

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

The virus among us

Covid-19 might never go away. It's time for a national conversation on how to reopen society



VIKRAM PATEL

REPUTATION & HARM

Panchjanya attack on Infosys does what it accuses IT giant of doing — damages national interest. Time for India Inc to stand up

OVER THE LAST few years, a growing number of people and institutions have been labelled “anti-national” and accused of belonging to the “tukde tukde gang” — students like Umar Khalid and Disha Ravi, teachers like Anand Teltumbde, activists like Sudha Bharadwaj, entire universities and those protesting against the CAA, NRC and farm laws. This name-calling has had disturbing consequences — a chilling effect on free speech and dissent, a narrowing of public spaces under the burden of a restrictive and unforgiving patriotism. These labels also act as dog whistles to the mob, which often hounds those so targeted in both digital and real-world spaces. Now, the “tukde tukde gang” has been expanded by the *Panchjanya* — a publication associated with the Sangh Parivar, that counts as its first editor BJP stalwart and former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee — to include Infosys. The RSS has distanced itself from the *Panchjanya* piece, but this is a step down a very slippery slope.

By any reckoning, Infosys Limited is a blue-chip Indian company, part of the backbone of the IT and related services industry. It was listed on the Nasdaq as early as 1999 and, long before tech “unicorns” became a frequent occurrence, had a billion-dollar valuation. The company, whose founders did not inherit but made their wealth, has been, and continues to be, a powerful symbol of an aspirational and confident IT and corporate sector, a testament to the rise of 21st-century, post-liberalisation India. The *Panchjanya* cover story titled “Saakh aur Aaghat (Reputation and Harm)”, which alleges that Infosys is in cahoots with “Naxals, Leftists and the tukde tukde gang” to try and “destabilise the Indian economy” cites as reason for these entirely unsubstantiated accusations the alleged problems in the functioning of the Income Tax Portal that Infosys has been developing. It is no one's case that the tech giant should not be held accountable for glitches in a system that is crucial to filing tax returns. And the government is within its rights to demand that the company fix these issues — as Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has already done. But a technical software glitch is not a conspiracy. Now more than ever, the Indian economy, already ailing before the pandemic, needs investment from, and cooperation of, the private sector. The “Atmanirbharta” vision outlined by the prime minister, or the Centre's asset monetisation drive, is unlikely to succeed if organisations close to the ruling party and its ideological fountainhead are seen to target corporations and question their patriotism.

The ball is also in the court of India Inc. Barring a few exceptions, corporate and industry leaders have maintained a studied — and perhaps strategic — silence about the vitriol that has been seeping into the public discourse, and corroding it. Now that the guns are trained on one of their own, it may be time to speak up. Both their bottom-lines and the national interest are at stake.

BECOMING STAKEHOLDERS

Karbi Anglong peace deal points to importance of addressing smaller insurgencies that scar Northeast landscape

THE TRIPARTITE AGREEMENT signed by the Centre, five insurgent groups active in Karbi Anglong, and the Assam government, marks the culmination of an extended process of negotiation to end insurgency in the region. According to the Memorandum of Settlement, greater autonomy will be devolved to the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council; the identity, language, culture of Karbi people will be protected; and more focused development carried out in the Council area. The government will also consider notifying Karbi language as the official language of the Council. Over a thousand armed insurgents have surrendered their arms under the peace deal.

The Northeast's map is dotted with big and small insurgent groups that have made demands ranging from a separate nation-state to statehood within the Indian Constitution and autonomy under the state government. The Naga insurgency has been an inspiration for these separatist movements, which exploit alienation caused by an insensitive and exploitative state, and engage in extortion. While the focus has been on big groups such as the NSCN-IM and ULFA, the smaller insurgencies have been no less disruptive of the state-building process in the region. If the ULFA emerged as an expression of Assamese nationalism, many smaller groups, some of which pre-date the Assam Movement of the late 1970s, have fought to protect their distinct ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity from being subsumed within a broader Assamese identity. They have tried to build on older memories of kinship and legacies of ancient kingdoms and refute the umbrella of the nation state. The Centre's double-barrelled approach to this threat to sovereignty has been to offer autonomy under the Constitution on the one hand while using security forces to crush militancy, on the other. Insurgents who negotiate for peace are accommodated in state legislatures or Autonomous Councils. This approach has had various degrees of success, in Mizoram, Tripura, the Bodo areas. In Assam's hill districts of Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong, separatism that rejected Sixth Schedule status transformed into a demand for an autonomous state under Article 244(a) of the Constitution after militancy peaked in the 1990s. The Karbi Anglong agreement signed on Saturday falls short of fulfilling that demand though it promises more autonomy than currently enjoyed by the Autonomous Council under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution.

However, autonomy and funds may not be sufficient to improve the condition of the people on whose behalf ceasefire agreements and settlement deeds are signed. Autonomous Councils are often captured by vested interests, who invoke fears of a militant past, and the enhanced development funds are diverted to private parties. The transition from an insurgent to a stakeholder or agent of democracy is not easily achieved.

THANK YOU FOR THE MUSIC

With two new songs, it's almost as if the last 40 Abba-less years never happened

IN 2020, COVID-19 brought the world together in anxiety and in 2021, Abba has brought it together in nostalgia and renewed anticipation. The Swedish pop group, which disbanded in 1982, has dropped two new singles, *I Still Have Faith in You* and *Don't Shut Me Down*, both of which zoomed to the top of the charts. A new studio album, *Voyage*, is set to release on November 5, and fans are already buying tickets to the concert in London next year which will feature Agnetha Fältskog, Björn Ulvaeus, Benny Andersson and Anni-Frid Lyngstad as virtual avatars of their 1979 selves.

Incredibly, in its heyday, the group's music was often derided as kitschy, disco fluff, with one critic famously dismissing *Abba's Greatest Hits Vol 2* — which featured fan favourite single *Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!* — with the words, “We have met the enemy and they are them”. In all, Abba's reign lasted only six years, from its breakthrough albums *Greatest Hits* and *Arrival* (both in 1976) to its eighth — and until now last — studio album, *The Visitors* (1981).

And yet, few musical acts can boast of Abba's cross-generational appeal. Its fans range from those who remember the day in 1974 when it won the Eurovision contest with *Waterloo* as well as youngsters who first heard Abba's songs in the two *Mamma Mia!* movies (2008 and 2018). Artists as diverse as The Sex Pistols and Elvis Costello have cited Abba as a musical influence, bringing new fans into the fold with cover versions of classics such as *Dancing Queen* and *The Winner Takes It All*. And when the group joined TikTok last week, it got a million subscribers within five days. It's almost as if the last 40 Abba-less years never happened.

I VIVIDLY RECALL when we were told that the pandemic would end in May 2020 thanks to the country's dramatic and brutal lockdown. Then, when the first wave appeared soon after the lockdown relaxed, that universal masking would help beat the pandemic. Then, when this first wave mysteriously petered out despite low levels of masking, we were told this was because a very high proportion of people had experienced asymptomatic infections. This implied that the virus had swept across the land, and most people were not even aware that they had been infected. We had miraculously attained that fabled goal of “herd immunity”. By Diwali 2020, we thought the nightmare was behind us and bars, wedding venues and holiday destinations began heaving with people, celebrating that the virus had been beaten and that we were well on our way back to normal.

Only we were not.

Like that childhood monster that leaps out of the closet just when we have let our guard down, it was back with a vengeance. By the time of the devastating second wave, though, the game had changed: We had the vaccine. Now we were told that not only would we protect ourselves with the vaccine, but we would also help our populations get to herd immunity because, once vaccinated, a person was very much less likely to get infected and to transmit the infection to others. Vaccinating a sufficiently large chunk of our people would win the war. No one is quite sure exactly how many people we need to vaccinate, though whatever the target is, we are still a long way from it.

But will we beat the pandemic even then?

Several bits of emerging data suggest that we won't. It seems that vaccination, while certainly effective in protecting us from falling ill and dying (a very important benefit, of course), seems to have two potential limitations. First, it does not eliminate our chance of being infected; on the contrary, it appears that if a vaccinated person is infected with the delta variant, now the dominant variant in most countries, they have similar viral loads as people who are not vaccinated.

This is surely the elephant in the room for governments, scientists and communities, for it is slowly dawning that, as some pundits had predicted at the very start of the pandemic, we will never eliminate this virus, unless we discover a vaccine which is highly effective in blocking its entry into the body. Another possible game-changer might be a highly effective antiviral medication. But history makes me somewhat pessimistic given the failure of decades of efforts to conjure similar magical potions for any other coronavirus infection.

Furthermore, the hopes that vaccination may reduce the chances of passing it on to others because the vaccinated are less likely to become ill are being tempered by the discovery that the delta variant starts spreading even in the absence of symptoms. And so, vaccination will not stop transmission no matter how many we vaccinate. This implies the continuing threat of further mutations. One can only pray that the coming mutations are more benign than its parent.

To compound this, the second limitation is that it now appears that vaccine-induced immunity wanes with time and new variants. This may well be the reason why Israel, once lauded for achieving very high levels of vaccination coverage, is now experiencing another wave. In response to the findings of declining protection, countries with cash are gearing up to start booster doses less than a year after completing vaccination. The necessity of booster doses, except in the immunocompromised, is yet to be determined but it's likely that they will prolong protection. In short, the current regime of vaccination offers neither “herd immunity” nor long-term protection.

So now, what next? This is surely the elephant in the room for governments, scientists and communities, for it is slowly dawning that, as some pundits had predicted at the very start of the pandemic, we will never eliminate this virus, unless we discover a vaccine which is highly effective in blocking its entry into the body. Another possible game-changer might be a highly effective antiviral medication. But history makes me somewhat pessimistic given the failure of decades of efforts to conjure similar magical potions for any other coronavirus infection.

The dilemma is how to shape policy in the light of these facts. On the one hand, we risk being trapped in a seemingly never-ending cycle of lockdowns, uncertainty, vaccination drives, restrictions on travel and in-person interactions, the evisceration of occupations that require in-person interactions, the loss of learning for children shut out of schools, wearing masks in indoor spaces and so on. Given the rising levels of fatigue, anger and

despair with this dispensation, not to mention the shattering of the most vulnerable livelihoods, I cannot countenance such a future. On the other hand, we would have to contend with waves of the epidemic sweeping across the population at regular intervals, sickening and killing many in its wake. Assuming we enter the era of booster doses, the feasibility, acceptability and value of vaccinating a billion people each year is questionable. But there is a glimmer of good news that the risk of dying of Covid-19 is falling, not only due to vaccination but also more effective medical care for the very ill.

Maybe the way forward lies in a middle path. Thus, one may prioritise public resources for vaccinating only the vulnerable, such as the elderly and those with co-morbidities, and all frontline workers. This is the situation we have with influenza, a close cousin of Covid-19; we live with the virus with no restrictions to travel, work or mingling, annually vaccinate those who are vulnerable, and accept that some of us will fall ill and a small fraction will die. Mortality can be further reduced by investment in infectious disease surveillance, community-based supportive care and peripheral hospital critical care.

What seems increasingly likely is that we will need to learn to live with the virus because it is becoming endemic, which simply means it will always be amongst us. This is the time for a national conversation, with public health experts joining up with social scientists, political leaders, businesses and representatives of civil society, to figure out how we, as one people, can soldier forward with solidarity for all sections of our diverse population. Then, we might find the right path towards fully reopening our society while ensuring that the goal is not to eliminate the infection but to reduce sickness and mortality to as low as one possibly can.

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FIGHTING OUR CORNER

Keshav Desiraju believed in building institutions, and standing up for justice



JO CHOPRA

I FIRST met Keshav Desiraju over 20 years ago in a dusty, low-level government office in Dehradun. He sanctioned a Rs 1 lakh grant for a national conference the Latika Roy Foundation was organising for parents of disabled children. “What you're doing is important. I wish it could be more. That's the limit for what I can sanction without getting you into endless red tape,” he said apologetically.

Endless red tape and how to avoid it was the story of his life. As a government officer who rose eventually to become India's health secretary, Keshav cut through the bureaucracy for so many of us. He had a special passion for disabled children and the mentally ill, but he went to bat for anyone trying to ensure that the public health system delivered for those it was meant to serve.

Others will record the facts of his well-known family and his illustrious career. My memories have to do with his unwavering support for my organisation and the cause of disabled children; of his passion for Indian classical music, his sense of the absurd and his eccentric and prodigious vocabulary (he described a friend I once sent his way as “fetching, but rather gormless”).

I got into the field of disability because of my own daughter Moy Moy, and that has always been my driving force. But it was Keshav who taught me that to be effective, I had to be more than just a mom. I'll never forget a meeting in his office in 2010. He was

the Health Secretary for the Uttarakhand government and I had gone to him with a proposal to set up an early intervention centre for disabled children in the government hospital in Dehradun. That day, as I was describing the importance of early intervention, I could see I was losing his attention. Then I quoted James Heckman, the Nobel Prize winning economist, paraphrasing his research for the Indian economy. “For every rupee the government invests in early intervention for disabled children, you'd get a 13 per cent annual return.”

Keshav sat up straighter. He proceeded to ask a series of searching questions about the incidence of disability in Uttarakhand, the per child cost of providing early intervention and the long-term cost of not doing it. The result of that conversation was the approval of a grant for Gubbara, the first NGO-run early intervention centre in a government hospital in India, providing state-of-the-art services to disabled children in Uttarakhand.

He worked tirelessly to make Gubbara happen, fighting our corner in Uttarakhand and later in Delhi, where he was eventually transferred. But he never asked me for cute pictures or heart-warming stories. Every argument he made was based on economics, scale and hard data. He demanded numbers and he made it clear that when you are thinking about a whole country, you have to raise your game.

Ultimately, his commitment to the country was what cost him. Asked to sign off on a dubious appointment to the Medical Council of India, he refused and was transferred.

When I next met him, he was secretary for consumer affairs in a poky little office in the South Block, but as cheerful as ever. With no illusions about the nature of government work, he still believed that institution-building was the only way forward. Political parties would come and go, corruption would always be with us — but if we stayed true to the values of democracy, fairness and social justice, eventually good would triumph.

Watching Keshav run a meeting or deal with supplicants or handle seven things simultaneously was like walking into the wide-open blue sky. His mastery of his work, his powers of expression and his unerring sense of what was required were formidable. I never once saw him at a loss for words or wonder what needed to be done. He could cut through anyone's ramblings to get to the heart of the matter in a flash, and I saw him do it again and again. It was a marvel of skill and eloquence. He was witty, generous and true. He kept his head down and did what needed to be done to make this a stronger, better country. India is poorer today for his loss.

The writer is the director of the Latika Roy Foundation, a non-profit for disabled children in Dehradun



SEPTEMBER 7, 1981, FORTY YEARS AGO

DOST'S VISIT

THE AFGHAN FOREIGN Minister Shah Mohammad Dost will be visiting Delhi for a one-day visit. The hurried visit comes in view of the coordinated efforts made by India and the Soviet Union to promote a dialogue between India and Pakistan. The visit also has significance in view of the forthcoming session of the UN General Assembly and the conference of the Commonwealth Heads of Government at Melbourne where the issue is likely to figure. Kabul and New Delhi have been in touch with each other since the August 24 proposals by the Afghanistan President for tripartite talks between his country, Pakistan and Iran.

NEW MOORE PEACE

INDIA AND BANGLADESH announced a breakthrough in efforts to defuse the tension over New Moore, the tiny island in the Bay of Bengal which sprouted in 1979 and emerged as an issue between the two countries in March the following year. A communique issued simultaneously in New Delhi and Dhaka said the two countries have succeeded in defusing the tension on New Moore. The Bangladesh Foreign Minister will be visiting India this week at the invitation of his counterpart in Delhi, PV Narasimha Rao.

IRAN CRACKDOWN

AUTHORITIES IN IRAN confirmed the crackdown on leftist opposition by announcing the execution of 25 dissidents in the provinces of Mazandaran and Lorestan. The Tehran Bazaar normally open on Sunday was closed to mourn the Ayatollah killed on September 5.

DEFICIT RAINFALL

THE EARLY WITHDRAWAL of rains in North India will adversely affect the kharif crop and is causing anxiety to the agriculture ministry. Rao Birendra Union Agriculture minister said that the Haryana, Punjab and UP governments have been asked to provide a large share of power to the agriculture sector.

13 THE IDEAS PAGE

Pakistan's Kabul syndrome

Rawalpindi's 'victory' in Afghanistan might make it a bigger nuisance for India and the region, but is unlikely to reverse the steady decline of Pakistan's comprehensive national power over decades



THREE SETS OF events last week highlight Pakistan's special importance in Afghanistan after the Taliban victory. One was the appearance of Lt Gen Faiz Hameed, the chief of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, in Kabul. Another was a (virtual) meeting of top regional diplomats from Afghanistan's neighbours (Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China) convened by Pakistan's special representative on Afghanistan, Mohammed Sadiq. Meanwhile, many major regional and international leaders interested in Afghanistan are picking up the phone to call Prime Minister Imran Khan or contact the Army chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa. Delhi should expect even more Pakistan-centred political and diplomatic activity on Afghanistan in the days ahead.

Does this intense activity translate into concrete outcomes in favour of Pakistan? Frenzied motion does not always compute as purposeful movement. Pakistan has an uphill task in converting its tactical advantages in Afghanistan into strategic gains.

Geography has given Pakistan a pivotal role in Afghanistan. Yet, Rawalpindi has been unable to turn it into sustainable political sway over Afghanistan. Neither the creation of Afghan proxies nor the massive assistance from the great powers has helped Pakistan transcend its structural limitations in Afghanistan. The story this time is unlikely to be any different.

To be sure, much of the world is turning to Pakistan to intercede on their behalf with the new rulers in Afghanistan. Whether it is the evacuation of citizens, limiting refugee flows, or containing terrorism, Pakistan is presenting itself as the one-stop-shop for Afghanistan-related issues. But Pakistan's ability to leverage the international interest depends on its ability to control the internal dynamic in Afghanistan. Therein lies the rub. The gap between Pakistan's reach and its grasp in Afghanistan, however, has been impossible to bridge.

For all the international media attention to Hameed's visit to Kabul, there is nothing unusual about an intelligence chief heading to a nation in political turbulence to secure his government's interests. CIA Director William Burns was also in Kabul recently to talk to the Taliban leaders.

The purpose of the two visits too was different. Burns was there to seek assurances on the safe evacuation of American citizens and others from Afghanistan and explore the potential for future engagement with the Taliban. As a neighbour deeply involved in Afghanistan's troubled evolution since its independence, Pakistan has much larger stakes in Afghanistan than any other country.

The ISI's role in Afghanistan too has been expansive — in helping create the Taliban, providing it sanctuary after it was ousted from power at the end of 2001, helping it gain military ground in Afghanistan in the last two decades, and lending diplomatic support for the legitimisation of the Taliban.

While there are many issues on Hameed's agenda in Kabul, one particular Pakistani objective has gotten special attention — to mediate between different Taliban factions on



power-sharing and launch a sustainable new Afghan government. The ISI's activism in shaping the next government in Kabul is part of Pakistan's long tradition of messing with Afghanistan's internal politics.

It also reminds us of Pakistan's difficulty in structuring a durable arrangement in Kabul. Pakistan is strong enough to destabilise Afghanistan, but not powerful enough to construct a stable political order across the Durand Line.

This is certainly not the first time that a Pakistani intervention has "won" in Afghanistan. In the mid-1970s, Pakistan in partnership with the Shah of Iran succeeded in moving the Afghan strongman Daud Khan away from his communist friends at home and in Moscow. But the victory barely lasted a few years until the Afghan communists ousted Daud Khan in a coup in the late 1970s.

Pakistan "won" again in 1989 when it pushed the Soviet Army out of Afghanistan with a bloody insurgency backed by the West and got the Mujahideen to control Kabul by 1992. But the Mujahideen soon got locked into massive civil war and Pakistan had to bring in the Taliban to "win one more time" in Kabul during 1996. The Taliban government itself was ousted as it invited the wrath of America after the 9/11 attacks organised by Osama bin Laden from his Afghan sanctuary.

In the 21st century, Rawalpindi's persistent destabilisation and the US's inability to prevent Pakistan from playing both sides of the terror street have led to the inevitable unravelling of the post-Taliban order in Afghanistan. There is no question that the Pakistan army is now in the driver's seat in Kabul. But can Rawalpindi drive the Afghan state and society anywhere, let alone in a sensible direction?

Pakistan is already running into the familiar problem in Kabul. It is one thing to get the Taliban into Kabul, but it is entirely another to organise a credible new government there. It is now three weeks since the fall of the Ghani government and the factions of the Taliban are struggling to arrive at a new government. There is speculation that Pakistan is helping to sort out the issues and a new government will be announced this week. How cohesive it might be is a different matter.

If you think of the current negotiations as similar to the formation of coalition governments in democracies, the political delay and

difficulty in Kabul seem natural. But the problem in Kabul is deeper. While the various factions were united in ousting foreign military presence, there is little agreement among them on how to govern Afghanistan.

Issues of women's rights, amnesty to those who were part of the previous government, accommodation of ethnic and religious minorities in the new government and responding to international concerns are all deeply divisive. Equally contentious are the problems of managing the broken finances of the government and developing credible strategies of economic development.

If Pakistan's record of interventions is not impressive, the difficulty of turning Afghanistan into a coherent entity has challenged all the regimes in Kabul since the monarchy was deposed in 1973. Since then, a series of governments — of various political colours, from socialist to Communist and Islamist — backed by different great powers and massive foreign military interventions could not stitch the country together.

That Pakistan can perform this miracle — with the support of China — is the current conventional wisdom. But the messiness of the real world will intervene sooner than later and remind us that political miracles are rare.

It is quite tempting to believe today that the spoils of the Afghan war belong to the presumed victor — Pakistan. But it is also possible to argue that the opposite is true — that Pakistan is now part of the Afghan spoils. The strategy of using decades of violent religious extremism to control Afghanistan over the last five decades has also deeply affected Pakistan's polity that is now under the shadow of the Taliban's pre-modern ideology.

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Meanwhile, the grand political obsession with destabilising its neighbours has made Pakistan's economy fall well behind that of Bangladesh. India's GDP is 10 times larger than that of Pakistan today. Rawalpindi's "victory" in Afghanistan might make it a bigger nuisance for India and the region but is unlikely to reverse the steady relative decline of Pakistan's comprehensive national power over the last few decades.

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

"Richer countries must ensure that developing nations have incentives to cherish forests in a global economic system that currently rewards their destruction."

— THE GUARDIAN

Misreading the Mappila mutiny

Denigrating the peasant uprising is part of the RSS toolkit, another instance of othering a section of the population



MISREPRESENTATION OF FACTS, distortion of history, appropriation of some historical figures and events while negating or falsifying others are standard techniques in the Sangh Parivar's "toolkit". This urge to rewrite Indian history stems from a deep-seated sense of inferiority. When the Indian masses were coming together against imperialism, the RSS and other fundamentalist forces had extended cooperation to the British. The recent expression of this anxiety was when a senior member of the BJP-RSS tried to give a communal colour to the Mappila Rebellion of 1921 by calling it "one of the first manifestations of Talibani ideology in India". It's a description devoid of historical context.

The Jamaican activist and politician Marcus Garvey said, "A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots." If the Indian freedom struggle with its various branches can be envisioned as a tree, the RSS would have no branch to claim. That's what moves them to try to uproot the tree of history itself and replace it with their false and divisive narrative.

Denigrating the Mappila Rebellion as a manifestation of a Talibani mindset is another case of the RSS "othering" a section of the Indian population by looking at every event from a communal "us versus them" perspective. That way, most peasant insurgencies would have a communal angle -- Hindu, Muslim or Sikh.

Looking at the history of the freedom movement primarily through the lens of religion overlooks its inclusive character and undermines the role of class-based struggles aimed at overthrowing both the British and their local collaborators. The use of religious, caste, tribal or regional affinities for mobilisation was prevalent until the freedom movement evolved a coherent programme to fight the British, and people from all faiths started subscribing to it. Frequent references were made to a *dharam raj* or a golden age in the struggles of tribals against outsiders, both the British and their local supporters in the Chhota Nagpur region. Vasudev Balwant Phadke, a Chitpavan Brahman, aimed at establishing a Hindu Raj through his group of social bandits, which included people from many castes. The use of religion as a mode of mobilisation gradually lost its sheen till the RSS, Hindu Mahasabha and Muslim League started using it again for sectarian goals.

The Mappilas, once a wealthy trading community, was reduced to the status of paltry peasantry and agricultural labourers in the Malabar region of modern-day Kerala. When the British gained control of the area from Tipu Sultan, they altered its land revenue system and monopolised essential commodities like salt and timber. Between 1862 and 1880, there was an increase of nearly 250 per cent in rent suits and nearly

450 per cent increase in eviction decrees in the South Malabar talukas. Agrarian distress was at its peak and the peasants of that area, including Hindu peasants, rose against this oppressive structure at least 29 times between 1836 and 1919. While the population of the region was predominantly Muslim, many had converted to Islam to get rid of caste disabilities. The *jemis* or zamindars were drawn almost exclusively from upper-caste Hindus.

In the early 1920s, the Congress under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi gave a call for non-cooperation and included the demand of Khilafat to achieve Hindu-Muslim unity. The movement aimed at creating an anti-imperial front, including Hindus and Muslims. When the movement spread to Malabar, it took a violent form — peasants started attacking British officials and local landlords. In this aspect, it was not different from other militant peasant uprisings in which peasants attacked landlords and local moneylenders because they were the representatives of imperial oppression locally. Under the influence of some Khilafat leaders, the form of mobilisation and the expression of the rebellion became religious in some cases but, overall, it remained anti-imperial and anti-landlord in content. Gandhi resented the use of violence by the Mappilas but commended them for their bravery.

It took the British Army some time to wrest back the areas from the agitated peasantry. More than 2,000 rebels were killed followed by the ignominy of the Wagon Tragedy, where 64 rebels suffocated to death, without water or food, in a closed train wagon transporting prisoners to Bellary. These horrible deaths created a furore across the country and spurred the desire for independence amongst Indians.

Many rebels were sent to the Cellular Jail in Andaman where they were tortured. In 1924, the then British under-secretary to India, Robert Richards, said, "In July last, there were in all 1,235 Mappilas in the Andamans. Seventy-two were in the cellular jail, 12 in the adolescent gang, 40 agriculturists and self-supporters, and the rest in convict barracks." After their release, many of them settled in the Andaman group of islands as agriculturists and fishermen. While visiting the islands with freedom fighter and CPI Leader N E Balram, I met and interacted with the families of those who survived the severe British oppression.

The inability of the RSS-BJP in engaging with peasant uprisings is ideological since their ideological affinity is towards capitalists and landlords — predominantly upper castes. The Communists, in contrast, have been at the forefront of peasants' movements through the Kisan Sabhas and were instrumental in bringing legislations to abolish the zamindari system and bringing land reforms.

The class characteristic of the RSS-BJP has been on display through their attitude towards the farmers protesting the farm laws. The RSS tries to create discord among people on the basis of religion. However, the unity of the oppressed classes and castes has the potential to rise above this dichotomy and resist the onslaught of the RSS on our history, our present and future.

The writer is general secretary, CPI

Hemmed in on all sides

Kabul will be under pressure from four directions: Pakistan, China, Russia, US/EU



THE TALIBAN'S SPEEDY advance and the fall of Kabul is a distant memory, replaced by rumours of trouble brewing within the fledgling enterprise. Leadership is unseen, spokespersons are numerous and signals are confusing. But some facets are clear. Taliban governance in provinces and districts is highly decentralised, and is so far restricted to PR photographs of site visits. Governance is more focussed on policing, with each Taliban group following its own set of rules on what women should do and wear and the punishment to be meted out to former government/military employees. Evolved protection of human rights will clearly be missing. The most dependable assessment is that the Kabul regime will be under pressure from four directions: Pakistan, for security and past links; China, for investment; Russia, for intelligence; and the US/EU, for the ability to conduct finance globally. So far, the Pakistan hand is showing up with prominence.

Pakistan appears to have claimed victory by sending its spy chief for a visible visit. But most observers feel that serious concerns of conflict and a possible firefight between Pakistan's Haqqani Network and the Doha negotiators was the key reason. For Pakistan to have to physically intervene in a leadership crisis indicates its lack of control over the Doha and Haqqani factions. Further, Pakistan has clearly not been able to impress upon the regime the need to cater to Western demands to include ethnic minorities and members of

the Ghani regime, and is still to deal with the question of whether to disband ANDSF, purge it of undesirables or just recruit Talibs into the existing structure. The catastrophic results of disbanding Saddam's army and intelligence were there for all to see, given their eventual recruitment by ISIL and offshoots.

Pakistan has to also deal with an enormous refugee crisis. Given Afghanistan's faltering fiscal situation, the key assistance that Afghans will expect in terms of food, fuel and power will have to come from Iran and Pakistan. Iran has already cut a deal and is allowing export of its abundant oil in exchange for cash. Pakistan, itself in dire economic straits due to restrictive IMF conditions, has just about managed to resolve its forex crisis, having accumulated \$27 billion forex reserves. It will find it exceedingly difficult to send supplies to Afghanistan, especially on uncertain terms of payment and in a currency of its choice.

Pakistan is now stuck in a classic catch-22 situation, where the West will hold it to its promise of control over the Taliban and of ensuring inclusivity. There is a debate within Pakistan's security establishment on how to handle this victory and how to keep it under control. Pakistan's experts are worried that a seemingly-weak Helmandi Pashtun, heading the clergy, could grow wings, while a much-required strong Pashtun as head of government will surely come under Indian, Iranian and Western influence and move in a different

direction.

Pakistan is acutely aware that the West holds several cards without which the survival of the regime is impossible. Such levers include American control of Afghanistan's forex and remittances; existing and future UN and US Treasury sanctions regime; potential CAATSA sanctions for any Russian investment; FATF for financial strangulation; and avenues for Western intelligence to tie down China's promised BRI investment in a traditionally restive Afghanistan. Even a single misstep by Pakistan could jeopardise its attempts to exit the FATF grey list, while also including Afghanistan in a similar process.

For decades, Pakistan has taught the strategy at its army college that it can't afford a two-front war, with a belligerent India to the east and an India-inspired Afghanistan to the west. Having been granted a strategic wish with a suddenly less-sensitive eastern border, it must be aware that Indian strategists would be counselling their diplomats and intelligence agencies to sell old wine — the idea of Pashtunistan — in a new bottle to the Taliban regime. An informal comment was made by the Taliban spokesperson that it was opposed to fencing the Durand Line. The strategic-economic alliance that Pakistan established with China, in order to bind India down to hard borders along its entire west-to-east boundary, may just have been mitigated by the Taliban victory, with India having no option but to encourage Pashtun separatism within Pakistan.

The other interesting division in the Taliban that Pakistan is unable to handle is the sudden emergence of Anas Haqqani, not UN-designated, but wearing the traditional turban signifying the legacy of his father, Jalaluddin Haqqani. Sirajuddin Haqqani does not possess such a legacy. However, the latter was groomed by the ISI and has evaded arrest and drone strikes, despite a \$5 million American bounty. With the US unable to have the Haqqanis delisted from the sanctions regime, Sirajuddin is now a Pakistani asset, inconvenient to the US. His continued presence is a danger to the stability of the new Taliban regime. His past dalliance with ISIS-K, including rumours of involvement in the August 26 bombing which killed 183, are serious threats to Western interests in the region.

Therefore, Pakistan will desperately try to bring Sirajuddin on board the Taliban regime which, in turn, risks reducing the chances of recognition, and therefore the survival of the regime. On the contrary, if it leaves him out, it risks destabilising the nascent regime, and will be forced to house a dissenting or warring Haqqani faction within Pakistan. Both scenarios and the continued absence of visuals or statements from Sirajuddin indicate that his days may be numbered, unless he has already found new refuge and has begun to plot against his new enemies, Pakistan and the US.

The writer is former DGP J&K

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

COMMON WEALTH

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'On assets, a narrow view' (IE, September 6). Public infrastructure is central to the socio-economic development of any country. Its real worth cannot be explained in monetary terms alone but by the way they directly or indirectly create value for the community and society at large, through the social and economic activities it facilitates through unhindered access to its users. Handing over the operational control of such public assets is always a tricky issue but if private players can unlock their true potential without compromising their welfare character, then it is a promising proposition.

Sudip Kumar Dey, Barasat

SWACHH QUESTION

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The nutrition-hygiene link' (IE, September 6). The role of nutrition and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) in "environmental enteropathy" and diarrheal deaths is a reiteration of a public health fact: Long before the advent of effective medical treatment in the late 1800s, the mortality from infectious diseases were substantially reduced by improved sanitation and hygiene. On October 2, 2014, the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) was launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to achieve universal sanitation. It's worth analysing why, despite the SBM, there is an increase in the prevalence of diarrheal

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disease in children under five years of age from NFHS-4 (2014-2015) to NFHS-5 (2019-2020) in half of the states and UTs surveyed recently.

LR Murmu, Delhi

COME CLEAN

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Curious case of CBI' (IE, September 6). After the internal documents came into the public domain, the Congress and NCP demanded an inquiry asking why a case was lodged against Anil Deshmukh when the CBI officer found no evidence of corruption. The agency tasked a special team to investigate how an internal probe report of CBI was leaked. As the matter is extremely serious the CBI must come clean.

SS Paul, Nadia