



2+2 = ?

India must watch its side of the ledger while deepening defence ties with the U.S.

The India-U.S. defence relationship has been given a significant boost with the three agreements signed on Thursday after the inaugural 2+2 Dialogue in Delhi: the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), “hotlines” between the Defence and Foreign Ministers of both countries, and the first tri-services military exercises between the two countries. COMCASA is the third of four “foundational”, or enabling, agreements signed by India after more than a decade of negotiations, and is perceived as an inevitable consequence of the large amount of U.S. defence hardware it has been purchasing. This will increase, going forward, given the U.S. decision to include India in the top tier of countries entitled to Strategic Trade Authorisation (STA-1). Apart from the defence agreements, both sides said in a joint statement that they had discussed trade issues, cooperation on fighting terrorism, advancing “a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region” and promoting sustainable “debt-financing” in the region. The last two points are clearly aimed at Beijing’s role in the South China Sea and the Belt and Road Initiative projects, respectively.

The 2+2 discussions, held after two previous cancellations this year, brought much-needed focus on the India-U.S. relationship after months of drift and occasional discord. However, while trade was addressed, India did not receive a clear-cut assurance of its GSP (Generalised System of Preferences) status being restored, or of waivers on steel and aluminium tariffs imposed by Washington. Instead, U.S. officials said clearly that they expect India to increase imports of American oil and gas as well as aircraft in order to wipe out the trade surplus India enjoys. It is unclear whether the Centre has acquiesced to this blatantly anti-free market demand, but its silence on the matter is disturbing. The U.S.’s other demand, to “zero out” oil imports from Iran by November, is simply unreasonable. It would hurt India dearly not only because of costs at a time when the dollar is strengthening and fuel prices are going up, but also in terms of its substantial engagement with Iran. No public statement was made on what the U.S. will do on India’s investment in the Chabahar port once its full sanctions kick in on November 4. American officials also gave no firm commitment in their statements that India will receive a waiver to purchase Russian hardware, beginning with the S-400 missile system. While signing agreements the U.S. has pursued for years, India appears to have taken a leap of faith on its own concerns, expecting that the Trump administration will come through on waiving sanctions and being more flexible on trade issues. Delhi must work with Washington in the next few months to ensure that the benefits from the 2+2 dialogue don’t add up only on the other side.

Post office solutions

The new India Post Payments Bank can hasten financial inclusion, but detailing is key

Amidst some fanfare, Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the India Post Payments Bank (IPPB), a financial service provider that will operate under the country’s age-old postal department. The government-owned payments bank will be able to accept deposits of up to ₹1 lakh from customers but without the rights to use these funds to advance risky loans at higher interest rates. It, however, plans to offer a variety of other financial services to people, including the holders of postal savings accounts that are worth over ₹85,000 crore. The primary rationale behind the public payments bank idea is to help in the government’s goal of achieving financial inclusion by providing savings, remittance, and payments services to the rural and unorganised sectors of the economy. It is also hoped that the payments bank idea will help reinvigorate the postal system, which has a wide network of branches across India. All the 155,000 post offices in the country are expected to be linked to the IPPB system as early as in December this year. The payments bank will also have a digital platform that is expected to make financial services more accessible even from remote locations.

A big challenge facing the new public payments bank is whether it can manage to earn the profits required to survive as a standalone business entity. Given the severe restrictions imposed by the Reserve Bank of India on how payments banks in general can employ their funds, the odds seem to be stacked against the IPPB at the moment. The first wave of new payments banks that commenced business last year – Airtel, Paytm and Fino – have not exactly set the market on fire. (The payments bank model, it should be noted, is still untested even though prominent private companies such as Airtel and Paytm have shown interest in the space.) Banks have traditionally stayed away from the business of pure deposit banking, unless customers have been willing to pay for these services, for a good reason. The IPPB promises to pay an interest rate of 4% to its savings account customers. To generate revenues, it plans to charge fees on money transfers and other financial services while investing idle customer deposits in safe government securities in order to earn interest. Whether this will be sufficient to cover interest and operational costs remains to be seen. Meanwhile, the IPPB is also likely to face stiff competition from private companies, which are generally more nimble in adapting to business realities and far more customer-friendly compared to the government-owned behemoths. And with increasing competition, the IPPB’s revenues and margins are also likely to come under pressure. Yet, if it succeeds, the new payments bank could usher in a new era of rapid financial inclusion across rural India.

The sadness of silence

What has become of the Indian intellectual as storyteller? Is he only an annexe of the state or can he be critical?



SHIV VISVANATHAN

A few months ago, I was at a screening of a documentary on the Bengal Famine. *Bengal Shadows*, while well-intentioned, was more a pretext for the text that followed. The question was, why was there such a silence about the event, which claimed over 3.5 million people and was one of the most arrogant acts of triage in history? It was a systematic elimination of people on grounds of rationality, of a scaling in terms of policy priorities. The British tended to explain it away as one of the sideshows of history, an act of contingency of an imperial Winston Churchill too busy with winning the war.

A split narrative

Indian historians were also polite as though belonging to the Oxbridge club was more critical than compassion for the victims. Between the middle ground of silence and an illiteracy about the event, the narrative split into two. One strand merged into folklore and people’s memory and became a tale told by old men and women to their families. In the other what one sees is a banalisation, a ritualisation of the event. There is a subtle recognition of a new possibility, that while the national movement may have been peaceful, even dialectic, the nation-state as an entity emerged out of the imagination of two genocides: Partition and the Bengal Famine.

What emerged was a state devoted to science, planning and de-

velopment and committed to managing huge populations. Memory recedes to the background and what remains is the politics of dislocation and number. What emerges is an implicit social contract between the nation-state and science to create new orders of stability. Out of Partition comes the idea of community development and urban planning. Jawaharlal Nehru invites Le Corbusier to build the new city of Chandigarh. The Bengal Famine becomes a pretext for planning and the administrative apparatus required to create a welfare state. The violence of the famine is not erased, it is sublimated into the creation of a new state.

Second, the violence and its large-scale disruptions led to the violence of Partition and also an acknowledgement that such large-scale violence is part of the new modernity. What one misses is a critique of the famine as it gets domesticated to a benign policy document. There is little protest about British behaviour, no attempt to call Winston Churchill to account as a war criminal. Instead, what we get is a ritual of table manners, not an ethical response to one of the great genocides in history.

Failure of story-telling

The Bengal Famine is a failure of storytelling as it gets sublimated into policy narratives or war-time memories. That very silence, its normalisation where a society accepts violence as part of a logic of strategy has tainted the unconscious of India. Sadly, the intellectual has become part of the conspiracy of silence, hiding behind the emperor’s new clothes, the emerging policy science, which banalise the logic of violence in everyday life. A Michel Foucault



would have been ironically delighted with the event as a case study where Famine, Partition and World War become the creation myths of the Indian state apparatus.

Listening to the narratives, one often wonders what became of the Indian intellectual as storyteller. Is he only an annexe of the state or can he be a critical intellectual? This question becomes even more critical during the Narendra Modi regime where the silence and passivity of the intellectual are deeply distressing. Yet, there is little analysis or reflection to fix it at another level.

At another level, I keep wondering why so little attention has been paid to silence in history. Listening to narratives of genocide and violence, I often think that there should be a monument to silence. The silence of Partition centres around rape and few talk about it. It is a bit like the scene in the film where men discuss Partition and a woman listens quietly. In the end she says, “You have told a man’s story. The woman’s is still not available.” In fact, India has become a history of silences. I was thinking of the history of the Bhopal gas tragedy. The tragedy of Bhopal was a census of storytelling. After the census of numbers and the arguments of legality, little remains. It is as if suffering and silence go together. The idea of witnessing hardly seems to command

attention, and the few witnesses that did exist seem to be voices in the wilderness. It is as if silence was as lethal a killer as the gas and more overwhelming. The missingness that silence creates haunts Bhopal. Even commemorations become empty events, punctuation marks which sound hollow. They lack the poetics to challenge and the poignancy of the silence.

One senses the same tenor of desperation as one confronts the battle against the Narmada dam. The survivor as resister attempted to revive memory, even create a calendar of struggle – yet today the waters of the dam have reduced the struggle to silence.

I keep wondering why even events that find their voice lapse into silence. I am thinking of the Emergency which found a storyteller in the Shah Commission report, or the 1984 riots which found a witness in the PUCL-PUDR report, “Who are the Guilty?”. But eventually even these interrogating voices lost power. It is almost as if every atrocity is accompanied by its own symphony of silence. Each genocide creates its own demography of silences. India, in fact, becomes a history of silence, when actual history is too mute, unable to stand witness. Voice becomes a disappearing species. So all we have is the silences of Partition, the muteness of Bhopal, the silence of Narmada, and along with these bigger silences, the little dialects of silence – a Dalit’s silence, a woman’s silence, a tortured silence, a child’s silence, all waiting. It is as if justice begins when the storyteller returns and the first voice is raised against the silence. India suddenly appears as a million bodies walking in the muteness of silence.

Silence today seems to need an anthropology of its own. Today’s

silence does not smell of yesterday’s desperation but of consumerist indifference, of a self-centredness immune of the other. It is not the silence of compassion, or the conviviality of caring. There is erasure, indifference, amnesia, forgetfulness, muteness, each calling a different world of experiences.

Troubling everydayness

I find the everydayness of silence even more troubling. It is like the silence of a husband and wife who have seen torture and rape and yet never talk about Partition. It is like the silence of Gujarat after 2002. Yet the agony is, silence speaks, silence demands speech, silence begs for voice and then lapses into defeat. Silence still has an eloquence which indicts us at every moment. India stands today like a Republic Day parade of silences, each violence mute into itself.

A democracy cannot be built on silences; it needs the speech of storytelling. Silence cannot be replaced by noise, by the bombast of the nation-state, or the cacophony of development. Each concept, each word must yield its story, so suffering never occurs in silence

A few weeks ago I saw a Chinese painting under which was inscribed a haiku-like poem. All it said was “How sad, silence is.” That inscription could be the history of modern India. By breaking this silence, we could begin to challenge the tyranny of modern India, bring back to citizenship a memory that flows, revive the power of storyteller and the hospitality of listening. The sadness of an empty democracy cannot settle for less.

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

A strange new world

American footballer Colin Kaepernick’s protests have underlined the power of sport and endorsement



SONALDE DESAI

It is a strange world when a brash young man, a multinational corporation with a reputation for running sweatshops and a Twitter-happy American President combine to convince you that American football is more than a bunch of grown men piling over each other. It just might be the stuff that legends are made of.

Taking on Trump

The story began in 2016 when Colin Kaepernick, a football player with the San Francisco 49er team, chose to kneel on one knee instead of standing when the American national anthem was being played before a nationally televised football game. Kaepernick chose kneeling as a way of drawing atten-

tion to needless deaths of African-Americans at the hands of the police and vigilantes – while demonstrating his respect for the anthem. Instead of focussing on the cause Kaepernick was trying to highlight – Black Lives Matter movement – U.S. President Donald Trump chose to make him a whipping post by tweeting in September 2017, “If a player wants the privilege of making millions of dollars in the NFL, or other leagues, he or she should not be allowed to disrespect... our Great American Flag (or Country) and should stand for the National Anthem. If not, YOU’RE FIRED. Find something else to do!”

Kaepernick was in the process of renegotiating his contract and found no professional football team willing to sign him, even as they were signing up players who appeared to have an inferior record. For the past two years, Kaepernick has been unable to find work, and he is suing the National Football League (NFL) for illegal collusion to keep him out of the

game in response to political pressure. Recently, athletic shoe and apparel manufacturer Nike signed him as the face of their new advertising campaign and instantly became target of Mr. Trump’s tirade where he called for a boycott of the company. Mr. Trump’s supporters have mounted a boycott and the Nike share price has fallen. Regardless of the market risk, the company has chosen to stick to its guns and even increased Kaepernick’s coverage.

With everything to lose

All good stories need heroes and villains. The irony of this story is that we are handed unlikely heroes and villains. We have Kaepernick, a brash young man with tattoos, who is often considered an egotist. It would be easy to dismiss his protest as a way of seeking the limelight. However, the magnitude of his sacrifice can only be understood if we remember that as a young college student, Kaepernick was seen as a rising baseball star, while he loved another sport, foot-



ball. He was offered a professional contract to play for one of the well-known baseball teams that he turned down to continue to play football at a time when his future in football was uncertain. For a man who loves football this much, to walk away from it in order to continue to speak truth to power is a profile in courage that few can match.

There is not much to be said about a President who uses his bully pulpit to target friends and foes alike. However, it is strange that a country that has always taken pride in the freedom of ex-

pression chose to see kneeling rather than standing for the national anthem as a sign of disrespect but has no problem with seeing its national flag on towels and bathing trunks. Strangest of all is Nike, the poster child for corporate greed thriving on sweatshops in poor countries, choosing to make a stand against government pressure and buyer boycotts to support Kaepernick.

The moments that make history are only recognised in retrospect. Mahatma Gandhi picked up a pinch of salt in Dandi and changed the fate of British empire. Rosa Parks sat down on a bus in Alabama in a seat reserved for whites and changed the nature of race relations in America. Will Nike by standing up to political and market forces change the nature of corporate citizenship? I hope so.

Sonalde Desai is Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland and Senior Fellow at the National Council of Applied Economic Research. The views expressed are personal

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.

Defence pact

It is gratifying that the inaugural India-U.S. ‘2+2’ Ministerial Dialogue went without a hitch and paved the way for the inking of the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement between the two nations (“India signs landmark defence pact with the U.S.” September 7). One hopes that the issues and irritants with regard to India importing oil from Iran will in no way affect the landmark pact. The call to Pakistan to end terror strikes should not end up as a ritualistic one.

C.G. KURIAKOSE,
Kothamangalam, Kerala

■ More than the significance of the pact, what stood out was “women power”. The picture said it all. The image of two women Ministers being a part and parcel of important agreements with a leading world power spoke volumes about the capabilities of women in handling high profile jobs. It is an inspiring and promising moment.

NIRMALA NARAYANAN,
Bengaluru

State of infrastructure

The “collapse” of infrastructure – the latest example being the collapse

of a span of bridge in Kolkata – is a wake-up call (“Kolkata flyover collapse toll reaches 3”, September 7). It may not be incorrect to say that the handling of public projects by contractors of questionable integrity has a role to play in this. Ultimately it shows the government in question in a bad light resulting in a decline of voter trust. The West Bengal government must be conscious of the faith reposed in it by the electorate.

N. VISVESWARAN,
Chennai

Readers speak

It is pleasant news that *The Hindu* is turning 140 this month (Page 1, “Let us know you better”, September 1). The fact that the daily is now published from 21 centres across the length and breadth of the country shows its zeal to reach readers before they start their day. A sore point is the absence of the Editorial on Sundays. Perhaps this Editorial could be on a light and non-political subject.

S. VIDYADHAR,
Hyderabad

■ The many anecdotes by long-time and younger readers while recollecting their ‘journeys’ with the

daily have been interesting to read.

I remember the time when the paper first used the word “exchequer” instead of “treasury”. When I appeared for the practical examination of the B.Ed course, one of the tasks was to take a lesson for students. While teaching them, I used the word “exchequer”. The observer was mighty pleased to hear the word and summoned the next candidate after allowing me to leave. Believe it or not, I was awarded the first rank in this part of the examination. All credit goes to the daily.

G. PURUSHOTHAMAN,
Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu

■ It may be worth recalling that even the veteran journalist, Khushwant Singh, in a letter to the editor [October 19, 2011], once declared *The Hindu* to be the best [“most readable”] in the world. Its many features are enough to engage readers throughout the day, giving them qualitative and authentic information. I was introduced to *The Hindu* more than half a century ago, as my father was in the business of newspaper distribution, with his shop at Luz in Myslapore, Chennai. A joke that was popular in my college days was that

even when it came to obituaries, staff from the daily would visit the house of the person to check.

R.S. RAGHAVAN,
Bengaluru

■ I am running 87 and if I am able to speak and write good English, I have to thank *The Hindu*. I have been reading the daily for the past 72 years and was called a “star speaker” in my office because of my command over the English language. In my days I was the only school final SSLC.

P.K. SRINIVASAN,
Chennai

■ Another reader, and for 40 years! The daily has been a companion right from college and university and has played a significant role in improving my English language skills. Its conscious attempt to reach out to children must not be forgotten, and in my case, these supplements have helped my children in their formative years. I too have learnt a lot more.

G. RAMASUBRAMANYAM,
Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh

■ I began improving my reading skills while studying for Intermediate in the erstwhile Madras Presidency. My guardian was an elderly

gentleman who was an English teacher and had the distinction of passing out from Madras Presidency College in English literature. He was all praise for the daily (in the 1950s) and compelled me to make it a habit to read the paper. He would conduct tests at regular intervals by asking me questions based on the Editorial/middle page. If I fumbled, he would smile and say, “Perhaps you have not understood certain portions. Why don’t you read the column once again and we will have a full discussion tomorrow.” There was no escape, but it was a boon.

P.M. GOPALAN,
Mumbai

■ I am 67 and have been reading the paper from age 10. I recollect my grandfather teaching me English and grammar by advising me to read out aloud articles by G.K. Reddy and “From the Delhi Special Correspondent”. The paper

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In the Editorial “The right to love” (Sept. 7, 2018), the quote “Constitutional morality trumps any imposition of a particular view of social morality”, was attributed to Justice R.H. Nariman. It should have been Justice R.F. Nariman.

The photo caption that went along with the Sports page report, “Next target is to qualify and do well at 2020 Olympics: Mirza” (Sept. 7, 2018), erroneously identified the person on the left as Fouaad Mirza. Actually Fouaad Mirza is on the right.

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