

THE EDITORIAL PAGE

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

To engage Taliban, or not to

For India, on Afghanistan, 'strategic patience' cannot be an alibi for inaction



VIVEK KATJU

TERMS OF RECOVERY

With private consumption and investment still subdued, exports could provide fillip to growth

THE ECONOMY GREW by 20.1 per cent in the first quarter (April-June) of the current financial year — a period when the country was in the throes of the horrific second wave of the pandemic. In normal times, these year-on-year comparisons provide a fair understanding of the state of the economy. But the first quarter numbers suffer from a statistical distortion — a low base effect. The economy had contracted by 24.4 per cent in the first quarter of the previous financial year (2020-21) when a national lockdown was imposed to deal with the spread of the virus. Notwithstanding this, these numbers suggest that even though the second wave of the pandemic was more virulent than the first, the localised restrictions imposed during this period seem to have had a less deleterious effect on economic activity. And that even after growing at 20.1 per cent, GDP in the first quarter of the current year is around 9 per cent lower than what it was in the first quarter of 2019-20. Considering that the economy had reached pre-Covid levels in the second half of last year, this reflects the loss on account of the second wave of the pandemic.

The sectoral breakup of the GDP data shows that despite concerns over the dramatic spread of the virus in rural areas, agriculture has continued to hold up. In fact, of all the sectors in the economy, only value added by agriculture and electricity, gas and water supply, is higher than their pre-Covid levels. Manufacturing and construction — both sectors had contracted sharply last year — bounced back, but value added by these sectors has still not reached 2019-20 levels. In the labour intensive trade, hotel, transport and communications sector, the gap is even larger. On the expenditure side, even as private consumption and gross fixed capital formation, which connotes investment activity in the economy, exhibited high growth rates, they remained well below their 2019-20 levels. Only exports surpassed the 2019-20 levels.

In the weeks and months thereafter, with the second wave waning and lockdown restrictions being eased, high frequency indicators suggest a strong uptick in momentum. The Nomura India Business Resumption Index rose to 102.7 for the week ending August 29, up from 60.2 in May — indicating a return to pre-pandemic levels. But there is cause for concern. For one, the quarterly GDP data does not accurately capture trends in the informal economy. As such, it is difficult to know the extent of its recovery from the depths of May. This, and how MSMEs are faring, will have a bearing on employment prospects. Second, with household demand subdued, and capacity utilisation rates low, private investment is likely to remain muted. The ability of government spending to drive growth is also constrained at this juncture. Exports, though, could provide the much needed fillip to growth. Third, even as the pace of vaccination has picked up, there continues to be uncertainty over the prospects of a third wave.

LOST LESSONS

As states reopen schools, governments must start paying urgent attention to the gaps the pandemic has widened

AFTER OVER A year-and-a-half of closures, as Covid-19 cases decline and vaccination picks up, several states have begun to reopen schools. This is enormously welcome. By forcing schools shut since March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic has thrown students and teachers into a deep crisis. The Centre's short-sightedness in not including teachers as frontline workers whose inoculation must be prioritised, shares the blame for compounding school closures. Unless faced with emergency situations such as the question of holding board exams, governments have paid little attention to an education catastrophe in the making. According to a parliamentary standing committee report, "around 320 million children in India have not stepped into a classroom for more than a year." The brunt of this blow has fallen on the vast majority of children who have no means to enter the digital classroom. Even for those able to access online classes, one-way digital learning has been a poor substitute for the physical classroom.

Teachers and educationists fear that the consequences of this schooling gap on learning, an area of concern even before Covid, might be formidable. A study carried out in January this year in five states by a research group from Azim Premji University found not only evidence of a learning loss, but an alarming regression in children's abilities. Ninety-two per cent had lost one specific language ability and 82 per cent at least one specific mathematical ability from the previous year across all classes. The measure of the absence of school from the lives of children is not only in the loss of learning. It has had emotional costs — the loss of friendship and social skills — and most likely led to poor nutrition in the absence of hot cooked mid-day meals. For the most vulnerable, the pandemic has meant an end to education, or being forced into marriage or child labour.

Going back to school, therefore, comes with a set of daunting challenges — and not just involving social distancing protocols. From mapping the number of children who have dropped out of education and coaxing students back, to bridge courses that can help restore their skills and confidence, schools must be ready with nimble solutions. The urgent need to return primary school children to the physical classroom, too, can no longer be ignored if the inter-generational loss of learning is not to become permanent. On their part, governments must resist imposing top-down technocratic solutions — and allow schools to take the lead in designing interventions or adapt to the developing Covid situation in their respective areas.

NO PRAISE, PLEASE

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister's firm rejection of sycophancy is unexpected and welcome; hope it endures

THERE WAS A time when leaders like C Rajagopalachari, the first Indian Governor General, Periyar E V Ramasamy, and C N Annadurai towered over Tamil Nadu politics. Then came a time when cutouts started to define politics. M Karunanidhi and M G Ramachandran were leaders in their own right, of course. But the influence of a star-driven cinema over politics had changed the relations between politicians and voters to leader and follower. By the time matinee idol, J Jayalalitha, became the chief minister, the leader demanded complete obeisance from the cadre. Senior ministers and party functionaries took the cue and would even prostrate before the leader in full public view. And the leader began to be omnipresent — on billboards, government advertisements, public transport, offices, freebies.

So it came as a surprise when MK Stalin, Karunanidhi's heir and CM of Tamil Nadu, told his party legislators last week not to praise him while speaking in the Assembly. A day later, when Cuddalore MLA G Iyappan started to praise the CM during a debate in the House, Stalin got up and warned that he would take action against the MLA for ignoring his order.

In fact, the first 100 days of Stalin as CM have been a departure from the days when political rivals even refused to acknowledge each other's presence. Karunanidhi and Jayalalitha were such bitter rivals that he or she would skip the Assembly when the rival was CM. Stalin has made friendly overtures to Opposition leaders and even included Dr Vijayabhaskar, health minister in the Edappadi Palaniswami government, in his Covid management team. He has also instructed officials not to recall kits and freebies that carry the former CM's picture. Old habits die hard and it remains to be seen if Stalin's colleagues walk their leader's talk. However, for now, those who seek to turn every public-funded scheme and programme into an occasion and opportunity for self praise and promotion, can pick up a lesson from Tamil Nadu.

REFERRING TO THE evolving situation in Afghanistan, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar told the Rajya Sabha on July 29, "We will work with the international community to ensure that political negotiation[s] for settlement are pursued and we will never accept any outcome which is decided by force." Now, only a month later, as the last US aircraft left the Kabul airport, if the erudite Jaishankar reflects on India's policy towards Afghanistan in the recent past, he would ponder over the cruelty of categorical assertions in fluid situations.

By end-July, the Kabul political elite was crumbling. At its head was a president to whom India had inexplicably attached itself. Indian policymakers obviously thought much of this man, who scooted from the Afghan capital when his people needed him the most. It was also clear by then that the Taliban had gained unstoppable military momentum. Was it conceivable, then, that its military success would not translate into political dominance?

Jaishankar's strong comment becomes all the more intriguing because at least one branch of government had reached the conclusion that the Taliban would take over Kabul. Speaking at a think-tank on August 25, Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat said: "From India's perspective, we were anticipating a Taliban takeover of Afghanistan." He went on to add, "Yes, the timelines certainly surprised us. We were anticipating this thing happening a couple of months down the line." General Rawat would, perhaps, not have been taken by surprise if the Indian army had studied the nature of warfighting in Afghanistan and also the ethos of the main body of the Afghan security forces built up under the Americans. This only emphasises the need for closer scrutiny of the nature of military forces in regions of concern to our security interests.

The Taliban are now in Kabul. The Panjshiri defiance led by former Vice-President Amrullah Saleh is unlikely to go anywhere without considerable and abiding support from the US and a firm commitment from Tajikistan. Amrullah is courageous and resolute but these qualities alone in an individual or a group cannot sustain insurgencies. The Taliban grip over Afghanistan will only strengthen unless there is a popular revolt against it in the cities and non-Pashtun

The Taliban spokespersons have been equivocal while speaking about India. Some have warned this country not to interfere in Afghan affairs while others have welcomed India's continuing involvement in the economic reconstruction of Afghanistan. They have stressed that Afghan soil will not be used against third countries. All this cannot be taken at face value, but to explore the Taliban's approaches towards India there is an obvious need to establish open and direct contacts with it. That will also allow India to convey its red lines. This should not be confused with diplomatic recognition.

areas. Such a revolt occurred in 1997 in Mazar-e-Sharif against the Taliban but at that stage, there was a unique set of factors that led to it. Thus, the chances of an uprising of the non-Pashtun people against the Taliban is remote, especially as the evidence suggests that the group has gained ground among them too.

After a flurry of activity between leaders of the extinguished Afghan Republic and the Taliban on central government formation, there has been no news of the process for more than a week. It would seem that the Taliban has remained rigid on its core positions. However, there is continuous pressure on Taliban leaders and Pakistan from the Western donor community for the formation of a government acceptable to it. Certainly, assurances would be sought from the Taliban not only by the West but also by Russia and, perhaps, China that there will be no attempt to put in place the 1990s practices of the Islamic Emirate on gender issues and the more medieval manifestations of the Sharia. Some Taliban leaders would want financial flows to continue to prevent a collapse of the Afghan economy. But will they be able to persuade their more insular colleagues to pay heed to these demands? Certainly, Pakistan, fearful of large refugee movements across the Durand Line, can be expected to lean on these leaders on government formation and to put forward a more moderate face.

It is certain that the US will keep close scrutiny on the Taliban to honour its commitment on al Qaeda and will demand that it continues to cooperate on ISIS-K extermination, an objective shared by Russia. The US will also not hesitate to take further aerial action against targets on Afghan soil. Diplomatic recognition of a Taliban government, including allowing it to occupy the United Nations seat in the forthcoming future will depend on its acceptability. However, the US and EU will not be reluctant to maintain open and direct contact with a Taliban government. Some influential countries, like China, though may be more aggressive on the diplomatic recognition front.

India continues to "wait and watch" Afghan developments. While it does so, many new terms are being added to the Indian diplomatic lexicon by supporters of such an approach. These include "strategic patience" and not

granting "legitimacy". While some members of the Indian foreign policy and strategic community now seem willing to accept the need for open contact with the Taliban by the government, others are not willing to go so far. The latter are suggesting out-of-sight contacts would be preferable. The external affairs minister has indirectly conceded that there have been such contacts with the Taliban, if only for functional reasons.

What is being overlooked is that "strategic patience" cannot be an alibi for inaction. The invocation of the British Raj policy of "masterly inactivity" by some scholars defies logic for it applied in a completely different context. In any event, it accepted the person who controlled Kabul. Besides, while diplomatic recognition or its denial is a specific act of a country in inter-state relations, "legitimacy" is more applicable in the internal jurisdiction of countries. Its application in inter-state relations can open a box best left closed. Finally, India "waited and watched" Afghan developments from the sidelines, at least since the US-Taliban deal. It apparently hoped that the day of the withdrawal of US forces would not come. How long will India continue to "wait and watch"?

The Taliban spokespersons have been equivocal while speaking about India. Some have warned this country not to interfere in Afghan affairs while others have welcomed India's continuing involvement in the economic reconstruction of Afghanistan. They have stressed that Afghan soil will not be used against third countries. All this cannot be taken at face value, but to explore the Taliban's approaches towards India there is an obvious need to establish open and direct contacts with it. That will also allow India to convey its red lines. This should not be confused with diplomatic recognition.

The establishment of open contacts with the Taliban will not be contradictory to actively welcoming those Afghans, irrespective of their faith, who are closely connected with India. It would damage India's reputation greatly and into the future, if perceptions grow, as they are growing, that India has abandoned its friends in Afghanistan at the time of their need.

The writer is a former diplomat

A HAPPIER SCHOOL

Samagra Shiksha scheme 2.0 aims to make learning equitable and joyful



ANITA KARWAL

OUT OF THE 293 transformative paragraphs of the National Education Policy 2020, about 180 are dedicated to school education. Provisions of 86 of those paragraphs figure in the revamped Samagra Shiksha 2.0 scheme that was approved by the Union government on August 4.

Recently, a video of a six-year-old girl making a strong case for reducing the burden of studies went viral. This monologue was an appeal to usher in joyful education in our schools. Samagra Shiksha or holistic education is essentially joyful education: It encompasses the physical, social, emotional, and mental well-being of the child alongside academic and skill development in an integrated format. Version 2.0 of the scheme focuses on access and retention, strengthening foundations, equity and inclusion, quality and standards, holistic curriculum and pedagogy, assessment reforms, capacity building and stakeholder participation, and technology integration.

There are over 25 crore children in the 6-18 age group. The first thing they require is affordable access to quality education. The scheme has been funding basic school infrastructure, textbooks, uniforms and admissions to private schools under RTE Act since its inception. But for the first time, pre-school infrastructure and workshop/laboratory cum classroom for vocational education shall also be funded in the 2.0 scheme. For retention after class 8 and 10, the scheme will provide transport for students to attend formal school. It aims to attract 16 to 19 year-old out-of-school children through the Open School system.

Infusing joy at every stage and in every aspect of school education in a holistic manner, with the complete support and participation of all stakeholders is the way forward.

From the pre-school stage itself, it is crucial to focus on learning to read, write, communicate and do basic math operations. The NIPUN Bharat Mission for foundational literacy and numeracy is a first-time component under the new Samagra Shiksha. Play and toy-based teaching-learning material and pedagogy will be the cornerstone of building this foundation. On connecting and engaging with people, objects, representations, children acquire a context. Play-based learning is strongly linked cognitive, language, thinking, communication, collaboration and psychomotor skills.

Gender-related interventions have been strengthened by giving additional funds for extending Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas to grade 12, and provisioning of sanitary pad vending machines and incinerators in all girls' hostels. The self-defence training component is now extended from grades 6 to 12. Disabled girls from pre-school to grade 12 will now get a separate amount as a stipend and separate funding for aids and appliances, etc.

There are 21 disabilities identified under the PwD Act of 2016, many of which are difficult to identify in a classroom setting. Children whose disabilities remain unidentified find it difficult to adjust to schooling and their teachers have no idea of their specific pedagogical requirements. The revamped Samagra Shiksha for the first time provides for block-level camps for identification and training of special educators and equipping Block Resource Centres and home-based schooling for severe and profound disabilities.

The quality and standards component has

several new aspects too. Aside from DIKSHA, ICT Labs, other digital initiatives, science labs, engaging teaching-learning material, curricular and pedagogical reforms, and tinkering labs, the inclusion of a holistic progress card, topic circles, bagless days, criterion-referenced item banks, and school complexes for efficient schooling, heralds a shift towards competency-based education. For every school that gets at least two medals in Khelo India at the national level, a grant of Rs 25,000 awaits.

Capacity building will now focus not just on in-service teacher training but also on building capacities of stakeholders — school management committee members, parents, PTA, etc. Institutional strengthening of State Councils for Educational Research and Training (SCERT), District Institutions for Educational Training, Block and Cluster Resource Centres are expected to re-invigorate the teaching community. A special assessment cell is being set up in each SCERT to take assessment reforms forward in all states/UTs. The earlier system of funding subject streams has been done away with, and any combination of subjects will now be funded.

Infusing joy at every stage and in every aspect of school education in a holistic manner, with the complete support and participation of all stakeholders is the way forward not only for inducing positivity in the system, but also for bringing synchronicity in the experience of both teachers and learners.

The writer is secretary, school education, Union Ministry of Education

SEPTEMBER 1, 1981, FORTY YEARS AGO

SCANDAL ROCKS HOUSE

THE REPORTED COLLECTION of huge sums of money by a chief minister in the name of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi rocked both Houses of Parliament, culminating in a walk-out in the Lok Sabha when the Speaker refused to admit an adjournment motion on the subject. In the Rajya Sabha, the Deputy Chairman, Shyam Lal Yadav, gave an indication that he would allow a call attention motion on Tuesday. For well over 30 minutes, the Opposition in both Houses jointly demanded a detailed discussion on what it termed the "scandal of the century and the detestable attempt to use the prime minister as a "commodity of corruption". Almost all Opposition

members carried copies of *The Indian Express*, which gave details of the money collected by AR Antulay from business houses and cooperative societies.

RAIL TRAGEDY

FIFTEEN PERSONS WERE killed and 39 injured when the New Delhi-bound Tamil Nadu Express derailed between Ralpet and Sirpur-Kagaznagar on Monday, the South Central railway announced in Hyderabad. The casualty figure was based on the recovery of bodies and the authorities did not rule out more victims. Of the 21 bogies of the super-fast express, 19 had derailed. Unofficial estimates put the death toll at 20.

ANTULAY'S FUTURE

THE MAHARASHTRA CHIEF Minister, A R Antulay faces renewed threats from dissidents. A delegation of state MLAs is expected to arrive in Delhi on Tuesday to meet the Prime Minister to complain against his style of functioning in general and fund collection in particular. According to Congress (I) High Command sources, Mrs Gandhi was unhappy with Antulay. A party spokesman, however, said that Antulay had not been asked to step down. The sources added that if Antulay resigned on his own, he would not be asked to stay on. Antulay met the prime minister on Monday morning in an attempt to explain his controversial fund collection.



11 THE IDEAS PAGE

How we look back matters

Partition was 'ujara' or devastation, not just 'batwara' or division. We need to recall that time with sensitivity, not use it for discursive polarisation



MANISH TEWARI

ON AUGUST 21, I travelled to Amritsar to pay obeisance at the Golden Temple and Durgiana Mandir, both powerful symbols of Punjab's syncretic past and present. These shrines are revered by Hindus and Sikhs alike. They symbolise the quintessence of the state's ethos — Punjab, Punjabi and Punjabiyat.

Since the prime minister had made a grandiloquent announcement that August 14 every year would be observed as Partition Horrors Remembrance Day, I made it a point to spend an hour in the Partition Museum located in the iconic Town Hall building. It was a sobering walk down the bloodstained pathways of history that stand as mute witnesses to the depravity of humankind.

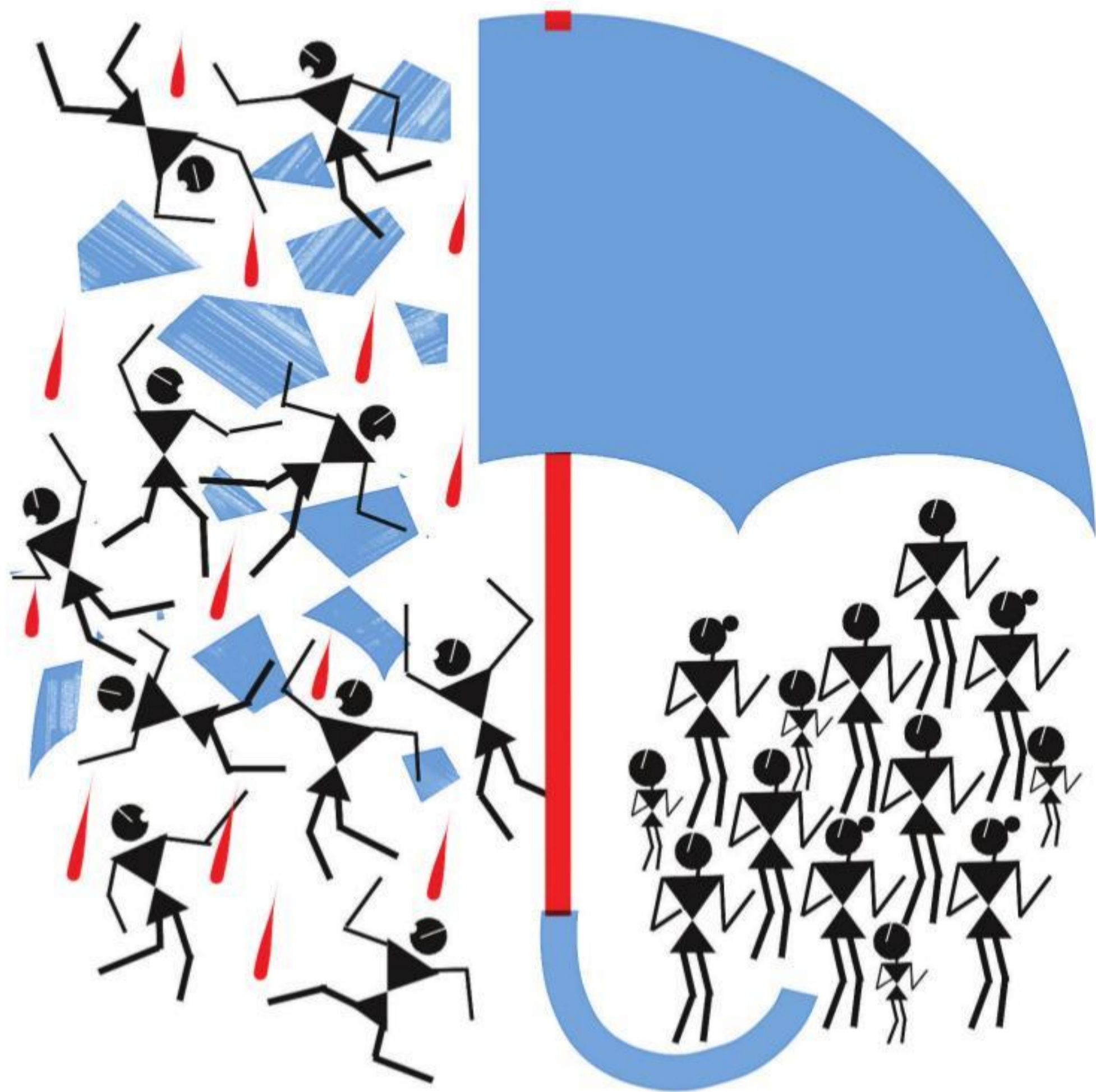
I was born 18 years after Partition and grew up in Le Corbusier's little fantasy town, Chandigarh. Our parents and even grandparents never really ever talked about the Partition. There was always the collective desire to just move on.

My first real acquaintance with the horrors that unfolded during the months before and after August 15, 1947 came in 2004 during my first parliamentary election campaign. As we hopped from village to village, many of them with typically Muslim sounding names especially along the banks of the river Satluj, one of our MLAs who is getting on in years educated me by reliving those traumatic times. He had come across from Sialkot, now in the Punjab that is part of Pakistan, to the rural heartland of east Punjab (Indian Punjab) in a buffalo-drawn wagon and had seen it all first hand. The vivid memories of those days would still bring a lump to his throat.

The term he used to describe the Partition was "ujara" or devastation, not "batwara" or division. Over the next 10 years from 2004-14, as we bounced from village to village during my public outreach programme in Ludhiana, this elderly gentleman became a kaleidoscope of memories about life before and after the Partition. He would emotionally recount the horror of that two-and-a-half month journey that uprooted them from their home and hearth and transported them into completely alien environs and the struggle to build a life all over again. The reason I have recounted this episode in detail is to attempt to bring home the bewilderment of an 11-year-old boy becoming an outsider in his home in the blink of an eye. This was the fate of millions like him. This is what Partition means to us Punjabis.

Over 5,00,000 people are said to have perished on the borders of a divided Punjab between July and September of 1947. Over 15 million crossed over the lines drawn on a map by the British barrister Sir Cyril Radcliffe who had not even set foot in India before unleashing this perversion. Independence meant rape, homelessness, if not death for many. Hindu, Sikh or Muslim, it didn't matter. It was equal opportunity free-for-all mayhem.

In Bengal, the wanton loot and bloodlet-



CR Sasikumar

ting on Direct Action Day, Noakhali riots, the Kalshira massacre, Nachole killings, and many more such horrific tragedies, have stained our history books.

While there are a myriad of theories about what led to the Partition — whether it was an imperial plot or events overwhelmed the makers of modern India and therefore made it inevitable — the fact remains that what emerged out of the ravages of this inferno was an Islamic Pakistan and two competing visions of India. A theocratic conception articulated by the right wing that conceives of India as a Hindu Rashtra, and an inclusive construct that believes that the idea of India has to be a nation where faith does not define an individual.

This is the fundamental ideological battle, going back seven decades. It is between those who want to make hate the life force of India and others who want to let go of hate and anger and make India the sky under which all could find shelter and not only survive but thrive and be prosperous.

The terrifying reality of Partition is a horror movie not only for India but for three nations of this sub-continent. Rather than bolstering people's understanding of the Partition and the circumstances that led to it,

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such remembrances, if not carefully designed, would only further irrigate and perpetuate the hate that has held the field in the Indian subcontinent for the past 70 years.

Lord Mountbatten presented the Partition plan for India on June 3 1947 and the Radcliffe Award that partitioned the country was officially announced on August 17 1947 at 7 pm in the evening. Then what is the rationale behind designating August 14 as Partition Horrors Remembrance Day? It has only one purpose — to accentuate the otherness of the "other". While the Muslim League is certainly culpable for the Partition of India, so are the right-wingers whose public advocacy of two separate nations based on religion pre-dates the formal articulation of this demand by the Muslim League by a couple of decades.

The Partition Horrors Remembrance Day is a terribly divisive idea that mocks the pain, suffering, tears and tribulations of all those people who suffered that carnage. What we owe that generation is a degree of equanimity and sensitivity when we recall those terrible times, not a politically loaded metaphor of polarisation.

The writer, a former Union minister, is a lawyer and Congress MP from Punjab

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Washington elites are more aware than anyone else how much blood of civilians from war-torn countries is on the hands of US troops they command."

— GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA

Explaining the Kerala surge

False assumptions must not be used to defame a protocol-driven, well-functioning health system



UDAYA S MISHRA AND WILLIAM JOE

THE PANDEMIC'S PERSISTENCE and the devastation of two waves of widespread infection have led to serious scientific engagement with the assessment of its possible trajectories, particularly after the vaccination drive has been in full swing as well as the periodic sero-positivity surveillance. At the onset of the pandemic, the common yardstick of its intensity was the case fatality rates and the use of this measure for comparison was fraught with many limitations.

The primary difficulty was to have the corresponding fatalities of the cases that were in the denominator and, therefore, a lagged measure of case fatality was preferred. However, this measure did not entail an appropriate comparison across the population given that the fatality associated with Covid-19 intensified with pre-disposed risks of the patient in terms of chronic morbidities as well as the age profile along with the presentation of the case at a hospital. Case fatality rates were further conditioned by the available health infrastructure as well as the inadequacy of critical care availability. These limitations have made case fatality rates less visible in the current discourse, following the devastating fatality levels (otherwise understated in government records) and with the rising levels of testing with increasing capacities all across the nation. Alternatively, when two waves of the infection have already passed, it is assumed that a much greater number of the population got exposed to the infection without realising it, and either lost the battle or recovered. This is also the impression that is emerging from the periodic sero-surveillance findings — the numbers seem to be systematically improving over time in the Indian population in general, with wide variations across regions.

The most recent yardstick of Test Positivity Rates (TPR) guiding the trajectory of the pandemic in terms of its potential spread as well as the differential levels of containment measures appears to indicate something that is unbelievable. The trends in sero-prevalence coupled with the levels of immunisation coverage and a very low level of TPR situates the regions of India with relatively poor infrastructure and human resources for healthcare in an advantageous position against regions that have all the systems and protocols in place. The most recent mapping of the infection around the country shows that Kerala is contributing half the national infection rates with unacceptably high levels of TPR. This is not only surprising but raises genuine doubts about

the comparability of TPR levels.

Comparability not only depends on the magnitude of testing but also the testing protocols adopted by the health system. Test positivity rates are not merely a function of the levels of testing carried out but also the entire "tracing, tracking and testing" protocol followed by the system. While the spread of infection is undoubtedly shaped by the violation of Covid protocols, it is also largely the asymptomatic carriers that are spreading it within homes or the community. In Kerala, the testing is done in clusters where positive cases are found and the likelihood of positivity is obviously greater than the general population.

The use of interstate comparison of TPRs to comment on a state's efficiency seems far-fetched, overlooking the manner and extent of testing. Testing is a voluntary initiative — apart from cases presenting in clinical facilities. Kerala's population has volunteered for more testing because a negative test is a prerequisite for intra-state mobility. Comparisons of TPR should not ignore the fact that access to testing infrastructure varies widely across states. Greater access to testing and greater sensitivity to the spread of Covid-19 makes Kerala's numbers higher — and more genuine. The TPR mapping across the country could well be illusory, if a large majority is neither tested nor vaccinated, and the sero-prevalence indicates greater immunity compared to Kerala's population.

If a genuine comparative assessment is to be made then the entire road from the detection of infection to recovery has to be evaluated. Such an evaluation should include the number of patients needing hospitalised care, the rate of their progression to oxygen dependence, ICU care and ventilators and finally, fatalities. In fact, comparative evaluation of this kind is perhaps not possible in many of the northern and eastern states, given the abysmal inadequacy of infrastructure there. In the final analysis, Kerala's case fatality rate as of August 20 remains among the lowest — 0.51 — of all Indian states and against a national average CFR of 1.36. This bears true testimony to the management of the infection by the healthcare system of the state. The claimed immunity across a majority of Indian states may be falsified again with the emergence of another wave after the festive season.

It is clear that any opportunity to demolish the image of a protocol-driven, well-functioning healthcare system is used by those engaged in competitive politics based on false assumptions. These assumptions can put the entire population at risk of a devastating third, fourth wave. The lesson is to avoid politics and politicisation when it comes to human lives. The pandemic scenario will remain gloomy until and unless vaccination coverage is advanced and healthcare infrastructure is increased to meet future uncertainties.

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Truth about asset monetisation

Criticism of government plan to lease out assets to private players is baseless



HARDEEP S PURI

"A LIE CAN travel halfway around the world, while the truth is tying its shoelaces." This famous quote aptly summarises the methodology of using lies, half-truths and misinformation to create anxiety and fear amongst the people. It is regularly used by our principal opposition party in their desperation to salvage their political relevance.

In an article ('The grand closing down sale', IE, August 29) former Finance Minister P Chidambaram says "The big lie has been exposed". Indeed, it has. His own. It has also laid bare his party's hypocrisy — what is good for the country when the Congress was in government is bad for the country if the government is led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP. It is a pity that a senior MP and a former Union minister has to do this to score a political point. And he fails.

The claim that the Modi government by the stroke of a pen has threatened to reduce India's public assets to zero shows that he either does not understand what the National Monetisation Pipeline (NMP) proposes to do or that he wishes to twist logic. He obfuscates by deliberately mixing up strategic disinvestment with asset monetisation. The fact is that none of the assets in the NMP are up for sale. They are going to be leased out to private partners through an open and transparent bidding process on terms that more than safeguard the public interest. The entire process must satisfy the law and courts. The private partner will operate and maintain the assets and return them over to the govern-

ment on completion of the lease.

The former FM wishes to appear ignorant about the use of innovative instruments that the government has permitted in the monetisation of assets. The use of Infrastructure Investment Trusts (InvIT) and Real Estate Investment Trusts (REIT), which, like mutual funds, pool investments that then flow to infrastructure and real estate, will allow the people of India and prominent financial investors to invest in our national assets. Some InvITs and REITs are already listed on stock markets.

What the former FM disparagingly calls a "rent" of Rs 1.5 lakh crore a year from asset monetisation will actually lead to more churn, and use of financial leverage to fuel higher government investment in building infrastructure. That is the real logic of asset monetisation. Unfortunately, through scams like 2G, Coalgate, CWG and Adarsh, the UPA appeared focused on monetisation of a different kind.

The government needs financial resources to upgrade India's infrastructure to world-class levels without over-burdening honest taxpayers. In the past seven years, the total length of highways has gone up one-and-a-half times the length created over 70 years. Total investment in the urban sector in the past seven years is over seven times the investment made in the 10 years between 2004-14.

Ironically, in his effort to distort the narrative, Chidambaram has disowned even the few progressive baby steps that the UPA government had taken to monetise public assets. The privatisation of Delhi

and Mumbai airports happened under the UPA when Chidambaram was FM and chairman of the Group of Ministers that was responsible for decision making on the matter. Chidambaram writes that the Railways is a strategic sector and should not be opened to private participation. Why did he not put his foot down when, in 2008, the UPA government invited Requests for Qualification for the redevelopment of the New Delhi Railway Station? Even after the UPA, the Congress has been in state governments that have taken policy decisions to monetise public assets. In February 2020, the Mumbai-Pune Expressway was monetised for Rs 8,262 crore by the government of Maharashtra. Chidambaram and his party could have stopped Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray's "stroke of the pen."

Chidambaram then raises the bogey of possible monopolies in certain sectors. He cites the examples of the US cracking down on tech companies, South Korea taking on Chaebols and China's purge of some of its internet giants, all for anti-competitive practices. India also has institutions that deal with issues related to uncompetitive practices. There are sector-specific regulators. There is the Competition Commission of India. There are consumer courts. All of these have the authority, quite independent of the Government of India, to come down heavily on any anti-competitive practice. The government is also committed to market competition and will design processes in a way that minimise the probability of any concen-

tration of market power. In some areas, like Railway tracks, where there is a natural monopoly, there will be no asset monetisation.

The former FM raises other bogeys, like the matter of jobs. The case studies of the privatisations undertaken by the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government show that jobs grow when an operation is more efficiently managed. In addition to jobs increasing in the assets being monetised, a new set of jobs will be created when the government reinvests its revenue proceeds. There is a positive multiplier effect, which someone who has been Finance Minister ought to appreciate.

Finally, Chidambaram accuses the government of secrecy in the way it has gone about the NMP. Nothing could be further from the truth. The asset monetisation was announced several months ago in the Union Budget. Several rounds of webinars and national-level consultations were organised. What was announced last week was a roadmap. Earlier, the government had announced a strategic disinvestment policy in 2016.

Our government is committed to forward-looking, pro-people reform. We are acting out of conviction. Stealth and secrecy are companions to Congress-style subterfuge. This government makes no compromise with transparency and national interest.

The writer is Union Minister for Petroleum & Natural Gas and Housing & Urban Affairs

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

REHAUL SYSTEM

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'A cry at Gate D' (IE, August 30). Transfers and suspensions shouldn't be the initial response against impunity. It won't suffice. Stricter measures like permanent dismissal and detention must be considered. Impetus must be given not just to the enactment of laws concerning the safety of rape survivors but also on their effective implementation. Not being able to protect the dignity of the survivors would hint at the incompetency of both the judiciary and the police force.

Melvin Thomas, Bhopal

INDIA'S GREATEST

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Jhajharia's feat' (IE, August 31). Veteran Devendra Jhajharia (40) wrote history at Tokyo Paralympics 2020 when he clinched a silver medal in men's javelin throw after winning gold medals in the 2004 and 2016 Games. Jhajharia started well but with two back-to-back foul throws and with a 61.23m in the final, his gold medal hopes ended. But he proved as India's greatest Paralympian.

SS Paul, Nadia

ON GUARD

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Optimism & Caution' (IE, August 30). Half the country's population getting at least one dose of the vaccine may bolster the fight against the pandemic, but variants of the mutating virus, capable of striking irrespective of the vaccine-induced antibodies, are still keeping the danger alive. India can ill afford to lower

its guard.

Vijai Pant, Hampur

A SORRY FORCE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The great unknown in Kabul' (IE, August 31). The apology for the non-performance of the ANDSF is unconvincing. The fighters of the Taliban or soldiers of the ANDSF come from the same stock and there is no difference in their intrinsic fighting abilities. While the Taliban was high on morale, the soldiers of the Afghan army were demoralised due to rampant corruption in the higher echelons, failure of logistics and most importantly failure of their leadership. The Army was trained in conventional warfare under an air umbrella while the Taliban was fighting a guerrilla war. The least the ANDSF could have done was to destroy their arms and inventory before fleeing.

H N Bhagwat, Chiplun

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