Ramallah recall

Narendra Modi's visit signals India's strategy to grow ties with Israel and Palestine separately

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Palestine underlines the delicate balance New Delhi has adopted in this long-standing and seemingly intractable conflict. India, which has been a champion of the Palestinian people's national aspirations, has built strong ties with Israel in recent years. Last year Mr. Modi became the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Israel; the Ramallah visit has come just weeks after his Israeli counterpart, Benjamin Netanyahu, visited India. On the other hand, late last year India voted along with a vast majority of member-states at the UN General Assembly against U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Last week in Ramallah, the Palestinian National Authority's administrative headquarters, Mr. Modi reiterated India's support for the Palestinian cause, saying it "hopes that Palestine soon becomes a sovereign and independent country in a peaceful atmosphere". Both sides also signed a number of agreements for India-funded projects in the West Bank. India's policy objective is clear and rooted in political realism. It wants to maintain the balance in its relationship with both Palestine and Israel, and strengthen bilateral ties with each separately.

This balance is vital for India, for which Israel is a source of defence equipment and agricultural technology. But Israel also faces political isolation internationally over its occupation of the Palestinian territories and does not have diplomatic ties with most countries in West Asia. As reflected in the UNGA vote, international public opinion is overwhelmingly against the occupation. India, which has vital interests in the Gulf and enjoys good ties with the region's Muslim countries, cannot afford to be seen to be politically closer to Israel at the expense of ties with Palestinians. So it is not a coincidence that the Prime Minister's visit to Palestine took place against the backdrop of India's deepening ties with Israel. With the Ramallah visit, the message Mr. Modi is sending out is that India's partnership with Israel is not at the expense of its principled support for the Palestinian cause. Still, changing nuances in India's position were on display during the visit. Traditionally, India has supported the creation of an independent Palestine within the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. According to this line, Israel would have to withdraw from the West Bank and East Jerusalem and either pull out the Jewish settlements or do a land-swap with the Palestinians as part of a final agreement. Mr. Modi carefully avoided any reference to the borders or to the capital. In effect, India's support for the two-state solution remains, but it has now stopped short of the specifics.

Woods and trees

We must review the strategy to revive forests, and move away from monoculture plantations

The Environment Ministry's 'India State of Forest Report 2017' based on satellite imagery, may present a net positive balance in the form of 24.4% of India's land area under some form of forest or tree cover, but this is but a broad-brush assessment. According to the report, forest and tree cover together registered a 1% rise over the previous estimate two years ago. However, such an estimate listing very dense, moderately dense, open and scrub forests mapped through remote sensing does not really provide deep insights into the integrity of the green areas. The emphasis in environmental policy to raise forest cover to 33% of the geographical area will yield some dividends. There has been an increase over the baseline cover of 20% at the turn of the century. Yet, tree cover is not the same as having biodiverse, old-growth forests. The ecosystem services performed by plantations that have a lot of trees grown for commercial purposes cannot be equated with those of an undisturbed assemblage of plants, trees and animals. India may be endowed with 16 major forest types, and 221 types and sub-types based on the Champion and Seth classification, but retains very little of its ancient forests after centuries of pre-colonial and colonial exploitation. Latter-day development pressures are also taking their toll. Forest restoration should, therefore, aid the return of native vegetation.

In its audit of various regions, the Ministry's report has calculated a cumulative loss of forests in Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal of nearly 1,200 sq km. The impact of such a terrible loss must be seen against the backdrop of the Northeast representing a global biodiversity hotspot. Any gains achieved through remediation programmes in Odisha, Assam, Telangana, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir and Manipur cannot compensate for it adequately. Naturally, environmental economists have come to regard the calculation of national accounts of wealth and development as weak, because governments do not add the benefits of functions such as flood control and climate moderation to the value of forests. Such a failure erodes the gains made by many communities, because lost natural capital contributes to material losses. India must review the programmes that it has been pursuing to revive forests, and move away from monoculture plantations that are favoured by even forest development corporations in many States. Scientific reforms to bring true nature back are needed. The latest assessment categorises more than 300,000 sq km of area as open forests with a tree canopy of 10-40%. These lands provide the opportunity to bring back diverse, indigenous trees. Such a measure, combined with a policy against allowing open cast mining, can bring about a renaissance. Dedicated efforts will be required to protect the precious forests of the Northeast.

The danger of counterfactuals

To ascribe Partition to the machinations of the Congress is to distort a very complex history

NEERA CHANDHOKE

AP

In democracies, citizens have a right to know why, where and how the government spends public money. Each year we, therefore, await the Prime Minister's response to the President's address in the Budget session of Parliament. This year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speech was less about the financial implications of the intended policies of his government, and more about blaming the Congress for the disasters that track Indians since 1947. In the process, he neatly sidestepped the basic obligation he owes us: accountability.

Equally troubling is his rather rash allegation that the Congress was responsible for the partition of the country, and for the division of Jammu and Kashmir. We know that representations of history tend to wander far away from actual events, and even construct them. But Mr. Modi's explanation of the Partition has little to do with one of the most catastrophic divisions of territory and people in the subcontinent. It has more to do with a personal obsession.

Counterfactuals

The claim that if Sardar Patel had been the head of the government, Kashmir would have remained united belongs to what is called counterfactual history. In a somewhat random comment, the famous French mathematician Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) wondered whether the history of the world would have been different if Cleopatra's nose had been shorter. Interestingly, the observation inspired René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo, authors of the delightful comic book series Astérix. Throughout the story of a group of gutsy Gauls fighting the Romans, Getafix the venerable druid, extols Cleopatra and her perfect nose and yearns to rub noses with her. We envy Cleopatra her nose, but we simply do not know whether a shorter version would have given us a different history. We can only speculate. But speculation is hardly history, an endeavour that is deeply contested.

The Partition, which led to one of the biggest mass migrations in world history, and to the death of an estimated one million people or more on both sides of the border, is one of the most debated issues among historians. The puzzle can hardly be under-estimated. Till the middle of the 1940s, Partition was just one of the political alternatives before the country. Historians tell us that Jinnah preferred a federation because the Muslim population was spread across India, and Nehru wanted a centralised and unified state. How did these differences spill over into the calamity of the Great Partition? The complex answers historians give to the question, 'why Partition', are based on meticulous research of documentary, literary and biographical sources.

Most scholars agree that the causes can be traced to the turn of the 19th century. The colonial project, intent on intellectually colonising Indians, proceeded to shape a loose, plural and decentred tradition known as Hinduism, cast it in the mould of Semitic religions, and create a 'unified' faith. A homogeneous version of Hinduism, and later Islam, politicised religious identities and harnessed them to competitive nation-making projects. Colonial policies gave an added fillip to this politicisation through group representation. By the early 20th century, the politicisation of religious identities led to communal violence.

Another group of historians focusses on the role of elites in the making of independent nation states. Elites proceeded to tap religious identities, forge a constituency, and mobilise struggles for independence and for a separate state. In recent times, attention has shifted from the causes of the Partition to its consequences: murder, rapes, mutilation, displacement, and generalised suffering. People were mercilessly removed from their homes and hearths in a land that had suddenly become another country. And yet another strain of writing on Partition focalises the making of new nation states through the creation of boundaries, passports, recovery of abducted women, and consolidation of territory.

We can hardly discern one reason for the Partition. To ascribe the tragic event to the machinations of the Congress party distorts the multiple, complex and often contradictory developments that led to the separation of Pakistan from India. More significantly, the Prime Minister ignores the role of his own constitutive community, and its ideology of Hindutva, in the making of the Partition.

Cause for unease

History has taught us a bitter lesson. If a political movement is successful in tapping deep structures of sentiment in a society, these sentiments must already be there, lurking under the skin of a shallow modernity expected to usher in a secular age. After all, religion cannot be harnessed to the cause of communal mobilisation until it has some grip on people's minds and psyches. Yet, this neat formulation – customised prejudice translates into murderous assaults on the 'other' community – gives us cause for unease. People may or may not be inclined towards religiosity, and yet might hesitate to dine or socialise with members of another community. But this does not mean that they ritually inflict harm on the bodies of other people. We can believe that others have their own reasons for thinking and doing what they think and do, and we have different reasons for thinking and doing what we wish to do. For many reasons, people construct symbolic and spatial barriers between themselves and others.

Note, however, that the bracketing-off of identities is a social phenomenon. Despite these social barriers, forms of cooperation can and do arise in the workplace, in social and political organisations, in and through movements, and through associational life. When these identities are transformed into political weapons in pursuit of symbolic or material gains, a sociological phenomenon translates into a political movement that lays exclusive claims upon the body politic. The politicisation of identities leads to open and ruthless competition for all sorts of power, invariably at the cost of human lives.

What is important is that the transition from often, hidden animosities to violence involves a trigger. The trigger is provided by organisations that belong to the religious right and/or entrepreneurs and merchants of hate who excel in excavating unarticulated sentiments of resentment against other communities, and in playing up incidents that otherwise can be easily passed off as minor. The trigger stokes and evokes hellfires of hatred, devastating violence, and eternal damnation. When politicised religious identities compete for the same spatial and material resources, communities are motivated to inscribe in-erasable injuries on others, and on the polity.

Each new morn

The Partition teaches us that the eruption of insane political violence under the banner of 'this' or 'that' religion, the suspension of civil ties between erstwhile neighbours, and the merciless brutality inflicted upon the bodies of children, men and women leaves ineradicable scars on collective memories, and destroys civilisations. We should have learnt that religious identities, once evoked, cannot be controlled. The history of religious strife in the subcontinent establishes that the trajectories of identity politics are unexpected, and that they take unforeseen and shocking routes. These routes inevitably lead to devastation. "Each new morn," says Macduff of war in Shakespeare's Macbeth, "New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows Strike heaven in the face, that it resounds." Yet, till today, communal organisations continue to trigger the brutalisation of social and political identities, creation of divides, exacerbation of hitherto muted schisms, and the creation of new ones. We have, it appears, not paid heed to these warnings. If we had, India would not re-enact the horrors of the Partition.

Neera Chandhoke is a former Professor of Political Science at Delhi University

How to handle Big Data

There are infinite ways to analyse data, but great caution must be exercised

ATANU BISWAS

The Hollywood film Moneyball (2011) is about the Oakland Athletics baseball team and the attempt by its manager to put together a competitive team on a lean budget using data and computer analytics rather than depending on mere biases to recruit new players. The film stands out for focussing the spotlight on data science by showing that the art of data science is more about asking the right questions than just having the data.

It is difficult to imagine the great volume of data we supply to different agencies in our everyday actions, bit by bit through surfing the Internet, posting on social media, using credit and debit cards, making online purchases, and other things where we share information about our identity. It is believed that social media and networking service companies such as Facebook may already have more data than they are leveraging. There are infinite ways to slice and dice data, which itself is quite daunting as at every step, there is potential to make huge mistakes.

Careful data mining from Big Data might help understand our behaviour in order to facilitate planning. But there are examples of blunders being made with a load of information at one's fingertips. The problem with so much information is that there is a much larger haystack now in which one has to search for the needle.

The Google project

Here is an example. In 2008, Google was excited about "Big Data hubris" and launched its much-hyped Google Flu Trends (GFT) based on online searches on Google for flu-related information with the aim of "providing almost instant signals" of overall flu prevalence weeks earlier than data out out by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the leading national public health institute in the U.S. But much of it went wrong; GFT missed the 2009 swine flu pandemic, and was wrong for 100 out of 108 weeks since August 2011; it even missed the peak of the 2013 flu season by 140%. Google tried to identify "flu" with the search pattern.

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Usually, about 80-90% of those visiting a doctor for "flu" don't really have it. The CDC tracks these visits under "influenza-like illness." Understandably, the Net search history of these people might also be an unreliable source of information. While GFT was promoted as the poster project of Big Data, it eventually became the poster child of the foibles of Big Data. In the end, it focussed on the need for correctly using the limitless potential of Big Data through efficient data mining.

Data blunders often arise out of bias, low-quality data, unreliable sources, technical glitches, an improper understanding of the larger picture, and lack of proper statistical tools and resources to analyse large volumes of data. Moreover, Big Data invariably exhibits fake statistical relationships among different variables, which are technically called "spurious correlations" or "nonsense correlations". Relying too heavily on a particular model is also a common mistake in Big Data analyses. Therefore, the model should be wisely and carefully chosen according to the situation.

"Big data may mean more information, but it also means more false information," says Nassim Nicholas Taleb, author of The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable However, today's world is obsessed with collecting more and more data while being inattentive to the necessity or capacity to use them. There is a possibility of getting lost in the waves of data. As a statistician, I firmly believe that unless there is serious need, we should restrain ourselves from collecting data as searching for the needle in haystacks should not be made unnecessarily difficult. The errors are bound to increase exponentially with more and more redundant information.

Mining and geological engineers design mines to remove minerals safely and efficiently. The same principle should be adopted by statisticians in order to mine data efficiently. Big Data is more complex and involves additional challenge. They might involve the use of some skills involving analytics, decision-making skills, logical thinking skills, problem-solving, advanced computational expertise and also statistical expertise. So, using some routine algorithm is not enough. Too much reliance on available software is also a serious mistake.

So, where are we headed with so much data, most of which are useless? What is the future of so much reliance on data, where a lot of spurious correlations could dominate our lifestyle and livelihood? Let me bring in another Hollywood film, Spielberg's Minority Report (2002) which is set in Washington DC in 2054, where the 'PreCrime' police force is capable of predicting future murders using data mining and predictive analyses. However, when an officer is accused of one such future crime, he sets out to prove his innocence! Does data mining depend more on probabilistic guesswork much like the danger inherent in a game of dice? Does this Spielberg film depict the future of data mining? And is the future dystopian or Utopian?

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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.

Animal welfare

It might not be right to say that the Constitution imposes no binding obligation on the state to protect animal welfare (Editorial page, "The jallikattu challenge", February 13), and therefore, the controversial practice be permitted as part of a citizen's fundamental rights. Articles 48-A and 51A(g) of the Constitution specify protecting "wildlife and to have compassion for living creatures". Therefore, human 'passions' such as jallikattu or rooster fights should be banned if one looks at the cruelty, bloodshed and lack of compassion in such 'human pleasures' at the cost of animal welfare.

B.M. BALIGA,
Bengaluru

■ Though the points put forth are commendable, one gets a lurking feeling that they may fail to impress die-hard votaries of jallikattu. Assuming that the Constitution Bench bars jallikattu, either from a legal perspective or moral angle, the show will go on especially when the State government has ratified the holding of jallikattu. Finer legal nuances may be unattractive to a boisterous mob and it all boils down to a lack of self-realisation. A medieval sport that poses inherent danger to the challengers is routinely and needlessly killing some and maiming many more every year. A similar crude sport called Buzkashi, exists in Afghanistan. Jallikattu is in a similar league and a court verdict, with all its constitutional trappings, may not impact the scenario.

V. LAKSHMANAN,
Tirupur, Tamil Nadu

■ As a lawyer, the writer has dealt with the subject exclusively as a legal subject. Be that as it may, how can one accept a dangerous game which is marked by cruelty, injury and much worse? Leaning on tradition and culture to justify the practice does not carry any conviction. In a society which has advanced by leaps and bounds, following a sport bordering on barbarism is uncivilised and unacceptable. Continuing the gene pool of country bulls can be done in other ways. Those in support of jallikattu need to be dispassionate and rational in their thinking.

R. RAMANATHAN,
Coimbatore

The cackle

It must be made clear at the outset that Congress parliamentarian Renuka Chowdhury's cackle in the Rajya Sabha last week was a vocal protest against Prime Minister Narendra Modi's assertion that L.K. Advani was the author of Aadhaar. The Congress MP showed the courage to demystify Mr. Modi. If her cackle provoked the Prime Minister to evoke the analogy of a demoness and the House Chairman to recommend that she seek psychiatric treatment, the reactions of the leaders signify a lot of things. The reference to mythology probably stemmed from the belief-system that it is about "you are either with us or against us".

The two leaders should have realised that the Congress MP is not one whose features are ruffled easily. What was sickening was the way rows of BJP MPs laughed derisively and thumped the desk to celebrate a fellow MP being demeaned.

G. DAVID MILTON,
Maruthancode, Kanyakumari

Many questions

The claim by the RSS chief that the right wing could raise a force for the country in three days, as opposed to the Indian Army which would take six to seven months to carry out the same task, needs to be looked at closely. Of course he added that the right wing is not a military institution but has the wherewithal to raise a militia.

The Opposition has, naturally, gone to town over the issue. The point here is not about whether the right wing can actually mobilise a fighting force in a few days. The question that needs to be asked is this: why exactly has the right wing been training an "army"? What have its shakhas, camps and lectures been teaching that can be useful in organised warfare? In a democracy, is any organisation or ideology permitted to raise an army?

K.S. JAYATHEERTHA,
Bengaluru

Bad loans crisis

The continuous losses, quarter on quarter, almost all nationalised banks are incurring is cause for worry (Editorial - "Unending pain", February 13). Though recovery measures seem to have been initiated a year ago, progress is slow. Fresh NPAs are adding up without allowing the regulatory authorities breathing space. The announcement of huge losses reported by the State Bank of India is surprising. This also establishes the fact that mergers are not helpful in controlling the NPA level as was the argument promoted at the time of bank branch mergers. The RBI should ensure that all banks promptly recognise stressed loans. Huge NPAs are a legacy from the previous government.

T.S.N. RAO,
Bheemavaram, Andhra Pradesh