



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

STEP BACK, PLEASE

Kerala Catholic Church's claim of a 'narcotics jihad' is unwise and disquieting, can unsettle communal peace

AN INFLUENTIAL CATHOLIC bishop in Kerala has triggered a controversy by alleging that a "narcotics jihad" is being waged by Islamist groups to endanger youth belonging to other religions in the state. Christian girls were falling prey to "love jihad", he also said, an allegation the church first made some years ago, which has then been weaponised by the Sangh Parivar. Christian and Muslim groups have been organising marches in support of, and against, the bishop's remarks while the BJP has asked for a central law to deal with "love and narcotics jihad". The Catholic Church and the Kerala Congress (M), part of the Left government in the state, as well as the Nair Service Society, an influential community outfit, have backed the bishop whereas Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan and the Leader of Opposition in the Assembly and Congress MLA, V D Satheesan, and a host of civil society actors, including from the Catholic community, have criticised the Church. This face-off has the potential to unsettle communal peace in Kerala, which has an enviable history of three major religions coexisting with minimum conflict or confrontation for decades.

Government must crack down on the production and supply of narcotics. But to paint the business in religious colours, to make it a communal dog whistle, is an act of irresponsibility that must be guarded against. In the name of speaking up for the laity, the Kerala bishop and his supporters may be contributing to the promotion of Islamophobia. This has the potential to build a discourse that scapegoats the Muslim community for the gathering social and economic worries, which of course have no communal basis, confronting people across denominational divides in the state. The crisis in agriculture, and the general economic slowdown, especially after Covid, have pushed the middle and lower middle classes into a precarious situation. Public policies, such as greater weightage given to Muslims in scholarships — an outcome of the Sachar Committee recommendations — have been projected as evidence of appeasement and as a sign of the disproportionate influence of Muslims in politics. International political developments — from the attacks on Christians in Africa to Sri Lanka, to the presence of Christian converts among recruits to ISIS, and the conversion of Hagia Sophia in Turkey to a mosque — too seem to have contributed to the Catholic Church's sense of insecurity and anxiety. That the non-Catholic churches have so far refused to back the Catholic clergy's allegations is also revealing.

In the larger interest of Kerala, the Catholic Church needs to halt this campaign that can stoke the fault-lines between communities. Economic worries and political concerns must not become grist for the politics of religious polarisation. The Catholic Church has an illustrious history of public service and contribution to the making of a secular Kerala. Hopefully, the current "jihad" campaign is a temporary aberration, which the clergy will step back from immediately.

FLATTENING THE HILLS

Haryana's narrow definition of Aravallis ignores range's ecological role. State government needs to rethink its plan

A NEW PLAN to draw the boundaries of the Aravallis in Haryana could deprive a big chunk of the world's oldest fold mountain system from enjoying the protection accorded to eco-sensitive regions in the NCR. A committee constituted by the state government has asked officials to identify areas under Aravallis on the basis of a 1992 MoEF order that limits the mountain range in Haryana to the erstwhile Gurgaon district — currently Gurugram and Nuh districts. That means more than 9,000 hectares in Faridabad will not come under the National Conservation Zone (NCZ), exposing the area to real estate activities and jeopardising the mountain range's ecological functions.

Extending for nearly 700 km from eastern Gujarat to south Haryana, through Rajasthan and Delhi, the Aravallis are the green lungs for large parts of the subcontinent. They moderate the velocity of hot winds that blow towards north India and resist the advance of the Thar Desert towards the Indo-Gangetic plains. Their forests are crucial to recharging groundwater. The NCR regional plan 2021, framed in 2005, slotted the Aravalli ecosystem in the area under the NCZ, most of which is out of bounds for construction activity. But the plan has been subject to vigorous stonewalling by successive governments in Haryana, which insisted that there was no clear definition of the Aravallis. In 2017, the state administration told the Union Ministry of Urban Development that there were no Aravallis in Haryana, except in parts of Gurugram and even there, the NCZ strictures on construction activity should not apply. Last year, it was pulled up by the Punjab and Haryana High Court for delaying the notification of NCZ.

Since 2002, a number of Supreme Court orders have placed strictures on mining in the Aravallis. However, real estate developers — as well as miners — have found ways to flatten the hills and appropriate land. In 2018, the apex court noted that the range had lost a quarter of its hills. In recent times, the apex court has come down heavily on illegal construction in the Aravallis — at times making no distinction between farmhouses of the rich and the dwellings of the poor. It would, however, be salutary to understand that such transgressions are a result of a complex interplay of socioeconomic factors and administrative failures. In Haryana, much of the administrative failure stems from poor appreciation of the ecological services provided by the Aravallis. The state government would do well to keep in mind the increasing pollution level in Haryana's cities, most of which are also groundwater stressed. A narrow definition of the Aravallis will not be in the interests of the well-being of the state's residents.

EMMA'S JOURNEY

Raducanu's Grand Slam win told the story of a prodigy. It also had a backstory of the immigrant's enterprise

CRUNCHING DOWN-THE-LINE BACKHANDS and smacking deep forehands cross-court saw Emma Raducanu keep it all crisp in her breakout Grand Slam title victory at the US Open. Even by women's tennis' non-jaded standards, where 20 different players have become Slam champs in the last 10 years, the all-teen final featuring 18-year-old Raducanu and Leylah Fernandez, 19, at Flushing Meadows, seemed to speak of dewey spring in the autumn tournament. Raducanu, with her backstory of immigrant upbringing in the United Kingdom, while being born in Canada to Romanian and Chinese parents, made it a persuasive watch. In an Olympic year, the history-making champion — British Virginia Wade last won a Slam in 1977 — is expected to edge out Tom Daley of August Tokyo Olympic vintage for the BBC Sports Personality of the Year honours.

Raducanu's story is different from so many other teenage prodigies. Call it the immigrant's enterprise or the genius of the young woman, Emma aces academics with straight-A's and could've taken her pick from among swimming, golf or table tennis. Tales continue to trickle out about her unwavering focus in training through the pandemic, on streets outside her home and at the neighbourhood tennis club.

Women's tennis doesn't recreate the Big Four aura of the men's game. With no one dominating, it tends to lean back and observe how many waves the likes of Angelique Kerber, Simona Halep, Garbine Muguruza, and most recently Naomi Osaka and Ashleigh Barty, can ride. Time will tell if Raducanu can hold aloft a few, or many, trophies and string together consistent seasons. There's the additional challenge to live up to British expectations, which are never tempered, nor proportional, and Sweet Caroline is a fluttering hope away.



KANWAL SIBAL

9/11 SET THE stage for America's "global war on terror". The attacks by al Qaeda on September 11, 2001 against the military and economic symbols of the foremost global power were bound to trigger a global American response.

The attacks elicited outpourings of sympathy and solidarity worldwide, even from countries hostile to the US. The shocked realisation that well-organised terrorism could cause grand-scale mayhem anywhere must have sunk in. President Vladimir Putin was the first foreign leader to speak to President George W Bush. China sent condolences. Cuba, Libya, North Korea as well as Syria's Assad and Iranian leaders Khamenei and Khatami condemned the attacks.

Afghanistan was the first target of the war on terror, whose grandiose objectives as spelled out by the Bush administration were to defeat terrorists such as Osama bin Laden and destroy their organisations, end state sponsorship of terrorism, strengthen the international effort to combat terrorism, and abolish terrorist sanctuaries and havens. The Taliban regime, which harboured Osama, was ousted militarily.

In the heady phase of US unilateralism, it was used as a tool to achieve larger foreign policy goals in West Asia by eliminating leaders opposed to or no longer serving America's geopolitical interests in the region, beginning with Saddam Hussein. Military action against Iraq in 2003 was also labelled as part of the war on terror. The Arab Spring phenomenon of 2011 got US backing in the hope that the urge for democracy in the Arab world would prove an antidote to religious extremism and terrorism in Arab society. The regime change in Libya and the bid to topple the Syrian regime in 2011 on mixed grounds of terrorism and human rights were products of this belief deriving from the mood and policies that 9/11 generated in the US.

However, the signal failure in Iraq and Afghanistan to do "nation building" on democratic foundations, the chaos in Libya and the havoc in Syria exposed the political and military limitations of the war on terror as an instrument of state power in eliminating non-state actors inspired by a pan-national ideology



CHETNA GALA-SINHA

PARVATI SELLS vegetables in the weekly market of Mhaswad in Satara, Maharashtra. She has a savings account with the Mann Deshi Sahakari Bank. But whenever she needs money, she takes a loan from the local moneylender. One day, while buying vegetables at the weekly market, I struck up a conversation and asked her why. She responded, "Yes, I know I am paying Rs 10 interest per day on every Rs 100 I borrow from the moneylender, which is exorbitant. But I do not want to take a loan from your bank because I require a loan in the morning and want to repay it in the evening or maybe next week. I also would like to take the second loan immediately. And all this flexibility is given to me by the moneylender and not by your bank."

Parvati's situation is not unique. Her business is one of the 63.4 million MSMEs in India, 99 per cent of which are micro enterprises with less than Rs 10 lakh in investment. These tiny businesses are run by nano-entrepreneurs, a burgeoning segment that is absolutely critical to the growth of our rural economy.

What is being done to bring these businesses into the formal economy? If we assess our progress against the definition of "financial inclusion", which refers to the accessibility of banking and availability of credit, we can congratulate ourselves on significant progress. However, if we question the adequacy of the financial products that they find access to, we fall short. Parvati might be financially "included" but she is not financially "integrated". The journey from inclusion to integration is

War and terror

Measured by its stated objectives and international consequences, US-led war on terror has failed

The US war on terror has been selective, marred by double standards, equivocations and geopolitical motives. The stated goal was not to make only America safe, but eliminate the terrorist threat globally as part of America's leadership role. The way it has withdrawn from Afghanistan has created doubts on whether it will honour its commitments elsewhere, leading countries to hedge. Europe sees the withdrawal as a foreign policy disaster for the western alliance. India is less safe with the Taliban-Pakistan takeover of Afghanistan under the accommodating umbrella of the US.

based on scriptural injunctions, cultural aversion and a deep sense of revenge for humiliations inflicted by the West. An upsurge in terrorism, civil conflict, refugee flows and unprincipled local compromises with extremism discredited the war on terror. President Barack Obama, in 2013, lowered his sights, discarded the war on terror phraseology, narrowing down the "boundless war on terror" to "a series of persistent, targeted efforts to dismantle specific networks of violent extremists that threaten America". This signified already that America's anti-terrorism crusade would be limited primarily to protecting its own security, a view expressed more clearly by Trump. The unilateral retreat from Afghanistan broadly represents this reality.

Measured by its stated objectives and international consequences, the global war on terror has failed strikingly. Bin Laden's elimination might have provided a trophy to display, but Islamist terrorism and religious extremism got a tremendous boost with the rise of the Islamic State in parts of Iraq and Syria, and after its elimination, the pronounced spread in Africa of extremist movements affiliated with the al Qaeda and the Islamic State. Islamist terrorism has viciously struck Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, and has targeted Southeast Asia. Europe has suffered dramatic terrorist attacks and an influx of refugees, with political and social consequences marked by the rise of anti-Islamic sentiment and right-wing nationalist forces.

America's post-9/11 war on terror impacted India's interests unfavourably. The removal of autocratic but secular regimes in West Asia allowed extremist Islamist movements that were consciously suppressed to rise, leading to serious concerns in India, a victim of jihadi terrorism, about the fallout in the subcontinent.

Ironically, though, the emergence of the Islamic State and a reinvigorated Muslim Brotherhood has had the collateral effect of drawing the Gulf states such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, concerned about the danger posed to their polities by these ideologies, closer to India. America's draconian sanctions on Iran, including for its alleged terrorist activities, have adversely affected our strategic as

well as energy interests in Iran.

The gap between the objectives of America's war on terror and actual achievement is clear in our region. The terrorists have neither been defeated nor their organisations destroyed, either in Pakistan or Afghanistan. Despite Pakistan's state sponsorship of terrorism, not only against India but also against US forces in Afghanistan, the US has looked to Pakistan to facilitate its withdrawal from Afghanistan through its Taliban links, allowing it in the process to obtain its longed for "strategic depth" in Afghanistan against India. The US has failed to "abolish terrorist sanctuaries and havens" in Pakistan, or to compel an unwilling Pakistan to act against the Haqqani group, which now controls Afghanistan's interior ministry. Ironically, whereas the US acted to destroy the Islamic State in West Asia, it has handed over a state to the Taliban, with the new Afghanistan government liberally composed of UN-designated terrorists. Ironically, Islamist extremists and terrorists have taken over a country without any democratic process with the consent of an America committed to democratic values.

As against all these negative realities, India-US counter-terrorism cooperation has productively expanded in important areas. The US recognition of the LeT, JeM, HuM as terrorist groups, and its references to "cross-border terrorism" have been diplomatically helpful, but this has not balanced the far larger unpunished space given to Pakistan despite its terrorist affiliations.

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The writer is a former foreign secretary

CAPITAL FOR THEIR COURAGE

How financial service providers can enable women entrepreneurs

Bankers and private financial institutions erroneously believe that a poor person takes a microcredit loan because she cannot save. In reality, if you go to any remote area in India and ask any woman how much she has saved in the post office, you will find huge numbers. They are able to save because of village postal agents who collect their savings from the doorstep. Greater accessibility has major benefits not only for the customer but also the supplier.

not only about making products available and accessible, but also about making them relevant, applicable, and acceptable.

The first challenge in making products broadly available is bridging the gap between supply and demand of capital. In a financially integrated world, capital is agile. Yet owing to a limited risk appetite, low or thin-file data on customers and challenging regulatory oversight, capital remains a constraint in designing bespoke products. For India to overcome these challenges, the existing infrastructure must be adapted to our new purpose, providing easy-to-use, customer-centric experiences.

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It is also critical we recognise that the conventional method of one-size-fits-all is no longer viable. Products must be designed and delivered intelligently to meet the customer where they are, and by keeping in mind that they use products to reach their goals. This involves tailoring the products to the needs and income profile of the customer, including being cognisant of their environment, geography, and demography.

Parvati's case became an inspiration for the Mann Deshi Bank to design and launch a cash credit product for women. Since its launch, hundreds of women vendors in the area have benefited from the product.

In the traditional financial system, the design and distribution cost on financial products at sachet size is high. Expensive technology development and brick-and-mortar infrastructure all contribute to an impractical model. Financial service providers are consequently dissuaded from attempting to reach rural, financially excluded groups, and the availability of financial services, therefore, remains an urban privilege. By using the power of machine learning and cloud infrastructure, we can significantly lower operating costs while offering customers affordable, bespoke financial products that help them reach their goals.

While the above are supply side issues, the demand side has its own set of challenges. Financial literacy and technology readiness are two critical issues. Financial education assists people in making sound financial decisions. These are not just challenges of the Indian market, but other economies too.

Despite constraints, rural women entrepreneurs follow the motto "my courage, my capital". It is our responsibility as financial service providers to create an ecosystem for them to deploy this capital of courage.

The writer is the founder of Mann Deshi Mahila Sahakari Bank

SEPTEMBER 14, 1981, FORTY YEARS AGO

REPORT ON RIOTS

THE REPORT OF the three-member judicial commission headed by Jitendra Narain, former judge of the Patna High Court, which probed the April 1979 communal riots in Jamshepur bristles with strident strictures against the RSS, top district officials and the Bihar Military Police (BMP). Set up on May 15, 1979, when the Janata Party was in power, the commission submitted its report to the government on August 31. The two others who served on it are K Ghosh, former chairman of the Tripura Public Service Commission and S Q Rizvi, former IG of police, Bihar. The riot which rocked Jamshepur on April 11 and 12 took a toll

of 108 lives. Releasing the report, Bihar Chief Minister Jagannath Mishra said he would invite the attention of the Union government to the findings of the commission on the activities of the RSS, Jana Sangh (now BJP) and its labour wing, the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh.

WARRANTS IN PUNJAB

THE POLICE HAVE been alerted all over Punjab to arrest Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale whose arrest warrant was obtained by the Ludhiana police from a local court under Section 134 of the IPC for his alleged abetment in the murder of Lala Jagat Narain. Warrants for the arrest of

Bhindranwale's nephew Swaran Singh, and another accused, Dalbir Singh, have also been issued.

UP FLOODS

Floodwaters of the Rapti entered Domariaganj town, in UP's Basti district, when the river breached the Mali-Mannaiya bund. The irrigation authorities were making efforts to plug the breach. The Rapti was flowing above the danger mark by 30 cm at Balrampur, by 43 cm at Bansi and 20 cm at Gorakhpur. The floods have brought misery to people in over 1,000 villages in UP, particularly the state's eastern part. The season's fatalities in the state have gone up to 329.

13 THE IDEAS PAGE

Don't bank on Shanghai group

While India must contribute to collective effort at this week's SCO summit to hold Taliban and Pakistan to their promises, it will be hard to bet on success



CR Sasikumar

The SCO was preceded by the creation of a "Shanghai Five" — Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The three former Soviet republics shared a long frontier with China. The purpose of the Shanghai Five was to stabilise this frontier as well as build on the shared Sino-Russian interest in preventing American meddling in their Central Asian backyard.

Moscow and Beijing were also ill at ease with the American military presence in Afghanistan and its impact on Central Asia. The US military retreat from Afghanistan has brought cheer to both Moscow and Beijing, although publicly they criticise President Joe Biden's hasty retreat.

Would the US retreat weaken the glue that binds Moscow and Beijing in Central Asia or tighten it? Although Russia and China are closer to each other than ever before, their interests are not entirely the same in Central Asia.

While military confidence building measures have grown under the SCO banner, Russia had its own security organisation for the region, called the Central Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Three of the SCO members — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan — along with Armenia and Belarus are members of the CSTO.

Russia sees itself as the sole protector of the former Soviet Republics and may not be ready to share that role with China — "yes" to coordination, but "no" to a Sino-Russian security duality.

Moscow also appears reluctant to back Chinese proposals to promote trade integration under the SCO banner; it prefers the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) under its own leadership. China is not a member of either CSTO or EAEU. This is one reason for the weakness of SCO regionalism.

The Central Asian members of the SCO have quarrels of their own, and have struggled to develop collective approaches to their common regional security challenges. It is no surprise then that they are at variance on the Taliban.

Turkmenistan, which is not part of SCO, has been quite open to engaging the Taliban in sync with its principles of neutrality. Some Russian analysts see Turkmenistan as the po-

Like Moscow and Beijing, Tehran was happy to see the Americans leave in humiliation and appeared hopeful of a positive engagement with the Taliban. Those hopes may have been suspended for now, if not discarded. India and Pakistan, needless to say, are poles apart on the Taliban. Given this divergence, it is unlikely that the SCO can come up with a 'regional solution' for the Afghan crisis. The only real Afghan convergence today is between Pakistan and China. Expect them to try and nudge the SCO towards a positive engagement with the Taliban. Most others have serious concerns.

tential weak link in the defence against the Taliban's potential threats to the region. Uzbekistan seems open to a cautious engagement with the Taliban.

But Tajikistan, given its kinship with the Afghan Tajiks and direct links to the Panjshir valley across the border, has been sharply critical of Kabul's evolution under the Taliban. Iran, which has ethnic and linguistic links with the Persian-speaking Tajiks, appears equally worried about the Taliban's policies towards minorities.

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While the SCO is not an impressive regional institution, it remains an important diplomatic forum. Delhi has sought to make full use of the SCO's diplomatic possibilities without any illusions about its effectiveness.

At the SCO summit this week, Prime Minister Narendra Modi should remind other leaders of the "three evils" that the SCO set out to defeat — terrorism, extremism and separatism. Few would disagree that the Taliban embodied all the three sins in the past. Today, the Taliban and its mentor Pakistan say the sinner wants to become a saint.

While India must contribute to the collective effort at SCO to hold the Taliban and Pakistan to their promises, it will be hard to bet on success. Delhi must focus on finding common ground with those members of the SCO who do share India's concerns about Afghanistan.

The writer is director, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore and contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"A wide-ranging crackdown and leftist rhetoric have stirred fears of a return to the apogee of Maoism."

—THE GUARDIAN

Challenge matters, not challenger

Opposition does not need an alternative to Modi, as much as it needs to convey fallibility of ruling party



GIRISH KUBER

SHARAD PAWAR'S RECENT "zamindar" dig at the Congress expectedly set a cat amongst the opposition's pigeons, who were chanting a mantra of unity against the BJP. The reactions that the old Maratha warhorse's statement triggered can be divided into two categories.

On the one hand is the secular camp, some of whose members are perennially wary about every move and statement of the Maratha strongman, for which he himself is to be blamed. This group comprises mainly of Congressmen who like to display their allegiance to the party's First Family and, as such, try to discredit any leader who can emerge as a challenger to Gandhi. Pawar unfailingly keeps providing ammunition to this group at regular intervals.

On the other hand are the BJP and RSS sympathisers. This group, having successfully sowed one thought in the politically-naive middle class's mind, keeps posing the question: Where is an alternative to Narendra Modi? Helped unknowingly — but mostly knowingly — by the media, this question appears to have become a virtual political reality. The impression that there is no alternative to the BJP in general and to Modi in particular is the narrative successfully created and even more successfully marketed by the saffron camp. The situation on the ground unfortunately strengthens this, making the opposition's challenge even tougher. Before we deal with this "saamne hai kaun" (who can emerge as a challenger to Modi) question, some myths need to be busted.

The first and foremost myth is about how elections are won and lost in India. It needs to be said that in our "first-past-the-post" system, the opposition never wins. It is the ruling party that loses. And by virtue of the rulers' loss, the opposition gets a chance to lead. Our electoral history since 1951-52, when the first elections took place in independent India, will prove this often-overlooked fact. There is hardly an election which the opposition "won".

This negates the need to present a challenger to the ruler even before elections are held. It is always the electoral outcome that throws up the alternative. There was "no alternative" to Indira Gandhi in the post-Emergency elections, there was "no alternative" to Rajiv Gandhi after the historic mandate of 1984 and there was "no alternative" to Atal Bihari Vajpayee in the 2004 "India Shining" elections. It was after their losses that Morarji Desai, VP Singh and Manmohan Singh emerged. The situation was similar in the much-touted "positive vote-for-change-election" held in 2014 which catapulted Modi to the national stage. In 2014, it was due to the Congress's inept

handling of UPA II that the BJP succeeded in creating the "oust Manmohan Singh" feeling amongst the majority of voters. The exception, however, could be the subsequent election fought on a nationalist agenda, thanks to Pulwama and the following air strikes on Pakistan.

So the question that arises is: What makes the incumbent lose?

The answers are many and are applicable more or less to all dethroned PMs. The hubris that invariably sets in during the second term has been the primary cause in many a PM's loss. Add to it the complacency and the air of invincibility created by over-enthusiastic cronies. The third reason could be the free import of leaders from other parties which voters experience ahead of every election. Though most of these leaders get defeated, that has hardly proved to be a deterrent to the ruling parties' poaching of the opposition.

In India, it is strange to note that though the economy also plays a crucial role in stoking the fire against the ruling party of the day, it doesn't get due importance in the election agenda. To become an election issue, the economy needs to be tagged with inflation and/or joblessness. Election campaigning gets spiced up if these issues are coupled with large-scale corruption allegations. Indians love to defeat so-called corrupt leaders. In a land full of the dispossessed, anyone, especially from the ruling elite, seen amassing substantial wealth is a strict no-no for the common man. Remember the BJP's smartness in linking the corruption allegations against hordes of UPA ministers in 2014 to rising prices? Along with these come caste, religious equations and an ability to form alliances.

Every point stated above, except one, applies to the BJP. History proves that the window for the opposition opens up every time the ruling combine appears unconquerable. However, this is not to suggest that the opposition should wait till the ruling party starts digging its own grave. The opposition's success depends on how skilfully it conveys the fallibility of the ruler.

This brings us to the key question: Where is Modi's challenger? This question was posed to a few national leaders from different parties. The answers are interesting. "The tide will start turning the moment the opposition combine, especially Congress, issues a simple, two-line statement," a veteran leader said. Another spelt out what that "ideal" statement could be. It reads like this: None from the Gandhi family shall run for the PM's post and, should the situation arise, they will unitesly bring in a reputed technocrat, like Raghuram Rajan, under whom the government shall be formed.

"The surge that the BJP witnessed in 2019 is due to its success in bringing non-BJP voters into its fold. No party can be propelled to power only on its dedicated vote bank. It's the outsiders' votes that give it a surge. This can easily be reversed if the opposition plays its own masterstroke like this one," he says.

The writer is editor, LokSatta

The engaged scholar

Sheila Bhalla combined rigour of research with support for peasant movements

SHEILA BHALLA (1933-2021), professor emerita at Jawaharlal Nehru University, an internationally renowned agricultural economist with special expertise on Haryana agriculture and a scholar deeply engaged with progressive and democratic movements in India passed away on September 5, 2021. She and her husband, G S Bhalla, were my teachers at the Department of Economics, Panjab University (PU), Chandigarh, and were the kind of teachers with whom you kept lifelong contact. G S Bhalla passed away in 2013.

Sheila, as she was affectionately known, was Canadian by background. She met Gurdarshan (G S Bhalla) when both were carrying out their postgraduate studies at the London School of Economics. Both were attracted to the socialist vision of reorganising economies and societies; in Sheila's case, she was influenced by her father, J C W Scott, a Canadian physicist and a radar specialist who was also a committed communist. This shared intellectual and political vision led to Gurdarshan and Sheila getting married and deciding to move to India. Bhalla came from a large family originating from the village of Badhni Kalan near Moga. To engage meaningfully with her new Punjabi family, she acquired an excellent understanding of the Punjabi language and reasonable proficiency in spoken Punjabi. For a considerable period during their academic careers in Chandigarh and Delhi, Sheila looked after her husband's elderly mother who could only speak and understand Punjabi and developed a loving relationship with her.

The Bhallas spent their entire lives combining their superb academic work with multiple forms of support for workers' and peasants' movements and for democratic rights in India. I have so many memories of them, but will share just one today. When they joined PU in 1969, I had just entered the second year of my undergraduate studies. On September 2, 1969, the Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh passed away and some of us organised a meeting in the university to pay homage to his revolutionary leadership. Many students turned up but only two faculty members from the whole university joined the meeting — the Bhallas. It was a great boost to our morale and the beginning of a lifelong relationship.

The management of PU was, for a very long time, controlled by pro-Arya Samaj right-wing groups supported by the Congress Party and the Jan Sangh, and later by the Bharatiya Janata Party. Together with her husband, Sheila played an understated but critical role in challenging the dominance of these parties. They were assisted in this by their friends Dharam Vir of the Chemical Engineering department (a man of remarkable intellect and moral stature who was a life-long friend of the Bhallas) and Gurbaksh Singh Soch of the English department (who died young). They developed the Panjab University Teachers

Association (PUTA) from an organisation of virtually no importance to one that had critical significance to the governance of PU. When Professor Bhalla successfully challenged a heavy-weight pro-Congress faculty member (V N Tewari) for the office of president of PUTA, Sheila played a key role in organising and strategising their group's election campaign. Many left-wing teachers such as D N Jauhar, Manjit Singh and Ronki Ram (not to mention myself) later became presidents of PUTA, but the influence of left-wing ideology on the organisation was first created by the Bhallas and Vir. Whenever the history of PUTA is written, their names will feature as guiding stars.

During their time at PU, the major opportunity and breakthrough in the research career of the Bhallas came with the award of a substantial research project grant by the Haryana government to study the development of the Green Revolution in the state. Their first major publication, Changing Agrarian Structure in India: A Study of the Impact of Green Revolution in Haryana (1974), resulted from this project. One important finding of the study was the inverse relationship between farm size and productivity, that is, when farm size increases, farm output per acre decreases. The study's finding that small farmers are more productive resonates today with the farmers' movement in India, which aims to defend small and marginal farmers against the onslaught of big agro-business firms.

Subsequently and especially after their move to JNU, a division of intellectual labour seemed to develop between them — Sheila specialised in Haryana and other regions of India such as Andhra Pradesh, while G S Bhalla specialised in Punjab and Gujarat, among other regions. Sheila pioneered the study of agrarian relations in Haryana and published outstanding papers on the subject.

The tribute paid to Professor Sheila Bhalla by the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) recognises the convergence between her intellectual and political work:

"AIKS expresses deep grief at the passing away of Professor Sheila Bhalla, a life-long fighter for the cause of peasants and workers. Her vast array of work helps us to understand the impact of capitalist development on Indian agriculture, the plight of the poor, agricultural labourers, tenant farmers and other peasant groups. An agricultural economist of great renown, after her retirement she continued to live an active life dedicated to studying the changing face of agriculture and the impact of neoliberal economic policies."

Bhalla is survived by her daughter Sharan Rastogi, and her sons Upinder Singh Bhalla and Ravinder Singh Bhalla (all three have doctorates in their respective fields in India), and Yoginder Singh Bhalla, together with eight grandchildren.

The writer is Professor Emerita, Oxford Brookes Business School

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A CORRECTION

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Chandan The Pioneer' (IE, September 6). Chandan Bhan Prasad says *The Washington Post's* South Asia Bureau chief Kenneth J Cooper sought my help to find a Delhi journalist. I am surprised that Prasad has swallowed this untruth from the Internet. I have never met, known or spoken with Cooper and he never asked me to do what Prasad says he did. The article of mine to which Prasad refers, though published 25 years ago, continues to be discussed and cited. Any piece of writing that attracts so much attention on the net is bound to gather a lot of dross. Some have even claimed that Cooper was the first to research the subject of Dalit presence in Indian media and that I merely picked the idea from him. Let me clarify that there never was any foreign journalist who asked me that question. If at all, he was a figment of my imagination, just a peg created to hang my story on. I must also tell my friend, Mr. Prasad, that I am very much "a civilisational Indian and a Hindu" and yet fairly capable of pricking a mud-caked conscience, Hindu or whatever. This should not be mistaken as my inability to appreciate Mr. Prasad's well-intended sarcasm. Only he could have turned out a phrase so incisive, yet so free of any malice.

BN Uniyal, via email

ship's approach may cost the ruling party the state.

Bal Govind, Noida

RESPECT HISTORY

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Stones of Sabarmati' (IE, September 13). Historic sites such as the Sabarmati Ashram and events bind us together as a people. Attempts to redevelop these sites must not destroy the essence and originality of these symbols of our heritage.

Hemant Contractor, Pune

MORE THAN TECH

THIS REFERS TO the editorial 'IIT-Plus' (IE, September 13). It's heartening that the old IITs are trying to make their curricula more holistic and contemporary. They are giving students the option of choosing non-technical courses. This liberal approach fits in with the emphasis on interdisciplinary studies as advocated by the New Education Policy adopted last year.

Sudip Kumar Dey, Barasat

PALM OIL ROUTE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The aatmanirbharta challenge' (IE, September 13). The author suggests that a focus on oil palm at the cost of wheat, rice and sugarcane could reduce India's dependence on edible oil imports. Our policy-makers would, however, be well advised to learn the lessons from the counterparts in Indonesia, where the environmental consequences of oil palm have been well documented.

Bandana Pradhan, Lucknow

CHANGE IN GUJARAT

THIS REFERS TO the editorial 'Shrinking the CM' (IE, September 13). It's clear all is not well in Gujarat BJP. That is why Vjjay Rupani was asked to go. The BJP leader-