



THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE
ENGINEERING WITHOUT IMAGINATION
SINKS TO A TRADE.
— HERBERT HOOVER

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

An aatmanirbharta challenge



ASHOK GULATI AND RITIKA JUNEJA

Move to promote oil palm is welcome, but incentive structure that favours rice, wheat must change

SHRINKING THE CM

BJP central leadership replaces one more chief minister, trend of overweening high command takes hold

THE BJP HAS replaced yet another one of its chief ministers — the third in two months — before the end of his tenure, for reasons that are not officially stated but ostensibly have to do with balancing caste equations and containing anti-incumbency. The party has chosen Bhupendra Patel, a low-profile legislator with no previous experience in government, as the new Gujarat CM, seemingly in a bid to assuage the politically powerful Patel community ahead of assembly polls in 2022. Vijay Rupani's poor record in Covid management — the Gujarat High Court had censured the government's functioning — and his inability to win over powerful social groups, may have gone against him. But his exit, in circumstances that are strikingly similar to his elevation to chief ministerial office in 2016, speaks of a larger trend in the BJP.

Political parties are prone to replacing MLAs in elections to dent anti-incumbency, but a change at the top is usually made when there is a threat of revolt by legislators. However, the BJP has visibly downsized the office of the chief minister in states where it runs the government — even assembly elections are fought in the name of the prime minister. The presidential mode of campaign in the general election, which has coincided with the rise of Narendra Modi in national politics in 2014, has percolated down to assembly elections. Gujarat, where Modi has also been the chief minister, is the best example of this trend: Votes are sought for Modi in elections at all levels — Rupani and the new CM, Bhupendra Patel, were not prominent in state politics until their elevation to the state's top office. After his ouster from office, Rupani compared the change of chief ministers to a relay race: "I was running. Now I will give the flag to someone else. (Now) he will run," he said. In Uttarakhand and Karnataka, where the BJP also recently replaced CMs, it similarly preferred legislators with limited influence to party veterans: For instance, in Karnataka, it opted for Basavaraj Bommai, who had joined the BJP only in 2008. In Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Uttarakhand, West Bengal, the party did not highlight any state leader during assembly elections and sought votes by projecting Modi's leadership.

Ironically, this rise of a powerful party centre, reminiscent of the Congress high command under Indira and Rajiv Gandhi, is at variance with the federal approach the BJP had cultivated and nurtured under Atal Bihari Vajpayee and L K Advani. That had enabled the party to create a second line of leadership of charismatic politicians in the states. Many of them — Shivraj Singh Chouhan, Uma Bharti, Vasundhara Raje, Raman Singh, Yediyurappa, Kalyan Singh among others — led the party to success in their respective states, which can be said to have laid the ground for the BJP's spectacular growth under Modi and Amit Shah. The denial of autonomy to state units and agency to state leaders, the preference for faceless runners in a relay race over influential politicians, and the dependence on the high command for electoral outreach, are significant changes in the form and character of the new BJP.

IIT-PLUS

Their success as B-schools is a sign of a more expansive education vision taking root at premier engineering institutions

SIX IITS ARE now among the top 20 management institutions in the country, some even outpacing reputed business schools such as IIM-Indore and IIM-Lucknow — proof that India's premier engineering schools are not content to remain just that. The signs of a more expansive vision of education, that looks beyond tech to embrace the world of humanities and law, arts and architecture, have been evident at the IITs for a while now. IIT-Kharagpur, for example, opened a medical college in 2018; over a decade earlier, it had set up a school of law focussed on intellectual property. The highest ranked IIT on the National Institute Ranking Framework in the management category, IIT Delhi, started offering MBA programmes in the late 1990s. Over the years, several IITs have gone on to offer courses in humanities, social science and literature as well, arguably in response to a growing realisation that an exclusively technical education can become a stunted one. The transformation has been slow and steady, at a pace decided by the IITs and on their own terms. But it signals an important, welcome change — it is increasingly hard to conceive of education, even professional education, in silos. Indeed, the IITs have been chipping away at a working model of interdisciplinary education, much in the mould of what the National Education Policy envisages a future university ought to be.

This success offers a lesson: Given adequate financial resources and the autonomy to decide their own trajectory, higher education institutions can build on their unique strengths to live up to the ambitious blueprints of policymakers. For example, what is giving the IITs momentum in challenging the best business schools is a focus on research. Where the IITs falter is an old, deep-rooted deficiency — gender diversity. Despite the introduction of super-merit quotas to increase the intake of women, the IITs remain a largely male preserve — here, they are losing out to the IIMs, which do much better on the count of inclusivity.

For decades now, the IITs have defined success for lakhs of students barely out of school, ready to hurl themselves into rigorous hyper-competitive training to procure a seat at the elite institutions. Some of the features of this regime have been called into question, from the social bias that makes an IIT classroom predominantly male and upper-caste to the rigid walls between science and arts education. Not all of those questions, especially on gender and caste inclusion, have found satisfactory answers. But a widening of the IIT canvas bodes well — for the larger education ecosystem.

LAST WEEK, THE government announced the minimum support prices (MSP) of rabi crops for the marketing season 2022-23. The MSP for wheat is up by 2 per cent while that of rapeseed-mustard is up by 8.6 per cent, perhaps indicating that the government wants to focus more on edible oils/oilseeds than on wheat. This is the right approach given, on the one hand, the bulging stocks of wheat at home and the massive imports of edible oils on the other. But the profitability of MSP over the projected cost (A2+FL) is 100 per cent both in case of wheat as well as rapeseed-mustard. Given that the government has a massive procurement programme for wheat, but a very meagre one for rapeseed-mustard even when the prices rule below MSP, the relative incentive structure remains in favour of wheat. So, we doubt if farmers will switch from wheat to mustard in any meaningful manner to bridge the edible oil deficit.

In this context, it is important to note that Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently announced a Rs 11,000-crore National Edible Oil Mission-Oil Palm (NEOM-OP), as a part of the Aatmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan. This is a bold step to augment domestic edible oil supplies, given that 60 per cent of the edible oil consumed in the country is imported — more than half of this is palm oil followed by soybean and sunflower. In FY 2020-21, edible oil imports touched \$ 11 billion or about Rs 80,000 crore (for 13.5 million tonnes). Despite these imports, edible oil inflation in July 2021 (on a year-on-year basis) was 32.5 per cent.

In this backdrop, the move to promote oil palm is a step in the right direction. It is the only crop that can give up to four tonnes of oil productivity per hectare under good farm practices. But it is a water-guzzling crop, loves humidity (requires 150 mm rainfall every month) and thrives best in areas with temperature between 20 and 33 degrees Celsius. The National Re-assessment Committee (2020) has identified 28 lakh hectares suitable for oil palm cultivation in the country — the actual area under oil palm cultivation, as of 2020, is only 3.5 lakh

hectares. A large potential is thus waiting to be tapped. Much of this (34 per cent) is in the Northeastern states, including Assam, followed by Andhra Pradesh (19 per cent) and Telangana (16 per cent).

NEOM-OP aims to bring an additional 6.5 lakh hectares under oil palm by 2025-26, of which 3.25 lakh hectares will be in the Northeast and the remaining in other parts of the country, most prominently in the irrigated tracts of Telangana. Thus, by 2025-26, the government hopes to cover an area of a million hectares under oil palm. We feel the government could have been bolder and attempted to cover 2 million hectares by 2025-26, given the huge deficit in edible oil production in the country. Achieving self-sufficiency in edible oil production through the other oilseeds complex would require adding about 45 million hectares under oilseed cultivation. This is not possible without drastically cutting down the area under cereal crops. The best alternative is, therefore, to ensure proper care of palm oil crop, provide good planting material, better irrigation management, fertilisers and other inputs to raise productivity to four tonnes of oil/hectare.

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The NEOM-OP intends to focus on productivity and area expansion by supporting the farmers in the following ways: An input assistance of Rs 20,000-29,000/ha for planting material, additional assistance of Rs 12,500/ha for four years to cover maintenance/opportunity costs of farmers, with no limits on acreage, a Rs 5-crore assistance to industries that plan to set up a five tonnes/hour processing unit, assistance of Rs 100 lakh to seed gardens in the Northeast for 15 hectares (up to Rs 80 lakh in rest of India); and support for vermiculture, irrigation and farm mechanisation. This comprehensive assistance package will, hopefully, attract farmers as well as incentivise the industry to work with agriculturists and augment edible oil production in a globally competitive manner, thereby reducing the import bill.

A critical element of the strategy is the pricing formula for fresh fruit bunches (FFB)

of oil palm. There will be no MSP, but the FFB price for farmers would be fixed at 14.3 per cent of average landed CPO price of the past five years, adjusted with the wholesale price index. This is the most critical part of the pricing policy and the formula needs to be carefully calibrated. However, the litmus test of pricing will be dovetailing it with the import tariff policy to protect the farmers in case landed prices fall below the cost of production. Recently, the effective duty on crude palm oil imports has been slashed against high global prices to 30.25 per cent (including agri-cess at 17.5 per cent and social welfare cess at 10 per cent). The effective duty on refined palm has been slashed to 41.25 per cent. Duties on other edible oils, soya and sunflower, are in the same range. However, effective duty for rapeseed and cottonseed oils ranges from 38.5 per cent for crude and 49.5 per cent for refined oils. It's this high import duty, at a time when global edible oil prices have gone up by almost 70 per cent (y-o-y), that has caused high domestic inflation (32.5 per cent) in edible oils.

In its 2012 report, "Oil Palm: Pricing for Growth, Efficiency & Equity", the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices recommended that India should keep an import duty trigger at \$800/tonne — if the import price falls below \$800/tonne, the import tariff needs to go up in countercyclical manner. Thus, import duty needs to be in sync with rational domestic price policy. It is a necessary condition to give a fillip to aatmanirbharta in edible oils. But the sufficient condition would be revisiting the existing incentive structure that unduly favours rice, wheat and sugarcane through heavy subsidisation of power, fertilisers and open-ended procurement. The need is to devise a crop-neutral incentive structure where cropping patterns are aligned with demand patterns, and the crops are produced in a globally competitive manner.

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RAMU RAMANATHAN

THE SONGS OF SONALBEN

Through libraries and classrooms, Sonal Shukla opened new worlds for women

WHEN I SPOTTED Sonal Shukla for the first time in the 1980s, I thought she was the best singer in the world. A feisty woman all pumped up and hollering at the top of her voice during a protest in Mumbai. Around her were a ragtag army of women marchers. Her finest moment was the Forum Against Rape movement — spontaneously formed by 49 women who connected over an open letter signed by Upendra Baxi and three others about the injustice in the Mathura rape case judgment by the Supreme Court.

Sonalben was our Odetta (the voice — and what a voice — of the civil rights movement in the USA). Music was in her genes. She was the daughter of Ninu Mazumdar, the musical maestro who composed hundreds of Gujarati songs and ditties. She once told me, "We have truly no roots in the family's feudal past. No caste, no 'native place' to visit, no assets in Gujarat anywhere, no idols at home, no vrat and fasts, no rituals of any kind at home. Our father created musicals based on Sita, wrote stutis to Shiv and garbas of devis, but treated those sources as literature and not religion."

Unlike her siblings, Shukla inherited very little of the musical notes from her father. But that never deterred her. Sonalben sang her protest songs. Future activists like me joined the chorus. We were shaped by her.

A committed feminist, Shukla's focus in life — like Savitribai Phule — was "the empowerment of girls from deprived communities." Her favourite child was Vacha. Born in 1987, Vacha is a tiny library in a municipal

school in Santacruz which houses women's magazines and writing by women. The Vacha idea was simple. Ordinary young girls in bastis could access words and indeed ideas — particularly work songs and work anecdotes — because they shape their lives better than high theory. Shukla and her team published books in which a girl asks: "Is Chyavanprash only for boys?" or "Why must boys not wash utensils?"

Today, three decades later, Vacha has an outreach in more than 16 bastis in the city. Publishing books in which the *bal-kishoris* document their lives, the centres borrow heavily from Shukla's work in her formative years. The emphasis is on basic stuff: "The right to food; right to pee; right to complain; the right to walk or cycle on the streets of Mumbai with heads held high; and, the right to laugh."

When I had asked her what that meant, she said, "We had mothers who told us our daughters are happy at your centre, but please instruct them not to laugh so much when they step out. Some man will then stop them from going there."

During the pandemic, her work carried on. She reported that the situation in the bastis was "frightening", with job losses and mounting inflation. Vacha ran classes for six-year-olds in 2020 as schools shut down, and then for Class II students this year. Her forecast for this group of children was dire: "All over the country, millions of children between five and seven are likely to remain ill-

literate or semi-literate."

Besides dialectics and *daaru* with the best minds of our generation (from Angela Davis and Tariq Ali and Praful Bidwai to Flavia Agnes), Shukla's weekly column in a Gujarati newspaper commanded respect from readers at a time when her Left politics had in some ways been eclipsed by right-wing gobbledegook. Be it her tributes to Dhiruben Patel and Ila Pathak or her analysis of women characters in Gujarati novelist Govardhanram Tripathi's works, she sang the song of sanity. She analysed Vile Parle, the part of the city in which she stayed most of her life. In fact, she had insights on everything, from secret non-vegetarian joints to rare harmonium players. From Marx to Gandhi.

She corrected me when I mentioned her fondness for Gandhi in a public programme. "Gandhian education, though not always Gandhi, has been dear to me. Even today, I am trying to balance both in Vacha's scheme of social education in the bastis of Bombay."

By some standards, the planet has made progress when it comes to rights for women. And yet, four decades after the Mathura case, the question to ask is, if an Adivasi minor girl would be raped today, will we find the energy, force and commitment to raise our collective voices?

If only we had time for one more rousing song, Sonalben.

The writer is a playwright and editor of PrintWeek

FREEZE FRAME

E P UNNY



SEPTEMBER 13, 1981, FORTY YEARS AGO

TAMIL NADU BANDH
THE STATE GOVERNMENT-sponsored bandh in Tamil Nadu against the atrocities on Tamils in Sri Lanka was almost total and peaceful, barring a few incidents of stone throwing and obstruction of trains in some parts of the state. Except for some central services like post offices, ports, railways and Indian Airlines flights and some essential services like hospitals, chemists, milk supply and the press, all activity was paralysed in the state. State government offices, banks, shops, hospitals were closed. The roads wore a deserted look, except for a few private cars and taxis. A skeleton suburban service was, however, maintained. Chief Minister M G Ramachandran in a statement

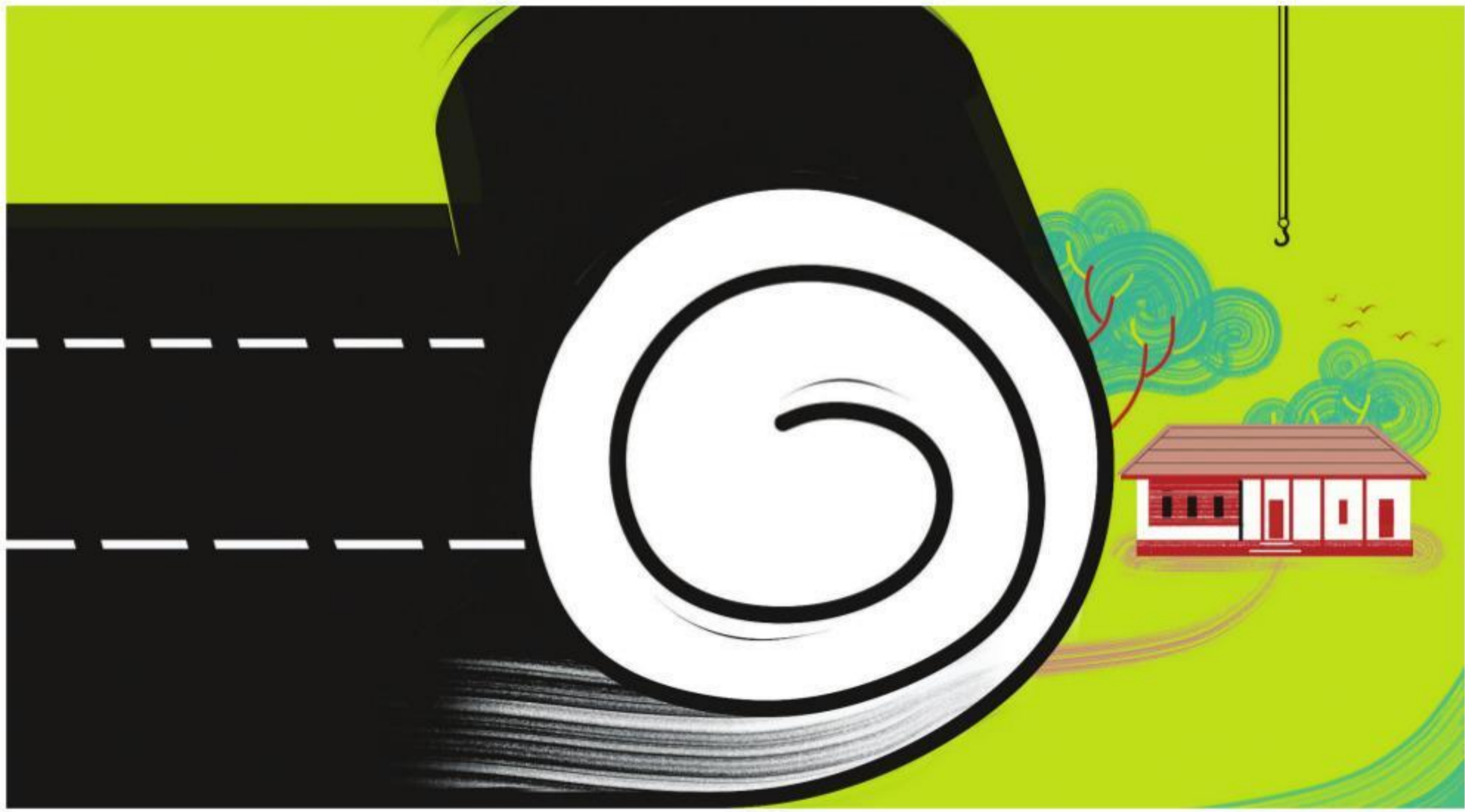
thanked the people and parties in the state for making the bandh a success.

ANTULAY'S SUCCESSOR
EFFORTS ARE BEING MADE by the Congress (I) high command to settle the Maharashtra issue before the Prime Minister leaves for her tour abroad. Sources close to the party say that there are no two opinions in the party that A R Antulay has to go. The delay in the final decision is only because of the selection of his successor.

JAGAT NARAIN MURDER
THE PUNJAB GOVERNMENT suspects Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale to be the agent

provocateur behind the murder of Lala Jagat Narain. The chief secretary, Paramjit Singh, gave enough indication about Bhindranwale without naming him at a news conference. He, however, neither accepted nor denied direct questions about his role. He said evidence now confirmed that the murder was one of the few planned by "some elements who were planning the elimination of some persons with serious differences with the views they were expressing".

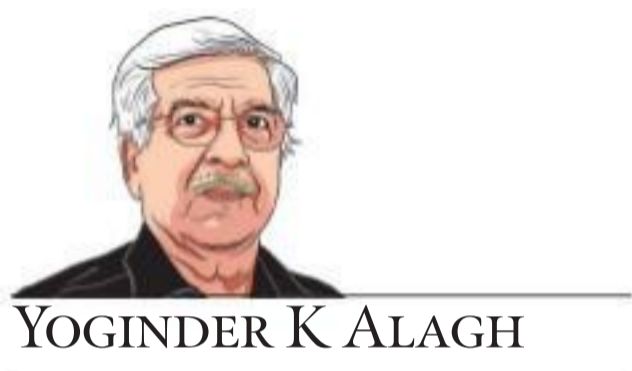
CHINA DENIES
A CHINESE government spokesman denied all knowledge of a reported intrusion by Chinese troops into India's remote north-western Ladakh territory.



CR Sasikumar

Stones of Sabarmati

Gandhi's Ashram is an abode of peace, a piece of history to be treasured. The nation must respect its heritage, allow it to speak



YOGINDER K ALAGH

STONES SPEAK TO you, unless you are the Taliban destroying the Bamiyan Buddhas with barbaric vengeance. The recent decision to build new structures in the IIM-A, because the corridors are dark and cold, took me back to the mid-Sixties when I was teaching and finishing my thesis at the University of Pennsylvania at Philadelphia. One day, Louis Kahn called all of us — Indian students and teachers — to the School of Architecture. In his dramatic style, he stood in front of a silk curtain behind which we could see a light. He dramatically parted the curtain and we saw the model of the IIM-A. He asked: "First impression?"

I was in the first row and he asked me: "Do you know Ahmedabad?" I said: "Yes sir". He said: "So?" I blurted out: "It is very un-Indian." He was infuriated. "What do you mean?" he asked. I knew I was in a soup. I said, "Mine is a poor country. These give a sense of power." He looked at me, stammered and said: "No. It's a monastery." I retired hurt.

In Ahmedabad, the Sabarmati was once a river. Bapu's ashram was on its banks. When I had a headache on account of all my worldly care — running institutions from a relatively young age — I would go to Hriday Kunj, sit for a few minutes, see his spectacles, writing desk and slippers, feel he was mock-

ing me for trivialising life ("Look at my problems young man," his twinkling eyes said). I went to the river bank, sat for a while, felt happy again, walked back, ate puri/shak at the cafeteria and went back.

Then there were the riots in March 2002. Chuni Kaka (the Gandhian, Chuni Vaidya) called up to say that he and Narayan Desai were going on a silent march, with a black gag on their mouth, from the Kochrab Ashram to the Sabarmati Ashram, carrying a poster, "Ahmedabad wants peace". "Would you like to join?" Of course, I will, I said. My son joined too. We were around 40 people to begin with. Ahmedabad was still burning. We didn't have police protection. But people kept on joining and half way, at the Gujarat Vidyapith set up by Bapu, there were hundreds marching. *Log saath aate gaye aur carvaan banta gaya.* At the ashram, a message of peace was read out, in spite of my protest, in my name — and not Vaidya's or Desai's. It was reported the world over.

Many years later, I was to lead the Indian delegation to the first Indo-Pak Planning Commission meeting. At Takshila, the stones speak to you, although the official guide gave it an "Islamic" twist, ignoring my diplomatic demurring, which he dismissed as anti-Islamic propaganda. Later at Nalanda, the stones whispered the same stories.

Meanwhile, Bimal Patel, whose teacher, the American planner of Spanish origin, Manuel Castells, had once invited me to a select meeting of experts to brief the first Prime Minister of Spain after the fall of the Franco regime, gave me a lowdown on his plans for redevelopment of the riverfront. I told him not to plan with a 10-year flood history, and sure enough, crores of rupees of work were

The redevelopment of Gandhiji's birthplace in Porbandar destroyed its simple elegance. A few decades back, a narrow road led to his three-storied brick-and-stone house. There was peace on each floor. You sat there, happy at the journey you had made. Now the *gali* is widened. The shops are gone. The house has been 'redeveloped'. It's sickening if you compare it with the earlier ambience.

washed away in the next monsoon flood. During this briefing, I also muttered something about my friend, the architect Charles Correa, and that he had not spoiled the Ashram while redoing it. I shudder at the redevelopment now.

At JNU, the stones speak to you in your morning walk. The Aravalli ranges there are short of water. The Rohillas ran away because of thirst. I wasn't going to run away. So, I got satellite imagery to help us to decide where to dig for water. While planning the Sardar Sarovar dam, we had to dig the foundations to withstand a thousand-year flood.

And now they want to turn the room where Nehru stood up on the midnight of August 14, 1947 and addressed the world — "When the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom" — into a museum. There are such rooms in other countries. Nations treasure their heritage. We are the descendants of Pataliputra. My ancestors include Raja Porus, Prithviraj Chauhan, the persecuted Bahadur Shah Zafar. The Dandi March is my heritage.

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We must learn to treasure the stones, each one of which will remind us of their "memory".

The writer is an economist and a former Union minister

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The establishment of a Taliban government in Kabul has underscored that far from reasserting its global supremacy, the US looks more vulnerable today; and that the echoes of 9/11 are still reverberating across the region — but will not stay there." — THE GUARDIAN

It's still uphill

GDP is unlikely to reach pre-Covid level in ongoing quarter. But uptick in vaccinations could bridge the gap in second half of the year



ADITI NAYAR

THE DISTORTED BASE of last year's restrictive nationwide lockdown has expectedly obscured the challenges wrought by the second wave of Covid-19 in India in the first quarter of the current financial year. India's real GDP has expanded by a record-high 20.1 per cent (year-on-year) in the first quarter on the low base. However, a more appropriate assessment of the real recovery can be achieved by looking through a pre-Covid lens — that is, comparing the first quarter of 2021-22 with the first quarter of 2019-20.

The impact of the second wave was a considerable 9.2 per cent compression in the real GDP relative to the pre-Covid level. Incidentally, the corresponding change displayed by other large economies over the same period ranged from a moderate contraction of 3.9 per cent for Italy to a stellar growth of 11.5 per cent for China. The US reported a rise of 2 per cent, benefitting from the earlier coverage of vaccines over a larger proportion of its population.

Coming back to the drivers of aggregate demand in India, both private consumption and investment trailed their pre-Covid levels in the first quarter of the ongoing year by 12 per cent and 17 per cent, respectively. While farm demand remained resilient after a series of healthy harvests, the loss of employment and incomes in swathes of the non-farm rural and urban economy as well as higher medical and fuel expenses, contributed to the overall squeeze in private consumption. Investment plans were put on hold by the private sector amidst the second wave, even though government capital spending, especially that of the central government, put up a healthier performance even as government consumption spending exceeded the pre-Covid level by a healthy 7.4 per cent in the first quarter.

To examine this further, we analysed the performance of Centre and state finances in the first quarter, relative to that of the first quarter in 2019-20.

Let's first look at the fiscal metrics of the central government. The Centre's revenue expenditure rose by 7.8 per cent, led by non-subsidy spending. Moreover, its capital expenditure nearly doubled to Rs 1.1 trillion, from the muted Rs 0.6 trillion that had been recorded amidst the parliamentary elections and implementation of the model code of conduct.

Despite this, the Centre's fiscal deficit declined to a modest Rs 2.7 trillion from the pre-Covid level of Rs 4.3 trillion. This is due to an increase in its revenue receipts, benefitting from the upfringing of the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) surplus of

around Rs 1 trillion to the first quarter of this year, from the second quarter of 2019-20, following a realignment in its accounting year to April-March in line with that of the Government of India. But, the Centre's overall gross tax revenues have also grown, with rises seen across the board — corporation tax, personal income tax, and excise duty collections.

The considerable rise of 47 per cent in the direct tax collections is at odds with the decline in the GDP in Q1 FY2022 relative to Q1 FY2020. A likely conclusion is that the formal/tax-paying portion of the non-agri economy has gained at the cost of the rest.

For the 19 major states whose data has been published by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), we observe a substantial increase in their revenue spending — Rs 4.9 trillion in the first quarter of 2021-22, relative to the pre-Covid level of Rs 4.3 trillion. This possibly reflects higher social sector spending amid the second wave of the pandemic. These states have also seen their capital spending exceed their pre-pandemic levels.

However, in contrast to the compression observed in the Centre's finances, these 19 states have seen their fiscal deficit nearly double to Rs 1.1 trillion this year, up from Rs 0.6 trillion the year before. This is because the states' combined revenue receipts in the quarter were only marginally higher than the pre-Covid level. This can be traced to lower tax devolution from the Centre (relative to pre-Covid levels) and the subdued taxes of the states.

The decline in states' own taxes, which are predominantly indirect in nature, broadly resonates with the contraction in private consumption this year as compared to its pre-Covid level. In particular, despite attractive home loan rates and cuts in stamp duty rates by some of the states, collections this year were substantially lower than pre-Covid levels, revealing the continued impact of the pandemic on states' finances. On the other hand, the lower tax devolution in the first quarter, in our view, only represents a timing mismatch, with the budgeted target for the current fiscal modestly higher than the actual devolution in 2019-20.

Looking ahead, GDP will have to grow by 8 per cent (year-on-year) in the ongoing quarter to equalise to the pre-Covid level. Our current forecasts suggest that a continued lag in demand for contact-intensive services may narrowly prevent this from being achieved.

However, the pace of Covid-19 vaccinations has been ramped up since mid-August — this offers the best conceivable insurance to dampen the potency of another wave. If the seven-day moving average of 7.3 million doses/day as of September 5 can be sustained, 64 per cent of adults will have received their second shot before the year draws to a close. This could impart a positive momentum to the economy, pushing it above the pre-Covid level in the second half of the year.

The writer is chief economist, ICRA



SWAPNA KONA NAYUDU

The way we write on Afghanistan

Point of view of Indian writers mirrors Eurocentric ideas of war and empire

IN THE AFTERMATH of the recent US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Fariba Nawa, an Afghan-American journalist, said in a tweet, "Congrats that you wrote a book and you have a few Afghan friends on the ground. And now you're a superstar because you embedded with the TB [the Taliban] or government forces. You were super brave. But you don't represent us. You don't have anything [to] lose. We do." Nawa was responding to writing on Afghanistan by non-Afghans, of scholarly or journalistic expertise from around the world. This damning indictment compels us to ask: What are the ethics of writing about Afghanistan from New Delhi? Of course, I use New Delhi as a signifier term rather than to indicate its precise location, to indicate writing sympathetic to an Indian point of view, reflective of the worlds of policymaking and the academe that often intersect, and have a shared readership.

Due to its longstanding imagery in Indian writing as a frontier state, Indian political writing on Afghanistan to a large extent has always been writing on war. This tendency was deepened by the world wars, which occasioned a closely entwined theorisation of war and empire by South Asian thinkers. The non-violent politics of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, and his Khilafat Movement in the 1920s, embodied that consciousness. Afghanistan was a central concern in an exciting tradition of anti-colonial thought and anti-imperial agitation, eclipsed in public memory by populist movements led by Gandhi, but, in actuality,

enacted through writing across the British Raj. If the distance between Delhi and Kabul in the 1920s and '30s is the distance between Gandhi and Bacha Khan, then that history of the takedown of empire should be a fertile source for writing.

Where is that history now and what role does it play in interpreting a contemporary war? And how is it that so much Indian writing disjoins the current political landscape of Afghanistan from the wider context of empire, in its British, Soviet or American iterations? Projects aimed at decolonising political writing have escaped their confines in academia and have gained considerable hold in popular writing. Yet, this present moment is perplexing because it seems that new critical approaches to war are being neglected precisely when they could be tools to evaluate the failure of and sudden abdication by a great power in India's immediate neighbourhood. How is it possible that mid-20th-century subcontinental writers mounted extraordinarily unforgiving critiques of the imperial project, but despite long strides in the state of the theoretical field, Indian writers now are sliding back into ways of thinking about war that are resolutely imperialist?

There are two overlapping explanations for this reversal — first, the subcontinental anti-imperial tradition has now been lost to the trickle-down, ironically from the West, of Eurocentric ideas about war and empire. The radical vocabulary of modern Indian anti-imperialist thought is eschewed in favour of dominant western so-

cial and political thought, especially on writings concerning war. Eurocentrism is rampant, in what the critical theorist of empire, Tarak Barkawi, calls "the unreflective assumption of the centrality of Europe, and latterly the West in human affairs". This sort of Eurocentric analysis is materialised in an enchantment with the consequences of the US occupation of Afghanistan for the occupying power.

Second, foreign policy analysis has become a weak substitute for responses to the imperialist, fascist and ultimately capitalist aspects of world order. There is no critique to be made if we remain shackled to the language of strategy, which is ultimately a militaristic language. Indeed, the urge to respond pragmatically goes against the notion that India and Afghanistan share an imperial past and are impaled by it in our statehood, even if not in equal measure. Profound insights have emerged on humanitarian projects in Afghanistan, and on the moral fortitude India should have shown once the US withdrew, but we need more thinking on the relationship between what is happening in Afghanistan now and the neoliberalism India has embraced for itself.

To say that there is an intimate relation between 21st-century neoliberalism of the stripe now seen globally, but rather starkly in India, and America going to war, is possibly now blasé. When the Afghan National Army fell so quickly to the Taliban this past month, it reminded me of the words of an American soldier in Iraq, 2002: "America

is not at war; the Marine Corps is at war. America is at the mall." The frailty of Afghan institutions and their impending fate must provoke in us a deeper consideration of how a South Asian state has had a disastrous decolonisation forced upon it, with those in power now an unmitigated consequence of the very imperial project that has been displaced.

After the 1960s, Indians have written little about wars that were not India's to fight. From the 1920s to the 1960s, in a long moment of dense internationalism, writing about Asia, Africa, Latin America meant writing about wars and empire. War writing has since slid into the domain of military history, which is important in its place. But we also need to disentangle the neoliberal militarism that makes war possible but also that becomes validated through war. If we are to write about war as a field where contestation between unequal powers escapes the civility of politics, then in India we only have to look back to our own not-so-distant encounters with empire that remain with us and are unceasing in the social and political effects they produce. Reengaging India's colonial past in service of the present moment may help us write the history of this war as that of Afghanistan's war, waged on Afghan soil and on the bodies of Afghan men, women, children.

The writer works on India's international relations and political thought at Harvard University Asia Center

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

ILLEGITIMATE GOVT
THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The government of the Taliban' (IE, September 10). A government that was installed through the force of violence is, ab initio, illegitimate and cannot acquire legitimacy through the band-aid solution of including women and even Hazaras. Therefore, governments across the globe ought not to keep barking up the wrong tree and instead, unitedly call for democratic elections in Afghanistan, to be supervised by external agencies of high integrity.
Surentra Sundararajan, Baroda

NOTHING NEW

THIS REFERS TO the article 'Deal with the new Kabul' (IE, September 10). We should avoid taking the Taliban at their words. Rather we need to judge them by their past heinous record. There seems to be nothing new in their world view. They can change their coat but not their theological beliefs. If our demonising the Taliban goes against our so-called national interests, our canonising them clashes squarely with our own concept of a plural and liberal society we are defending back home against many odds.
Tarsem Singh, Mahilpur

CLIMATE PLAN

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The other shared crisis' (IE, September 10). India is home to 1.3 billion people, with the world's largest youth population and a huge section of aspirational middle-class that is driving the economy. India still has a sizable population under abject poverty. Its developmental needs are paramount, and cannot be compromised. The UN SDGs are already in sync

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with India's developmental priorities. The country's National Mission on Strategic Knowledge for Climate Change has been tasked to work on developing indigenous solutions to the issue of climate change, considering regional and local priorities and challenges. The global community is expected to acknowledge and support the "Indian solutions" to the problem of climate change.
Sudip Kumar Dey, Barasat

A COVER-UP

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'Eight years on, probe finds those killed were unarmed, not Maoists' (IE, Sept 10). Justice VK Agarwal, who inquired into the "encounter" in Bijapur district of Chhattisgarh concluded that none of the eight people killed, including four minors, were Maoists. The report says that the security personnel "may have opened fire in panic", and it was "a mistake". This is plausible. But planting evidence to cover up the botched operation is deliberate. And this can't happen without the involvement of higher-ups. Sadly, this facet of the event only compounds the tragedy.
LR Murmu, Delhi