## Strange turn

The Supreme Court's attempt at mediation in the Ayodhya dispute is incongruous

Mediation, especially when it is at the instance of a court, is a welcome option for those embroiled in protracted civil disputes. A compromise could indeed be preferable to an order that may leave one side aggrieved. However, it is questionable whether this principle can be applied to all disputes and in all situations. The Supreme Court's order appointing three mediators to find a solution to the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute is quite strange and incongruous, given that all such previous attempts have ended in failure. Further, the case is ripe for final hearing, and not all parties favoured mediation. The dispute over the site at Ayodhya, where a 16th century mosque stood until it was torn down by Hindutva fanatics in December 1992, has remained intractable since 1949. After the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the President referred to the Supreme Court the question whether there was a temple to Lord Ram before the mosque was built at the site. The court, in a landmark decision in 1994, declined to go into that question. More important, it revived the title suits and, thereby, restored due process and the rule of law. The present attempt by the Supreme Court to give mediation a chance within a narrow window of eight weeks goes against the spirit of the 1994 decision. After all, it was that verdict that made possible the 2010 judgment of the Allahabad High Court, which favoured a three-way split of the site among Ram Lalla, the Sunni Wakf Board and the Nirmohi Akhara, which is under appeal.

A welcome feature of the court-mandated mediation attempt is that it will not consume much time; the same eight weeks are needed for preparation for the final hearing. The confidentiality rule will be helpful as none would want the atmosphere to be vitiated by premature disclosures when the country is in election mode. However, the inclusion of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar as one of the mediators is controversial. In the past, he has made remarks to the effect that Muslims ought to give up their claim and that the failure to find a negotiated settlement will result in "civil war". It is true that the prolonged problem has had an adverse impact on the body politic and some "healing" is required. But the injury to the country's secular fabric was caused by fanatical Hindutva groups that launched a revanchist campaign on the plea that some temples had been turned into mosques by invaders. The only way to heal this festering wound on the body politic is to render complete justice not only in the civil case, but also for the criminal act of the demolition. No one must be left with the impression that the exercise is aimed at privileging the faith-based argument that the mosque stood at the exact spot where Lord Ram was born over the legal question on who holds the title to the land.

## Road through Rome?

Italy's proposed endorsement of the BRI highlights the dilemmas within the EU

Italy's plan to endorse the Belt and Road Initiative, the first such move by a G7 member, will boost China's global ambitions. In turn, this highlights the difficulties facing the EU and the U.S. in formulating a concerted response to counter China's growing might. On its inception in 2013, the BRI envisaged linking about 65 countries along a modern Silk Road, the transformation of China into a high-income economy and the renminbi's elevation into a global currency. Today, it has expanded to over 80 countries, mostly least developed and developing economies, as Beijing seeks to bolster its Made in China 2025 industrial policy. The lure of the BRI is attributed largely to the informal nature of the deals Beijing negotiates with partner-states, with attractive loan terms and sans political strings. Their opaque nature has spurred criticism that recipients risk being pushed into a debt trap. But the glitches facing some of the BRI infrastructure projects have merely led to calls for renegotiation rather than their roll-back. The BRI has moved forward, along with Beijing's other venture, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Many Central and Eastern European countries, EU members and aspirants alike, are part of the "16+1" group, which includes China, collaborating in infrastructure ventures.

However, Italy, an EU founder-member, will be the first major developed economy to participate in the BRI. Rome's ruling eurosceptic and anti-establishment coalition has been enthusiastic in signing on. Its timing is seen to have something to do with the difficulties the government has faced in balancing its growth targets with the EU's stringent fiscal norms. These tensions surfaced in recent negotiations with Brussels that led to a revised Italian budget. Italy is counting on its BRI endorsement to boost investment in it, given recent reductions in Chinese outflows into the EU. Rome is expected to sign an MoU to participate in the mammoth endeavour during a visit this month of President Xi Jinping. Italy's move comes at a moment of increasing concern in European capitals, especially Paris and Berlin, to counter Chinese mergers and acquisitions of European firms to protect the bloc's strategic economic sectors. The Trump administration has, in keeping with its America First policy, invoked national security provisions rarely deployed in international trade and targeted Beijing with punitive import tariffs, ostensibly to protect domestic industries. China's phenomenal economic expansion since joining the WTO in 2001 has almost altered the global landscape. But attempts to block Chinese businesses may prove short-sighted. Instead, Western democracies should strive to live up to their repeated pledges, since the 2007-08 global financial crisis, to eschew protectionism and promote rules-based open and free global competition.

# A peace movement is needed

India and Pakistan must re-imagine the border as a fold of peace instead of as a threshold of hostilities

SHIV VISVANATHAN

One of the things I miss in the age of TV and digital news is the presence of the storyteller. Maybe it is an old-fashioned need, but I miss the magic of the moment that begins, 'once there was'. Our sense of peace is desperately in need of myths and storytellers. In fact, as we watch the Pulwama event and after, we sense peace has lost autonomy as a narrative. Peace has been reduced to the lull between two acts of violence, an uneasy interlude. Our sense of war reads peace passively as a cessation of hostilities. Peace is more holistic and comprehensive in a way our current narratives do not capture. It is a different world. While war is anchored on the parochialism of concepts like border, security and nation state, peace has to dig deep into the unconscious of theology, philosophy and civilisation to literally create an alternative world view. India desperately needs a peace movement.

**Beyond machismo**

Our present vision of history and politics has become a handicap here. There is an irony to the Gandhian movement in India. Satyagraha as an imagination has inspired exemplars abroad, including Václav Havel, Martin Luther King, Jr., Thomas Merton and Desmond Tutu, but it has lost its passion and vigour in India. Today the Gandhian movement has died out, while Gandhians still play a role in other battles of resistance, such as the Narmada. Our ashrams are no longer pilgrimages of the imagination. They need to be revived to counter the think tanks of war and a middle class which craves the machismo of militarism.

What makes the dyingness of Gandhian ideas even more poignant is that violence and war have become technologically and strategically inventive, creating an acceptable normalcy around genocidal deaths. We read body counts with more indifference than weather reports. It is time peace as goodness challenges the inventiveness of war. As Gandhi pointed out, to be inventive, peace has to be both cognitive and ethical. It has to go beyond moral rhetoric and create experimental possibilities of peace, and it has to transform ethics into a political act that transforms the dullness of current democracy. Second, peace has to be seen as a craft, a lived world of meaning, not as a technocratic exercise. It needs daily rituals of practice where life, livelihood, lifestyle follow the codes of non-violence. For example, food has become a source of violence both as production and consumption. One has to rethink the logic of food as part of the testament of peace. The start-ups for peace have to be more imaginative than the usual start-ups of technology. Food as a cross-cultural imagination can help create the myths of diversity, generosity and justice that peace thrives on.

One has to also create a tradition of peace, a genealogy of exemplars and anecdotes, myth and folklore that sustain our everyday sense of life and living. Sadly, while we have many exemplars,

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we have few paradigms with which peace can confront the arrogance of war. We need a flood of peace hypotheses, efforts of men like Rajni Kothari, Kuldip Nayar, Johan Galtung and the folklore that went with it. Without a folklore of peace, a civilisational store of proverbs and wisdom, a social science of peace would be arid and administrative. The role of the university and civil society becomes critical because one of the institutions India has to dream of is a new University of Peace. The University of Peace was dreamt of by Patrick Geddes, watching the ruins of the League of Nations. He planned a model of peace where knowledge created frameworks of peace. Knowledge was to be a civics of peace. Tagore wove this idea into the idea of Shantiniketan. This other Shantiniketan did not survive and needs to be revived as India's creative answer to war and Partition. Civil society must take a leaf out of Abdul Ghaffar Khan's book and create a new vision of the soldiers of peace, the Khudai Khidmatgars. Imagine peace groups working on both sides of the India-Pakistan border in a dialogue of peace. This will help us rethink the idea of the border as a threshold of hostilities, a hinge of war rather than a fold of peace. Today we see people on the border as vulnerable. One needs to give them some sense of agency in creating counter-currents to war. Finally, one needs civilisational ideas on war, where a dialogue of religion creates an antidote to war. The role of religion in peace is particularly crucial as our conventional spiritual leaders have become handmen of the state.

**No democracy without peace**

One has to recognise while there is a poetics to peace, there is also a prose to routine. Time and the varieties of time become crucial in understanding peace. Waiting for peace is almost the everyday burden of women in war zones as they wait for their loved ones to come back, and dream of the return to normalcy. I remember Manipuri activist Irom Sharmila once telling me that normalcy meant returning to the possibility of being a woman, falling in love, going for walks untrammelled by army interrogation. Normalcy is such a rare phenomenon in frontier areas where war and insurgency have become endemic. Democracy, in that sense, is an ode to normalcy, to the rhythms of being we call peace. Recently there was a demonstration of Naga students in Delhi. The group did not ask for rights or critique the brutality of the state. All they said was that they were tired of war, tired of waiting for peace. All they wanted was peace in their lifetime, which Indian democracy is duty bound to give.

Once one realises peace is a craft, one has to prepare for it. One needs to see dialogue in creative ways. One is reminded of Raimon Panikkar's definition that dialogue is a pilgrimage where one encounters the difference of the other to discover oneself. India and Pakistan need a dialogue in the sense that Panikkar spoke about. In this context, a dialogue of the people must be accompanied by more specialised dialogues. India has a chance to revive the power of the Pugwash movement. One has to remember that the first Pugwash conference was to meet in India till Cyrus Eaton hijacked it to Nova Scotia, his birthplace. The new Pugwash should go beyond nuclear fiefdoms and challenge the inventiveness of violence. It provides an opportunity for the satyagrahi and the scientist to blend in creative ways. The encounter between India and Pakistan must create wider models for thinking about peace.

**Guns and culture**

India as a civilisation, a nation state and a democracy has a major resource to fall back on in the wisdom of our cultures and civilisations. It reminds me of an oft-repeated story from the Nazi era. Once the Nazi Minister for Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, claimed that every time he heard the word culture, he reached for his gun. The fittest reply came from a scholar, a Harvard professor called Alexander Gerschenkron. He replied that every time he heard the guns, he reached for his culture. It is time India goes beyond the grammar of surgical strikes and reaches for its cultures of peace, pilgrimage and understanding.

*Shiv Visvanathan is an academic associated with the Compost Heap, a group in pursuit of alternative ideas and imagination*

# The case for a First Front

A Third or Federal Front will not be able to confront the challenge the Hindu right poses to India's secular polity

SHAIKH MUJIBUR REHMAN

The most remarkable accomplishment of Narendra Modi as Prime Minister has been that he did not let Opposition parties close ranks completely against him, though he entered the national political stage as the most polarising political figure in modern Indian history. This reflects more on the ideological nature of Opposition leaders and their concern for secular India than on Mr. Modi's ability.

**Coalition failures**

Since 2014, attempts were made to put together a coalition against him. For instance, in 2017, there was an Opposition gathering in Chennai on June 3, then-DMK chief M. Karunanidhi's birthday; on August 17, former Janata Dal (United) president Sharad Yadav launched the 'Sanjhi Virasat Bachao' (save composite culture) in New Delhi, where many Opposition leaders were invited; at Rashtriya Janata Dal leader Lalu Prasad's 'BJP Hatao, Desh Bachao' rally on August 27, 15 parties took part.

And this January, Trinamool Congress Mamata Banerjee's congregation in Kolkata was attended by 22 parties. On February 13, Arvind Kejriwal of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) too held a gathering. A direct relationship, it is often argued, exists between the authoritarian conduct of a Prime Minister and the holder of the most powerful political office, and formation of a pan-Indian coalition against him or her. Examples of Indira Gandhi in 1975-77 or even Rajiv Gandhi in 1989 are often cited to corroborate this hypothesis. Though the coalition against Mr. Modi is far more organised today than it was in 2014, it's not anywhere close to that of 1977 or 1989.

**Looking beyond**

The endeavour by the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) leader, K. Chandrasekhar Rao (KCR), to float a Federal Front may be a non-starter, but in Uttar Pradesh, the Samajwadi Party-Bahujan Samaj Party alliance without the Congress raises a valid question: Is there a space beyond the BJP and the Congress in the Indian polity today? Indeed, a vast political space does exist outside their social bases. This is partly because the best days of the Congress, India's grand old party, are over.

It does not imply that the Congress won't win more seats or even lead a coalition government, but its revival seemingly will be driven more by forces of anti-incumbency. The Congress is unlikely to form a national government on its own in the coming decades. On the other hand, a general disapproval of the BJP's toxic politics does exist, led by a dominant social coalition particularly in regions where a credible alternative is presented, as was the case with the AAP's victory in Delhi and later by the Lalu-Nitish Kumar coalition in Bihar in 2015, both at the height of the Modi wave.

GETTY IMAGES

The TRS is a dynastic party. Therefore, Mr. Rao's attempt to weave a coalition of other regional dynastic parties would barely pass as a serious alternative ideologically to what the Congress or the BJP have offered already. If Mr. Rao's adventure worked out, it would be an extension of the dominant populism that prevails today. Parties that do not allow internal democracy cannot be sincere champions of democracy, and the political elites who use dynastic veto to throttle the legitimate aspirations of its new generation of leaders cannot be serious advocates of equality of opportunities. Both run against the spirit of the Constitution and tenets of liberal democracy. Therefore, what Mr. Rao appears to be offering is more a case of old wine in a new bottle.

**Shift to the right**

Since 2014, scholars have argued that India has moved right ideologically. Let us not blame Indian voters for this shift because they waited for decades for the non-Congress space to be occupied by a secular coalition. Sadly, none of the coalitions that emerged victorious in 1977, 1989 or 1996 lasted for long. If they had, the BJP might have remained a regional outfit. When V.P. Singh was confronted by the media during the post-Babri Masjid period for his hypocrisy in characterising the BJP as a fascist party – it had backed his government in 1989 – he explained that the decision by the National Front government of taking outside support of the BJP was based on the understanding that the BJP would emerge as a weakened force, as was the case with the Jan Sangh during the 1977 anti-Emergency coalition. As it turned out, it was the V.P. Singh-led political formation that imploded.

Scholars will endlessly debate if having the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Jan Sangh as part of an anti-Emergency coalition gave a new lease of life and legitimacy to the Hindu right. But the fact is the Hindu right emerged deeply demoralised in 1980 when the Janata Party coalition imploded and consequently Atal Bihari Vajpayee was opposed to the Jan Sangh's revival in any shape or form. It was the determination and persistence of L.K. Advani that finally persuaded Vajpayee to come along and help set up the BJP in 1980.

The fact that the Jan Sangh was revived under a completely new name indicates that there was a realisation among its leaders that it had lost is brand value. Jayaprakash Narayan (JP), it is worth recalling, did make serious efforts to persuade the RSS to give up on the idea of a Hindu Rashtra and create space for Muslims, though the RSS remained unmoved, which devastated JP.

**The vote share riddle**

While the social capital of the Hindu right might have increased today, Indian voters are yet to embrace its extreme agenda to the extent to vote it to power in New Delhi. In 2014, Indian voters embraced the BJP only on the development plank and many have found themselves in a trap. Clearly, instead of a Third Front there is a need for a First Front to confront the challenge that the Hindu right poses to India's secular polity.

*Shaikh Mujibur Rehman teaches at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, and has edited the recent book, 'Rise of Saffron Power'*

## 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.

**Rafale exposé**

The Central Government's stand in the Supreme Court, on the Rafale deal, on the ground that the documents on which it is based were 'stolen' is untenable. So long as the authenticity of the documents is not challenged, how they came into the hands of the press is irrelevant in a vast majority of cases. Let's also remember that today's government was yesterday's Opposition, and that in its earlier avatar, it took the then government to task on the basis of numerous press reports based on 'leaked' documents. The AgustaWestland case, for example, saw a blizzard of leaked papers.

P. ARIHANTH,
Secunderabad

■ The whistle-blower who made available the 'secret documents' must have done it after being thoroughly convinced that it was a murky deal and disappointed over the way the government has been trying to bury the hard facts. In my opinion, the one who has taken such a grave risk to bring out the truth and expose the government for its suspicious involvement in the deal must be a true nationalist.

THARCIUS S. FERNANDO,
Chennai

■ The issue in the deal is that there has been avoidable financial loss; there is no official secret about this fact. Every Indian is entitled to know what his government is doing and he has the right to question/criticise his rulers. The BJP has a mindset that no one should oppose its writ. This newspaper has done the job courageously with all one can expect from ethical journalism.

P.V.D. PAUL,
Chennai

■ I came across a Reuters report, published in *The Fiji Times* (March 8), headlined "India may prosecute newspaper under secrets act over Rafale documents". It is the job of good journalism to hold power to account in its public watchdog role to ensure the conduct of any government transaction is above board, and consistent with the public good. When big government contracts are undertaken, it is not uncommon for wheeling and dealing to occur, involving influential corporations. It is also not uncommon for the state to use the threat of prosecution to forestall any questioning or criticism. *The Hindu* has not divulged any state secrets. All it was doing was to make sure there is no secrecy surrounding this big government military hardware deal. The daily should be applauded for doing its job diligently. It is a shame that it has been threatened with state persecution instead.

RAJEND NAIDU,
Glenfield, Sydney, Australia

■ For the Attorney General to belatedly assert that "secret documents" had been "stolen" from government custody is to tacitly admit that the documents are in fact genuine, and worse, that the government has been woefully lax in safeguarding such important documents. This is an absolutely inept way to handle the issue, with elections just around the corner. It betrays the total disarray among the crisis managers in government on how to tackle the issue. They need to douse the fire rather than ignite it even more. The cartoon (OpEd page, March 8) captures the irony.

M. RASHEED,
Chennai

■ While there is nothing ostensibly wrong with *The Hindu*'s stand on disclosure of sensitive documents for the public good in this particular instance, the only solid argument in the daily's favour is its stellar record of journalistic integrity. This, however, cannot be set as a precedent, considering how vulnerable prudence and restraint are to the pressures of competitive journalism.

ARAVIND S.,
Thiruvananthapuram

**It's apathy**

It is painful that Indian cities are most polluted (Editorial, "Breathing clean", March 8), despite the government's aggressive initiatives. What is surprising is that high-profile Varanasi finds a place. It is a pity that neither the public nor governments are bothered about a clean environment but only interested in populism.

KSHIRASAGARA BALAJI RAO,
Hyderabad

■ Buying water is now common. But are we staring at a situation where buying clean air may soon be the norm? All of us need to work quickly before the next generation laments the legacy of an unliveable environment.

A.G. RAJMOHAN,
Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh

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**CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:**

In the story on Lokpal appointments (March 8, 2019), the date of Justice Ranjana Prakash Desai's letter to the Attorney General was wrongly given as *September 28*. It should have been *February 28*.

The headline in the online version of a report (some editions, March 8, 2019) about the inauguration of an integrated HIV treatment centre in Mumbai by the Humsafar Trust has been corrected as the published headline had an erroneous implication.

It is the policy of The Hindu to correct significant errors as soon as possible. Please specify the edition (place of publication), date and page. The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300 (11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday); Fax: +91-44-28552963; E-mail:readerseditor@thehindu.co.in; Mail: Readers' Editor, The Hindu, Kasturi Buildings, 859 & 860 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002, India.
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