



Healing touch

Kashmiri students elsewhere must be reassured of their personal safety

The Supreme Court has agreed to hear a petition seeking directions to educational institutions to protect Kashmiris in the face of harassment and intimidation in various parts of the country after the ghastly terror attack in Pulwama on February 14. Hundreds of Kashmiri students, primarily from Dehradun in Uttarakhand, have already returned home or moved to Delhi or Jammu seeking safety. Amid these reports, the Union Home Ministry had on Saturday issued an advisory to all States and Union Territories to ensure the safety of Kashmiris. The Jammu and Kashmir police too have set up helplines. It is to be hoped that these measures will be strengthened, especially with the Supreme Court now hearing the issue. It needs to be made clear by the State and Central governments that there will be no compromise on the State's responsibility to ensure the well-being of citizens. Equally, there needs to be stern action against the mobs that harassed and tried to frighten Kashmiris. The Uttarakhand police arrested 22 students on Tuesday for trying to have Kashmiri students expelled from their college, but there have been other similar instances. It will be a cause for lasting shame if young people studying in different parts of the country were sought to be isolated, and their ethnic identity headlined to make them targets of majoritarian mobs looking to avenge a terrorist attack. Law and order must prevail, and the students must be given enough confidence that they can return to their educational institutions and studies without fear.

However, occurrences such as these, of communally charged attacks, cannot be forgotten with the mere return to a semblance of normalcy. No group of Indians should be allowed to be isolated by blame-calling mobs, and the situation demands a strong, politically-led initiative to end the intimidation and reassure the victims. Given this, it is regrettable that members of the Narendra Modi Cabinet have either been in denial or have infused ambiguity into their statements of reassurance. Union Human Resource Development Minister Prakash Javadekar, for instance, on Wednesday said outright that there had been no such harassment. Equally disturbing, he prefaced his remarks with a reference to "a tremendous reaction of anger in the country about the Pulwama incident". The fact is that many Kashmiris have already fled Dehradun, and some of them have shared their stories. Mr. Javadekar, as HRD Minister, should address their feeling of insecurity, instead of being dismissive about it, and in the process allowing the mobs a free pass. Moreover, the fact that anti-Pakistan sloganeering can so easily slip into anti-Kashmiri rhetoric must bother civil society and politicians of all hues. Even if the attacks are isolated, the counter-argument must come from across the political spectrum, and in one voice: that all Kashmiris enjoy all protections and rights available to them as Indian citizens.

Half-measures

It is good the 'angel tax' has been moderated, but its arbitrary nature remains intact

After the uproar among start-up investors in the last few weeks, the Centre on Tuesday decided to ease the conditions under which investments in start-ups will be taxed by the government. According to the new rules, investments up to ₹25 crore in companies that are less than 10 years old and with a total turnover of less than ₹100 crore will be exempted from the new angel tax. Further, investments made by listed companies with a net worth of at least ₹100 crore or a total turnover of at least ₹250 crore will be fully exempt from the tax; so will investments made by non-resident Indians. When it was first proposed by the Centre in 2012, the angel tax was justified as an emergency measure to prevent the laundering of illegal wealth by means of investments in the shares of unlisted private companies at extraordinary valuations. But the adverse effect that it has had on investor confidence has forced the government to ease the stringent rules. The easing of the outdated angel tax rules will definitely make life easier for start-ups, which are in desperate need for capital to fund their growth and other business requirements. Further, since the new rules are set to be applied retrospectively, many young companies that have received notices from the Income Tax Department in the last few years will be relieved by the latest tweak in the rules.

There are, however, a few other issues with the new rules that could still cause unnecessary headaches to young start-ups. Companies wishing to make use of the latest exemption, for instance, will first need to be registered with the government as start-ups. To be classified as one, a company needs to attest to conditions such as that it has not invested in any land unrelated to the business, vehicles worth over ₹10 lakh, or jewellery. These requirements, while probably aimed to prevent money-laundering, can lead to considerable bureaucratic delays and rent-seeking. Also, the new rules for the angel tax, though less stringent than before, can cause the same old problem of arbitrary tax demands for companies that do not fall under the defined category of start-ups. The taxes to be paid are still supposed to be calculated by the authorities based on how much the sale price of a company's unlisted share exceeds its fair market value. It is impossible to know the market value, let alone the fair market value, of shares that are not openly traded in the marketplace. So tax authorities with ulterior motives will still possess enough leeway to harass start-ups with unreasonable tax demands. Unless the government can address the arbitrary nature of the angel tax, the damage to investor confidence may remain.

The great Indian political shift

The Ambedkarite, Lohiaite and Dravidian parties are visibly moving to a politics without 'othering'



SAJJAN KUMAR

The 2019 general election is being seen as a test of the parties opposed to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance in forging workable pre-election fronts, and of the BJP in deepening its electoral coalitions. But it is interesting to scan the changing political landscape before the campaign for the Lok Sabha gets truly underway for changes in the 'politics of othering' that has so far defined most Indian parties. Or in other words, are non-BJP, non-Congress parties adopting Congressism?

Episodic othering

The enumeration exercise by the colonial ethnographic state since the late 19th century brought to the fore the politics of 'numbers', thereby reshaping society into the binary of 'minority-majority' along caste, religion and ethnic lines. By the 1920s, the political discourse in India, barring that of the Indian National Congress, inhaled the politics of 'numbers', which seamlessly metamorphosed into the politics of 'othering'. This took various forms under parties such as the All-India Muslim League, the Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha, the Justice Party, etc.

By the 1950s, against the backdrop of the domineering discourse of Congressism, which was a politics without 'othering', India witnessed the emergence of four dominant political threads: Lohiaite, Ambedkarite, Hindutva and Dravidian, championing the fault-lines of caste, religion and ethnicity, thereby practising the politics of 'numbers and othering'.

The constitution of the 'other'

happened at three levels. First, at the symbolic level, wherein the founding fathers were pitted against each other. Second, at the societal level, wherein the socio-economic interest of one section was shown as being unaligned with that of sections signifying the 'other'.

Third, at the political level, wherein idiom, metaphor, popular slogan and appeal were deliberately sectarian, exhibiting a 'friend-enemy' simile. It was argued that popular politics was about speaking for different shades of subalterns, who constituting the majority, thereby projecting the politics of 'numbers and othering' as necessary to serve the ideals of equality and freedom. However, this mode of politics infused a great deal of bitterness in the societal realm by treating the ideals of 'fraternity' as subservient to 'equality and freedom'.

The manifestation of this three-fold othering was seen in the political culture across India since 1990s in an entrenched way. The popularity of slogans in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, emanating from Ambedkarite and Lohiaite discourse, while championing an egalitarian quest took recourse to caste-based 'othering' that competed with the religious 'othering' of Hindutva.

This entrenchment of 'othering' could be seen most clearly in post-2000 Uttar Pradesh when the acidic political rivalry between the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Samajwadi Party (SP) manifested itself in their governments' policies as they pitted two social justice icons, R.M. Lohia and B.R. Ambedkar, against each other. For instance, the BSP government by 2012 had brought almost 19,000 most backward villages under the Ambedkar Village Scheme. The official signboard designated them as 'Ambedkar villages' qualified for special developmental funds.



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

However, when the SP government came to power in 2012, it selected another set of villages under a new village development scheme, Ram Manohar Lohia Samagra Gram Vikas Yojana, and officially labelled them as 'Lohia villages'. The replacing of Ambedkar by Lohia had another dimension. While the Ambedkar villages were inhabited by significantly large numbers of Dalits, the Lohia villages had a majority of non-Dalits, particularly the Other Backward Classes.

This three-fold othering had its parallel in the southern and Northeastern States, which was reflected in the BJP's slogan 'Jati-Mati-Veti' (identity, land and resource) in 2016 during the Assembly election in Assam, privileging ethnic identity, and in the controversy over the separate flag during the Karnataka election in 2018.

Besides, going against the ideals of fraternity, the fact that any politics of 'othering' becomes a politics of exclusion by default underlines the need for a politics without 'othering'. Therefore, the question is, can India witness a 'politics of numbers' (pragmatic electoral compulsions) that doesn't necessarily metamorphose into a 'politics of othering'?

Something may be changing. The frequency of 'othering' in the political discourses of Lohiaite, Ambedkarite and Dravidian politics is declining, and is now at the

Picking sides in West Asia

India could find it difficult to maintain a 'balancing' approach between different West Asian powers



HARSH V. PANT & HASAN ALHASAN

Over the past few years, the course of India's relations with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) suggests that under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India finally appears to be moving away from its traditional "balancing" approach to West Asia. The Modi government has in practice demonstrated a preference for working with the three regional powers rather than Iran, a trend likely to be reinforced after the visit of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) and the proposed trip by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to New Delhi.

Regional realities

Since the 1990-91 Gulf War, India has officially adopted a "balancing" approach to West Asia, which some view as a legacy of non-alignment. Although this approach has allowed India to eschew involvement in regional disputes and de-hyphenate relations with regional rivals including Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia, the policy has also constrained India's ability to press

its geopolitical interests in the region.

Geopolitically, MBS and Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ) have over the past few years escalated their battle against political Islamist groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood. Most notably, this materialised in their support for Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's takeover of power in Egypt from the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013, and in their dispute with Qatar, a key regional backer of the group. Naturally, this brings them closer to Israel, which faces a growing threat from Islamist militant groups, including Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iranian-backed forces in Syria.

The campaign by Saudi Arabia and the UAE to curtail the influence of political Islamist groups also draws them closer to India. During his visit to New Delhi, the Saudi Crown Prince hinted at the attack by vowing to "cooperate in every way, including intelligence sharing". In recent months, the UAE has also ramped up its security cooperation with India, extraditing at least three suspects wanted in relation to the AgustaWestland case.

Defence and energy needs

Meanwhile, India's defence and security partnership with Israel has already proven useful to its security and military modernisation drive. In 1998, Israel provided In-



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

dia with valuable intelligence on Pakistani positions during the Kargil war. More recently, India and Israel have collaborated on a \$777 million project to develop a maritime version of the Barak-8, a surface-to-air missile that India successfully tested in January. India has also reportedly agreed to purchase 54 HAROP attack drones for the Indian Air Force and two airborne warning and control systems (AWACS) worth over \$800 million from Israel. Due to its technological sophistication and warm relations, Israel has become one of India's top suppliers of military technology.

Economically, the ability of Saudi Arabia and the UAE to mobilise investments despite low oil prices is a huge asset in their relations with India. Investments have included a \$44 billion oil refinery in India by Saudi Aramco and the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company in partnership with an Indian consortium. During his visit to New Delhi, MBS said he foresaw up to \$100 billion worth of Saudi invest-

ments in India over the next few years, including a plan by the Saudi Basic Industries Corp. to acquire two LNG plants.

Iran's stake

In contrast, Iran's support for Islamist militancy, not least by transferring advanced missile technology to Islamist groups and militias in Lebanon and Syria, has led to an increase in tensions with Israel, which responded by conducting air strikes against Iranian targets on Syrian soil in January. Although the simultaneous attacks that claimed the lives of 27 members of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps and 40 members of India's Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) are likely to bring India and Iran closer together against Pakistan, it is doubtful that the occasion would generate much momentum in bilateral relations.

From an economic perspective, U.S. sanctions have turned Iran into an unreliable economic partner. Despite obtaining a six-month waiver from the U.S. in November on energy imports from Iran, India is shoring up plans to find alternative sources as the waiver reaches its term. Meanwhile, Indian investments in Iran, including the Shahid Beheshti complex at Chabahar and the Farzad B gas field, have languished for years, reflecting the severe constraints on doing business with Iran.

However, India's tilt towards Is-

rael, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE is not a risk-free move. Iran continues to exercise much influence in West Asia and can help shape events in Afghanistan by shoring up the Taliban against the U.S. Moreover, Iran's Chabahar port represents a strategic investment for India which hopes to use the facility to connect with the International North-South Transit Corridor (INSTC) that extends to Central Asia and to bypass Pakistan en route to Afghanistan.

Yet, as tensions rise in West Asia, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have coalesced more closely against Iran under the U.S.-sponsored Middle East Security Alliance (MESA). Concurrently, recent escalation between Iran and Israel on the Syrian front suggests that tensions are unlikely to drop soon. Amid competing demands from West Asian powers for India to take sides, India might find it difficult to maintain a "balancing" approach even if it wanted to.

For now, the Modi government seems to have taken its pick. Having practically abandoned a "balancing" approach, the Modi government has, in effect, placed its bets on Israel and the Gulf monarchies, relegating relations with Iran to the side.

Harsh V. Pant is a political analyst. He is associated with Peoples Pulse, a research organisation that specialises in fieldwork-based political study

Harsh V. Pant is Director, Studies and Professor of International Relations at King's College London. Hasan Alhasan is a PhD candidate at King's College London

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.

Employment test

The data on employment, or their lack, are there for all to see (Editorial page, "The employment test", February 22). Regular employment opportunities appear to be a thing of the past, with employment on a contractual basis and daily wages becoming common. The now infamous promise of the government, of the creation of two crore jobs every year, was an important reason why it came to power in 2014. Lakhs of jobs have been lost, mostly in the informal sector, and because of demonetisation. Thousands of youth from faraway parts of the north and Northeast are now working in the south as there are fewer opportunities in their

States. In the public sector, the pronounced tilt towards privatisation is cutting off opportunities for educated youth.

G.B. SIVANANDAM,
Coimbatore

■ The employed category in several sectors, both government and private, is over-burdened, evident in the banking and information technology sectors. Mental health issues are also on the rise. It is time the government enacted suitable statutes to regulate the workload and targets. It may be possible to find more job opportunities for the unemployed if available jobs are evenly distributed. As welfare is not money alone, this is an area for focus.

P.G. MATHEW,
Kochi

■ Going by the growth trajectory in the past few decades, it is illusory to expect any government to "vacate the stage" if it has failed to generate employment. There has been little difference in the economic policies of the Congress and the BJP, which have remained pro-big business. The alleged fudging of official data may indicate that we have not lagged behind in graduating to a post-truth society.

MANOHAR ALEMBATH,
Kannur, Kerala

■ It is amusing that the writer has tried to link it to the Narendra Modi government. One wonders what the writer's line would be in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, or 4IR, where technology use is

growing exponentially. A major aspect of the 4IR will be to change the way we work, as there will be the increased automation. Experts claim that automation will sound like a recipe for a worldwide disaster, as it will put people out of jobs, have labour unions, or what is left of them, striking and cause political upheaval. Is India prepared for this?

R. SUBRAMANIAM,
Bengaluru

On teaching

It is pathetic to note that those who take up teaching do so to escape unemployment, resulting in mediocrity in the educational system (OpEd page, February 21). That apart, the modern Ekalavya does not need to depend on

a teacher or the 'chalk-and-talk' method; Google is the guru and Skype has started replacing 'dreary' classroom learning. In this digital mayhem, passion towards teaching is rare. It is ironic that educational institutions are run by the rich who have political backing. 'Teaching is a service and not a transaction', is what the writer feels, but are there such teachers today?

E.S. CHANDRASEKARAN,
Chennai

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In the story on resident certificate issue in Arunachal Pradesh (Feb. 21, 2019, some editions), there was a reference to a rally addressed by Deputy Prime Minister Chowna Mein. He is actually the Deputy Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh.

A report headlined "Vishnu Prasad ridicules Ramadoss" (Feb. 21, 2019, some editions) talked about the incarnation of former PMK MLA Kaduvetti J. Guru in jail. It should have been incarceration.

The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in