



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

A limited window

Policy support is needed to nurture the drivers of growth, sustain recovery process



SAUGATA BHATTACHARYA

SPEND MORE

Centre must shed conservative approach to spending and front load its expenditure to further economic recovery

RECENTLY RELEASED DATA by the Controller General of Accounts (CGA) suggests that the fiscal health of the central government is in a better position than expected. At the aggregate level, the Centre's gross tax collections in the first four months (April-July) of the current financial year have already touched 31 per cent of the budgeted target for the year, significantly higher than in previous years. Tax collections are almost 30 per cent higher than in 2019-20, despite the economy being around 9 per cent lower. However, there is cause for concern. The dip in GST collections in August when seen in conjunction with lacklustre disinvestment proceeds, the manufacturing purchasing managers index losing momentum in August, and the lower-than-expected core-sector data, raises concerns over the durability of the recovery and government finances.

A closer look at the disaggregated fiscal data released by the CGA shows that direct tax collections continue to lag indirect taxes. However, under the rubric of direct taxes, both corporate and income taxes have witnessed healthy growth so far this year. On the indirect tax side, while excise tax collections continue to grow at a brisk pace, the dip in GST collections in August, though minor, is worrying. As ICRA noted, the dip has occurred, despite a "healthy improvement in the GST e way bills to a daily average of 2.1 million in July 2021 from 1.8 million in June 2021, which was reflective of the lifting of restrictions especially across the Southern states". Of equal concern is the slow progress on meeting the disinvestment target. As against the target of Rs 1.75 lakh crore, proceeds have so far touched only Rs 8,368 crore.

Surprisingly, despite a healthy revenue growth which creates space for the Centre to ramp up support to the economy, data suggests that the government is being conservative when it comes to spending. In the first four months of the current financial year, revenue expenditure has been lower than last year, and only marginally higher than in 2019-20. GDP estimates had also shown that overall government consumption expenditure actually contracted by 4.8 per cent in the first quarter of the current financial year, when the country was in the throes of the Covid second wave. Capital expenditure also contracted in July, though for the full four-month period it was higher than last year, and the year before that. Considering the starkly uneven nature of the recovery, the stretched financial position of MSMEs, and of households at the lower end of the income distribution, the government should front load its expenditure and use the fiscal space it has to provide greater support to the economy.

THE APRIL-JUNE QUARTER GDP numbers were slightly weaker than the consensus estimates, with growth coming in at 20.1 per cent. The more representative measure of economic activity, gross value added (GVA), grew by 18.8 per cent. As a technical aside, GDP is derived by adding indirect tax collections, net of subsidy payouts, to GVA. The higher GDP growth was driven by high indirect tax collections, largely GST. Note that while interpreting the growth prints, one must be mindful that they are over a base quarter that had contracted sharply due to the lockdowns during the first Covid wave last year.

In terms of sectoral activity, the revival of manufacturing GVA was the most robust, with mining and electricity growth somewhat moderate. Agriculture grew at 4.5 per cent, with cereals, pulses and oilseeds output at all-time highs. As could be expected, the services sector remained vulnerable, with activity even softer than expected. The weakest was the composite print of "trade, hotels, transport and communications", though even the construction revival was weaker than expected, given analysts' reports of strong residential demand. Steel and cement output growth — proxies for construction activity — were also quite robust in the quarter.

From the demand and expenditure side — a mirror to the above output description — private consumption was up 19.3 per cent (vs a 26.2 per cent contraction) while investment was at 55.3 per cent. Government consumption was lower by 4.8 per cent. Net exports (exports minus imports) are typically in deficit, but the gap was much lower in the first quarter — almost a quarter of the deficit observed in the last year. This reflects both high exports and subdued imports (mainly a reflection of weak domestic demand, particularly of lower crude imports).

The overall and sector-specific activity levels need to be evaluated vis-à-vis the corresponding thresholds of (the pre-pandemic) first quarter of 2019-20. This provides a perspective of how much lower activity levels remain at present, and the quantum of recovery required to regain the levels. The deepest gaps, understandably, persist in the services segments, most starkly in the construction and "trade+" groups, which are still significantly below the thresholds. In aggregate, GVA remains 8 per cent below, despite the pace of recovery rising.

Looking beyond the first quarter, the set of high-frequency economic signals we track suggest a strong recovery in July and August. Axis Bank's Composite Leading Indicator shows August activity above pre-pandemic levels, and would have been even higher if poor tractor sales in July had not pulled the Index reading lower. Mobility indicators — electricity consumption, e-Way bills, etc — suggest continuing strong activity in August. Rains, still deficient in most geographies, seem to have recovered recently. Jobs and hiring indicators, though, present mixed signals.

We expect India's 2021-22 GDP growth around 9.5-10 per cent, with some upside, as the pace of vaccinations increase, and if concerns of even a moderate third wave begin to wane. But, how can this recovery over the rest of the year and beyond be sustained, and even accelerated? The three distinct potential growth drivers — consumption, investment and exports — will need to be effectively sustained by policy initiatives over the next couple of years.

The most direct support is likely to be higher government spending. The prints of the Centre's revenues and expenditures during April-July this year suggest that it has significant room to increase spending. In addition to revenues from planned disinvestments, speedy and effective implementation of the National Monetisation Plan will open up further fiscal space to increase spending, in particular, on capex. These initiatives are well placed for bridging demand gaps in the near term.

There have been significant improvements in corporate balance sheets over the course of the pandemic. The debt overhang has been reduced, operations have become more efficient, and the surviving enterprises are more competitive and resilient. However,

the large universe of mid-and small-sized enterprises will take some time to restore their pre-pandemic operational levels. An increase in the flow of credit, from banks, NBFCs and markets, particularly to these stressed segments, is a priority, as a supplement to state spending. Bank credit off-take has remained modest during April-July, growing at an average of 6.1 per cent. This will need to increase.

The external environment provides another opportunity for India to scale up. Global inventories are low and depending on the progression of the pandemic relaxations across geographies, are likely to provide opportunities for Indian exports to fill some of these gaps. While some of the supply dislocations might be transitory, this is an opportunity to increase and embed market shares. Yet, offshore risks are also rising.

Global central banks are signalling the imminent normalisation of ultra-loose monetary policy, and the resulting increase in financial sector volatility will have spillover effects on emerging markets, including India. While our economic fundamentals are now far better, the RBI will also shift to a neutral monetary policy stance sooner or later, with a gradual increase in interest rates. To keep the process smooth, it is crucial to raise India's potential growth so that the economic recovery does not rapidly close the output gap, thereby preventing a surge in inflationary pressures.

There is a limited window of opportunity for India to leverage the current ongoing realignment of global supply chains and progressively onboard both manufacturing and services entities. Multiple reform initiatives, tax and other incentives are in the process of implementation. These need to be accelerated in coordination with states, and using the massive amounts of data now available, to enable an environment of steady, high growth in the medium term.

The writer is Executive Vice President and Chief Economist, Axis Bank. Views are personal

FILTHY AND UNHEALTHY

Mysterious fever in Western UP suggests poor hygiene and sanitation. Local administration must step up

AT LEAST 40 people, most of them children, have lost their lives in Firozabad in Uttar Pradesh to a mysterious fever, which officials suspect as dengue. More than 200 children are undergoing treatment at the pediatric section of the children's hospital in the area. An ICMR team that tested samples from the hospital has ruled out Covid. Firozabad's district magistrate, Chandra Vijay Singh, who carried out an inspection of the hospital, told this newspaper that people had complained about "cleanliness problems in some areas". He also gave information about "an intensive spraying" drive in the affected areas and said "many teams are monitoring the situation". But the truth is that it required a visit by UP chief minister Yogi Adityanath to the outbreak-hit areas for the administration to spring into action, nearly a week after the disease assumed grave proportions.

The best way to prevent dengue is to prevent bites by mosquitoes infected by the pathogen. In other words, sanitation and preventing water logging hold the key to disease control and elimination — an imperative underlined by the WHO and national health agencies. The Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare's strategy for prevention and control of dengue talks of the importance of local bodies in framing area-specific responses to tackle the disease. By all accounts, the Firozabad administration has fallen short in this respect. Like in several other parts of the country, neglect in basic sewerage and waste disposal facilities affects the quality of people's lives in the area's working-class colonies, home to more than 60 per cent of its population. The locality at the epicenter of the current outbreak has a sewer drain running perpendicular to its entry point, it has several open drains and a large garbage dump about 100 metres inside the locality that testifies to the negligible impact of the Centre's flagship project, Clean Indian Mission, on Firozabad. While the jury is still out on whether the epidemic is dengue, doctors in the area seem to be certain that lack of cleanliness is the primary reason for the disease stalking the area.

Meanwhile, another mysterious disease has been reported from Mathura — like Firozabad, a part of the Agra division. Officials here talk of "some deaths" caused by scrub typhus — a vector-borne disease caused by bacteria and with proven links to poor hygiene and sanitation. Mathura and Firozabad are part of the UP government's "smart city" plans. Clearly, the administration in these areas have a long way to go in being alert to peoples' well-being.

PARTITIONED MINDS

Partition savagery is the collective shame of the Subcontinent



T M KRISHNA

IT HAS BEEN nearly three weeks since the Prime Minister declared August 14 as Partition Horrors Remembrance Day. Though he did not mention any specific community in his tweet, his intention was abundantly clear, both from the date he chose and the joy with which members of the BJP responded to the declaration.

I was told on social media that, as a South Indian, I had no locus standi to comment, since the violence of Partition was not a part of my family story. I enter this discourse as an individual who, like many, belongs to a family that was parochial, though we lived thousands of kilometres away from where the frenzied mobs were doing their worst. Fear festers and perpetuates violence. But what caused this fear? Apart from the larger and universal philosophical enquiries into the nature of fear, we need to look closely at the undulations caused by religion, caste, and gender that have made fear normative. The millions who lost their lives during Partition were victims of this normalisation for which we, as a society, need to take the blame. My grandparents, sitting in Madras, were as culpable as a family in Punjab or Sindh. Fear has no borders. The Congress, the Muslim League and every political leader, including Gandhi, Nehru, Patel and Jinnah, were only reflections of us. We failed — all of us, collectively.

We failed because we were fearful, angry and triggered by hate. Hate grabbed every human being in the Subcontinent, ate at our insides and let us strew carcasses on our streets, the stench of which still remains. Being deeply

anguished by the horrors after they have happened does not reduce our culpability.

Remembrance is essential; we cannot and should not forget. But memory is also a prioritising mechanism. The first reflex of self-preservation is that the worst is hidden, in the hope that it will be forgotten. But those experiences, pushed to the deepest recesses, remain open wounds and the hate grows. Nobody knows where the hurt ends and hate begins. Soon they become interchangeable, even synonymous. Hence, Prime Minister, when you decide that the loss of lives during the Partition needs to be remembered, what do you mean? Whose deaths do you want us to mourn? Do you also want us to remember the incredible stories of compassion that emerged during the time? Shall we also remember that harsh political and religious lines kill? Do you want us to acknowledge the anguish of families who live in Pakistan?

What the Prime Minister wants us to remember is "the horrors". And he wants it remembered on the day that Pakistan declared its freedom from the British Raj in a struggle we fought together. He qualified that tweet with phrases such as "our sisters and brothers" and "in memory of the struggles and sacrifices of our people". Who are "our people" when men, women, and children were slaughtered by people who claimed to be either Hindu, Muslim or Sikh? Now that we have chosen to remember "our people", we should also condemn those of "our people" who disembowelled women and smashed the heads of children. Why shy away from that remembrance?

I am ashamed that, from that time of the worst kind of savagery, the Prime Minister attempts to claim a moral high ground for India.

After the PM's announcement, his supporters equated remembrance of Partition with the Holocaust. Such an equalisation is wrong, manipulative and disrespectful of the Holocaust. Jews were persecuted, put in concentration camps, stripped of all their physical, emotional, political and economic humanity, and shot or gassed to death. In the Indian Subcontinent, Partition resulted in shared killing in the name of religion. The perpetrators and victims belonged to Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities, each unleashing greater violence in their respective territories of control. This was a collective act of barbarism that has very few equivalents in the world. What scares me the most is that many who express this analogy actually believe it to be true. In India, they are Hindus, and undoubtedly, an equal number in Pakistan will be Muslims. Both are wrong in this internalised and dangerous falsity.

If the Prime Minister wanted us to really remember Partition for what it was, and hoped that we would learn from it, it would have been a day of shared remembrance between India and Pakistan. Instead, he ensured that the day would increase the Indian majority community's fear of Muslims and Pakistanis a little more every year. When our neighbour celebrates its Independence, we will spew hate. Dharma has left this land.

The writer is a musician and author

THE LOST LEADER

Syed Geelani had his moment in politics, but was blinded by the lack of an expansive vision

SYEDAJI SHAH Geelani, who passed away in Srinagar aged 92, was one of Jammu and Kashmir's tallest separatist leaders who believed that the Valley's destiny was linked to Pakistan. If that defined his political vision, it blinded him as well. For, his endorsement of the two-nation theory that considered religious identity as the basis of statehood was and, to this day, remains antithetical to the very idea of a plural democracy. His intransigent, intractable views could draw crowds of supporters but they also glaringly revealed the narrow limits of separatist politics in J&K. Geelani's headline and maximalist agenda — the merger of J&K with Pakistan — allowed little scope for any negotiated settlement that factored in the ground reality of a territorial dispute involving two nuclear-armed nation states. Moreover, by providing political cover to violence and terror aided and abetted by Islamabad, he failed the people he claimed to represent.

And, yet like most things in the Valley, there was a paradox. Geelani started his political career as a stakeholder in electoral politics — he was thrice MLA in the J&K Assembly. His disillusionment with electoral democracy after the rigged 1987 elections was the moral weapon that he, very effectively, used against the political mainstream. However, it also ended up demonising mainstream politics itself, set off a violent militancy and, eventually, marginalised the Hurriyat Conference, a platform of separatists he once led. He denounced then Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf for mooted a plan to settle the J&K issue and exhorted the Valley to embark on a path of hartals and stone-pelting. His strike calendars disrupted normal life in the Valley while his own family lived a relatively sheltered existence. Governments for long indulged him by providing security, allowing him to travel to Delhi for meetings with Pakistan's diplomats, medical treatment and so on.

When the political terrain shifted in 2014, Geelani found himself in the margins. A hard state has since read down Article 370 and diminished J&K to a UT, his brand of politics is subject to the law of rapidly diminishing returns. Geelani had his moment in the late 1990s and 2000s but he lacked the expansive vision to seize it. The Indian state outwitted him and his beloved Pakistan moved on to new assets. In a way, the Valley's head hardliner scripted his own political obituary.



SEPTEMBER 3, 1981, FORTY YEARS AGO

NO PROBE ON ANTULAY

FINANCE MINISTER R VENKATARAMAN informed the two houses of Parliament that he had known from a "reliable authority" that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had not inaugurated the Indira Pratibha Pratisthan, a trust formed by A R Antulay for which crores of rupees have been collected from different sources. He rejected the Opposition demand for a high-level probe into the affairs of the trust because no improprieties have been committed by it. Venkataraman denied that the money had been used for party activities. If that happened, he assured the Opposition, the trust would lose all ex-

emptions granted to it by the income tax department. During the discussion in both houses of Parliament the government admitted that government departments had been very efficient in disposing off applications of the trust.

ROW OVER DIPLOMAT

IN THE FIRST incident of its kind in Indo-American diplomatic relations, India has vetoed the appointment of a political counsellor in the American embassy and the US retaliated by refusing to accept the appointment of an Indian diplomat in Washington. The government has refused

to accept the appointment of George Griffin as political counsellor after a careful evaluation of his posting in India and other parts of the subcontinent.

CURFEW IN AIZAWL

DISTRICT AUTHORITIES IN Aizawl clamped an indefinite curfew on Aizawl in view of increasing tension in the Mizoram capital. Patrolling by the BSF and CRPF has been intensified. Tension has gripped the city in the past two days following clashes between the police and the Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZO), a student organisation, in which four students and four policemen were injured.

9 THE IDEAS PAGE

From legs to minds

Five million Indians now export more software than Saudi Arabia does oil. Imagine what 1.3 billion Indians could do with lower regulatory cholesterol



MANISH SABHARWAL AND MOHANDAS PAI

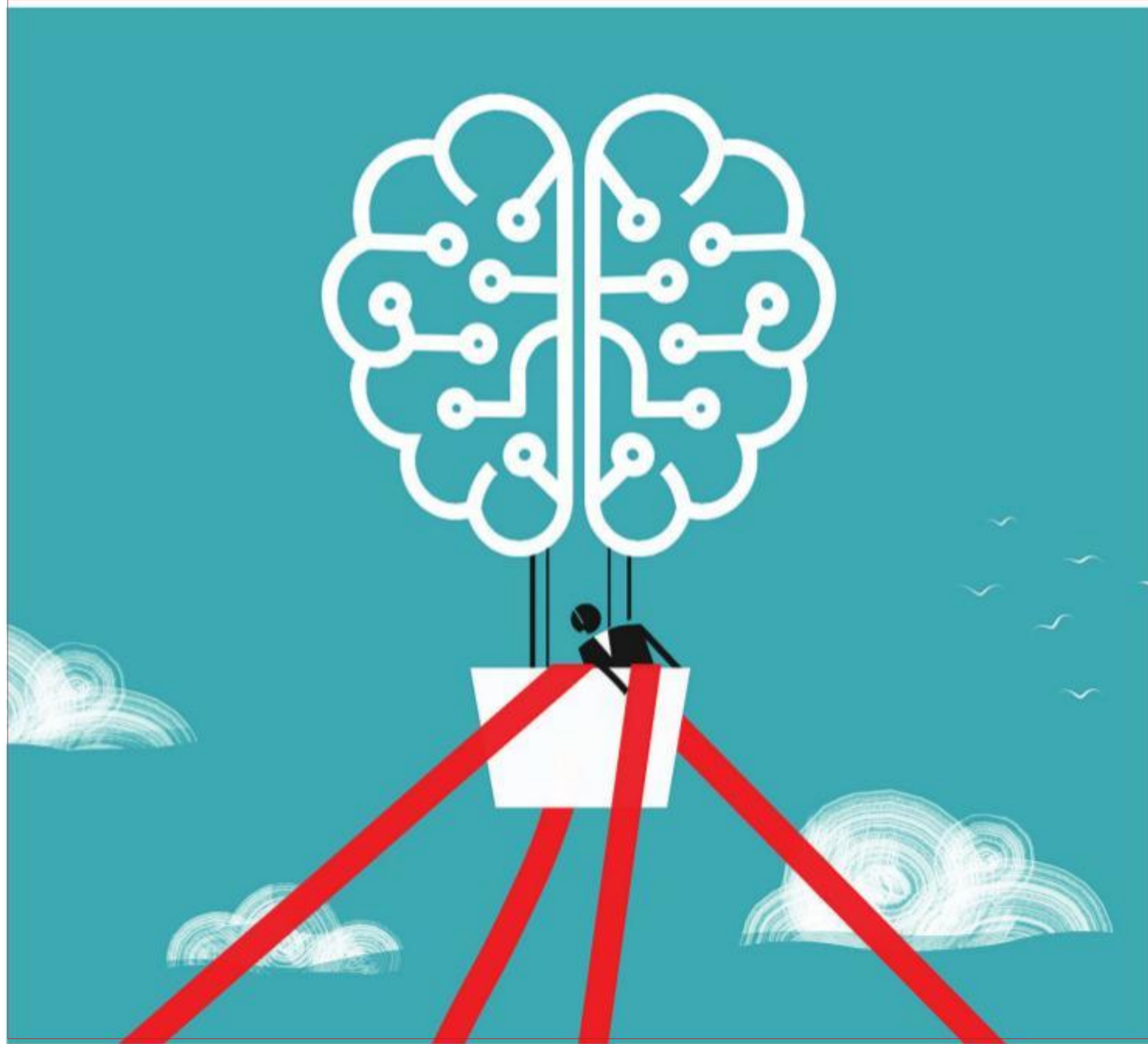
IN 1893, A 12-day sea journey from Japan to Canada sparked multiple conversations between two remarkable Indians travelling independently to attend the World Parliament of Religions and a Technology Expo. Swami Vivekananda convinced Jamssetji Tata that technology can be imported but scientific temper cannot be bought and must be built within a country. A direct outcome of this chance encounter was Jamssetji setting up the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore. An indirect outcome was a technology-encouraging culture at the Tatas that pioneered India's software industry in the 1960s: India now exports more software than Saudi Arabia does oil. Covid and recent Chinese events have increased India's attractiveness to global investors. We make the case for unshackling 1.3 billion Indians with a surgical strike on the regulatory cholesterol that sabotages our productivity.

Last Independence Day brought an exciting addition to big reforms like GST, MPC and IBC. The PM announced that 15,000 of our current 69,000+ employer compliances and 6000+ filings have been identified for removal. This abolition will accelerate formal employment and reduce corruption but must be paired with overdue reform to the accountability, culture and incentives of 25 million civil servants that breed this cholesterol and resist its rationalisation, decriminalisation and digitisation.

Let's step back. India is a development economics outlier: Few models predict a \$2,500 per-capita income country with five million people writing software, internet data costs per GB at 3 per cent of US levels, 1.2 billion people empowered with paperless digital identity verification, 3.5 billion real-time monthly digital payments, \$10 billion in private equity raised in July, and a \$3 trillion public market capitalisation. Harvard's Ricardo Hausman believes the only sustained predictor of sustained economic success is economic complexity and suggests that India's prosperity is less than our economic complexity would predict. India@75 doesn't have a shortage of land, labour, or capital but misses their combining productively at scale to create well-paying jobs.

Our software industry is an oasis of high productivity — 0.8 per cent of India's workers generate 8 per cent of GDP. The mandatory global digital literacy programme and digital investment super-cycle sparked by Covid in education, medicine, shopping, office work, payments, restaurants, and entertainment will double our software employment in five years. Consequently, India will have the switching costs in software that China has in manufacturing. But there is another delightful consequence of our software industry's talent, alumni, and global engagement — 50,000 tech startups that have raised over \$90 billion since 2014 from 500+ institutional investors. India's software services industry and tech startups are each estimated to be worth about \$400 billion today. By 2025, we expect India's startup universe value to grow to \$1 trillion.

The divergent destiny of India's software and manufacturing exports has many reasons but one is the different regulatory thought



C R Sasikumar

worlds of the Software Technology Parks India rules of 1991 (STPI) and the Special Economic Zones Act of 2005 (SEZ). STPI's genius was simplicity. It allowed rebadging existing assets, embraced trust over suspicion, and adopted self-reporting that was largely paperless, presenceless, and cashless. SEZs largely replicated the regulatory cholesterol and distrust that has made India an infertile habitat for employment-intensive industries.

A single factor can't explain divergent STPI vs SEZ outcomes but regulatory cholesterol is surely one of the reasons why it took 72 years for 1.3 billion Indians to cross the total GDP of 66 million Britishers. Covid reminds us that raising our per-capita GDP (138th world ranking) matters more than raising our total GDP (5th world ranking). Raising per-capita needs high productivity manufacturing and domestic services firms that disrupt our low-level equilibrium of labour handicapped without capital and labour handicapped without labour.

India's software services and tech startups are built on India's openness, consistency and fairness. China's magnificent 80 times rise in per-capita GDP over 40 years has also been built on these principles. Until recently, their tech industry seemed unstoppable — half of their 160 unicorns (startups worth more than a billion dollars) operate in AI, big data, and robotics. But this is changing. Over 50 recent regulatory actions against China's tech industry have already cost investors over \$1 trillion. It's risky to underestimate China but let's not underestimate the impact of the Chinese communist party replacing Deng Xiaoping's pragmatic genius with an opaque "common prosperity" on India's attractiveness to factories, multinationals, startups, venture capital and pension funds.

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are either non-Hindu and/or oppose Hindutva. Apart from random attacks on individuals, four leading intellectuals — Narendra Dhabolkar, M M Kalburgi, Govind Pansare and Gauri Lankesh — have been killed by some advocates of Hindutva. Though similar assassins could not reach him, the eminent author and actor, the late Girish Karnad was at the top of a death-list uncovered by police. Those who bear the brunt of vigilante violence in the name of Hindutva find no comfort in being told that other religions are or have been far more violent and oppressive. Or that these are fringe elements that do not represent Hindutva proper.

Opposition to Hindutva is also driven by anxieties over systemic shifts. New laws in several states make it difficult or impossible for inter-faith couples to marry. Destruction of places of worship to avenge historical offences is valourised. Physical attacks on people because of what they eat, or for any other reason that is deemed to be anti-Hindu or anti-national, are condoned.

Many who are deeply anxious about these trends are practising Hindus who see Hindutva as an ideology that is profoundly antithetical to the essence of Hinduism as a spiritual tradition. So they are opposed to polarisation, narrowing of identities and hatred on any grounds.

This is the set of people who have most to lose due to any effort which frames Hindutva in binary or mechanical terms — as that conference poster does. What is unfolding within Indian society now is a complex and multi-dimensional social-political and psychological process which has organic roots that Hindutva advocates fertilise diligently to intensify polarisation.

Therefore, any further narrowing and sharpening of identities, either on lines of religion or political ideology, helps the forces of Hindutva to undermine Hinduism as an open culture, a metaphysics, in order to promote a nationalism that is defined in competition with various "others".

The conference, however inadvertently, could fan the fears of those Hindu who lean towards Hindutva largely due to unresolved insecurities. This is grievously unfortunate because the need of the hour is to open spaces where all of us can be more confidently self-critical and introspective. Those leaning towards Hindutva need to explore how their angst can be creatively and non-violently processed and sublimated. Conversely, those of us who oppose Hindutva need to find ways to reaffirm and restore the Indian ethos of "sarva dharma sambhav" by not treating advocates of Hindutva as our "other", as an opponent to be eliminated.

We are indeed in the midst of a large and epochal struggle for the future of India and what it means to be a Hindu. But to see this challenge merely as a contest between ideologies is to fall for a decoy. Why not instead focus on what really is at stake — the dream of 21st century India as an open society in which unconditional and equal right to life, dignity and freedom of expression is so vibrantly lived that all authoritarian tendencies and hate-based agendas become powerless.

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WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

China's epidemic fight demonstrates that China is far ahead of the West in protecting people's rights amid crises — GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA

The golden rule: Both sides listen

At stake is India's future as an open society in which the right to life and free speech prevails over authoritarian tendencies and hate agendas



RAJNI BAKSHI

AN INTERNATIONAL conference, "Dismantling Global Hindutva", scheduled to be held in the US in the second week of September, has triggered a storm of protest. The conference's website shows that it is co-sponsored by departments in dozens of leading American universities with academics and activists, from India and elsewhere, scheduled as speakers.

The conference's poster depicts the nail-removing side of a hammer plucking out saffron-coloured images of what are clearly meant to be representations of RSS workers. Predictably, social media is buzzing with the outrage of Hindutva advocates while opponents of Hindutva are issuing calls for solidarity with the event. In such a highly charged atmosphere, it is imperative to apply the golden rule of conflict resolution. Namely that both sides listen deeply to decipher the concern, the hurt, the anxiety behind the other's complaint or agitation.

Can each side apply the principle of *purva paksha* — to understand and represent the opponent's view with full integrity and authenticity? In attempting to do this I will depict not the extreme fringe of either side but what I understand to be its core elements.

Let us start with advocates of Hindutva for whom "Hinduism" and "Hindutva" are now inter-changeable terms. They see Hinduism, the third largest religion in the world in terms of population, as being under threat in a world of aggressive proselytisation by Christians and Muslims. There is discontent about Hindu-majority India not being a Hindu *rashtra*, when there are many officially Christian and Muslim nations. Additionally, both in theory and in practice, Indian secularism is perceived to have privileged minorities at the cost of Hindus.

Hindutva is therefore seen as a necessary political ideology in order to secure the future for Hindus — possibly by making India formally a Hindu nation. Some embrace the militant modes of Hindutva because there is a self-image of Hindus as having been passive for too long and not adequately addressing various kinds of insults and affronts, be it in the distant past or now. From this perspective the call for "Dismantling Global Hindutva" is seen as an open threat. The conference poster is thus experienced as an insult.

Now let us look at the concerns and anxieties of those who oppose Hindutva. In essence, this opposition is anchored in the experience of India as a multi-cultural, multi-faith nation with a syncretic culture to be proud of. Commitment to this rich cultural heritage of respect and space for all faiths, is enshrined in India's Constitution.

Opposition to Hindutva has intensified because of the visible increase in social, verbal and physical violence against people who

The Kabul mission

India's rescue efforts are guided by the idea of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam



ANIL BALUNI

AS A grim situation unfolds in Afghanistan, particularly in Kabul, post the withdrawal of foreign troops, the world stares at a humanitarian crisis. Countries with their citizens stranded in Afghanistan are burning the midnight oil to ensure their safe evacuation. Since August 16, over 800 Indians have been evacuated back under "Operation Devi Shakti". Indian Armed Forces are engaged in evacuating not just Indians but also foreign nationals.

With a sizable Indian population still stuck inside Afghanistan and many Afghan Hindus and Sikhs seeking asylum in India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi began the rescue and evacuation operation by calling a meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Security. The Centre also took into confidence all political parties by calling an all-party meeting on the Afghanistan situation. With the situation unfolding fast in Afghanistan, the Centre is keeping a close eye even as the relief and rescue operation continues in top gear.

August 26 was the day when the worst fears of the world came true as a massive terrorist strike at the Kabul airport claimed more than 170 lives, including of US soldiers. The future of Afghanistan looked bleaker. At this crucial juncture, when India has a crucial role to play in its neighbour Afghanistan, PM Modi has been leading from the front — be it the rescue and evacuation of our citizens, providing relief and aid to the citizens of the war-torn

country or for rebuilding Afghanistan. India has always enjoyed close ties with Afghanistan and has been actively engaged in its rebuilding and development.

India under the leadership of PM Modi has a stellar record of evacuating its citizens and efficiently carrying out rescue and relief operations overseas. India believes in "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" (the world is one family) and all its humanitarian missions have been guided by this principle. In Afghanistan, too, India led from the front in evacuating citizens from India and across the globe.

In early 2020, when the Covid-19 outbreak shook the entire world and left people stranded, India launched the "Vande Bharat Mission". By July end last year, India had operated over 88,000 flights across the world, taking every health precaution and following the WHO guidelines. Over 100 nations were covered under the Vande Bharat Mission and around 70 lakh Indians were brought home. And that is not all — several Indians were also evacuated from Wuhan, the epicentre of the Covid-19 outbreak.

There are extraordinary stories of evacuation and rescue of Indians since 2014 and all of them have been carried out under the direct supervision of PM Modi. Who can forget "Operation Sankat Mochan" of June-July 2014 in which 46 Indian nurses were rescued from a Tikrit hospital from the clutches of the Islamic

State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in war-ravaged Iraq? It was a big diplomatic win for India.

In April 2015, the Indian Navy and Air Force became the saviours of 4,600-plus Indians and over 950 nationals of 41 countries as India carried out "Operation Raahat" to evacuate its citizens after the Yemen crisis following the military intervention by Saudi Arabia. Simultaneous rescue operations from the port of Aden by the Indian Navy, Air Force and Air India from Sanaa were a follow up to the successful Indian diplomatic intervention. Similarly, in March 2016, India carried out the successful evacuation of 250 Indians following multiple bombings at Brussels airport in Belgium.

There are several other stories of India's grit and successful diplomatic interventions during crises. Be it the rescue of hundreds of Indian students from Ukraine during the pandemic or the evacuation of Indians from Iraq and Syria, the Modi government has been resolute while dealing with the safety and security of its citizens.

The Indian government has shown the world how to swiftly respond to crises when its citizens are stranded abroad. Today, a special team of over 20 officials under the Ministry of External Affairs is coordinating and executing a round-the-clock evacuation of not just Indians but also nationals of other countries from Afghanistan.

The Afghan Sikhs and other nationals who have been evacuated are full of praise for the Indian government for saving them. One important highlight of the rescue mission has been the evacuation of three of the last six "Swaroops" of the Sikh holy scripture — Sri Guru Granth Sahib ji, considered as the "Living Guru" — from the Kabul airport. They were received by Union Minister Hardeep Singh Puri in Delhi.

The Modi government has reiterated that India firmly stands behind the Afghans during this crisis and will make every effort to ensure the fast rehabilitation and reconstruction of the war-torn nation. India has been a major partner in Afghanistan's development and reconstruction. Shining examples of it are the construction of the Afghan Parliament and its big dams and highways.

The successive successful evacuations of Indians from crises across the globe in the past seven years have given confidence to our citizens that today we have a strong government and a global leader who knows how to save its people and safeguard their interests. The Modi government has the political will and the diplomatic acumen to deal with such crises and act as a savior not just for the Indians but for citizens of all nationalities.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

INDIA'S MOVE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial 'A line to Kabul' (IE, September 2). India should be crystal clear that first and foremost is the safety of our people in Afghanistan. Once that is ensured, we need to make Taliban leaders understand that we will oppose any move by them to support anti-India activities. Gradually other nations will also toe the line of what the US, UK and India decide to do with the new regime, so now India will have to act smartly and strategically.

Bal Govind, Noida

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'A line to Kabul' (IE, September 2). Despite the abstention of two "P5" countries — Russia and China — from the India-led UNSC Resolution 2593, the Government of India said it was a "matter of satisfaction" that the resolution addressed India's "key concerns" on Afghanistan. Being a major stakeholder in Afghanistan for decades, India has a crucial role to play in the rebuilding of the beleaguered country. For the time being, New Delhi can gain a foothold by re-establishing its diplomatic presence in Kabul and responding positively to the Taliban's overtures.

SS Paul, Noida

HONOUR HISTORY

THIS REFERS TO the article 'A request, for sake of history' (IE, September 2). A stylised memorial to the victims of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre is not the best way to capture the pathos of the event. The memorial should have been as au-

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thentic to the event as possible, so as to let the tragedy sink in to visitors. The government should have drawn inspiration from the Auschwitz Museum and Pol Pot Genocide Museum and others while renovating Jallianwala Bagh, so as to truthfully capture the horrors of the tragedy.

Hemant Contractor, Pune

REALITY CHECK

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Afghanistan isn't lost' (IE, September 2). Amongst the rural areas of Afghanistan which are still swayed by archaic concepts of clan and religion, the Taliban enjoys considerable goodwill. India and the world need to take these ground realities into account. Mere goodwill of urban Afghans will not be enough.

Shubhada H, via email