wrestlers from Haryana, gymnasts from the east, shuttlers from Hyderabad and lifters from Manipur. Tokyo 2020 has also turned the glittering spotlight on a fencer from Chennai and a boxer from Assam. With the best of sport now available on smartphones, ease of communication because of social media and hyper-efficient search engines, there's no telling when and where a dream gets kindled, watching women sports stars perform and win consistently.

Gymnast Dipa Karmakar didn't just dream up a high difficulty vault for the Rio Olympics, she took her effort to the logical conclusion, came within striking distance of a medal. Sindhu ensured that Saina Nehwal's bronze was upgraded to silver and elevated badminton to a mainline television sport, before she returned to the Olympics for a bounce-back bronze. Perhaps the greatest first day at the Olympics for India was when Mirabai Chanu demolished her demons of failure from four years ago to chase down a weightlifting silver, a score of years after Kamam Malleswari's feat barely registered. Mary Kom refuses to go gently into the fading dusk of her career at 38. Another pugilist from the Northeast, Lovlina Borgohain from Assam, has picked up the baton. At the start of Week 2, all eyes are on wrestler Vinesh Phogat, five years after Sakshi Malik salvaged India's twelve-day-long zero count at Rio. Most hearteningly, India's women's hockey team has come to the party, beating mighty Australia.

It seems women go to the Olympics focussing on the podium, and work backwards on the effort needed to get as close to the target as possible. Keenly aware of the deficiencies of opportunities and facilities, and of the slim chances they might be afforded given societal traditions, they don't waste time to get going. Like Nehwal and Mirabai, they take disappointment to heart, and return to work harder. Like Lovlina and Sakshi, they go out there, fearless but without hubris, not giving themselves the cushioning of a "next time" — the sort of second-chances, for instance, that this time's medallist Olympic debutant Saurabh Chaudhary or Amit Panghal might be glibly given. PT Usha, Sania Mirza, Anju Bobby George — they are not just bright stars streaking across TV screens, but role models for countless young women. PV Sindhu went to eight majors and brought home medals from seven. India's sportswomen deliver on their promises, time and again. They get the job done.

## ON THE UP

Centre's finances have fared well. But limited disinvestment, need for higher spending, could build up pressure

RECENT DATA SUGGESTS that with the second wave of infections subsiding, and with state governments easing localised restrictions, economic activities in India bounced back strongly from the lows observed in May. At 95.3, the Nomura India Business Resumption Index for the week ending July 25 was only 4.7 percentage points below its pre-pandemic level. It had dipped to 60.2 in May. In line with these trends in the broader economy, recently released data also signals a marked improvement in central government finances during this period. In fact, with the economic fallout of the second wave being less than feared, government finances have fared considerably better in the first quarter of the current financial year than over the same period last year when the imposition of the national lockdown led to a virtual collapse in revenues.

At the aggregate level, the Centre's gross tax collections have touched 24 per cent of budgeted expectations in the first quarter (April-June) of the current financial year, with indirect tax collections doing a tad better. Under the broad rubric of indirect taxes, recent data signals a rapid pick up in both GST and excise/cess collections. GST collections at Rs 1.16 lakh crore in July were higher than in both May (Rs 1.02 lakh crore) and June (Rs 92,849 crore). With average daily e-way bills generated in July higher than in June and May, the outlook for collections is significantly brighter. Further, with economic activities picking up, fuel demand also rose sharply in July. In fact, as reported in this paper, preliminary sales data shows that petrol consumption has reached pre-Covid levels with state-owned fuel retailers selling 2.37 million tonnes of petrol in July. Even non-tax revenues have been bolstered by a higher than expected surplus transferred by the Reserve Bank of India. However, there continues to be cause for concern. As against an ambitious disinvestment target of Rs 1.75 lakh crore, so far proceeds through this channel have only been to the tune of Rs 7,645 crore. An inability to shore up disinvestment proceeds, coupled with the possibility of having to provide additional support to struggling parts of the economy, could add pressure on government finances down the line.

On the expenditure side, while the Centre's revenue expenditure has grown at a steady pace sequentially during this period, capital expenditure has been volatile, presumably due to lockdown restrictions. With the second wave receding, economic activity picking up, and greater clarity over its revenue streams, the government should now step up spending to provide support to the economy.

## PARADISE FOR PIGS

In China, the tallest pig farm in the world is utopia and dystopia, a model for the republic and revolution

IT IS NO easy task to go *Through the Looking Glass*, past *Animal Farm*, and establish *The Republic*. Yet, on a sacred mountain in southern China, a collection of nondescript concrete buildings has stoked and surpassed the imaginations of some of the world's greatest writers. The tallest pig farm in the world, nine storeys high, with 1,270 pigs on each floor, both a porcine utopia and dystopia, an absurd fantasy and a marvel of the modern state.

"The time has come, the Walrus said" in Lewis Carroll's classic, to ponder such deep questions as "whether pigs have wings". In China, while the ungulate cannot fly, it can take the lift. Individual care, 24/7 medical facilities and quick, hygienic disposal of the diseased have been put in place in the condominiums on Yaji ("sacred") mountain. This pampering of pigs — they are weighed, measured, sorted and kept in secure "bio-bubbles" — has ostensibly been necessitated by disease and the threat of dietary shortages. Over the last two years, China lost over 200 million pigs to African Swine Fever and other viruses. And the one-party state, that has been relatively unsuccessful in remaking Hong Kong, Tibet and Xinjiang, has set up a Platonic Republic for the animals. Each creature is cared for, its future predetermined.

But a word of caution: Pigs, like Politburo members, can become self-serving. A duck may ask, along with his sheep and goat friends: Why am I slumming it in farms, on the ground, while the portly pigs enjoy climate-controlled surroundings in high rises? In *Animal Farm*, while all animals were equal, some were more equal than others. The lesson from Orwell, which People's Parties often forget, also is that before there was Utopia, there was dissent and revolution. Revolutions can always come around again.



YASHWANT SINHA

THE RECENT GOINGS-ON in the standing committee on information technology has once again drawn attention to the system of standing committees, which is one of the major innovations of our parliamentary system of governance. Along with the earlier committees, some of which are mandated by the Constitution, these committees do enormous amount of work for Parliament but generally behind closed doors. It is a pity that in this day and age of complete transparency, the committees are forced to function confidentially. This is one of the main reasons why their good work is not known outside Parliament. It is high time to throw open the proceedings of the committees to public scrutiny as happens in most democracies.

Be that as it may, as someone who has dealt with these committees both as a minister and as member/chairperson, I am a great admirer of the system. So, when I read in the media about what happened in the committee on information technology, I was considerably saddened. In my time, the parliamentary committees generally functioned on non-partisan lines, with some unfortunate exceptions. I headed the standing committee on the ministry of external affairs briefly in the 15th Lok Sabha (2009-14) and the standing committee on finance for almost five years. There were three of us in the BJP in those days, who pretended to understand economics and finance, Murlu Manohar Joshi, Jaswant Singh and me. The real expert was Arun Shourie, but he was in the Rajya Sabha and only a member of the Lok Sabha could head the finance committees. I was the junior-most of the three. So, Dr Joshi and Jaswant Singh always got what they wanted. I had to make do with whatever was left. So, in the 15th Lok Sabha, Jaswant Singh took the public accounts committee (PAC), Dr Joshi took the standing committee on finance and I had to go to the standing committee on external affairs. Soon

## Once upon a committee

Parliamentary committees have worked with dignity, in non-partisan ways. Sadly this has changed

thereafter, Jaswant Singh was expelled from the party and it took all the diplomatic skills of Sushma Swaraj to persuade him to resign from the chairmanship of the PAC, which by tradition belonged to the main opposition party in Lok Sabha. After his resignation, Dr Joshi preferred to go to the PAC as its chairman rather than continue as chairman of the standing committee on finance. At this point, Sushma Swaraj wanted to know whether I would like to continue where I was or shift to the finance committee.

I was reminded of what Jaswant Singh once told me when he was minister of external affairs and I was minister for finance — that the real work was in the finance ministry, external affairs ministry was mere laf-fazi (verbiage). So, I told Swaraj that I would prefer to go to the finance committee. I never regretted that decision.

We indeed did an enormous amount of legislative work in the finance committee between 2009 and 2014. I had as colleagues some of the best parliamentarians of the day and the proceedings of the committee were conducted with a lot of energy but also with a lot of dignity. I always asked my questions at the end, after I had offered an opportunity to all members to ask their questions, if any. In fact, the best day of my parliamentary career was when we held the last meeting of the committee, an informal one, and exchanged views for one last time. I was overwhelmed when member after member showered me with encomiums regarding the impartial manner in which I used to conduct the committee meetings. As a result, the proceedings were always smooth, differences were aired with dignity and there was no ill-will even when a member had a major difference of opinion and gave a note of dissent, though it was rare.

I recall with pleasure the joint parliamentary committee which had been constituted to look into the stock market scam of 1992. I

was only four years old in Parliament then, but Chandra Shekhar thought it fit to nominate me to that committee. The chairman of the committee, Ram Nivas Mirdha of the Congress, conducted the meetings of the committee with great fairness. He allowed Jaswant Singh to function almost as the deputy chairman of the committee and gave us the space we wanted. He tasked S S Ahluwalia of the Congress then to work with some of us in close concert so that the committee could produce a unanimous report. But not all committees functioned like that. The second JPC on the 2G scam was a disaster and functioned on purely political lines. We had many ugly scenes in the committee meetings and ultimately had to write a parallel report. The PAC headed by Dr Joshi, which was examining the 2G scam, also saw very ugly scenes. The Congress members were under instruction not to allow the committee to adopt its report. So, when the time came to consider the report, my good friend, and a thorough gentleman otherwise, Saifuddin Soz, even climbed on the table to disrupt the proceedings of the committee. But politics in the committees was more an exception and most of the time the committees functioned as a cohesive unit setting aside party affiliations.

Today everything has changed. The present dispensation has little use for parliamentary conventions, practices and precedents, indeed for Parliament itself. With all due respect to the Congress, I have to admit that the "Congressisation" of the BJP is now complete. The only regret is that the present-day BJP has adopted all the wrong practices of the Congress but none of its virtues. Add rabid communalism to that and the picture is complete. If that means the erosion of democracy, then so be it.

The writer, a former Union external affairs and finance minister, is vice president Trinamool Congress

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CHAKSHU ROY

DISRUPTION IS replacing discussion as the foundation of our legislative functioning. The passionate debate that should inform the country is taking place everywhere other than in Parliament. Last week, this newspaper reported that the government is considering curtailing the monsoon session of Parliament. If that happens, then all four sessions since last year would have been cut short. The first two because of Covid, this year's budget session because of campaigning in state elections, and the ongoing session on account of disruptions.

Political parties understand what causes disorder and the changes required to prevent it. In 2001, a day-long conference was held in the Central Hall of Parliament to discuss discipline and decorum in legislatures. A galaxy of political leaders including the then Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Sonia Gandhi, and leader of the All-India Trinamool Congress, Mamata Banerjee, weighed in on the subject. Their inputs and those of parliamentarians like Arun Jaitley, Pranab Mukherjee, and former prime minister Chandra Shekhar helped identify four reasons behind the disorderly conduct by MPs.

The first was dissatisfaction in MPs because of inadequate time for airing their grievances. The second was an unresponsive attitude of the government and the retaliatory posture of the treasury benches. The third was political parties not adhering to parliamentary norms and disciplining their members. Finally, the absence of prompt ac-

## SETTING NEW HOUSE RULES

Increase number of sittings, give more time to Opposition, to end disruption

tion against disrupting MPs under the legislature's rules. Two of the conference suggestions to curb disorder in Parliament were enforcement of a code of conduct for MPs and MLAs and an increase in the sitting days of legislatures.

These ideas are not new. For example, the Lok Sabha has had a simple code of conduct for its MPs since 1952. Earlier, the rules required MPs not to interrupt the speech of others, maintain silence and not obstruct proceedings by hissing or by making commentaries during debates. Newer forms of protest led to the updating of these rules in 1989. Accordingly, members should not shout slogans, display placards, tear away documents in protest, play cassettes or tape recorders in the House. A new rule empowers the Lok Sabha Speaker to suspend MPs obstructing the Houses' business automatically. The conference also resolved that Parliament should meet for 110 days every year and larger state legislative assemblies for 90 days.

In the United Kingdom, where Parliament meets over 100 days a year, opposition parties get 20 days on which they decide the agenda for discussion in Parliament. The main opposition party gets 17 days and the remaining three days are given to the second-largest opposition party.

But these suggestions have not been enforced so far. The government decides when Parliament should meet, for how long and plays a significant role in determining what issues the House should discuss. Successive governments have shied away from increasing the working days of Parliament. When a contentious issue crops up, the government dithers on debating it, leading to Opposition MPs violating the conduct rules and disrupting the proceedings of Parliament. Since they have the support of their parties in breaking the rules, the threat of suspension from the House does not deter them.

Breaking this pattern of parliamentary disruptions requires a few changes in the functioning of Parliament. As recommended by the 2001 conference, there should be an increase in the working days of Parliament. Our legislature should meet throughout the year, like parliaments of most developed democracies. But these increased days will not help prevent disruptions if opposition parties don't have the opportunity to debate and highlight important issues. Currently, government business takes priority, and private members discuss their topics post lunch on a Friday.

In the United Kingdom, where Parliament meets over 100 days a year, opposition parties get 20 days on which they decide the agenda for discussion in Parliament. The main opposition party gets 17 days and the remaining three days are given to the second-largest opposition party. Usually, decisions of the House passed on opposition days are not binding on the government and are an opportunity for the opposing parties to focus national attention on issues that it deems crucial. Canada also has a similar concept of opposition days.

More strengthening of our Parliament is the solution to prevent disruption of its proceedings. There should be a deepening of its role as the forum for deliberation on critical national issues. It is the only mechanism to ensure that disrupting its proceedings or allowing them to be disrupted ceases to be a viable option.

The writer is head of outreach, PRS Legislative Research



## AUGUST 3, 1981, FORTY YEARS AGO

## CONG (U) STRIFE

JAGJIVAN RAM HAS been warned that he will be expelled from the Congress (U) if he attends the August 5 meeting of the All India Congress (U) Committee convened by Shyam Dhar Mishra, the recently deposed UP Congress (U) head, and others. The three Congress (U) General Secretaries, K P Unnikrishnan, Banka Bihari Das, and Ambika Soni have made this clear. In an answer to a question on whether Ram would be expelled if he attends the meeting, Soni replied, "Yes, anybody who joins the meeting will be expelled. Nobody will be given any special treatment". Congress (U) President Devraj Urs also threatened disci-

plinary action against anyone attending the meeting, "even if its Jagjivan Ram". The aim of the August 5 meeting is to elect a new party chief.

## VIOLENCE IN GODHRA

ONE PERSON WAS stabbed to death and three others were wounded when some unidentified gunmen attacked them after pulling out from a truck on the outskirts of Godhra town on the national highway. Godhra, the headquarters of Panchmahals district in Gujarat, was under indefinite curfew clamped since August 1 after clashes between groups of two communities in which two persons were killed and eight injured.

## CABINET RESHUFFLE

PRIME MINISTER INDIRA Gandhi may reshuffle her cabinet before her departure for Nairobi. The expectation is that some of the dual charges, now held by ministers, might be ended. Planning Minister N D Tiwari looks after labour, and Commerce Minister Pranab Mukherjee is also in charge of steel.

## US SCORES A POINT

THE UNITED STATES has got what it wanted at the North-South meet to be held in Cancun in October. There will be no specific agenda, only "free and open discussion" as demanded by US President Ronald Reagan.

# THE IDEAS PAGE

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## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Negligence and VIP culture contributed to the spread of the Delta variant in Karachi, and the resultant lockdown is the high price that citizens have to pay."  
—DAWN

# India & Greater Middle East

One of the unintended consequences of Erdogan's overweening regional ambition is the extraordinary opportunity for Delhi to widen India's reach to the west of the Subcontinent



RAJA MANDALA  
By C RAJA MOHAN

AN EGYPTIAN SCHOLAR, Mohammed Soliman, has recently written about the significance of what he calls the emerging "Indo-Abrahamic Accord" and its trans-regional implications to the west of India. Soliman's concept builds on the normalisation of Israel's relations with the UAE and Bahrain under the so-called Abraham Accords signed last August in Washington. The naming of the accords was arguably an inspired choice to denote the shared origins of the Jewish and Islamic religions. The UAE and Bahrain were followed by Sudan and Morocco in signing the Abraham Accords.

Although Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994) had established diplomatic relations with Israel earlier, the Abraham Accords are widely seen as making a definitive breakthrough in the relations between Israel and the Arabs. Soliman sees the Israel-UAE relationship as having acquired a character independent of Israel's relations with Palestine and a promise of expansive political, economic and technological cooperation.

Soliman also points to the transformation of India's relations with the UAE and Israel under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Although Delhi had relations with Abu Dhabi and Tel Aviv for many years, they certainly have acquired political depth and strategic character under Modi. Soliman sees this trilateral relationship as the potential nucleus of a wider regional coalition.

Soliman underlines the converging interests between India, the UAE, and Israel amidst Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan's assertive claims for the leadership of the Islamic world. The new geopolitical churn is also driven by Pakistan's growing alignment with Turkey and its alienation from its traditionally strong supporters in the Arab Gulf — the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

The fragile efforts since the end of the Cold War at normalising relations between Delhi and Ankara have also broken down, thanks to Erdogan's hostility towards India. Erdogan has been championing Pakistan's case on Kashmir after India changed the territorial status quo of the state in August 2019. At Pakistan's behest, Erdogan is also blocking India's entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group.

Turkey's quest for regional dominance has also widened the Indo-Abrahamic convergence to the eastern Mediterranean to include Greece and Cyprus. The discovery of new hydrocarbon resources in the eastern Mediterranean, the renewed territorial disputes between Ankara and Athens, and the Turkish quest for regional dominance has drawn Greece and the UAE closer.

Greece has also looked towards India to enhance bilateral security cooperation. India's external affairs minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar was in Athens at the end of June and the two sides have begun defence exchanges. Greece's European partners like France, which have a big stake in the Mediterranean as well as the Arab Gulf, have taken an active interest in countering Turkey's regional ambitions.

Many in Delhi will shake their heads in disapproval at the framing of India's Middle East possibilities in religious terms. But the idea



CR Sasikumar

has considerable traction among groups that are otherwise deeply antagonistic.

For example, many in Pakistan have long convinced themselves of a "Hindu-Yehudi conspiracy" to undermine its very existence. They could throw in the Greeks and add Christians to the conspiracy. Those in India that view the Middle East through the religious prism might believe Hindus and Jews are natural allies in the region. But the deepening of Indian and Israeli ties with moderate Arab states spoils the religious paradigm that so many in India and Pakistan would love to believe in.

The idea of an Indo-Abrahamic accord also troubles those in South Asia who view the Middle East through such secular tropes as anti-imperialism and the contradictions between Israel and Arabs. The intra-regional contradictions in West Asia have always been sharper than those between the region and the external powers.

Arabs do empathise with the Palestinians' plight, but many of them are no longer willing to let the Palestinians veto their normalisation of relations with Israel. Nor do all Arabs see the conflict with Israel as the principal contradiction in the region. For some, non-Arab powers like Iran and Turkey pose a bigger threat than Israel.

Viewing the region either exclusively through the religious or secular lens misses the complex interplay between competing versions of a common faith, the quest for profit, and diverging political interests within the region. Erdogan's support for the Muslim Brotherhood, which seeks to overthrow the current political order in the region, has deeply angered the governments of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Fighting the Brotherhood and balancing Turkey have become existential challenges for Cairo, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi. Although Erdogan's Islamic radicalism might appeal to the Arab street, the Arab elites are not about to let Erdogan reimpose the Ottoman imperialism over their lands.

As the current turmoil reconfigures the region's geography, its traditional subdivision into the Gulf, West Asia, and North Africa makes little sense today. Nor can the region be separated from Southern Europe and the Mediterranean at one end and the Subcontinent on the other. The familiar regional institutions like the Arab League and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation might endure but are incapable of addressing the re-

gion's contradictions.

One of the unintended consequences of Erdogan's overweening regional ambition, his alienation of Israel as well as moderate Arabs, his conflict with Greece, and his embrace of Pakistan is the extraordinary opportunity for Delhi to widen India's reach to the west of the Subcontinent.

Soliman asks if the deepening engagement between India, the UAE and Israel can be converted into a formal coalition. To be sure, there are many areas like defence, aerospace and digital innovation where the three countries can pool their resources and coordinate development policies. Coordination with Saudi Arabia will certainly remain a high priority for the three nations. Meanwhile, others like Greece are eager for greater cooperation with the coalition.

If there is one country that can give substantive depth to the Indo-Abrahamic Accord it is Egypt. Having ousted the Muslim Brotherhood from power in 2014, the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi is trying to revitalise the nation's economy and reclaim its regional leadership role. Located at the cusp of Mediterranean Europe, Africa, and Asia, Egypt is the very heart of the Greater Middle East.

Independent India's engagement with the region in the 1950s was centred on a close partnership with Egypt. The legendary special relationship between Jawaharlal Nehru and Gamal Abdel Nasser was instrumental in promoting Afro-Asian unity and founding the Non-Aligned Movement. It was not all about solidarity though. Nehru and Nasser visualised a strategic partnership and sought to build a joint fighter aircraft and develop a jet engine. If Delhi and Cairo lost each other in recent decades, Modi can rebuild the strategic partnership jointly with el-Sisi who is calling for the construction of a "New Republic" in Egypt.

The opportunities that are coming India's way to the west of the Subcontinent are as consequential as those that have recently emerged in the east. Much in the manner that the "Indo-Pacific" has transformed the way India thinks about the east, the notion of a "Greater Middle East" can provide a huge filip to India's engagement with the extended neighbourhood to the west.

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# To Kabul, with burden of past

London's Afghan engagement has been influenced by entrenched colonial assumptions and ignorance



DAVOOD MORADIAN

AMIDST THE ONGOING developments concerning Afghanistan, an exchange of diplomatic pleasantries between the UK Secretary of Defence and the Taliban spokesperson has received scant attention. In an interview with the *Daily Telegraph*, Ben Wallace announced that Britain will work with the Taliban should they enter government in Afghanistan. The Taliban's spokesperson seized upon the announcement and described it as "positive".

The exchange illustrates the lesser-known aspect of the UK's intervention in Afghanistan since 2001: To what extent does Britain's colonial past shape its Afghanistan mission? The UK was a junior partner in the US-led Afghanistan mission that is on the edge of implosion. UK-Afghanistan relations, however, span more than two centuries. Unlike popular interest in, and coverage of, the British Raj or Germany-Britain relations, Afghanistan remains a specialised subject and interest in the UK. But for many Afghans, the UK has impacted upon Afghanistan more than any other country, including in shaping its geographical boundaries and political culture and identity since the mid-19th century. It was inevitable, therefore, that the UK's re-entry in Afghanistan in late 2001 would ignite historical memories, prejudices, suspicions and fascination on the part of both sides.

On the surface, the Afghan war was projected as part of the global war on terrorism with a strong undertone of "liberal intervention". Many in London could not, however, tame their temptation to look at Afghanistan from the point of view their ancestors had adopted in the early 20th century. Reading Rudyard Kipling's *Great Game* and watching *Carry On Up the Khyber* became compulsory for the plethora of British military and civilian personnel deploying to Afghanistan.

The UK's choices of place, programmes and policies also articulate its colonial past in the country. The UK chose Helmand as its area of responsibility, a province rich with the memory of the Anglo-Afghan wars. The UK assumed the lead role in tackling Afghanistan's flourishing illicit drug economy, which was mainly concentrated in the southern provinces, once the frontier of British India. More importantly, as early as 2008, the UK was the first country to emphasise the futility of a military solution and advocate the need for a negotiated settlement. Mediation between Afghanistan and Pakistan was another of the UK's priorities.

Less known are the UK's efforts and "success" in "tribal balance". The UK supported the presidency of Ashraf Ghani, who belongs to the Ghiljai branch of Pashtun — to which most Taliban fighters are believed to belong. They reasoned that a Ghiljai president could induce the Taliban to join the political process.

The UK's entrenched colonial assumptions and ensuing hubris, ignorance and blunder are reflected in a number of statements made by senior UK officials. Before deploying his country's troops to Helmand, the UK Secretary of Defence at the time, John Reid,

had the audacity to proclaim, "We would be perfectly happy to leave in three-years time without firing one shot." In reality, Helmand became the scene for "the fiercest fighting involving British troops since the Korean War". Another former UK Secretary of Defence, Liam Fox, advocated for a negotiated settlement and revealed that the UK's main rationale in being in Afghanistan was not "for the sake of the education policy in a broken, 13th-century country". If Fox had acquired an elementary knowledge of the history of the country, he would have known that in the 13th century, Herat was the capital of the Timurid Empire (1370-1507) and a cosmopolitan and globally oriented city.

In 2007, the Afghan government took an unprecedented step by expelling two senior UN and EU officials, with Irish/British passports. The officials were expelled because they had cultivated unauthorised contacts with the Taliban, including by way of the distribution of cash. The Afghan government suspected the officials of being British spies. One of the two deported, Michael Sample, who has married the daughter of a senior Pakistani army general, managed to return to the country and continues to pursue his decades-long interactions with the Taliban.

The Afghan allegations of British collusion with the Taliban were not mere paranoia or conspiratorial. The Taliban are the third militant Islamist movement active in Afghanistan that has been supported by the UK and which aims to replace a progressively leaned political order with a draconian, repressive Islamism one. The UK played an important role in two previous successful attempts of Islamists to capture the Afghan state. The uprising against Afghanistan's modernising and enlightened king and Britain's sworn enemy, Amanullah Khan, in the 1920s combined tribal and clerical elements that had received significant support and encouragement from British agents. The second attempt comprised the Taliban's predecessors, the Mujahideen. Margaret Thatcher roused the Mujahideen by telling them that "the hearts of free world were with them in their bid to fight evil". Such rhetorical support was accompanied by massive financial, military and diplomatic support. The UK Chief of the General Staff, Nicholas Carter, has recently assumed additional responsibility for reviving the UK's mediation effort between Afghanistan and Pakistan. In the triangle of Afghanistan-Pakistan-UK, many Afghans would describe it as "2+1", similar to the Palestinians' view of the US role in the Palestine-Israel conflict. The UK's Pakistan-centric South Asia policy is further illustrated by the absence of any dialogue between London and Delhi on Afghanistan since 2001.

While too much focus on the role of colonial assumption and mindset would lead to an overly deterministic account of the UK's two-decades involvement in Afghanistan, it nevertheless deserves due recognition and scrutiny. Despite losing more than 450 troops and investing significant amounts of financial and political resources, the UK has failed to attain any of its stated objectives in the country. A UK emancipated from its colonial burden would have been in a better position to contribute to Afghanistan's stability and security.

The writer is founder and director-general, Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies

# The art of Blinkening

US Secretary of State's praise for India came from the heart



OOPALI OPERAJITA

**BLINKEN (VERB):** *To assiduously and tactfully refuse to be drawn into controversy; to maintain pivotal, cordial relationships, notwithstanding a cacophony of patently investigated noises, and, thereby, render those noises irrelevant.*

The recent visit to India by the US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, cemented the robust and time-tested relations between the world's largest and oldest democracies. On the agenda for urgent discussion: Covid-19, Afghanistan, the Quad, and a raft of other pressing matters that could brook no delay. In the wake of this visit, and, in particular, the press conference that he and India's External Affairs Minister, S Jaishankar, held at the conclusion of their talks, there was a flurry of articles trying to gloss over the fact that Blinken categorically — and graciously, in deference to accepted diplomatic protocol — refused to be drawn into any kind of commentary on India's internal affairs. These articles epitomise a refusal to accept what is true. If only he had cried havoc and let slip the dogs of war! We might work ourselves into a lather all we want, and read dozens of meanings into his statements on both democracies, but the truth is that Blinken assiduously avoided being judgemental about India, saying that he approached India with a sense of "humility". He alluded to our democracies as "works in progress" and offered up tangible

praise for India as a democracy. I, therefore, name this sage diplomatic strategy the art of Blinkening, infused with fresh meaning and depth as it has been, by Antony Blinken. There is just too much at stake in this crucial relationship to let self-righteousness taint it. It takes a large dollop of naïveté to assume that any leader is simply going to jump into an arena now populated by activists and belligerent mediapersons, and, thereby, jeopardise important bilateral relations. The real world does not work that way. The very act of requesting another nation to interfere in India's internal affairs is both immature and treacherous, and epitomises our colonial hangover.

Calling the US-India relationship "one of the most consequential relationships we have with any country on earth," Blinken added: "Finally, our bilateral relationship is strengthened by our shared values. As two of the world's leading democracies, we take seriously our responsibilities to deliver freedom, equality and opportunity to all of our people... Part of the promise of democracy is the constant striving for better. Those values are at the heart of our democratic systems. They're at the core of the vast array of partnerships connecting our countries, not only between our governments but also between our private sectors, universities, civil societies, and most of all between our people." As someone whose

professional and personal investment in, and connection with, North America dates back to 1980, and whose areas of specialisation are cross-cultural communication, international relations, and public policy, I believe I have a reasonably accurate take on exactly what Blinken meant. He was not fudging around; what he said, with discernible eloquence, came from the heart.

In the above context, a couple of comments in the media need responses: One Indian journalist thinks Blinken "waffled painfully, trying his best to say nothing when asked about the Modi government's democratic backsliding. But Dr S Jaishankar leapt in, right after, to reveal the three issues the US raised with India." This is inaccurate, and sheer fabrication: I watched the press conference live. Blinken chose to reply first, to Courtney McBride of *The Wall Street Journal*, when she asked him about his perception of India as a democracy, and here is an excerpt from what he said: "I'm happy to start... The most remarkable democratic elections in the world, in many ways, are here in India, just by sheer numbers. It's the largest expression of free political will by citizens anywhere on earth... And we celebrate that the world's oldest and the world's largest democracies are dedicated at heart to a shared set of values that I be-

lieve will ensure not only the success of democracy, but the success of the relationship between India and the United States." Now, for someone who was trying to say nothing, Blinken said rather a lot, and there wasn't the slightest trace of a waffle or discomfiture in his response.

In a predictably wilful and schismatic map of misreading, a writer at another daily refers, in a tweet, to her article which magnifies, out of proportion, Blinken's discussion of "CAA, love jihad and farmers' protests with civil society representatives", hoping, desperately, to delineate this meeting as the reason for a US Secretary of State's India visit. This is a risible and misfired attempt to diminish the centrality and positive outcome of the Blinken-Jaishankar dialogue, and the Blinken-Modi meeting, as if they were postscripts.

All those manufactured and spurious correlations, the hectoring and the cotton candy cozyness — they were all astutely banished. "Blinkened", if you will. Blinken complimented India as a strong and resilient democracy, on more than one occasion, and with elegance. India now looks forward to President Biden's visit.

The writer is a Distinguished Fellow at Carnegie Mellon University. Views are personal

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### TOP-DOWN ORDER

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The green warrant' (IE, August 2). The Supreme Court's blanket judgment is skewed and it must make corrections to the same. It is no secret that men in white-collar jobs don't understand the lives of their blue-collar counterparts but get to make laws for them and decide their fate for them. The Khori Gaon eviction order is no exception. The order purportedly taking a hard stance for environmentalism forgets that ruling with an iron hand on such sensitive issues can not only be detrimental to the people living there but also counterproductive.

Udit Sarkar, Kolkata

### GRUELING OLYMPICS

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'Super Sindhu Sunday' (IE, August 2). Badminton star P V Sindhu has won the bronze after defeating China's He Bingjiao 21-13, 21-15 during Sunday's third-place play-off. India had a special moment when its women's hockey team entered the semi-finals. While these stirring events kept India afloat, there is also the litany of heart-breaks. The Games exert immense pressure as it is always about the athlete combining individual excellence with national pride. It is never easy and the Indian contingent would vouch for that going into the second week.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

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### NEP PIPE DREAM

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Walking NEP talk' (IE, August 2). The NEP 2020, a year on, remains largely a decent document. And like most government "visions", it remains largely a pipe dream. What seems to be happening on the ground is that education is being left to the private, for-profit sector, at both schools and the university level. What is needed is a strong, neighbourhood-based public school system — along the lines of Britain's Comprehensive Schools — and an expansion of government universities.

Biswadeep Chatterjee, via email