



Another orbit

The GSLV-GSAT launch enhances India's capacity to meet its communication needs

The Indian Space Research Organisation has marked a big milestone by successfully testing its heavy-lift launcher while launching an advanced communication satellite. It plans to use this for the Chandrayaan-II moon mission in the early months of 2019. On Wednesday the Geosynchronous Satellite Launch Vehicle MarkIII (GSLV MkIII) launched GSAT29, an advanced communications satellite, into a geosynchronous transfer orbit where the satellite's closest approach to earth would be 190 km and the farthest 35,975 km. The launcher bearing the 3,423 kg satellite took off from a launchpad at the Satish Dhawan Space Centre at Sriharikota. Seventeen minutes later, after various stages, the vehicle injected the satellite into the transfer orbit. Taking over smoothly, ISRO's master control facility at Hassan assumed the command and control of the satellite, and it will be manoeuvred into a geostationary orbit, its final destination, in days. Once placed, the satellite's solar panels and antennae will unfold and work will begin. With a liftoff mass of 640 tonnes, the GSLV MkIII is the heaviest launch vehicle made in India, and GSAT29 is the heaviest satellite to take off from Indian soil. Both launcher and satellite have other characteristics that make them stand out. The launcher can carry payloads up to 4 tonnes to the geosynchronous transfer orbit and up to 10 tonnes to a low-earth orbit. The multi-band, multi-beam satellite can cater to the communication needs of people in Jammu and Kashmir and the Northeast.

The first successful experimental flight of the GSLV MkIII was in 2014 when it carried a dummy crew module as a payload. This proved its capacity in the atmospheric flight regime. Its first developmental flight was on June 5, 2017, when it launched GSAT19, weighing 3,136 kg. The present launch marked the second developmental flight of the MkIII. With these two successes, the launcher is declared 'operational' and joins the ranks of the working vehicles, the PSLV and the GSLV. This is far fewer than the number of developmental flights the older launch vehicles were subjected to. This is because the solid and liquid propellant stages had been tested before. The third cryogenic stage could establish its performance in just two developmental flights. Of course, these were preceded by numerous experimental flights and ground-based tests. This success sets the stage for trying out variations such as other types of engines, different fuel combinations and higher launch capacity. The GSLV MkIII has not just boosted the satellite into its orbit, but also restored morale at ISRO, which had been dented by the GSAT 6A setback.

Gaza on the brink

Israel and Hamas need to pull back to allow humanitarian intervention in the territory

The sudden flare-up in Gaza between Palestinian militant groups and Israel is another grim reminder that the situation in the blockaded Mediterranean strip remains precarious. The latest violence was triggered by a botched spy operation by Israeli commandos inside Gaza that killed seven Palestinians, including a Hamas military commander. Hamas, which controls the territory, and Islamic Jihad fired hundreds of rockets and mortar shells into Israel in retaliation. Israel responded with airstrikes and artillery fire, hitting scores of military posts and weapons depots across Gaza. They levelled television and radio stations as well as Hamas's military intelligence headquarters. It was the heaviest Israeli attack since the 2014 war on the impoverished enclave of 1.82 million people. Now, Gaza is staring at the prospect of a fourth war in a decade. The territory has been on the brink for years. In past wars, Israel inflicted enormous havoc on the enclave's public infrastructure and caused high human casualties, while in retaliation Hamas fired rockets into Israel's civilian areas. Israel has also imposed a land, sea and air blockade on the region in a bid to stop Hamas from amassing more weapons and to weaken its hold over the strip. But Hamas continues to control Gaza, having found multiple ways to smuggle in weapons, while ordinary Gazans bear the brunt of the blockade. Joblessness is 40%. The administration has no control on exports or imports, and is not even paying full salaries to government employees. Due to scarcity of diesel, there are extended power cuts. Sewage plants are not operational. In effect, Israel has imposed collective punishment.

The situation has been particularly tense in recent months. In March, thousands of Palestinians marched towards the border, demanding their right to return to the homes and lands their families were expelled from in the first Arab-Israeli war of 1948, immediately after the creation of the state of Israel. About 750,000 Palestinians were estimated to have been forced out of their homes during the war. The March of Return protests continued on the border since then, and have often been met with live bullets fired by Israeli soldiers. Since March, at least 200 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli soldiers and thousands of others wounded. It was against this background that Egypt and Qatar stepped in, offering to mediate talks and provide much-needed resources to the enclave. Israel initially responded positively, letting fuel tanks and Qatari money into Gaza. That should have set the stage for further dialogue, but Israel's undercover mission inside the enclave sabotaged it, triggering the current crisis. After both sides announced a ceasefire, violence on the border continued, underscoring how dangerous the situation is. They should restrain themselves, allowing peace efforts led by Egypt to continue. Gaza needs aid, not another war.

Searching for an elusive peace

India must remain engaged with the multiple processes underway on Afghan reconciliation



RAKESH SOOD

Russia hosted a regional conference on Afghanistan last week to nudge the reconciliation process between the Taliban and the Afghan authorities. The Taliban were represented by the political council chief, Sher Mohammad Stanikzai. Representatives from Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, the U.S. and India were also present at the meeting, making it the first time that all stakeholders were present in the same room.

Back in the game

Considerable political manoeuvring preceded the meeting. It was earlier planned for September, but failed to materialise. The Taliban were opposed to attending since the Afghan government insisted on co-chairing the meeting. The diplomatic solution was to have Afghanistan represented by the High Peace Council (HPC), set up and supported by the government with the specific aim of furthering peace talks, though formally not part of government. India sent two seasoned former diplomats, with the Ministry of External Affairs describing its participation as "non-official". The U.S. was represented by its Moscow embassy officials. Aware of the differences, the Russians refrained from attempting a final statement or even a group photograph. Nevertheless, with this meeting, Russia has sent a clear signal that it is back in the game in Afghanistan.

The idea of reconciliation with the Taliban has been around for

over a decade. As the Taliban insurgency grew 2005 onwards, the British, deployed in Helmand, soon found merit in doing side deals with local Taliban commanders by turning a blind eye to opium production in the area. With the help of the Germans and the Norwegians, they began to persuade the U.S. to work for a political outcome.

After being elected in 2008, President Barack Obama ordered a full-scale review of the U.S.'s Afghanistan policy. After extracting an assurance from the generals that the insurgency would be defeated in 18 months, Mr. Obama announced a shift to counter-insurgency mode with a surge of over 40,000 troops, but added that phased drawdown of troops would begin in end-2011. Operation Enduring Freedom formally ended in December 2014, handing over primary responsibility for combat operations to the Afghan security forces even as the insurgency gained ground.

The U.S. soon realised that it had run out of options. Insurgency could not be contained as long as sanctuaries existed in Pakistan and the carrot and stick policy with Pakistan had cost the U.S. \$33 billion but failed to change Pakistan's policy. A total cut-off was not possible as long as U.S. troops in Afghanistan depended on supply lines through Pakistan. In 12 years, the U.S. had lost 2,300 soldiers and spent \$105 billion in rebuilding Afghanistan, more than \$103 billion (in inflation-adjusted terms) spent under the Marshall Plan on rebuilding West Europe after World War II. War weariness demanded an exit and a political solution was unavoidable.

Taliban's growing visibility

After prolonged negotiations, a Taliban office opened in Doha in



June 2013 to promote talks and a peace process. However, when the office started flying the Taliban flag, calling itself the political bureau of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, it angered both the U.S. and Afghan governments. The office was closed down though the Qatar authorities continue to host Taliban leaders.

Coming to power in 2014 after a bitterly contested election, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani moved to improve relations with Pakistan, even calling on then Army Chief, Gen. Raheel Sharif, at the GHQ, to push for reconciliation. Preliminary talks were held in Murree but derailed in July 2015 when Mr. Ghani asked for a supportive audio/video (instead of a written statement) by Taliban leader Mullah Omar and learnt that he had died over two years earlier.

An internal power struggle within the Taliban erupted with Mullah Akhtar Mansour emerging as the leader. Insurgency grew with the Taliban briefly taking over Kunduz and Ghormach districts and threatening Ghazni. Mr. Ghani felt betrayed and lashed out, accusing Pakistan of "waging war".

A new initiative (Quadrilateral Coordination Group) involving the U.S., China, Pakistan and Afghanistan was launched in January 2016. After a couple of meetings, there was a roadmap; Pakistan was to use its influence to get the Taliban to the negotiating table. Hopes were dashed when the Tali-

ban demanded exit of foreign troops, release of detainees from Guantanamo, and removal of its leaders from international blacklists. Frustrated with Pakistan's inability to get Mullah Mansour to fall in line, the U.S. eliminated him in a drone strike in May 2016 in Balochistan. Maulvi Haibatullah was appointed as his successor.

Meanwhile, there were signs that the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan were converging under the banner of the Islamic State (IS) in Afghanistan's northern and eastern provinces. In December 2015, Russia publicly acknowledged that it had "communication channels with the Taliban for exchange of information" and "a shared interest with the Taliban to counter the threat posed by the IS". Clearly, it was getting back into the game. Preliminary consultations were held in 2017, at which Afghan officials (and senior Indian diplomats) were present but the Taliban declined to share the table with the Afghan government.

Remaining engaged

Mr. Ghani launched the Kabul Process for Peace and Security Cooperation, and in February, made an unconditional dialogue offer to the Taliban. The Taliban rejected his overture, declaring that they were ready to engage in direct talks only with the Americans. Mr. Ghani persisted, resulting in a three-day ceasefire during Eid. The U.S. softened its stand on an "Afghan-led and Afghan owned peace process", and in July, senior State Department official Alice Wells was in Doha for a meeting with the Taliban. In September, the State Department announced the appointment of Zalmay Khalilzad (former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan) as Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation. Mr. Kha-

lilzad, a pushy go-getter, has since been making the rounds in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E., Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, the situation continues to worsen. Today, the Afghan government controls barely half the country, with one-sixth under Taliban control and the rest contested. Most significant is the ongoing depletion in the Afghan security forces because of casualties, desertions and a growing reluctance to join. U.S. President Donald Trump's South Asia policy announced last August aimed at breaking the military stalemate by expanding the U.S. and NATO presence, putting Pakistan on notice and strengthening Afghan capabilities has clearly failed, and this is why multiple processes are underway. Everyone agrees that the war has to end; the question for the U.S. is how to manage the optics of the exit while not conceding victory to the Taliban.

Since July 2011, when the former President and Chair of the HPC, Burhanuddin Rabbani, visited Delhi, India has supported an 'Afghan-led and Afghan-owned' peace process. Last month, during Russian President Vladimir Putin's India visit, both countries expressed their commitment to the Moscow Format. India doesn't have the leverage to play spoiler but its presence is recognition that its economic cooperation programmes make it the most widely accepted development partner. Pragmatism dictates that India remain engaged with the multiple processes underway. Peace remains elusive but India's engagement demonstrates commitment to the idea of a stable, independent and peaceful Afghanistan.

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Sabarimala, and the quest for equality

The debate on opening the shrine to all women is revealing deep casteism and misogyny



T.M. KRISHNA

Sabarimala, it appears, could be our new touchstone for understanding liberals, especially from Kerala. The intellectual emptiness in the arguments of Congress MP Shashi Tharoor and former Foreign Secretary Nirupama Menon Rao on the Sabarimala imbroglio require both investigation and introspection.

Mr. Tharoor contends dangerously that "abstract notions of constitutional principle also have to pass the test of societal acceptance". Would he also recommend that the triple talaq pronouncement be rethought if conservative Muslims took to the streets in large numbers? And it scares me to think of what his position will be on the Ayodhya case if it does not satisfy his prescription.

The court's mandate

The Supreme Court does not, and should not, take into account mystical notions and practices as the foundation for its considered opinion. While it does consider the culture of people, every practice of culture or faith must pass the test of the Constitution of India. It is a cultural document in the sense that within its intentions, principles, pronouncements and guide-

lines lies the fibre of the people who make up this land. Hence its limitations are also our own social, cultural and political wrinkles. But the makers of the Constitution wished and hoped that the fundamental rights would represent an ideal of India. They were, and we are, yearning for an India where all forms of discrimination and segregation cease to be practiced. The Constitution is not a heartless, emotionless document; it is a passionate seeking for human uplift.

Therefore, the court should respond with care, compassion and empathy for the citizens of India, especially those who are at the receiving end of a discriminative practice, disregarding society's majoritarian impulses. Simply put, if the wishes of Ayyappa lead to an unjust limitation of access for women between the ages of 10 and 50 who want his blessing, then his wishes have to be set aside. The cornerstone of the Hindu tradition is bhakti. And there is nothing more sacred than the unconditional love of the devotee. Ayyappa has to surrender to its power. Philosophically, this is in alignment with the Supreme Court judgment of September 28. It was remarkable, reminding us of the profound vision of the architects of our Constitution. Justice D.Y. Chandrachud put it succinctly when he said, "Religion cannot be cover to deny women the right to worship."

Mr. Tharoor and the Congress, meanwhile, are playing a dangerous game in Kerala. Please do not



cry foul when the BJP uses exactly the same arguments you are making to oppress certain sections of society. This duplicity will come back to haunt you.

Soon after Mr. Tharoor's observations came a series of tweets from Ms. Rao. She argues that we should leave Ayyappa and his world of male-purification, self-control, abstinence alone. Shockingly, she makes the case that barring Dalits from temples was the result of upper-caste hegemony, but the Sabarimala practice is founded on the legend of Ayyappa and is, therefore, acceptable. But isn't that very same "purity" that forbid Dalits from entering temples being perpetrated here in the name of Naisthika Brahmacharism? Even today, women are advised not to enter places of worship when they are menstruating. Esoteric arguments of positive/negative energies and purity are expounded in order to cultivate fear and restrict women – a result of discriminative legends, stories, tales, social rituals, manuscripts and treatises.

Ms. Rao went on to say, "the men bond together, beyond class

and hierarchy and status during the pilgrimage, while the women are left free and unhindered in a blessed sisterhood." People of all castes do throng to Sabarimala but that does not mean it dissolves caste. By that argument, every temple is then casteless because today people from every section of society offer prayers and undertake pilgrimages. But we all know that this is entirely untrue. Most temples in their traditions, ritual practices, control and organisation are inherently casteist. And "sisterhood" in this context is unmistakably patriarchal.

She makes the calcey of Ayyappa central to her reasoning, forgetting that if she is going to grant Ayyappa that right, then the devotee has as much right to question his nature. Very soon, Hindu fundamentalists and conservatives from every religion will be expressing exactly these notions of tradition in varied contexts to justify the unjustifiable. Which is exactly why bigoted Islamic groups are lending support to the Sabarimala agitation.

Be that as it may, Mr. Tharoor and Ms. Rao have also brought into focus the inherently casteist and patriarchal nature of Kerala society. Social reformers Narayana Guru and Ayyankali fought this deeply entrenched caste discrimination and untouchability in Malayali society – the success of reservations and positive social indices suggest that they made a big dent in casteism. But it is obvious

from the upper-caste noise being generated in Kerala today that much work remains to be done. Within every one of us hides casteism, and it reveals itself in such situations. Patriarchy and male hegemony are the foundations on which caste operates, and Kerala is no exception.

Mr. Tharoor's misguided attempt to reconcile his prejudices on the Sabarimala issue – and that of his constituents, presumably – with his liberal interior undermines the Constitution. What he should be doing is grapple with his own implicit, unconscious acceptance of casteist and patriarchal religious practices. Ms. Rao, who has implied that Sabarimala is a mythologically sanctioned male domain for self-purification, should look at every domain that women have challenged and succeeded within. There was always some form of supernatural or socio-ritualistic restriction blocking all those avenues for women. It is just too convenient for caste-privileged liberal feminists to be selective in their idea of feminism.

Every sphere of activity, including the religious, needs to be questioned on feminist grounds, and practices that are restrictive must be reconsidered. Surely, the supreme being also hopes that we move forward as sensitive, questioning beings? Isn't that the very essence of being Hindu?

T.M. Krishna is a Carnatic vocalist, writer and public speaker

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.

Chaos in Sri Lanka

Both disputed Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa and President Maithripala Sirisena are doing everything they can to subvert democracy ("Turn the page", Nov. 15). They have stirred up a hornet's nest in a country where things were running quite smoothly. The world is waiting and watching these developments silently, but I think India should eventually intervene or put out a strong statement lest this causes trouble in the neighbourhood. R.M. MANOHARAN, Chennai

Mr. Sirisena has tampered

with the people's mandate by sacking Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. Thankfully the Supreme Court overturned the dissolution of Parliament. The results of the floor test have made things clear. It is crucial for Mr. Sirisena and Mr. Wickremesinghe to resolve their differences. VIDHYA B. RAGUNATH, Thanjavur

Time to celebrate

Amid pessimistic reports about rising fuel prices, scams, violence and mud-slinging by political parties, ISRO's achievements come as a ray of hope ("GSAT-29 has a perfect launch," Nov. 15). It is generally believed that the staff in government

organisations are not efficient, but ISRO proves this wrong. Government departments and public sector units can take inspiration from its successes. KSHIRASAGARA BALAJI RAO, Hyderabad

Remembering Nehru

The more the BJP tries to ignore the contributions of Jawaharlal Nehru, the more we learn about India's first Prime Minister ("The gold standard for a Prime Minister," Nov. 15). The government is bent on either destroying or tampering with institutions dedicated to Nehru. Nehru created a road map for India's development, and

the institutions that came up during his time are still considered among the best in the world. Everyone has the right to criticise Nehru and his policies but it looks like this government deliberately does so because of its animosity towards the Nehru-Gandhi family. They may attempt to erase Nehru's name from history but Nehru will always be remembered by both the old and the young. N. NAGARAJAN, Secunderabad

No one can dispute the pride of place deservedly occupied by Nehru in the nation's history. Had Atal Bihari Vajpayee got a longer tenure as Prime Minister,

he would have closely measured up to Nehru in statesmanship. However, it is also true that the history of the country and that of the Congress would have been different if Nehru had stood in the way of Indira Gandhi becoming the president of the Congress while he himself was the Prime Minister. Whatever

may be the greatness of Nehru, the fact remains that he subtly groomed his daughter as his successor. The country and the Congress are paying a heavy price for this indiscretion or weakness. C.G. KURIKOSSE, Kothamangalam

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS: >>In the stories "Four activists removed from Sipling village" (Nov. 14, 2018), "Dharmapuri schoolgirl's rape: 22-year-old held" (Nov. 12, 2018), and "Rape victim dies in Dharmapuri" (Nov. 11, 2018) that appeared in some editions, the name of the village where the incident took place was wrongly given as *Sipling*. It should have been *Sitling*.

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, Kasturba Buildings, 859 & 860 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002, India. All communication must carry the full postal address and telephone number. No personal visits. The Terms of Reference for the Readers' Editor are on www.thehindu.com