



## Uneasy fields

In order to address farmers' distress, the entire agricultural chain needs a reboot

Last week, tens of thousands of farmers reached Delhi for a two-day Kisan Mukti Morcha and held the country's attention. They sought a special 21-day Parliament session to discuss the crisis in India's agrarian economy. Their key demands included an unqualified loan waiver to mitigate indebtedness levels in farm households and better remuneration for their produce instead of promises on paper of high minimum support prices. These broad demands sum up the precarious livelihood of a majority of farmers who work on small, fragmented land holdings. This is certainly not the first distress call from the farm sector to Parliament and policymakers; several such stirs have taken place across States over the past year alone. In March, when around 30,000 farmers and tribals from Maharashtra walked for days to Mumbai, they drew appreciation for their restrained conduct compared to the usually unruly protesters. And, they secured assurances from Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis of tangible action on their demands over the next six months. Finding little movement on those promises, many of those who had marched to Mumbai joined the rally in Delhi, which was by far the biggest such gathering. Galvanised by the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee, it reportedly had participation from 200-plus organisations, with farmers from 24 States.

With rural distress palpable, elections for five State Assemblies under way, and the Lok Sabha election just about six months later, farmers' issues are bound to further dominate politics. Official data released last Friday show that the agriculture sector clocked a growth of just 3.8% (on a gross value added basis) in the second quarter of this fiscal, compared to the 5.3% recorded in the preceding quarter. To put that in perspective, farm sector output was growing strongly in the first three quarters of 2016-17, before imploding in the aftermath of the demonetisation exercise. The latest number suggests that the semblance of recovery seen in the previous two quarters has dimmed too. The government has done an about-turn on its responses to a parliamentary panel that farmers were hit hard by the note ban, and sought to reassure farmers by reiterating its own initiatives for the sector. The Opposition, in turn, is using the farmers' platform to take jibes at the BJP-led government at the Centre and in many States. Unfortunately, neither has focussed on the big picture strategy needed to reboot India's hugely state-controlled farm sector. The Centre exhibits an aversion to inconvenient facts. And the Opposition's attempts to tap into their angst with breezy promises of loan waivers (with both the Congress and the Telangana Rashtra Samithi promising them in State election pitches) that over-simplify the crisis. Farmers are not just vote banks, but also critical economic actors who aspire to live without handouts. Till that is clearly recognised, paying lip service to the humble farmer will continue to distort the discourse.

## Tariff truce

U.S. and China must use the next 90 days to close the trade war in a way that benefits both

The global trade war has come to a welcome pause. On the sidelines of the G20 meeting in Buenos Aires over the weekend, the U.S. and Chinese Presidents, Donald Trump and Xi Jinping, agreed to a 90-day truce. The two countries will try to find an amicable solution to the various problems plaguing bilateral trade relations, such as disputes over intellectual property rights and Chinese state support for domestic industries, through talks over the next three months. Meanwhile, the U.S. will refrain from raising the tariff on Chinese goods worth \$200 billion from the current rate of 10% to 25% on January 1, 2019, as planned. In return, according to the White House, China will purchase agricultural and other goods from the U.S. in order to reduce the trade imbalance between the two countries. If talks fail, however, increased tariff rates are scheduled to come into force immediately. It is worth noting that Canada and Mexico arrived at a compromise trade agreement with the U.S. in October, replacing the decades-old North-American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). So these are signs that the global trade war that began earlier this year may be cooling down a little as 2018 draws to an end.

What prompted the U.S. and China to arrive at an unexpected, albeit temporary, compromise is unclear. It will be important to see if any compromise between the two trade giants will include a complete rollback of the tariffs imposed on each other over the year. But the temporary trade truce should still offer some relief, as there have been apprehensions about the U.S.-China trade battle bringing global economic growth to a grinding halt. Signs of a significant slowdown in the Chinese economy and concerns over the negative impact of the trade war on American financial markets may have played a part in Mr. Trump and Mr. Xi agreeing to the truce – probably a sober recognition of the fact that there are no economic winners in any trade war. During the upcoming negotiations, the U.S. is likely to press hard on China's protectionist policies aimed at favouring its domestic industries. But it is unlikely that China will yield to such pressure as that would require a seismic shift in the country's growth policy, which till now has emphasised the state's role in the economy. In fact, the Chinese government's promise to increase imports from the U.S. is a clear giveaway of the fact that it still dominates the economy. Further, China itself is bound to draw attention to the U.S.'s own protectionist policies. A compromise that will allow both sides to claim a final victory in the battle would be the best outcome.

# Two Punjabs, one South Asia

India-Pakistan rapprochement and the South Asian future require subnational engagement, starting with Punjab



KANAK MANI DIXIT

For a flickering moment in the last week of November, it seemed as if Congress provocateur and Punjab Minister Navjot Singh Sidhu might set the geopolitical agenda, when he unabashedly spoke of the need for India and Pakistan to mend fences. He was in Lahore on the occasion of the start of work on the Kartarpur Corridor, meant to ease the travel of Sikh pilgrims to the resting place of Guru Nanak (picture).

Unfazed by ridicule on Indian television, the cricketer-turned-politician spoke of peace, trade and people-to-people contact, all of them lost causes of the 'track two' dialogues of past decades. His confidence seemed to emanate from being a Sikh and Punjabi reaching out to Pakistani Punjab, and in his wordy sermons one actually detected the formula for India-Pakistan cohabitation, which would also catalyse cooperation in the larger South Asian region.

### Ultra-nationalist fog

Peace in the Subcontinent presupposes amity between India and Pakistan, and more than 40 years of efforts at regionalism has been held hostage by hostility of the two, with the other countries watching askance.

The abuse hurled by the state establishments of each side is a populist political tool that distracts the public from pressing matters of growth, equity, democracy and accountability. That the cost of maintaining massive militaries in each country drags down efforts at social justice is lost in the fog of ultra-nationalism.

India, as the more stable democracy, should inculcate empathy for the neighbour, but the

New Delhi commentariat tends not to recognise the difference between the Pakistani state and its people, the latter struggling against extremism, military supremacy and state-centralism all at one go.

Indian media by and large is not bothered by the travails of Pakistanis, as right-wing trolls rule the airwaves and social media. Similar to how dissent is sought to be silenced with the 'Urban Naxal' tag, since long those seeking India-Pakistan amity and South Asian regionalism are rejected as romantic peaceniks lighting meaningless candles at Wagah-Atari.

The trolling and abuse on all matters related to Pakistan can be expected to peak as India's general election of 2019 draws near, which will only help Islamabad's military-intelligence complex tighten its grip on the society. It is high time to try once again for a plan for South Asian regionalism.

### Opportunity costs

The potential of South Asia for sustained high growth has been blocked by the tightened national borders, with India playing its part by building barbed wire fences on the Pakistan and Bangladesh frontiers. In all of seven decades, the economic history of the Subcontinent has been forgotten, with the ultra-nationalist narrative having us believe that this separate living is how it has always been.

Until Cyril Radcliffe drew the map of Partition, the economic synergy across the different parts of the Subcontinent was an unquestioned historical reality. There is no one to remember or remind that this reality of sealed borders was set only in 1947 for most parts of the Subcontinent, or that the door actually slammed shut only after the India-Pakistan war of 1965.

As the historical 'connectivity' of the Subcontinent crumbled, it created massive dysfunction as economies of scale and production chains were disrupted. The



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opportunity costs have been incalculable in terms of infrastructure, production and commerce, and the loss in livelihoods would be heart-rending if only we cared to calculate.

The present-day failure of South Asian academia is its unwillingness to theorise on the promise of economic growth and social justice that regionalism holds, through soft/open borders. Of the Indian intelligentsia, the failure is also in seeing economic geography through the New Delhi lens rather than those of the 'peripheral' regions, from Rajasthan to the Northeast.

'South Asia' must be understood as a project for social justice, to be achieved through economic rationalisation, sub-regional interactions and reduced military budgets - and open borders such as exists between Nepal and India.

### Counter-populism

The goal of the future should be to learn to compartmentalise one's perceptions of the 'other', that Pakistan is made up of its state and its people just as India too is made up of its state and its people. The mutual demonisation has to do with conflating the two, state apparatus and citizenry, as one.

While the Pakistani state is rightfully critiqued for the way the military/intelligence calls the shots - from the Kargil misadventure to cross-border militancy, to even denying Punjab province the right to import energy from India - the self-perception of India as 'good' and Pakistan as 'bad' should have been abandoned long ago.

In Pakistan, the space of the public intellectual is circumscribed

by the jihadists, the army and the military intelligence. In India, a much freer country no doubt, there is the rise of pernicious ultra-populism that keeps public figures from speaking up.

In the age of Narendra Modi, proposing South Asian solidarity is frowned upon to such an extent that academics and opinion makers, not to mention bureaucracy and even international funding agencies, all think it is better to keep aloof of the concept. Since 2016, the Prime Minister has been consistent in his refusal to attend the 19th SAARC Summit slated for Islamabad, which has rendered the regional organisation comatose. His vision of South Asian regionalism is where the neighbours dance to India's tune.

The fear that South Asia as a concept heralds some kind of supra-sovereignty is misplaced, for there is no plan afoot for supplanting of the nation-state and associated group privileges. No, the capitals are not being asked to relinquish their powers to a Subcontinental centre.

Instead, a realistic formula for South Asian regionalism lies in allowing the federal units of the two largest countries - the provinces of Pakistan and the states of India - autonomy, which today exists only on paper. This is where the Punjab-Punjab formula comes in.

Even as television sought to lampoon Mr. Sidhu, we saw what was required to push for peace in South Asia - chutzpah. The Yiddish word implies the gall or audacity of a showman, and the gift of repartee to challenge the harshest of televangelist anchors.

It does seem that ultranationalist populism can only be cut by counter-populist hyperbole. Responding to the Pakistan Foreign Minister's invitation to the Kartarpur Corridor ground-breaking, the Punjab Minister replied in a letter: "As our nations take this first step, the Kartarpur Spirit can make pilgrims of us all, venturing out on a journey that breaks the barriers of

history and opens the borders of hearts and the mind, a journey that our people can walk together towards a future of shared peace and prosperity for India and Pakistan."

If you read the words and not the perception some have of the gentleman, the future of Punjab-Punjab, India-Pakistan and South Asia as a whole can be found in the paragraph.

### Punjabiya

Nothing has been left untried in the effort to ease India-Pakistan tensions - Atal Bihari Vajpayee visiting Minar-e-Pakistan in Lahore; Mr. Modi flying in for Nawaz Sharif's birthday; secret emissaries rushing hither and yon; and 'track two' and 'track three' events of every kind.

Nothing has worked, and we are today in suspended animation between Mr. Modi's India-centric vision of the region and the Pakistani military's control of the geopolitical discourse in Islamabad. At such a time comes the possibility held out by the Kartarpur Corridor.

Punjab province is by far the most powerful sub-national unit of Pakistan. The Indian Punjab may not be as powerful within India in relative terms, but it is no pushover either. The two Punjabs have one history, as the stepping stone for invaders, battlegrounds that go back millennia, the shared tragedy of Partition, and the shared culture and language of Punjabiya.

Given that South Asian regionalism can only come from a turn towards genuine federalism in India and Pakistan, Punjab Province and Punjab State are the places to start anew. It may just be Punjabiya is the concept which will help bring India and Pakistan closer to peace, and make South Asia a safer and more prosperous place.

Kanak Mani Dixit, a writer and journalist based in Kathmandu, is the founding editor of the magazine, 'Himal Southasian'

# Secular democracy in peril

Indian politics today reminds one of the first decade of the existence of Pakistan



MOHAMMED AYOOB

India is literally at the crossroads with the very future of its secular democracy at stake. With five important State Assembly elections in various stages of completion and the general election around the corner, the political temperature is at boiling point. Competitive Hindutva has become the name of the game, with the ostensibly secular Congress party trying desperately to demonstrate its Hindu credentials to cut into the base of the Hindu-nationalist BJP.

Congress president Rahul Gandhi is busy visiting Hindu temples and publicising his caste genealogy for electoral gains. This is the first time since Independence that the religion and caste of a candidate for the job of Prime Minister is overtly portrayed as the defining basis for his/her claim to lead the country.

The Congress party's passive Hindutva will in all probability lead to its crushing defeat in the forthcoming general elections be-

cause, as a pale imitation of the BJP's aggressive Hindutva, it cannot compete with the genuine article. Mr. Gandhi and his advisers are confusing contrived demonstrations of personal religiosity with Hindu nationalism. The last is a clearly defined political ideology that, in direct contravention of the letter and spirit of the Constitution, is based on the notion that Hindus have exclusive claim to the country and Muslims and Christians are interlopers who can be treated as second-class citizens at best. It has nothing to do with personal piety and the religious tenets of Hinduism.

### Rising intimidation

The Congress's passive Hindutva is ceding the ideological ground to the BJP by heavily diluting the tenets of secularism enshrined in the Constitution. The well-established secular norm of not overtly using religion for electoral gains is now a thing of the past. A very dangerous aspect of this unfolding drama is the escalation in the politics of intimidation, which is undermining the rule of law and threatening the democratic fabric of India. The recent mobilisation of thousands of devotees in Ayodhya by the Vishva Hindu Parishad, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak



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Sangh, the Shiv Sena and related Hindu nationalist organisations is a prime example of this.

This mobilisation was a part of the strategy to put pressure on a government seen as friendly to the cause to build the Ram temple immediately on the site of the Babri mosque demolished in 1992. However, even more important, it was a direct challenge to the power of the Supreme Court where the matter is under adjudication, thus drastically undermining the judicial system itself. RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat made it clear in a speech during the rally in Ayodhya that "society does not move only by the words of law, but also by its own wishes". Other speakers indulged in even more intemperate language. What started as a property dispute has thus been turned into a matter of faith beyond the purview of the courts. Simultaneously, there is an anti-

democratic wave sweeping through the country. Populism rather than liberal democracy is increasingly coming to define the nature of the Indian polity.

### The opposite of patriotism

A jingoistic form of ultra-nationalism has become very popular. Politicians regularly engage in such rhetoric with discussants on TV channels, some of them retired military officers, also contributing in great measure to its legitimisation. This is the polar opposite of patriotism combined with liberal values that was enshrined in the Constitution and was held dear by the first generation of independent India's leadership.

A further indication of the erosion of democratic values is the tendency of highly placed serving military officers to comment publicly on sensitive issues of domestic and foreign policy. They intervene in debates such as those regarding illegal immigration and India-Pakistan relations, which should be the exclusive preserve of civilian leaders in government and in the opposition. This would not have been tolerated in an earlier era because the founding fathers of the republic were emphatic that civilian supremacy over the military brass must be safeguard-

ed at all costs and the military isolated from the political arena.

The current trajectory of Indian politics reminds one eerily of the first decade of the existence of neighbouring Pakistan. Mounting majoritarianism fuelled by religious intolerance, hyper-nationalism born out of insecurity, deliberate erosion of political and judicial institutions, and creeping military intervention in the political arena finally led to the first military coup in Pakistan in 1958. This paved the way for a succession of military takeovers. One of these resulted in the division of Pakistan in 1971 and another in the creation of terrorist outfits in the 1980s that continue not only to threaten India and Afghanistan but also to tear apart Pakistan's social fabric. Pakistan has never recovered from the tragic errors committed in its early years and is paying a very high price for it today. One hopes that India will not go down the same path because otherwise, the largest democracy in the world could face an equally bleak future.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

### Farmer income

The writer acknowledges all that is wrong with farming in India today and affecting the farmer (Editorial page, "Job creation at the farmer's doorstep", December 3). However the remedies he puts forth are somewhat irrelevant when what he should be recognising instead is the core issue - an agrarian crisis. The term also includes the dairy sector. The series of farmer rallies, which have also included non-farm wage earners, have highlighted the issue of not even getting the cost price of their products. The part about ensuring better lives for migrant workers should happen irrespective of whether there are farmers being seasonally employed in sectors such as construction. The solution to the agrarian crisis lies in

revamping agriculture. Unless we acknowledge and address it with proper research, the country will have to pay a very heavy price.

YONARK BAJAJ  
Mohali, Punjab

Surveys and reports have consistently highlighted distress in rural areas. The goal of developed and prosperous India cannot be realised without ushering in development in rural India. MSMEs and food processing have the greatest potential in job creation but progress is hindered by poor infrastructure.

GAGAN PRATAP SINGH,  
Noida, Uttar Pradesh

Marginal farmers and farm labourers have been on the fringes of the government's welfare schemes targeted at farmers. Falling farmer

income is a serious issue, especially when the present government promised to double farmer income by 2022. Non-farm diversification is a good solution, but along with this, farmers should be made agripreneurs which will make them stakeholders from farm to market. Farmers should be supported in establishing warehouses and food processing industries. MGNREGA should be expanded to include agriculture.

BALAJI AKIRI,  
Hyderabad

One of the biggest failures of India's rural policies has been in seeking to shift people away from agriculture. Non-remunerative farming has led to distress migration. Considering the even graver

threat climate change poses now, revamping of agriculture should proceed in a serious manner, casting populism aside. Introducing organic farming and zero budget natural farming, revamping cooperative farming and contract farming and regulating money lending can all be looked into.

HARSAHIB SINGH,  
Ludhiana, Punjab

### Citizen of the future

Expanded the fine literary flourish, the arguments in "Sing like an Urban Naxal" (Editorial page, December 3) are unconvincing. If an individual has a right to dissent, society too has an equal right to react. Unconvincing protestations cannot be labelled as those representing sane voices.

V. LAKSHMANAN,  
Tirupur, Tamil Nadu

### Changing attitudes

Society has undergone a transformation in its acceptance of people with disabilities. But the 'greatest disability is negative thoughts'. Once in a city bus when I offered my seat to a visually challenged person near me, he declined the offer politely saying he had strong legs to stand (OpEd page, "Disability is not a defining feature", December 3).

RADHIKA KUMAR,  
Bengaluru

### CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In the S&T page story titled "Good news on tiger numbers" (Dec. 2, 2018) a sentence that read "The results reveal that while the 10 tiger-range countries currently support 165 tigers, they could harbour 585 individuals" should be recast to read: "The results reveal that while the eight recovery sites in India currently support 165 tigers, they could increase to 585 individuals."

The story titled "Thoothukudi, a town in distress" - published in some editions on Dec. 1, 2018 - had a few misattributions. The corrected version can be found in https://bit.ly/2PH8lra

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