



THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS EXPOSED CRITICAL
VULNERABILITIES IN OUR PHARMACEUTICAL
SUPPLY CHAIN. — ABIGAIL SPANBERGER

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

TWO YEARS LATER



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

A new book assesses China's ambitions and US response, outlines a sobering new world order

The New Cold War

For Kashmir, meeting of mainstream parties with PM in June broke political ice. That moment needs to be taken forward

TWO YEARS since the Modi government announced its decision to do away with the special status of Jammu & Kashmir and the reorganisation of the state into two Union Territories. On the ground, the implementation of these momentous decisions was done through an unprecedented use of the hard instruments of state power. Thousands of political activists and leaders were arrested, and three of the state's former chief ministers — including one who is a sitting member of Parliament — detained for months, and slapped with the Public Security Act. Some political workers are still behind bars. Internet services were disrupted for nearly 18 months. Kashmir's media organisations were crippled, a new "media policy" was brought in. The onset of the pandemic only exacerbated the situation. The government's justification for these methods was that it had enabled the implementation of the reorganisation measures without loss of life.

But it may be a mistake to take the apparent calm for normalcy. Kashmir has seen such calm before, only to have it rudely shattered. By all accounts, despite the promises that the changes would bring in more private sector investment and create jobs outside the government, no such visible "development" has taken place. The loss of statehood and fears of demographic change, apprehensions and insecurities regarding ethnic and cultural identity, and spectres of jobs being taken away by outsiders, stoked by the new domicile rules, have served to keep people, in Kashmir, Jammu and even Ladakh, in uncertainty. Though the number of new militants has fallen steadily, young men continue to leave home and join militant groups. An impersonal administration run by bureaucrats of the reorganised UT cadre can only add to the grounds for alienation. The yearning for political representation, which the state has lacked since the PDP-BJP government fell after the BJP pulled out of the arrangement, was evident in the turnout for the District Development Council election. At the same time, however, those elections also served to show the limits of an imagination for Kashmir that depends on a new political class and a clean slate, minted in the corridors of power in Delhi.

This is why the meeting at the end of June between the leaders of the political parties of Jammu & Kashmir with Prime Minister Narendra Modi was a significant inflection point for both J&K and the Centre. It signalled that the government is perhaps ready for political accommodation. The main outcome from the meeting was a forceful reiteration by J&K's political leadership of the demand for restoration of statehood. The government must continue the process of engagement with the political leadership of the erstwhile state, and in consultation with them, must plan for Assembly elections at the earliest. After two years of heavy-handed measures, drift and political experimentation, this is the only way forward.

A COVID WARNING

Rise in infection rates in pockets of country calls for increased vigilance, quickening pace of vaccination

IN THE PAST four days, the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has released a set of sobering figures on the Covid-19 pandemic. The decline in the country's caseload, after the second wave peaked on May 9, slowed down considerably in early July because the infection had not abated in Kerala and other pockets in the country. Data now shows that the virus is rearing its head again. On Tuesday, the health ministry reported that the R-value — the rate at which an infected person transmits the disease — has gone beyond the danger threshold of 1 in seven states and UTs other than Kerala: Himachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Mizoram, Karnataka, Jammu and Kashmir, Lakshadweep, and Puducherry. Though only 44 districts have a positivity rate above 10 per cent, the fact that the country's weekly caseload spiked by 7 per cent in the last week of July should warrant a rise in vigilance levels. The Centre has asked states to consider local-level containment strategies in districts witnessing a surge. Their prime objective should be to stop crowds from gathering at busy urban centres — the Delhi government's crackdown on markets that violated Covid protocols in late June could be a good example to follow.

The uptick in the country's Covid cases comes at a time when the US, Japan, Southeast Asia and parts of Europe are confronted with a fresh surge. Random changes in the contagion's genetic code are threatening to undo the progress made in containing the pandemic's spread. There is, however, enough evidence that the current crop of vaccines, globally in use, blunt the virulence of the new variants, limit the number of people falling gravely ill. Though India has done well to meet its July target of administering 13-crore shots, the country's Covid challenge demands a quickening of the pace of inoculation. A little more than 55 per cent of people over the age of 60 have received one shot — about 27 per cent have received both doses. This means that a significant number of people, most vulnerable to the lethal ways of the virus, are still unprotected against the pathogen.

The government has maintained that vaccine supply will be ramped up in the next five months. Abiding by this commitment would, of course, be decisive in meeting the year-end goal of inoculating all adult Indians. In the coming weeks, increased supplies could also be crucial in helping state governments frame strategies to use the vaccine more effectively in curbing a potential surge — giving special attention to areas with a high incidence of Covid and priority to people at greater risk.

VACCINOLOGIST BARBIE

She's got baggage, but the doll is striking out in newer directions

WHAT A YEAR for Professor Sarah Gilbert. Not only was the vaccinologist, who designed the Oxford-AstraZeneca Covid jab, honoured with a damehood this June, she's now got a Barbie in her likeness. US toy maker Mattel has just released a Dame Gilbert doll, complete with red hair, glasses and a pantsuit, as one of six Barbies that pay tribute to women in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM). Even though she described it as a little "strange", Gilbert's hope is that her doll will help girls realise that it is "normal" for them to aspire to STEM careers.

This would have seemed like an odd thing to say — of course, it's normal for girls to want to be scientists, doctors and engineers — were it not for the hard facts. Around the world, STEM fields are dominated by men, even though in primary school, girls are as proficient as boys in maths and science. But as they grow older, ingrained biases, stereotypes and socio-economic pressures, especially in the developing world, steer girls away from STEM fields, sometimes even forcing them to drop out of education and forfeiting any chance at a career. According to data from the UNESCO Institute of Statistics, less than 30 per cent of the world's researchers are women — the ignominy of this figure has led the UN to include "Women in science" as one of the themes for its Sustainable Development Goals.

Despite her history of promoting unrealistic beauty standards and sexist attitudes, Barbie may just be the doll for the job. Since 2016, she has come in more diverse and inclusive forms — wearing a hijab, with natural hair, in a wheelchair, and as a boxer, tractor driver and firefighter. And while the heavy lifting in the battle against gender discrimination will have to be done by governments and policymakers everywhere, Vaccinologist Barbie could show little girls everywhere that they can be whoever they want to be.

THERE IS A story that in 1973 Zhou Enlai asked a young American interlocutor, "Do you think China will ever be an aggressive or an expansionist power?" The American, perhaps being polite, since these were the early days of the rapprochement, said "No." At which point Zhou Enlai is supposed to have shot back, "Don't count on it. It is possible. But if China were to embark on such a path, you must oppose it. And you must tell the Chinese that Zhou Enlai told you to do so."

Rush Doshi tells this story in his brilliant, bracing and empirically rich *The long game: China's grand strategy to displace American order*. The book takes on the dual mandate implied by Zhou's remark. The first is to explain that China is indeed on its way to being an aggressive and expansionist power. It is out not just to displace the American order, but to remake the international order in its own image. The second is to think about how America might respond to Chinese ambition. The book is based on an extraordinarily deep dive into Chinese documents and sources. It may well turn out to be the one single book that distils both the Chinese approach to the world and the broad contours of Sino-American competition. *The Long Road* would have been a consequential book in its own right but it acquires added interest since Doshi is now China Director on Biden's National Security Council.

The guiding thread through the book is that there is immense continuity in the Chinese approach to the world. This continuity is derived from a single-minded focus on national rejuvenation that enables China to be at the apex of the global order. The Communist Party is the vanguard of national regeneration. This rejuvenation involves not just immediate national aims, like unification with Taiwan, but a new form of order building that will be distinctively more coercive. Xi Jinping represents not so much a break with the recent history of Chinese policy, but the next logical step in its evolution. On this view, the differences between a slightly more open, less authoritarian China under Deng Xiaoping or Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping are inconsequential for world politics. The seeming difference in

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the Chinese approach to the world is governed by one critical factor above all else: The perception of China's relative power in relation to the US.

On this view, the Cold War, as it were, between China and the US had already begun in 1989. The decline of the Soviet Union, the Gulf War and Tiananmen Square, heightened China's threat perception. What is depressing is the sense the book conveys that China's suspicion of the US is over-determined. There is almost nothing the US could do to convince the Chinese of their benign intentions. There is almost a "damned if you do, and damned if you don't" quality to the perception of the US. If you don't integrate China into the world order, it is an indication of hostile intention; if you do integrate China, as the US did in allowing MFN and WTO status, it is a covert strategy to promote liberalisation and regime change.

But the actions that follow from this determined suspicion of the US are a function of an assessment of China's relative power in the world. In an analytically sharp, if perhaps overly neat, narrative, Doshi describes the Chinese foreign policy outlook in three phases. From 1989 to 2008, China's strategy was to blunt US power, prevent it from inflicting harm on China. Doshi shows in vivid detail how the blunting strategy works through all spheres of China's engagement with the world: It economically engages and participates in international institutions to protect itself. Its choice of weapons, from submarines to missiles, are guided by a consciousness of its need to wage asymmetric war and ensure area denial to the US, and it politically engages the world to soften its image. From 2009, especially with the onset of the global financial crisis, China goes into a building mode. It creates its own international institutions, its military acquires more offensive capabilities, and it asserts itself more politically. It has now entered an expansionist phase, where the objective is to resolve all territorial disputes in its favour, acquire bases around the world, evict the US from Asia, and create the world order in its relatively more illiberal image. The choice of actions in all three spheres, economic,

political and military, are guided by this assessment.

Doshi's response to an assertive China is to take a leaf out of the Chinese playbook. On his view, the US needs to blunt Chinese power where it can and build where it must. The book is full of vivid detail. But it requires effectively denying China the military space, making sure the Chinese do not capture international institutions, creation of partnerships through which Chinese influence can be curtailed, and the creation of a new US industrial strategy. It is a full blown manifesto for an ongoing Cold War.

It is possible that some might not be convinced by the seemingly excessive coherence that Doshi conveys about Chinese decision-making. But the book is refreshing in not making any assumptions about potential Chinese domestic weakness, or somehow the internal social contradictions of Chinese society bubbling up to save the world from potential Chinese ambition. It presumes that the Chinese system has deep roots, will remain legitimate enough, and has the ability to self-correct to reorient its society to its national aims.

Doshi argues against American decline. But as he notes, we are in uncharted territory in global politics, where America is encountering an adversary whose GDP is going to give America a run for its money. China is vital to shaping the future of the world order. The assessment of China is convincing. But there are two issues. The first is whether the US can execute a China-style grand strategy domestically without compromising its openness or attracting allies. It is still America First by any other name. A revitalised US democracy (increasingly looking unlikely), will of course have the power of its example. But just reiterating that China will export authoritarianism while the West will export liberal principles is too easy a narrative. The prospect of a world in which nothing can convince China that the US will not undermine it and little can convince the US that China is not expansionist, is a sobering one. This will be a bumpy ride.

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express



PREM SHANKAR JHA

WRONG WAY TO CLEAN UP

Shifting to electric vehicles means subsidising affluent. There are better alternatives

ON JULY 28, it was reported that 650 of the 8,033 Nexons — Tata Motors' popular mini-SUV — sold in June were EVs, that is, had electricity-driven engines. This breakthrough has been ascribed to the fact that thanks to a spate of central and state government subsidies, the e-variant now costs only Rs 2 lakh more than the diesel and Rs 3 lakh more than the petrol variant. Since the running cost of the E-Nexon is only a sixth of the diesel variant, even buyers who drive as little as 40 km a day can now recover the extra capital cost of the car in just over two years in comparison with the diesel, and three years in comparison with the petrol variant.

This sounds wonderful. So has India found the way out of fossil fuels in the transport sector? Not exactly. For, a year ago, the showroom price of the basic E-Nexon was Rs 14.3 lakh and that of the diesel variant Rs 8.3 lakh. The price difference between the two was therefore not Rs 2 lakh but Rs 6 lakh. So what has enabled the Tatas to bring it down to just Rs 2-3 lakh? The answer is the hefty subsidies being offered by the central government, and the state governments of Delhi, Maharashtra, Gujarat.

So has India found the way out of fossil fuels in the transport sector? Not exactly. A year ago, the showroom price of the basic E-Nexon was Rs 14.3 lakh and that of the diesel variant Rs 8.3 lakh. The price difference between the two was therefore not two but six lakh of rupees. So what has enabled the Tatas to bring it down to just Rs 2 to 3 lakh?

Together, these subsidies add up to Rs 5 lakh per car. They are presently time-bound and are being offered only by five states — Delhi, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka and Meghalaya. But the "Keeping Up With The Joneses" effect is bound to extend these subsidies, sooner or later, to the whole of India.

The moral blindness behind this offer is breathtaking. For only one in 50 of the 2.77 million cars sold in 2020-21 cost more than Rs 10 lakh. That is the affluent fraction of the car-owning population upon which the central and state governments intend to shower these subsidies on. A complete shift to EVs will therefore transfer Rs 2,770 crore from taxpayers to this fraction every year till the government terminates these incentives.

Such a "start up" subsidy would have been justified if there had been no alternative to electricity for replacing fossil fuels in the transport sector. But there are alternatives — ethanol and methanol — whose superior quality and greater safety has made them the preferred, often the only permitted, fuels in major motor races since the 1960s. The limitations of ethanol as the sole alternative to gasoline are now well

understood, but there is no such limit for methanol, which can be produced from any biomass waste from crop residues to municipal solid waste, both of which are available in abundance.

The first commercial plant to convert 1,75,000 tons of refuse-derived fuel into 45 million litres of aviation turbine fuel is being commissioned outside Reno, Nevada even as I write. It is expected to start commercial production before the end of this year. A three times larger plant is coming up at Gary, Indiana, and six more sites have been identified in other medium-sized cities.

For India, gasification holds even greater promise because simple, air-blown gasifiers are already in use in food processing that can convert rice and wheat straw into a lean fuel gas that can generate electricity and provide guaranteed 24-hour power to cold storage in every village. A by-product, biochar, is no less valuable because it can replace imported coking coal in blast furnaces or be used as a feedstock for producing transport fuels even more easily than municipal solid waste.

Jha is a senior journalist and author



AUGUST 5, 1981, FORTY YEARS AGO

MINISTER RESIGNS

THE KARNATAKA PLANNING AND Welfare minister, CM Ibrahim, resigned from the ministry on August 3. His resignation, forwarded by Chief Minister Gundu Rao, has been accepted by the governor. Gundu Rao will take over Ibrahim's portfolios. Earlier in the day, Ibrahim, the most controversial member of the Karnataka cabinet, had given notice of his intention to quit while making a statement in the Legislative Council. "I have requested the CM to relieve me, since I am fettered by many constraints and I feel I cannot adequately and effectively respond to the tirade against me". It all started with the murder of a Hindu

Mahasabha worker in Bhadravati, two months after Ibrahim was inducted into the ministry in early 1980. Ibrahim's brother is alleged to have engineered the murder.

INDIA-AUSTRALIA TALKS

INDIA AND AUSTRALIA would like the forthcoming Commonwealth Conference to make a contribution to the North-South dialogue and discuss steps for evolving better relations between developed and developing countries. This was evident from the talks between Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The two spoke for over an hour. The Commonwealth summit

will be held only a fortnight before the Mexico summit on North South questions in October. Commonwealth countries like India, Britain and Canada will attend both the summits.

FLAWS IN STADIUM

THE FAMOUS BRITISH structural design expert B B Makowsky has found flaws in the design of the indoor stadium being constructed for the Asian Games. He was called by the Delhi Development Authority to inspect the design and construction of the stadium. No Indian consultant was deemed fit for the purpose. Makowsky was paid Rs lakh as consultation charges.

THE IDEAS PAGE

Why Valley is still distant

Two years after annulment of Article 370, restoration of full statehood to J&K is prerequisite for credible political process in region



CR Sasikumar



M Y TARIGAMI

EXACTLY TWO YEARS ago, the Government of India decided to annul the country's special constitutional arrangement with Jammu and Kashmir and separate Ladakh from the rest of former J&K. While the decision was welcomed by sections within the rest of the country, its multi-dimensional ramifications continue to be felt across the former state. All this was done by keeping the people of J&K under confinement. It was a big blow to democracy and the Constitution itself.

While our opposition to this unwarranted, unconstitutional assault on the basic foundations of our relationship with the Indian Union is known, I don't want this column to be a reiteration of the same. I will use this occasion to objectively draw everyone's attention to some of the ground developments.

Those who defended the abrogation called it imperative as it would promote gender equality and end discrimination against marginalised communities like the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) in J&K. Reservation for the SC community was enshrined in the J&K constitution. On the issue of reservation for the ST, many state legislators had moved a bill in the assembly, though unsuccessfully. However, the reality is that even after reservation, the number of ST candidates in the legislature will be the same as in the last assembly. This is because of the demography of ST-dominated constituencies of J&K.

I agree that a state which was once at the forefront of progressive reforms in the sub-continent should have been more responsive to the allegation that some of the executive provisions seemingly promoted inequality of women. There is a need for the political class of J&K to introspect on these issues. At the same time, our apprehensions about the post-August 5 developments should also be heard with empathy and an open mind.

First of all, the abrogation has deepened the alienation of large sections of the population. It delegitimised the mainstream political space in J&K which has worrisome consequences for the rest of the country. In the last three decades, at great risk to our lives, we have consistently argued before the local people that a federal and secular India is the best channel that can provide dignity to our distinct Kashmiri identity. The people of J&K had opted for secular India rather than Muslim Pakistan not simply by virtue of accession, but because of the promises of building a pluralist, secular India in which the people of J&K were to have maximum autonomy. Those promises were part of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution and the Constitution of J&K itself. But those constitutional guarantees were gradually eroded and now fully abrogated, thereby providing an opportunity to those who wanted to undermine our relationship with the Union.

The precious space that was carved out by the sacrifices of hundreds of political activists, who were assassinated by militants, is now considerably diminished. The larger point I want to make is that in democracies, apart from constitutional, an emotional bond proves to be equally definitive in ensuring peace and prosperity. Sadly, that emotional bond stands deeply weakened.

Second, within the diverse region of J&K, the fissures continue to deepen among com-

munities and regions. This is a subject that demands a threadbare discussion. But in the post-August 5 era, the gap has widened and it seems the executive wants to govern the two regions of J&K as de-facto separate entities of Jammu and the Kashmir valley. Even within separated Ladakh, the Buddhist-majority Leh and the Muslim-majority Kargil are now divided on religious grounds and there is no glue holding them. Connected with this is the issue of delimitation, which has merely accentuated the anxieties of people in both the Kashmir valley and the Jammu region. It seems that whatever decisions the commission takes will only deepen the mistrust among regions and communities. There are apprehensions that with Ladakh already separated, there is a design at work to execute RSS's plan to trifurcate J&K. A resolution to this effect was adopted by the RSS at Kurukshetra in June 2002.

The Constitution is categorical that before taking any decision to tinker with the boundary of any state, consultations with the legislature of that state are required. For J&K, the bar was even higher because of Article 370. In this regard, there is already a resolution of the assembly to preserve the unity of the state of J&K and its secular character. A resolution which was moved by me on December 16, 2003 in the J&K legislature was adopted on March 3, 2004.

Incidentally, August 5 is also the birthday of the late Balraj Puri, whose work on J&K is widely respected. In the 1990s, at the height of the militancy, he had argued in his book, Kashmir Towards Insurgency, that "no Kashmir policy can succeed without taking into account the political and psychological urges of the people. The controversy over whether the policy should be tough or soft, whether it should be based on a nationalist or moral appeal, on realpolitik or ideal politics is unreal and irrelevant here. The real and relevant question is what is and what is not a

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correct assessment, a correct diagnosis, a correct strategy and a correct mix of force and tact. After all, Gandhi's ideal politics had triumphed over Jinnah's realpolitik on Kashmir." While keeping the unity of J&K, he had consistently proposed the idea of regional autonomy with a decentralised set-up that could accommodate the diverse aspirations of various regions, sub-regions and communities that make up the mosaic of J&K.

Recently, our interaction with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, though welcome, has not generated any significant hope among the people. Though we were heard patiently, no concrete assurances were offered. Nothing seems to be moving in the direction of reducing "Dil ki dooriyan aur Dilli ki dooriyan". Within the present context, immediate confidence building measures have to be taken. The immediate release of prisoners languishing in different jails has to be considered, ensuring protection of basic rights of movement and assembly, and putting an end to indiscriminate harassment. An immediate restoration of full statehood to J&K is the prerequisite to initiate a credible political process in the region. One of the essential lessons from the 1977 J&K assembly elections was that loyalty to India should not be construed as loyalty to the ruling party at the Centre. Democracy and national interest should not be seen as incompatible to each other.

To sum up, the engagement with J&K should draw from the complex history of the region. We should not repeat the mistakes of the past. Whatever the circumstances, all efforts should be focused on restoring the people's confidence. The aim has to be to reduce the massive alienation of the people.

The writer is the former CPI(M) MLA from J&K. He is the Convenor and Spokesperson of People's Alliance for Gupkar Declaration

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The provisional status is meant to signify that the final status of GB (Gilgit-Baltistan) will be determined according to the requirements of the UN resolutions."

—DAWN

In J&K, new hope

It is taking steps towards deepening democracy, fulfilling people's aspirations, increasing economic growth



JITENDRA SINGH

TWO YEARS ago, India bid farewell to Articles 370 and 35 (A), marking the start of a new era in the politics of Jammu and Kashmir. When the decision on 370 and 35 (A) was taken, there was happiness in most people, some experienced shock and a few felt apprehensive about the direction in which things would go. Two years later, it is important to assess whether Jammu and Kashmir is better placed than it was before August 5, 2019.

The first parameter is that of national unity. Articles 370 and 35 (A) created an unnatural and unhealthy divide in our nation. For every law passed, every rule made, we had to ascertain whether it applied to J&K or not. Today, such distinctions are history. J&K has been fully integrated with the other states and Union Territories.

The second parameter is that of democracy. By democracy, I do not refer to only state and central elections being held. I refer to a healthy culture of grassroots-level participation which was absent — rather, allowed to remain absent — for all these decades. One mistake by Rajiv Gandhi and Farooq Abdullah turned the clock back in 1987 and the after-effects lingered for a long time. Since assuming office in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi repeatedly said that among the critical deliverables for J&K was to hold panchayat polls, which were finally held in 2020. Holding these polls came at a heavy political cost for the BJP — the party preferred to sacrifice power in the PDP alliance rather than compromise on its commitment to grassroots democracy. Despite stray comments by disruptive elements, the polls were held peacefully.

The third parameter is that of peace. The memories of 2008, 2010 and 2016 are still fresh in the minds of the people of Jammu and Kashmir. An effort was made to reignite such sparks of tension after the decisions on Article 370 and 35 (A) but the Valley as well as Jammu have remained peaceful.

The fourth parameter is about people's aspirations. It baffled every thinking person why Jammu and Kashmir should not have RTI laws and why the benefits of reservation should not be availed by its SC, ST and OBC communities. The fact that the most marginalised groups can now get reservation benefits is a major leap for-

ward in fulfilling the aspirations of the people of J&K.

The fifth and a very important parameter is economic growth. It is an undeniable reality that the state machinery in J&K was under the stranglehold of red-tapism and corruption. The Valley is today abuzz with news of action against corruption in key departments and financial bodies in the state. Money being sent for public good was being misused by vested interest groups. The economic upliftment in the Valley began with the Prime Minister's Package of 2015. This set the stage for extensive spending on physical and social infrastructure. With the going of 370 and 35 (A) there is great hope that tourism will pick up in the Valley. Incentives given to different sectors of the economy — be it saffron farmers or those who fish trout — combined with a largely peaceful environment is empowering many lives. With corruption and leakages drastically reduced, resources are reaching the intended beneficiaries.

The road ahead also seems filled with hope and optimism. A few weeks ago, PM Modi sat down with key stakeholders from Jammu and the Valley to discuss the path ahead. The meeting was attended by four former chief ministers of J&K, and it was held in a conducive and cooperative manner. Political activity has also picked up across Jammu and Kashmir. The Centre's emphasis on a proper delimitation followed by full-fledged elections is in line with the commitments made to the people of Jammu and Kashmir.

Ever since the NDA government assumed office in 2014, it was clear that engagement with Jammu and Kashmir needed a fresh approach — one that widens political participation and makes space for fresh, young and aspirational voices.

The Prime Minister visited Jammu and Kashmir to extend solidarity to those affected by floods. Unlike what we saw in Uttarakhand in 2013, the flood relief was provided in a quick and transparent manner. Since then, PM Modi has made many visits to Jammu and Kashmir, including on Diwali to spend time with the troops. He has repeatedly mentioned inspiring life stories of common people from Jammu and Kashmir during his "Mann Ki Baat" programmes.

The situation in Jammu and Kashmir was never easy. Sadly, the need to maintain the status quo dominated the working of previous governments. Vested interest groups loved using Kashmir as a stick to beat India's democratic and inclusive ethos. As we enter the Amrut Mahotsav, it is for us to see the new realities in J&K. The people of the state have got the wings to fly and, in the years to come, J&K will make even greater contributions to India's growth and development.

The writer is a Union minister

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A GREAT LOSS

IN THE PASSING of Padma Sachdev, the nation has lost a leading literary figure and the Dogra-speaking community has suffered a grievous loss. Her contribution to Dogri literature over the decades was unparalleled and her poems will be long remembered by lakhs of Dogri speakers. Despite battling ill health all her life, she remained a positive and creative figure. I had known Padma ji for seven decades and we had numerous occasions to meet and interact. I have translated several of her poems into English. On her passing, I would like to pay homage to her memory and convey my deep sympathy to her family and well-wishers, particularly to her husband Sardar Surinder Singh.

Karan Singh, via email

BIRLA'S WARNING

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Grim prospects' (IE, Aug. 4). Kumar Mangalam Birla has red-flagged the concerns of foreign investors, who are reluctant to pump money into the company unless they are reassured that the government is keen on a three-player telecom market instead of a duopoly. If no efforts are made urgently to stop VIL's freefall, tens of crores of Vodafone customers will suffer. This will be a huge setback to the cause of digital empowerment.

SS Paul, Noida

CM AGAINST LAW

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Trigger-happy injustice' (IE, August 4). The spate of alleged shootings by the Assam Police reflects deteriorating law and order situation in the state. What is more reprehensible and shocking is the overt support and endorsement of these acts by the chief minister. The

The writer is former member, Planning Commission

The saviour complex

Amid rants against 'love jihad' and conversion, a Muslim Women's Rights Day



SYEDA HAMEED

AUGUST 1 has been declared by the government as the "Muslim Women's Rights Day". I ask the Minister of Minority Affairs (who I met several times during my 10-year term in the Planning Commission), "Do you really believe in this 'day'?"

In a statement released on August 2, more than 1,000 women and men across the religious divide have called your act "cynical optics". A popular song by the poet Hasrat Jaipuri in Basu Bhattacharya's film, *Teesri Kasam* comes to mind — *Sajan re jhoot mat bolo/ Khuda ke paas jana hai!* (My friend, do not lie/All of us have to face God!)

In 1998, when I was a member of the National Commission for Women, I went to Darul Uloom University in Lucknow to meet Maulana Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi — popularly known as Maulana Ali Miyan — who was also chairperson of the All India Muslim Personal Law Board. The commission, under the guidance of Mohini Giri, had just completed holding public hearings of Muslim women in 18 places across the country. We wanted to share our findings with Maulana Ali Miyan. He received us with affection and warmth, probably because he had known my family, especially the writings of my great grandfather, India's first feminist poet and religious and social

reformer, a man by the name of Khwaja Altaf Husain Hali. He spoke a language that resonated with my understanding of Islam as a religion, which gave the highest status to women. "Then why is their condition across the country so different from what had been ordained?" I asked. He spoke of the "mindset of the quom", of "patriarchy", of deviation from Islamic tenets.

The NCW report, *Voice of the Voiceless: Status of Muslim Women in India*, in which all the above is recorded, appeared in the year 2000. It gathered dust until 2004. When the government changed, it was taken off the shelf and many programmes for Muslim women were started. During my term in the Planning Commission, I witnessed the Sachar Committee laying bare the state of Muslims, both men and women. The government launched schemes, and the Planning Commission was entrusted with oversight. Civil society was brought in right from the start, first in planning, then in implementation. The best part of this process was that no one thought in terms of the religious divide. Hindus, Sikhs, Christians worked to bring Muslims into the mainstream. Taking inspiration from Maulana Ali Miyan, his successor Maulana Mujahidul Islam Qasim and the board secretary Qasim Rasool Ilyas tried to

bring Muslims into the development paradigm. This was the first time that representatives from the women's movement sat across the table with the AIMPLB.

Cut to 2014, and onwards until today. Over the months and years, scenes of lynching and violence have played out against Muslims — most of them men, young and old and boys.

In the capital city, at the university campus where I live, a slogan-shouting gunman shot at protesting students. At a crowded chowk, crowds are instigated by a future Cabinet Minister — "goli maro salon ko". In the remotest part of India, Lakshadweep, where the population is 97 per cent Muslim, the threat of ecological destruction is unleashed by the diktat of an administrator appointed by the Centre. In Assam, it appears as though Muslims may well be denied their constitutional rights. In UP, perhaps with an eye on the 2022 polls, polarisation seems to be the order of the day — whether as calls for "love jihad", the proposed population control Bill or the Religious Conversion Ordinance.

Our youth are incarcerated on dubious grounds — Sharjeel Imam, Umar Khalid, Siddique Kappan, to name a few. The honourable ministers launched the day in the name of Muslim women. Where were they

when hundreds of women sat 24x7 for 100 days at Shaheen Bagh? Did they heed their supplications? Did they salute their courage? Muslim Women Empowerment Day, did you say?

The MW (Protection of Rights on Marriage) 2019 Bill, which became law on its promulgation on August 1, remains a farce. What was its need when in 2002 the Supreme Court had already struck down instant triple talaq in the case of *Shamim Ara vs Dargu Pathan*?

Scenes from the event were played out on the screens on August 1. Many hijab-wearing women were caught on camera in a meeting room, where they were being tutored about their bright future. Images of some compliant faces were flashed. Some banal sentences of praise attributed to them were seen as subtitles.

The words of the poet Suroor Barabankvi speak volumes: *Yehi log hain azal se jo fareb de rahe hain/Kabhi daal naqabein kabhi odh kar labada* (These are people who have duped us for aeons/By putting on masks or wearing sacred robes)

The writer is former member, Planning Commission