



Beyond words

India and Pakistan must build on diplomatic courtesy to restore equilibrium to ties

In the midst of the inane controversy over Punjab Minister Navjot Singh Sidhu's presence at Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan's swearing-in ceremony, there have been more substantive exchanges between New Delhi and Islamabad. In his first statement after the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf emerged as the single largest party, Mr. Khan singled out India as a foreign policy relationship he hoped to work on, offering to walk "two steps for every one step" that India took. Narendra Modi responded with a phone call, and they spoke of a shared vision of "peace and development". Next, the Indian High Commissioner called on Mr. Khan and presented him a cricket bat with the signatures of the Indian team members. Mr. Khan's new appointee on the Pakistan Cricket Board has said that resuming bilateral cricket is high on the leader's agenda for improving people-to-people ties. Last week, a delegation led by a Minister in Pakistan's caretaker government came to Delhi to attend Atal Bihari Vajpayee's funeral. On Sunday, Pakistan's new Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, said Mr. Khan had received a congratulatory letter from Mr. Modi calling for the two countries to pursue "constructive engagement". And on Tuesday Mr. Khan tweeted that trade and resolution of differences through dialogue are the "best way" to "uplift the people in the subcontinent". All these gestures confirm that both the Prime Ministers are at least sticking by diplomatic courtesy against the backdrop of an otherwise acrimonious relationship.

Well-chosen words, however, will not be enough. To begin with, there appears to be very little trust in any quarter of both capitals. Both leaders face political realities that could inhibit them from taking any major risks. Mr. Modi, who dealt with the Pathankot airbase attack just days after his visit to Lahore in December 2015, may well prefer to avoid such overtures, especially with Lok Sabha elections due in less than a year. Mr. Khan, who commands a thin majority in Parliament, and has frequently criticised his predecessors for close ties with India, may choose to remain conservative. Even so, the steps needed are clear. To begin with, the situation at the Line of Control urgently needs attention, and a restoration of the ceasefire would be a major move forward for both countries. Mr. Khan could earn Pakistan an economic breather if he adheres to the international Financial Action Task Force's demands on ending terror financing; he would earn more goodwill by directly addressing India's concerns on the support to terrorists in Pakistan, and those being pushed over the LoC. These actions could set up an even bolder move, no matter how unlikely it currently seems: for Mr. Modi to agree to restore the SAARC process by attending the long-delayed summit due in Islamabad this year. Much work, preferably behind the scenes, is needed if Mr. Modi and Mr. Khan hope to realise any of the objectives they have spoken of over the past month.

Clearing the path

More needs to be done to protect elephant corridors across the country

The Supreme Court's order to seal and close 27 resorts operating in corridors used by elephants in the Nilgiris is a necessary step to restore the ecology of these spaces. Weak regulation of ecotourism is severely impacting important habitats, and affecting animals that have large home ranges, like elephants. Fragmentation of forests makes it all the more important to preserve migratory corridors. The movement of elephants is essential to ensure that their populations are genetically viable, and help regenerate forests on which other species, including tigers, depend. Ending human interference in the pathways of elephants is a conservation imperative, more so because the animals are then not forced to seek alternative routes that bring them into conflict with people. Forests that have turned into farms and unbridled tourism are blocking their paths, resulting in growing incidents of elephant-human conflict. These encounters claim the lives of about 450 people and lead to the death of nearly 100 elephants in retaliatory actions every year on average.

A review of elephant corridors published by the Wildlife Trust of India jointly with the Environment Ministry's Project Elephant last year indicates that there are 101 such identified pathways, of which almost 70% are used regularly. Nearly three-quarters of the corridors are evenly divided among southern, central and north-eastern forests, while the rest are found in northwest Bengal and the northwestern region. Some of these passages are precariously narrow, at only a hundred metres wide. These landscape characteristics, and the evidence that there are an estimated 6,500 elephants in just the Brahmagiri-Nilgiris-Eastern Ghats ranges, call for complete protection of the routes they regularly use. Surprisingly, the District Collector's report on 39 resorts in the Nilgiris points to their having come up right under the gaze of the Forest Department, the majority without the requisite permissions. This must be thoroughly investigated to check whether there was any wrongdoing. The grey area of mushrooming homestay structures, which are just hotels on forest fringes, also deserves scrutiny. But more importantly, the effort should be to expand elephant corridors, using the successful models within the country, including acquisition of lands using private funds and their transfer to the government. Among the major factors affecting conservation, two need quick remedies: about 40% of elephant reserves are vulnerable, as they are not within protected parks and sanctuaries; and the corridors have no specific legal protection. Illegal structures in these pathways should be removed without delay.

High science with low development

Promising the moon with tech dreams while ignoring human development leaves India at the mercy of the mob



PULAPRE BALAKRISHNAN

On our 72nd Independence Day, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that by 2022 we may expect the Tricolour to be unfurled in space. Even as he was announcing this from the ramparts of Red Fort in New Delhi, parts of the country were faced with flooding, due partly to water released from dams following exceptional rain. Previously we had witnessed lynchings, mostly over a wide swathe of north India from Uttar Pradesh to Jharkhand but not entirely absent in the south. Mobs had attacked persons either on their own or in small groups, with the victims in every case having been unarmed and acting without any provocation. The victims have been Dalits and Muslims engaged in the cattle trade, middle-aged single women accused of witchcraft, and migrant labourers allegedly trafficking in children. It is not difficult to see a majoritarianism in this as the victims are from the most marginalised sections of the country, left without protection by the state.

These incidents are incongruous with the claim of India being a long-lived civilisation, but it is the incongruity of such outcomes with democracy that holds out some hope for ending them. For while civilisational norms may place restrictions on individual action, democratic norms singularly protect the individual's inalienable right to life and liberty and place upon the state the responsibility of advancing it. Coercion in any form may

be allowed only of the state, and the Indian state must now be called upon to discharge its bounden duty. The governance imperative in a democracy does not end with promoting the ease of doing business.

The democratic agenda

Emphasising a space programme as an objective while failing to highlight the multiple failings of public policy in India makes a mockery of the democratic project, the principal object of which is the creation of enabling conditions for a valuable life. These conditions result from protecting natural capital, building public goods in the form of physical infrastructure, providing a public education and health service, and creating institutions that support individual aspirations. This is the democratic agenda. It is not obvious from their actions that the majority of India's political class is even aware of its centrality to their legitimacy. That in a democracy we elect a government to implement this agenda is not negotiable. When political parties pursue projects that evoke national prestige in the form of space missions, they mask the principal task for which they have been elected in the first place, which, it bears repeating, is to enable people to lead flourishing lives.

The pursuit of high science by the Government of India had started quite early after 1947 when it embarked on a programme of harnessing nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. The Atomic Energy Commission was formed and treated with reverence. The difference this has made to the power situation in the country is not clear. Independent experts at the Indian Statistical Institute point out that nuclear power is costly.



RITU RAI/KONWAR

But we also know that the alternative – of burning coal – is not just polluting but contributes to global warming and climate change, with catastrophic consequences. However, we need to rely neither on nuclear power or fossil fuel, for we have abundant sunlight in India and some wind power. And the cost of generating solar power is reducing rapidly due to advances in storage technology. The only question is whether we have a science policy that is focussed enough to monitor and exploit these trends and a government machinery that is both motivated and adept at facilitating a mass transition to cleaner fuel. Such transitions are not easily made and require the guiding hand of our elected representatives. Private agencies just do not possess the incentive or legitimacy needed.

The enchantment with high science, as opposed to a science and technology that serves our needs, that had imbued public policy in the early days of the republic is not hard to understand. India was then emerging from colonial rule, which had involved not only economic exploitation but also a disdain for the Indian way of life. The imperialist's trope had been to point to the superiority of the metropolis by way of its scientific accomplishments. While this

may have been a historical reality, it is worth reflecting upon whether the public policy of post-colonial India should have been guided by a knee-jerk nationalism. A space mission when India faces more urgent challenges is just that. Today, after 71 years we have the hindsight to see this, and we should take advantage of it. India's science and technology policy should now be re-oriented to improve the lives of Indians.

Tethered to the farm

An example of such a role for science was the launching of the Green Revolution in the mid-1960s. In a matter of less than a decade a precarious economy the size of a subcontinent was transformed into one self-sufficient in food. While the role of global knowledge in the form of biotech and American philanthropy in the form of funding was significant, there was also a national movement of sorts. The Green Revolution was achieved through a rare combination of scientific leadership in the agricultural sector, administrative ability and political acumen, but above all by the genius of India's farmers.

We have not seen national will on a similar scale since. This when we urgently need an agricultural initiative comparable in its transformative capacity today. Indian agriculture has performed more erratically than usual in the past decade. Given the scale of the public science and technology apparatus in India, especially of agricultural research institutions, there is a visible lack of response to this situation, if not crisis. Development economists recognise that the 'food problem' does not cease once a country is able to produce food in sufficient quantity. It is necessary to produce food at a cost

that is affordable to the mass of the population. It may be emphasised that this is fully compatible with a prosperous farming population. What is needed is an increase in the productivity of land. Despite the Prime Minister's claims in his speech of his government having delivered on farm price support, a rise in farm productivity requires more than the price mechanism; technology and extension services would matter.

A direct connection

It may appear odd to start out speaking of mob lynching and end by flagging the importance of agriculture. The connection, however, is not as tenuous as may be imagined as the former has mostly taken place in rural India. Bharat has benefited relatively less from a public policy with a penchant for high science. In the 1970s it had been fashionable to counter the charge of an 'urban bias' in Indian economic policy by pointing out that the Indian state was, after all, rewarding the agricultural sector with high and rising procurement prices. It was overlooked that the proportion of surplus farmers in rural India was very small in relation to its population. Today we are paying the price for a policy that generally neglected the majority of the rural Indians who more than anything else needed public services. Equipped with capability – through good health and awareness – the once marginalised would be vulnerable no more. Promising the moon by courting high science while ignoring human development leaves some Indians at the mercy of the mob and India's democracy diminished in our own estimation.

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Strengthening the federal link

There must be recognition of the potential of State Finance Commissions in building regional equity



M.A. OOMMEN

The State Finance Commission (SFC) is a unique institution created by the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (CAs) to rationalise and systematise State/sub-State-level fiscal relations in India. It has few parallels in other federal systems. Its primary task is to rectify growing horizontal imbalances in the delivery of essential public services to citizens. But there has been inadequate appreciation of the significance of this institution by the Union, States as well as the professional community.

Article 243I of the Constitution mandated the State Governor to constitute a Finance Commission within one year of the CAs (before April 24, 1994) and thereafter every five years. This means fifth generation SFCs ought to have submitted reports by now, with around 140 reports available in the public domain. Till date, only Assam, Himachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala have submitted their fifth SFC reports. Many States are yet to cross the third SFC stage. The large majority has violated the mandate of the Constitution with

impunity. The moot question is this: Is honouring the Constitution a matter of convenience? The seriousness, regularity, acceptance of recommendations and their implementation which characterise the Union Finance Commissions (UFCs) are conspicuously absent when it comes to SFCs. The UFC has been widely acknowledged as a professional and quasi-judicial body when compared to the SFC.

A cursory survey of the composition of SFCs would reveal the overwhelming presence of serving and/or retired bureaucrats rather than academics. The States have to bear their share of the blame for this.

In order to properly compare UFCs and SFCs, certain facts have to be put in perspective. One, for historical reasons, UFCs, particularly from the third, have chosen a restrictive role of staying away from plan and investment allocations. SFCs normally could not do this although some have chosen the UFC path. Now that the Planning Commission has been dismantled, the 15th UFC has to spell out its decision-making domain. Two, it is important to disabuse the notion among several politicians, policy makers and even experts that SFCs and the local governments they deal with have an inferior constitutional status when compared to the UFC. This is wrong. The SFC is undoubtedly modelled on the UFC created un-



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der Article 280 and exemplified in Articles 243I and 243Y. While the UFC is tasked with rectifying vertical and horizontal imbalances at the Union-State level, the SFC has to perform the same with reference to State/sub-State-level institutions. The Constitution treats a local government on a par with a State government, especially when it comes to sharing of financial resources.

A link role

Three, what is not adequately appreciated is that the task of the SFC to correct horizontal imbalances is extremely onerous when compared with the UFC as SFCs have to consider nearly 2.5 lakh local governments to promote minimum essential services in rural and urban areas. By implication, an SFC is the institutional agency to implement the golden rule of cooperative federalism that every citizen should be assured minimum public goods irrespective of her choice of residence. Four, Article 280(3) has been amended to add clauses (bb) and (c) in order to take measures to augment the re-

sources of panchayats and municipalities on the basis of the recommendations "made by the finance commission of the state". These sub-clauses affirm the organic link between local governments and SFCs to fiscal federalism. It is only when inter-State disparities are reduced by the UFCs through their inter-se distribution criteria and intra-State disparities are reduced by SFCs through the horizontal distribution criteria, that the Indian federation becomes a sustainable and inclusive nation-state.

Five, UFCs had no data problem in reviewing the finances of the Union and States. The financial reporting system of the Union and States is well laid down. On the other hand, local governments with no proper budgetary system are in deep disarray and, because of that, SFCs face a crucial problem of reliable data. In short, several sufficient conditions remain unfulfilled in the case of SFCs. Six, the federalist development state of India can grow only through a process of evolutionary policy making which works towards cherished goals. The CAs left the task of adequately empowering local governments to discharge constitutional obligations to the States. Unlike the UFC, no SFC can easily ignore Articles 243G and 243W (which speak of planning "for economic development and social justice") and Article 243ZD (which mandates that every State consti-

tute a district planning committee for spatial planning and environmental conservation at the sub-State level).

Moreover, UFCs have failed to play a hand-holding role in placing decentralised governance properly in the cooperative federal map of India. The hard truth is that no UFC has done its homework in reading and analysing SFC reports. Without presenting a consolidated account of the reality at the sub-State level or highlighting which report went wrong, where and how, no UFC can legitimately guide States or contribute to improving the goals of constitutional amendments.

All the terms of reference of UFCs (since the 11th) iterate the need for suggesting measures to augment the resources of panchayats and municipalities as a core task. But barring the 13th, have they made any concrete approach to redeem the situation and work towards a good local governance system? Their well-designed grant scheme to incentivise States was not given a fair trial.

In sum, SFCs have not been provided with the necessary environment to play their rightful role in Indian fiscal federalism. A great opportunity to build regional equity in India has been undermined.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Calamity and response

The unprecedented rains and consequent flooding across Kerala have created a crisis that is well-known by now. Now comes stage two – the very complex task of rehabilitation of those affected, helping them re-equip their households and restoring important documentation. While aid is pouring in from across India and other parts of the world, we also need to think of the future. If extreme events are to be the new norm, there is need for a permanent monetary fund of a very substantial amount which can take care of the financial needs of people. Therefore, social and political leaders should think in terms of creating such a fund by tapping resources from the corporate sector, voluntary organisations and wealthy members of society. Its

utilisation and maintenance of accounts should be done by a committee of eminent personalities.

T.R. ANANDAN,
Coimbatore

■ I am sure that the "newly appointed Reserve Bank of India member" is well-qualified to have been chosen to be associated with the RBI ("CPI(M) slams hate campaign on social media", August 21). But I am not so sure whether he has the ear of the deity, Ayappa. Ayappa is merciful, not vengeful. And people from other States travel to Kerala to pay him obeisance. I do not want to destroy his own people for any reason, least of all the Sabarimala case.

MAGGIE THOMAS,
Chennai

■ When there are many who are still debating the "hug" by Navjot Singh Sidhu and

shockers in the form of strange statements being made by some eminent personalities, the unique gesture by a child from Tamil Nadu puts these men to shame ("Hero for a little hero", August 21). It is equally heartening to know a cycle manufacturer has assured her of support. When various such instances of benevolence and valour are surfacing every day, it is shocking that social media is awash with hate.

G.B. SIVANANDAM,
Coimbatore

■ One has no quarrel with the right wing, but when those associated with it begin to attribute the flooding to meal choices/eating habits, it ceases to be civil. Are not such elements aware of devastating natural events that occur even in other parts of India?

ALQAMA RASHEEDI,
Jalaun, Uttar Pradesh

■ One should not overlook the statement of ecologist and academic Madhav Gadgil that the Kerala floods were partly a man-made event. Each citizen is complicit in the gradual destruction of the environment. A large-scale study ought to be conducted on the ecological damage inflicted by human activities and the steps needed to mitigate the impact of natural disasters, now and in the future.

MUHAMMAD VASEEM P.P.,
Kannur, Kerala

■ In my village, in Palakkad, acres of rice fields have made way for ugly cement and concrete structures. This is also happening as the gentrification of villages continues relentlessly across the State. The loss of rice fields aggravates the problem of groundwater absorption. Rampant urbanisation and the obsession for "modern terrace buildings" on rice

fields is something that the people of the State need to think about. It is a time for responsible action and a re-visioning of a post-flood Kerala with solutions that can withstand changing climate scenarios.

NIRMALA NAIR,
Chennai

Clearing the air?

The move by Reliance Group Chairman Anil Ambani to try to clarify the position of his group vis-à-vis the Rafale deal should hopefully restore some sanity to the raging

debate stoked by the Opposition camp in trying to make 'a Bofors out of Rafale' for political gains ("Congress misinformed on Rafale: Anil Ambani", August 21). The country, which has hitherto been dependent on imports for its defence requirements, can inch towards self-sufficiency only if the private sector is allowed to operate in a fair and free atmosphere.

V. SUBRAMANIAN,
Chennai

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS

Towards the close of the report, "Curb intolerance: Manmohan" (Aug. 21, 2018), the quote that said, "We have seen that the opening of the economy and the closing of the mind is a dangerous and destructive mix," was wrongly attributed to the former Prime Minister, Mr. Manmohan Singh. It was actually made by UPA chairperson Sonia Gandhi. In the same report, due to an editing error, the statement that "the homage to Rajiv Gandhi should be marked by a reaffirmation of one's commitment to abide by ... core values that the late Prime Minister stood for" got wrongly attributed Mr. Karan Singh, former Union Minister. It was actually made by Mr. Manmohan Singh.

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