



## Money talks

Pakistan is worried less by U.S. withdrawal of aid than the overall downslide in ties

That the U.S. will continue to withhold \$255 million in Foreign Military Financing to Pakistan this year suggests it is prepared to downgrade its ties with Pakistan further in an effort to hold it to account on terrorism. U.S. Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley cited Pakistan’s “double game” of cooperating with the U.S. and harbouring terrorists who attack its troops in Afghanistan. Mr. Trump’s own tweet, a day earlier, on January 1, was less temperate in its wording. He accused Pakistan of “lies and deceit” and of treating the U.S. leadership as “fools”. Pakistan has reacted, but without the same heat in its words. After a National Security Council meeting of top generals and ministers convened by Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, it issued a statement expressing “disappointment” over the U.S. statements, and referring to Pakistan’s record in fighting terrorism and providing support to the U.S. effort in Afghanistan. One reason is that the U.S. decision to hold back the \$255 million was not unexpected. In May last year, the Trump administration had decided to cut the annual outlay for 2018 from \$255 million to \$100 million. In August, it notified Congress it would withhold the current tranche due for 2016 as well, while a decision on 2017 was still pending. Second, while the overall downslide in ties with the U.S. will be a major worry for Pakistan, the cancellation of funds may not be that alarming. American assistance to Pakistan is at its lowest levels since 2001. Third, Pakistan’s confidence that it has an alternative in China has grown, with Beijing’s pledge of more than \$100 billion in loans for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor infrastructure, power projects, and so on. The question, then, is whether the U.S. will consider stronger measures, such as stopping all funding, sanctions, or cancelling Pakistan’s ‘major non-NATO ally’ status.

From India’s point of view, any attempt to hold Pakistan’s feet to the fire on its support to terror groups is a positive development. It is particularly important that the U.S. follow through on its ultimatums in this respect. However, all American statements so far focus on Pakistan’s support to terror groups that threaten Afghanistan, and more particularly, the U.S. troops in Afghanistan. Therefore, action against the groups that threaten India is unlikely to be an immediate priority. New Delhi must also be mindful of the impact of a more fractured U.S.-Pakistan relationship on regional security. Above all, the U.S.-Pakistan relationship, like that between India and the U.S. and India and Pakistan, is a long-standing bilateral one. While welcoming all moves to address India’s core concerns on terror, New Delhi must ensure it doesn’t get ensnared or triangulated in the equation between Washington and Islamabad.

## Citizen count

The draft of Assam’s National Register of Citizens is a first step, but it opens up concerns

Prodged by an unrelenting Supreme Court Bench, Assam met its December 31 deadline for publication of the first draft of the updated National Register of Citizens. In the event, the list proved to be a draft of a draft, with 13.9 million cases remaining under scrutiny and names of only 19 million of the 32.9 million applicants making the cut. It is to the government’s credit that its repeated clarifications that missing out on the list is no reason to panic kept people’s anxieties in check. The bigger challenge lies ahead when the contours of the draft assume a firmer shape, and there is a clearer sense of the numbers that do not make it to the Draft Consolidated List of the NRC – by implication, people who are illegal immigrants in Assam. The process will be protracted, with claims and contestations even after the final draft. But, when completed, one can only hope the exercise will bring some closure to the vexed issue of foreigners in the State, one that had triggered the six-year-long Assam Agitation that ended in the mid-1980s but has continued to roil its politics. The promise of detection and expulsion of aliens has propelled two parties to power 31 years apart, the Asom Gana Parishad in 1985 and the Bharatiya Janata Party in 2016.

While the scale is debatable, border crossings into Assam and West Bengal are a reality, and political parties are to blame for turning a blind eye to the situation over the decades in order to cultivate vote banks. The issue has, however, become much larger than a cut-and-dried question of who is an Indian citizen and who is not. There are important humanitarian concerns at play, concerns that go beyond identification and numbers. Nearly five decades have elapsed since the cut-off date of March 25, 1971, and individuals who have sneaked in illegally have children and grandchildren by now. Since India is the only country they have ever known, where are they expected to go? The conditions under which some 20,000-odd doubtful, or ‘D’, voters have been confined in Assam do not inspire confidence. That the list of aliens will only increase is daunting given the absence of a deportation treaty with Bangladesh. The situation has been muddled with the Centre’s intent to pass the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill and make Hindu illegal migrants and those from certain other minority communities in Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan eligible for Indian citizenship. Part of the BJP’s manifesto for the 2014 general election, the Bill, with a cut-off date of December 31, 2014, undermines the process of the NRC, which is denominationally agnostic. The BJP would do better to focus on its campaign promise of sealing the India-Bangladesh border and explore the possibility of provisions such as transparent work permits for foreigners, rather than push for this politically contentious legislation.

# Towards a genomics revolution

India has the scientific resources for genetic research — all it needs is the vision at the national level to leverage them



SHIVAJI SONDHI & PRIYA MOORJANI

In 1865, Gregor Mendel discovered the two laws of inheritance that are now named after him. Almost 90 years later in 1953, the work of James Watson, Francis Crick, Maurice Wilkins and Rosalind Franklin, deciphered the structure of the molecule – DNA – that stores our hereditary information and gets transmitted from parents to children over generations.

### Personalised medicine

At this point, in principle, the prospect of building individualised medicine based on the precise information stored in each human’s DNA (their genome) had come into view. But the human genome has around 3 billion base pairs and in 1953 it wasn’t possible to imagine extracting genetic information on the molecular scale and of this collective size.

Technological advances in sequencing methods have made the possibility glimpsed 60 years ago a reality today. Already by 2001 the human genome project and its private competitor, Celera Genomics, showed that an entire genome could be sequenced.

Since then the cost of doing so has plummeted – currently it is something like \$1000 per person and becoming cheaper – and the age of genomics-informed medicine is now within sight. Perhaps this will also make interventional treatments feasible, in the not too distant future, thanks to the revolutionary advances brought about by the discovery of new gene-edit-



ing techniques, such as CRISPR.

### Surveying Indian variation

What implications do these developments have for India and are there deliberate choices that would shape this coming future more advantageously for the country and its people? Are there strengths that India can bring to this task? To gain fully from the genomics revolution, India needs to collect information about the genetics of its population and train manpower capable of interpreting it. The information that is needed has to come from a large and sustained collection of data – fully sequenced individual genomes along with medical histories for the individuals who volunteer for this effort.

This kind of longitudinal study is what would allow actual physical manifestations relevant to health, e.g. specific illnesses, to be related to features in the genome. To pick an ambitious but not impossible number, a data bank that collects this kind of information on one million Indians over the coming decade would be a feasible effort of the right magnitude. We note that the China Kadoorie Biobank has been studying half a million people since their recruitment in 2004-2008. As India is

much more genetically diverse – with something like 5,000 ethnolinguistic and religious groups (castes and others), all of which probably have some degree of genetic distinctiveness – it needs a larger survey to do justice to all Indians.

The genetic distinctiveness of different Indian groups is in part the result of endogamy. While we cannot know the full impact of endogamy in advance of a proper survey, some recent research has shown that endogamy is very likely to be medically significant. Castes are not just “of the mind”. The genetic implication of this is that there are likely to be many recessive diseases stemming from single genes specific to individual groups that can be identified.

### Decreasing disease burden

This knowledge could then also be quickly applied to the task of managing diseases in these groups as well as be used for genetic counselling that could reduce their incidence in future generations. As an example elsewhere, the founder group of Ashkenazi Jews have almost eliminated Tay-Sachs disease from their population by such means. Looking ahead a bit more, with large samples the technique of “genome-wide association stu-

dies” that compare genomes of cases and controls could be used to identify genetic risk factors related to common diseases (such as heart disease that stem from many genes) that affect the health of many more individuals. We would like to emphasise that much of this is simply a question of applying existing methods and could all be done fairly quickly.

This is a good point at which to note that such a survey of Indian genetic diversity will be an important asset, beyond disease genetics. The data collected as part of these efforts will also help to uncover the basic biological function of genes and their interactions, which are not yet fully understood. This knowledge will be useful to humanity worldwide and also offer India a chance to claim a piece of the global medical and scientific frontier.

As a large part of the enterprise would be the application of information technology or “bio-informatics”, the prospects of establishing viable commercial enterprises with synergies to existing IT champions are also promising.

### What then is to be done?

As things stand there is certainly progress under way. There has been path-breaking work in using genomics to shed light on Indian history, a small number of hospitals are using genetic information to help patients, and there is at least one private sequencing company in India. But all of this activity is on a much smaller scale than needed and is currently not generating the manpower required to equip the next generation of medical and research activities in the area. What is needed is a coherent push at the national level that involves government, academic institutions, the existing health-care

industry, the IT industry and the nascent biotechnology industry. This coherent push should aim to set an ambitious but realistic objective of creating an Indian genetic data bank, to promote academic programmes that train scientists, technicians and doctors in this area and to create a regulatory framework that promotes broad objectives for both public and private sectors without being self-defeating.

The fact is that both genetic data and biological samples are easily transported across borders and if Indian regulation is shortsighted, it will simply cause Indian genomics to move abroad to places such as Singapore. In this context it is worth mentioning that the GenomeAsia 100K Initiative based in Singapore plans to sequence 100,000 Asian genomes, including some from South Asia. While this is eminently worthwhile as it will provide a broader pan-Asian set of data, it would be important to make similar investments at a national scale quickly to avoid the situation that this is one of the only enterprises to which Indians can turn to.

All in all, the time is ripe for India to begin its own genomics revolution. The technical understanding and will needed to launch this is present in India’s scientific leadership, in medicine and in industry. What is needed is a vision and leadership at the national level to leverage this and seize the day. Nothing less than the very health of the nation is at stake.

Shivaji Sondhi is Professor of Physics at Princeton University, U.S. Priya Moorjani is Assistant Professor of Genetics, Genomics and Development, Department of Molecular and Cell Biology at UC Berkeley, U.S.

# Understanding Bhima Koregaon

Hindutva forces are worried by the conspicuous politicisation of Dalits



PRABODHAN POL

Bhima Koregaon in Pune, Maharashtra, the seat of unrest now, is a tiny village, but is associated with an extraordinary phase of Maratha history. Two hundred years ago, on January 1, 1818, a few hundred Mahar soldiers of the East India Company, led by the British, defeated the massive Peshwa army, led by Peshwa Bajirao II, in Koregaon. This battle has, since, attained legendary stature in Dalit history. Ambedkarite Dalits do not see this from the narrow lens of nationalism versus imperialism. Over the years, as the battle came to be seen as a victory of the Mahars against the injustices perpetrated by the Brahminical Peshwas, thousands of Ambedkarites have been gathering in Bhima Koregaon on January 1 to pay their respect at the Vijay Sthamb (victory pillar). The pillar was erected by the East India Company in memory of those who fought the battle and in-

cludes the names of the Mahar soldiers who unknowingly brought an end to the Peshwa rule in 1818.

### The past and the present

Dalits are unanimous in drawing inspiration from the victory. In recent years, particularly in Maharashtra, since the Bhima-Koregaon Ranstambh Seva Sangh (BKRSS) was formed, Dalits regard the pillar as a site of positive memory of their valour and a symbol of their renewed political aspiration. Their denunciation of the Peshwas is strategic; it helps them relate to their social and political marginalisation in contemporary times. The debate here, however, is whether such invoking of history is effective in hoisting Dalit politics to a new level.

What happened on the day of the battle’s 200th anniversary which led to the death of one? Prakash Ambedkar, the grandson of B.R. Ambedkar and a prominent Dalit leader from Maharashtra, has said that a few Hindutva organisations planned and perpetuated violence against the Dalits in Bhima Koregaon. He has named Sambhaji Bhide and Milind Ekbote, prominent Maharashtrian leaders who have been actively



promoting organisations that advance the cause of Hindutva, as being responsible for bringing the State to a halt. These organisations have been polarising the political landscape on religious and caste lines, particularly against Ambedkarite Dalits who are seen as impediments to their political project.

A recent, and crucial, illustration of this was at Wadhu Budruk, a village not far from Bhima Koregaon. Wadhu Budruk is where Sambhaji, the eldest son of the Maratha ruler Shivaji, was cremated after being killed by the Mughals in 1689. As the legend goes, Sambhaji’s body was mutilated and thrown into a river by Aurangzeb.

It was Govind Mahar (Gaikwad), a Dalit descendant of Wadhu Budruk, who then gathered the body parts together and made arrangements for the last rites. Sambhaji’s memorial was said to have been erected by the Mahars of that village. Consequently, Govind Mahar’s tomb was also erected in the village after his death.

### A planned attack

A few days ago, upper caste Marathas, who refuse to acknowledge the role played by Govind Gaikwad and other Mahars in the last rites of Sambhaji, objected to a sign at the site that recounted the story. Complaints were filed with the police by both sides. In Maharashtra, there has been a consistent effort to situate Maratha history within the anti-Muslim Hindutva framework – in fact, this even predates the rise of the political right-wing in the State. Maratha youth, who are facing unemployment and a lack of educational opportunities, are now being easily pulled into these conflicts by Hindutva organisations that are consequently built by invoking past Maratha glory. The violent clashes in Bhima Koregaon were an extension of the conflict in Wadhu Bu-

druk. All indications are that this was a pre-planned attack.

Being the 200th anniversary, that gathering in Bhima Koregaon this year was much larger than usual. Many Dalit and Bahujan groups collectively organised a big public conference in the name of Elgar Parishad at Shaniwar Wada, which was the seat of the Peshwas until 1818. The agenda of this conference was evidently against Hindutva politics which was powerfully manifested by projecting Hindutva politics as the neo-peshwai (new Peshwas). Jignesh Mevani and Prakash Ambedkar were invited.

The conspicuous politicisation of Dalits against Hindutva, particularly after the Una violence in Gujarat, has been a cause of concern for those who propagate the latter. The Elgar Parishad helped consolidate their apprehensions against the politicised Dalits. The new political articulation of the Dalits (by equating Hindutva with the Peshwai) has annoyed the right-wing forces and exposed the fault lines we are seeing today.

Prabodhan Pol teaches history at Ramjas College, University of Delhi

## 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.

### Still opaque

When the scheme of electoral bonds was announced in the last Budget, much like the euphoria generated around demonetisation, it was hailed as yet another unprecedented step towards rooting out black money in the system and ensuring transparency (“Electoral bonds for political donations notified”, January 3). However, the claim of the Finance Minister that the bonds would put to rest the criticism about the actual flow of funds fell flat the moment the bonds were made bearer instruments not carrying the name of the “payee”. Where is the need to withhold the identity of the “payee”, if the government is committed to transparency in financial transactions? It shows that irrespective of asserting their adherence to ethical electoral practices, political parties play it safe on the issue of electoral funding. The common man, on the other hand, is

forced to undergo stringent KYC norms to identify himself for getting measly subsidies. Unless there is a political will to bring the operations of political parties under the ambit of the Right to Information Act, the nexus between corporates and political parties operating for mutual benefits will never see the light of day.

V. SUBRAMANIAN,  
Chennai

### Throwing good money

All these years, successive American Presidents were rendering help to Pakistan in every possible way despite knowing full well that it would be used against India. All our efforts at international fora could not make America mend its ways as it worked as our shadow enemy. Now, Donald Trump appears to have realised that aid is being misused by Pakistan to sow and foster terrorism on its soil which is becoming a threat not only to peace loving countries such as India but also to

America itself. Mr. Trump’s warning appears to signal a visible change in America’s attitude (“U.S. foolishly gave money to Pakistan”, January 2). There is reason to believe his words to be genuine as he has already successfully barred the entry of citizens of specific countries that have been accused of exporting terrorism to America and other places.

JAYARAMAN B.S.,  
Coimbatore

■ Mr. Trump seems to have begun the new year on a sensible note, which also appears to be the natural culmination of measures which began with the conditional transfer of aid during the Obama regime. Mr. Trump has rightly realised Islamabad’s devious acts. New Delhi’s credibility on the global stage has got a much-needed boost with Washington’s mention of India as “leading global power” in its National Security Strategy.

ANJALI B.,  
Thiruvananthapuram

### Rajinikanth in politics

Tamil superstar Rajinikanth, who has chosen the current phase of political instability in Tamil Nadu to announce his much-awaited plunge into politics, has lent an air of lofty idealism to his political philosophy by characterising it as “spiritual”, which can be presumed to mean value-based. It remains to be seen whether he will succeed in reforming the State’s notoriously venal political culture where voters see nothing wrong in demanding a share of the political spoils as “ballot money” during elections. Can the actor-turned-politician tame all this and even a section of the bureaucracy for whom bribes are an entitlement?

V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN,  
Thiruvananthapuram

### Thoughtless talk

The thoughtless comment made by a BJP MP from Uttar Pradesh, that it was normal for soldiers to die in combat, betrays his outrageous insensitivity (“BJP MP

apologises for remarks on soldiers,” January 3). Being an elected representative, he is expected to be responsible in his public utterances. Far from encouraging our jawans and officers who guard our borders round the clock, his remark will only hurt their morale and demotivate them. The Prime Minister needs to reiterate his caution to his MPs to exercise restraint in their thoughts and comments.

P.K. VARADARAJAN,  
Chennai

### Pursue soft power

By coming out in the open against the holding of any cricket matches between India and Pakistan, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj has struck a blow against soft diplomacy (“No cricket with Pak,” says Sushma”, January 2). While attempting to resolve bilateral issues, India should not lose sight of the hidden potential of soft power in diplomatic engagement. In this context, the reduced number of medical visas

being granted to Pakistani nationals is also worrisome. India needs to be balanced when engaging with its neighbours and the world.

SHEBA RIVY SIMON,  
New Delhi

### Donkeys under threat

That the least celebrated but one of the most useful and silent of all animals in the world, the donkey, is being hunted in order to cater to the greed of native medicine manufacturers of China makes sad reading (“Donkey slaughter in Africa is a high price for healing in China”, January 3). The gory details in the report, on how its hide is used in cures for a host of ailments, were chilling. Perhaps we need to be on our guard in India as well even as the animal is respected here as a proverbial friend. The day may not be far off when international agencies may have to save the animal.

SVANAMANI VASUDEVAN,  
Chennai

MORE LETTERS ONLINE:  
www.hindu.com/opinion/letters/