



Keep the peace

The immediate task is to dial down the tensions over Sabarimala

The riotous scenes in the pathways leading to the Sabarimala temple in Kerala in the last few days ought to persuade everyone, irrespective of where they stand on the Supreme Court's recent verdict, of the importance of one thing: to keep the peace. There is little to be gained in this surcharged atmosphere in stoking further trouble or using religious sentiment for political purposes. Whether one agrees with it or not, there is no dispute that the Supreme Court judgment allowing into the shrine the entry of all women, irrespective of their age, is the law of the land. Also, that it will remain so unless overturned by an even larger bench. The popular protests that have consumed Kerala following the Supreme Court judgment have suggested there is a sizeable section of devotees of both sexes that believes women in the age group of 10 to 50 should not be permitted into the shrine. But even so, this is no basis for devotees to prevent the implementation of the Supreme Court order, by threats and the unseemly use of force. Not one woman has managed to enter the temple, with two of them being turned away just 500 metres from the shrine. Faced with a threat by the head priest that the shrine itself would be closed if any of the women entered it, the police advised a woman journalist and an activist to turn back.

These developments do not augur well. Located in forest terrain, the shrine is accessible only from a few points, rendering it easy for protesters to stop vehicles and check for women in the 10 to 50 age group. It transpires that two of the women who tried to enter the temple were activists. The State government has now declared that its protection is available only to genuine devotees and not those trying to make a statement. After the drama and tension of the last few days, it is time for calmer reflection, not provocation. Activists and non-devotees are legally entitled to visit the shrine, but in such a volatile atmosphere, little is gained and a lot is lost by merely attempting to score a point. Everyone would do well to await the outcome of the review petitions before the apex court, even if the same issues resurfaced were the court to reiterate its verdict. The State government, the Travancore Devaswom Board and the devotees should discuss ways of implementing the Supreme Court order instead of frittering away their energies on managing protests and conflicts on a daily basis. If no solution is found soon, there is a risk that incidents may recur on any day when the shrine is open. Next month, the temple will open again for a longer season, placing a question mark on the possibility of peaceful and incident-free worship for devotees. Meanwhile, it is important that everyone works together to ensure that such fears are unfounded.

Taliban surge

With the Kandahar attack, the militants strike a blow to Afghan election and peace processes

The attack on a high-level meeting inside the Governor's compound in southern Kandahar on Thursday, killing top security officials, is yet another reminder of the sharply deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan. In recent years, the Taliban had shown its capability to infiltrate official meetings and attack any government building, notwithstanding claims by the authorities of heightened security. A year ago, the Kandahar Governor's office had come under attack by militants, resulting in the death of a Deputy Governor, the Ambassador of the United Arab Emirates and members of Parliament. Thursday's assault happened at a meeting that was attended by General Austin 'Scott' Miller, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan. U.S. troops later said he was unhurt, while Gen. Abdul Raziq, the Kandahar police chief, and Abdul Momin, the Kandahar intelligence chief, were killed. Kandahar Governor Zalmi Wesa was also targeted in the attack, but there were conflicting reports about the status of his health. Raziq was arguably the most powerful police commander in southern Afghanistan. A close ally of the U.S., he had previously survived several attempts on his life and was instrumental in coordinating the local police networks in the fight against the Taliban. His death will leave a security vacuum in the south, especially at a time when the Taliban has launched an all-out offensive.

Significantly, the Kandahar attack happened two days ahead of the much-delayed parliamentary election. From the day the election dates were announced, the Taliban had warned those participating in the process. The security situation is so dire in the country that one-third of the polling stations will not open on Saturday, election day. Over the past couple of months, the Taliban has repeatedly targeted election offices and gatherings, killing at least 10 candidates and dozens of their supporters. The already overstretched Afghan security forces will now have to deal with the fallout of the Kandahar strike. The attack is a setback for the U.S. plan for direct talks with the Taliban as a way out of the 17-year-long conflict. Zalmay Khalilzad, the American special envoy to Afghanistan, recently met Taliban representatives in Qatar. The push for talks comes from a realisation that the war has drifted into a stalemate and an outright military solution could be impossible. And as it finally comes around to the idea of direct talks, the U.S. is trying to turn up pressure on the militant group through Pakistan. But this strategy will work only if the Afghan forces and their allies make some advances on the ground, and bring the Taliban under military pressure. What is actually happening, as incidents such as the Kandahar attack suggest, is the opposite. Both the U.S. and Afghan forces appear to be clueless about how to stop the Taliban's advances.

L'affaire Khashoggi

There are limits to Saudi Arabia's defiance even within the ambit of narrow national interest



C.R. GHAREKHAN

The gory, gruesome and ghastly details of the last few moments in the life of Saudi Arabian journalist Jamal Khashoggi, as reported in the government-controlled Turkish media, have reaffirmed the continuing validity of the universal truth: the pen is mightier than the sword.

Authoritarian regimes not only do not fear open, violent acts of defiance but they also welcome them. It helps them identify opponents of the regime and deal with them with ruthlessness and brutality. Most such acts of opposition would be dismissed as terrorism, as is routinely done by totalitarian regimes. It is the written word, even more than the spoken one, that scares regimes. Khashoggi, after all, was just one person, at one time even close to the ruling circles in Riyadh. He welcomed Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's reform moves in the country such as permitting women to drive cars unaccompanied by male members of the family. But the regime felt so threatened by Khashoggi's dissident and heretical views that it felt compelled to liquidate him physically.

Nor are those responsible for his suspected murder necessarily unhappy that the horrible details of his torture have come out in the public domain, something they themselves might have greatly hes-



itated to do. They have achieved the purpose of sending a clear, unambiguous message to all potential trouble makers. The message will no doubt be effective in silencing dissent for a long while.

Tokenism in reactions

Saudi Arabia is defiant. It has warned all those who may be thinking of isolating or even moving sanctions against the regime with dire consequences. Some token action is being taken by some western governments such as demanding a thorough, impartial inquiry into the incident. The chief of the International Monetary Fund, Christine Lagarde, has cancelled her participation at the 'Davos in the Desert' Conference, in Riyadh. Significantly, the U.S. Treasury Secretary has joined the boycott. The outrage is universal in the developed world, though the developing countries seem to have decided their own counsel. The Bretton Woods institutions will still need Saudi funding.

This writer has long and firmly believed that foreign policy is all about promoting national interest

and that sentiment should have no place in it. This continues to be his conviction. U.S. President Donald Trump follows this principle quite ruthlessly. He is open about it, and not at all hypocritical. He is unabashed in proclaiming that hundreds of billions worth of arms sales are on the line and that he is not prepared to put them in jeopardy.

For all we know, the complicity of the highest levels of the Saudi monarchy may never be fully established; already fall guys are being projected which will give Mr. Trump the fig leaf to continue his cozy relationship with the regime. It remains to be seen if the noises made by some U.S. Senators about imposing sanctions or blocking the arms sales amount to any meaningful action.

It is the same principle of national interest that has inhibited us from confronting the Saudis as well as the Iranians about their open, unchecked support, financial and otherwise, by funding radical Sunni and Shia mosques in India. This is reported to have been going on for decades, perhaps be-

Statesmanship, not brinkmanship

The BJP must revisit the pages of Kashmir's political history and avoid its maximalist approach for short-term gains



SANDEEP BHARDWAJ

It is a sign of how accustomed India has got to the perennial Kashmir crisis that the municipal elections held in Jammu and Kashmir recently, which saw near-zero voter turnout in the Valley, have generated such limited public discussion. Despite being local body polls, the negligible public participation in them is significant, especially since only four years ago, the State had witnessed the highest voter turnout in 27 years. Last week saw only 35.1% turnout for the entire State, with Kashmiri participation dropping to a low single-digit percentage. Some have blamed this result on pressure from militants. However, it is worth noting that although militants often try to violently disrupt State elections, the boycott has rarely been as successful as this time.

We must recognise that this boycott was essentially a democratic expression of the people who are frustrated not just by the government but by the entire system. To ignore their voice is almost certainly going to lead to disastrous consequences for the State's already-deteriorating security situation.

Many have argued that the solution would have been to delay the elections. However, this would have also meant denying the people of Jammu their democratic

rights as they did want the elections and have participated in them enthusiastically. The true solution of this problem lay in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) tempering its political ambition. The resurgent Kashmir militancy was something that the Narendra Modi government inherited. However, instead of solely focussing on stabilising the situation, the BJP also tried to derive maximum political gains from the situation, using its typical take-no-prisoners style of politics. Within the State, it has pursued a blatantly-cynical and communally-coloured coalition politics; outside the State, it has led a campaign to end the "special status" of Jammu and Kashmir. Put together, this maximalist approach has dramatically destabilised the State's politics, and thereby its security.

A power disparity

The dilemma that Prime Minister Narendra Modi is facing has been experienced by his predecessors. As the head of the government, they felt it necessary to maintain stability in the State. However, as leaders of large national parties, they also saw Jammu and Kashmir as a fertile political ground which could be used to expand the bases of their parties, even if it was at the cost of stability in the State. The trade-off between these two impulses has been always difficult to negotiate. To be sure, there is nothing inherently wrong with any national party pursuing political gains within Jammu and Kashmir as they do in any other State. Indeed, many argue that it is actually preferable if a sensitive State such as Jammu and Kashmir is



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ruled by a reliable national party than by regional actors.

However, the problem is that in Jammu and Kashmir, the Central government enjoys enormous and extraordinary powers because of the security situation. This power disparity not only increases the likelihood of its abuse but also generates suspicion of abuse in the minds of the Kashmiri people. In other words, because New Delhi is so powerful in Kashmir, it needs to appear more benign than usual. History shows us that forgetting this essential fact and pursuing a maximalist political approach is fraught with danger and can lead to devastating consequences for national security.

Going back

In fact, even the initial birth of the Kashmir insurgency in the late 1980s can be traced back to Indira Gandhi's decision to adopt such a maximalist approach. In 1975, Mrs. Gandhi had established a historic accord with Sheikh Abdullah, making Kashmir's accession to India final. Then in a statesman-like move, she had asked the Congress Chief Minister in the State to step down for Abdullah to assume the position in a gesture of solidarity.

fore Independence. Yet, successive governments have not found it possible to protest such behaviour which amounts to direct interference in India's internal affairs and in radicalising sections of the Muslim community. It was felt that India's national interest, India's dependence on West Asian energy sources and anxiety not to upset them too much lest they voted against us in meetings of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, or side with Pakistan on the Kashmir issue, is what made us cautious.

India's deck of cards

Is there a lesson for India in the Saudi Arabian stance of defiance? India does not have the kind of money to throw around as the Saudis have. If India needs their oil, they also need to sell it. They need to sell as much oil as they can to continue with their disastrous misadventure in Yemen. The high level of crude price enables them to prosecute the war with comparably less cost, yet the Crown Prince's ambitious reform plan will need more money than the kingdom can produce.

If India is forced to reduce the import of Iranian oil to zero in the next few weeks, India does not have to worry about alternate sources of which there are plenty, as the Union Minister for Petroleum and Natural Gas has assured us. Saudi Arabia has no choice but to continue to make up the shortfall, first, because it needs to sell its oil, but second and more important, it must do all in its power to weaken and destroy its mortal enemy, the leader of the Shias of

the world. As King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia told the U.S. a few years ago, "the head of the snake needs to be cut off". If it becomes useful to befriend India in its relentless campaign against Iran, it will be a small price to pay.

There is yet one more weapon that India can selectively use. Next to the Saudis, we are the largest buyer of weapons in the world. The U.S., France, Russia all have only one interest in India – to sell their extremely expensive war material. They not only earn money, they even earn our gratitude. India has an insatiable thirst for weapons of war and apparently bottomless pockets to pay for them. Mr. Trump, who advocates, for his country as well as for others, to follow the principle of 'my country first' would be the last to impose penalties on India in case we do something that might not fit in with his agenda, either *vis-à-vis* Iran or Russia. The government seems to be conscious of this advantage that India has.

The principle of national interest can run into conflict with respect to other higher principles especially in democracies. Thus, the Khashoggi affair might eventually result in action in the U.S. Congress which the President then will have no option but to abide by. This is what happened in Congressional action against Russia and which Mr. Trump then had to follow. Vox populi will on occasion trump narrow national interest.

Chinmaya R. Gharekhan, a former Indian Ambassador to the United Nations, was Special Envoy for West Asia in the Manmohan Singh government

The Muslim United Front, an alliance of Islamic right-wing parties, expanded its vote share from a mere 6.4% in 1983 to 32% in 1987, in the Valley. Finally recognising this reality, in 1986 Rajiv Gandhi reached another accord with Abdullah which made both parties allies. However, by now it was too late. From a security standpoint it was necessary for the alliance to retain hold of the State; but in its weakened state, neither Abdullah nor the Congress could be sure that they would win the elections. Thus the stage was set for the infamous 1987 State elections, which were mired in allegations of widespread poll-rigging. Those who felt that the Abdullah-Congress alliance had "robbed" the elections became the first recruits of the incipient insurgency. In trying to reach for maximum goals – security gains and political mileage – the Congress ended up losing both.

Today, the BJP government finds itself in a similar position, where its political strategy is eroding the long-term security of the State. To make matters worse, unlike the Congress in the 1980s, the BJP is actually making political gains. Yet it must desist from this temptation. It must reckon with the profound dissatisfaction that the Kashmiri people have expressed through this recent boycott. Sacrificing its short-term political gains, the BJP should look towards the long-term stability of the State by moderating its own political appetite.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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At Sabarimala

What is surprising is to see many women protesters joining men in opposing the entry of women between ages 10 to 50 to the Sabarimala temple. It is a possibility that for them, faith is more important than gender equality. It is clear that the protesters will not heed any advice and will continue to block women in this age group from entering the temple. Perhaps it would need much patience, enlightened social reform and time for such a drastic change – in the form of the Supreme Court verdict – to settle down ("Sabarimala temple reopens amidst protests, violence", October 18).

D.B.N. MURTHY,
Bengaluru

■ It is unfortunate that a law and order situation has

arisen in the precincts of the Sabarimala temple. The cause espoused by devotees will not be enhanced by such violent responses. A silent protest with placards or banners and in a democratic and peaceful manner would have perhaps found more support to their cause.

R.V. EASWAR,
New Delhi

■ Perhaps the judgment was guided more by reasoning than by the faith of the devotees. The principle of equality cannot be misinterpreted by negating religious faith-belief and traditionally followed practices over years. The best option to resolve the current impasse is to file a review petition which allows for deeper consultation with the stakeholders towards reaching an amicable solution – more in the form

of a "referendum" in the devotees court. Judicial pronouncement in the matter of religious faith can never serve as social tool to promote gender equality.

N.R. JAGANNATH,
Bengaluru

■ The writing on the wall is clear. There is going to be a headlong clash between the proponents of gender-equality as enshrined in the Constitution and those who believe in well-entrenched tradition and deep faith. It cannot be resolved unless one side whole-heartedly leaves space for the other. Who knows, perhaps a compromise formula may be found without a loss of face for both sides.

C.G. SIVAKUMARAN,
New Delhi

■ The frenzied and violent response in Kerala is

reflective of the steady retreat of progressive forces and the ascent of regressive values. The BJP has smelt a political opportunity and is whipping up passions. How the BJP government in Maharashtra ensured the entry of women to the Shani Shingnapur temple following a High Court order exposes its Janus-faced approach. The Congress party, unsure of itself, is blowing hot and cold. The Kerala Chief Minister deserves praise for his determination to uphold the court judgment. However, whether the CPI (M) can hold on to its principled stand in the face of the emotional maelstrom remains to be seen.

MANOHAR ALEMBATH,
Kannur, Kerala

Ocean clean-up

While a national-level management policy is

welcome, there are other things that need to be done as far as cleaning up our oceans are concerned. How can one forget the amount of plastic trash on our beaches? Awareness must be created to protect our marine life. Second, fishing nets made from plastic do not degrade for years on end, in turn posing a huge threat to marine organisms. Biodegradable materials and alternatives to plastic could be used to produce nets. Third, incentives should be given to fishermen who collect abandoned nets. (OpEd page, "Unclogging our oceans", October 18).

VIDHYA B. RAGUNATH,
Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu

Being eco-friendly

The public mindset in India is such that when it comes to religious rituals, people fail to envision the

environmental degradation they can cause. With our rivers drying up, air quality deteriorating and global warming becoming a reality, it cannot be business as usual. All this points to the need to adopt environment-friendly means not just in our daily chores but also in our religious rituals as well. I would disagree that bringing in a punitive element in the Swachh Bharat campaign can bring about change. It will not only increase the burden of the judiciary and the police but also prove ineffective. A society-led movement can ensure changes in the way waste is generated and disposed of (OpEd page, 'Single File', "Cleanliness and godliness", October 18).

KAVITA SEWDA,
New Delhi

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