

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Politics, but no politics

Deteriorating situation in Valley can't be delinked from abdication of political responsibility by governments in Delhi



SHYAM SARAN

THE LATEST TERRORIST outrage in Kashmir underscores the nature of the war against terror. The terrorist has to succeed only occasionally to negate, in public perception, the scores of successes security forces may have achieved in preventing or forestalling similar previous attempts. It is to the credit of the security forces, including the Indian Army, the BSF and the CRPF, that they have undertaken many successful operations in the recent past to neutralise terrorist elements before these could perpetrate lethal damage.

The number of terrorists who have been eliminated in recent operations has increased significantly. While we must identify any lapses in Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) or intelligence failures which may have enabled a major attack to be mounted against the CRPF convoy, one must acknowledge that there will always remain a possibility that someone, somewhere, sometime will manage to breach even the most forbidding of defences.

There is a limitation of resources, making it difficult to put in place the most advanced and relatively robust anti-terror measures. There is a constant compulsion to minimise inconvenience and the potential harassment of ordinary citizens. There is always a trade-off between enhanced security and the public's freedom of mobility and access to public spaces. One may lessen risks but their total elimination is not possible. Before rushing to judgement on what may have gone wrong and fixing accountability, it is important that we do not lose sight of the complex political and security environment, particularly in Kashmir, that our forces have to operate in.

In the present case of a suicide bomber jamming his explosive-laden SUV into a CRPF troop carrier which was part of a long convoy, several points are noteworthy. The attack occurred on the Jammu-Srinagar highway, which is the only major artery leading into the Valley. This is used by civilians as well as the security forces. To close off the highway whenever it is being used by security forces is simply not feasible. It would have an adverse impact on the state's economy. This compulsion created the opportunity for the explosive-laden SUV to drive alongside and jam into one of the CRPF vehicles. Could the troops have been moved by air instead? Yes, but this would have been a major expense and if included in the SOPs for the future, will necessitate a huge increase in the security budget.

The use of a suicide bomber for the operation, and that too, a local youth, is ominous. It represents a deliberate escalation and points to growing radicalisation of Kashmiri youth.

There is talk of intelligence failure. Those familiar with intelligence work know that the agencies are inundated daily with a large volume of information picked up from human and electronic sources, including communication intercepts. Intelligence alerts may be issued on this basis but alerts are not the same as precise intelligence indicating the place, time and nature of a planned attack and who may be intending to carry it out. In the present case, too, there were vague "alerts", but to allege intelligence failure because these alerts did not lead to apprehension of the attacker before he carried out his murderous attack, may be misleading.

Being aware of the very real limitations, technical and political, under which security forces operate, one must be prepared to deal with a likely breach. Our reaction when that happens should be balanced and nuanced. Morale should not be undermined by the failure to prevent one such incident when many more successes have been achieved. Additional measures should be put in place but only after careful evaluation rather than as a knee-jerk reaction. Nor should additional measures put even more onerous restrictions on normal daily civilian life.

The deteriorating security situation in the Kashmir Valley cannot be delinked from the abdication of political responsibility by successive governments in Delhi. The security forces have repeatedly restored relative peace and stability enabling political processes to be activated and more enduring political solutions to be found. But each time, relative peace has only bred complacency in the political leadership creating the setting for renewed bouts of violence and local disaffection. In a highly polarised pre-election environment, political parties must not engage in a high-decibel blame game. They must come together to deal with what is a festering wound which could spread its toxin in the entire body politic.

What is happening in Kashmir and in other disturbed parts of India is only the more acute manifestation of a national malaise whose symptoms are rising communal, parochial and sectarian confrontations which

often erupt into brutal violence. While the state has to deal with such violence and restore safety and security, the only sustainable answer is addressing, through constitutionally-mandated political processes, underlying political, economic and social grievances that are drivers of these multiple mutinies. To treat each such manifestation as a law and order challenge is to enmesh the state in an action-reaction process where violence born out of disaffection and state suppression follow in mutually escalating and destructive steps.

Kashmir cannot be isolated from the rest of India and its alienated population brought to heel through imposition of ever stricter security measures. To accept this logic is to open the door to citizens in other parts of the country being subjected to the same oppression in the name of safeguarding the state if they express dissatisfaction and dissent.

The Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) based in Pakistan has claimed responsibility for the latest attack. There are already demands that Pakistan be punished for aiding and abetting the terrorist group in undertaking cross-border attacks against India. This could take the form of another round of "surgical strikes" and/or heavy artillery fire directed against Pakistani targets much like what we witnessed after the Uri terrorist attack.

There will be renewed attempts to mobilise international opinion against Pakistan on the terrorism issue, including by persuading China to withdraw its objection to declaring JeM leader Masood Azhar a global terrorist at the UN. We should bear in mind their failure so far to change the strategic calculus in Islamabad. Will more of the same work, and if significant military escalation is proposed, can the inevitable risks be contained and managed?

We must also acknowledge that external forces will continue to exploit the disturbed situation in Kashmir to undermine India's security. What we need is a strategy which takes into account both the domestic and external dimensions of the Kashmir issue. Unless a security perspective is accompanied by a willingness to use democratic political processes to chart a path towards normalcy in the state, the precious lives sacrificed by the security forces will continue to be in vain.

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PUNISHING JAISH

Masood Azhar and his outfit must be brought to book. To ensure that, China must rethink its position

ALMOST IMMEDIATELY AFTER a suicide bomber rammed into a CRPF convoy in Awantipora, killing at least 40 security personnel, the Pakistan-based terrorist outfit, Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), claimed responsibility for the terror strike. The attack bore the JeM's signature. Since 2000, when a 17-year-old blew up an explosive-laden Maruti car which he had driven to the headquarters of the Army's 15 Corps in Srinagar, suicide strikes have been one of Jaish's preferred methods. The 2000 Srinagar attack had announced the arrival on the terror stage of Maulana Masood Azhar. Released a few months earlier, in late 1999, from an Indian jail in exchange of the crew and passengers of an Indian Airlines aircraft that was hijacked and taken to Kandahar in Afghanistan, Azhar took the help of the Afghan Taliban to form the JeM. Its attack on Parliament in 2001 almost pushed India and Pakistan to the brink of war. A few months earlier, Islamabad had used the term "terrorism" to condemn a JeM attack on the Jammu and Kashmir legislative assembly. However, even though it outlawed the outfit in 2002, forced in large measure by international pressure, Islamabad has allowed it to operate under different names — Afzal Guru Squad, Al-Murabitoon and Tehreek-al-Furqan — while Azhar remains under nominal house arrest in Bahawalpur. Pakistan's denials of his involvement in terror flies in the face of the JeM's ownership of Thursday's attack. Its ally, China, has stonewalled India's attempts at the UN to have Azhar declared a global terrorist.

After lying low for nearly 10 years, the JeM has upped the ante in the last three years. In November 2015, it claimed responsibility for an attack on the Brigade Headquarter at Tangdhar, very close to the LoC in Kupwara district. India has also blamed the outfit for the January 2016 attack on the Pathankot airbase, in which seven security personnel were killed and the September 2016 Uri attack which claimed the lives of 20 soldiers. In the last two years, security forces have killed at least two JeM commanders in the Valley.

Thursday's attacks should bring into focus India's security challenge in the aftermath of US President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw his country's troops from Afghanistan. With Kabul's current regime under President Ashraf Ghani sidelined in the peace talks, the Taliban, which currently holds sway over 45 per cent of Afghanistan, looks set to return to the country's political centrestage. The outfit has maintained it will not go back to terrorism, but that could be a bargaining ploy. On its part, the JeM has never shied away from its umbilical connection to the Taliban. Russia and China, both of whom have advocated a role for the Taliban in Afghanistan, have condemned Thursday's attacks. But it is evident that the first step towards addressing India's concerns would be bringing Azhar to book. It is time China reconsidered its position on the matter.

RE-IMAGINING DELHI

Centre and Delhi government face-off must be addressed through a new idea of statehood

THE BATTLE OVER the legislative and executive control of the National Capital Territory of Delhi remains unresolved. The split verdict by a two-judge bench comprising Justices A K Sikri and Ashok Bhushan has, in essence, affirmed the power of the Union government (through the office of the lieutenant governor) over the elected state government on crucial matters: The Centre remains the cadre-controlling authority in Delhi and the Delhi Anti Corruption Branch cannot investigate central government officers. The two judges, however, differed on whether the state government can manage cadre below the rank of joint secretary and the matter will now be referred to a larger bench. Not surprisingly, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal expressed his displeasure at the verdict while the BJP celebrated it.

Part of the blame for the conflict and theatrics over governance in the capital lies with the current cast of political actors. The AAP has certainly been more shrill than its predecessors, choosing spectacle and agitation over quiet and patient negotiation. Equally, the Centre, through successive LGs and the home ministry, has tried to hobble a government with an impressive mandate using Delhi's constitutional peculiarity — it's legally a Union Territory with an elected government whose powers are circumscribed. But it is only through a mature politics that the root cause of the over-politicisation of governance, playing at least since 2015, must be addressed. The courts are limited by the letter of the law, by the contours of the distribution of powers laid down in the Constitution and previous judgments. What Delhi needs is a bold re-imagining of the skewed federal contract that currently determines its executive and legislative boundaries.

Since Independence, the National Capital Region has gone from being just the seat of power to a vibrant, growing city, its diversity enriched by waves of migration, its economy by industry and services. The tussle between the Centre and state, between the people and the law, can only be addressed through a new idea of statehood, one which recognises that sovereignty ultimately derives from the people. Delhi's exceptionalism, the power imbalance in favour of the Centre, emerges from the needs of a national capital — the seat of government and power, the nerve centre of administration. A mature discussion between stakeholders that looks beyond short-term political gains holds the potential to resolve the embedded contradiction. Both the current Union and Delhi governments enjoy impressive mandates. Unfortunately, instead of using their opportunity to bring in a much-needed redefinition of the division of powers, they have passed the buck to the courts.

WELCOME, REX

The first cricketer from Manipur to earn India U-19 stripes is an exciting addition to cricket firmament, paves way for others

THREE MONTHS AFTER he snaffled all 10 wickets in an innings against Arunachal Pradesh, 18-year-old left-seamer Rex Singh became the first cricketer from Manipur to earn the India U-19 stripes. A player from the Northeast taking baby steps in competitive cricket is an inspiring sight. It's a vindication of cricket's untapped potential in the region, hitherto a hub for combat-sports and football. The only cricket ground in Imphal is a ramshackle maiden. Rex, like most poster-boys from cricketing backwaters, emerged despite the system, not because of it.

Though the cricket board had initiated several grass-root programmes for the development of the sport in the region since the turn of this decade, Rex traced an uncharted route, shrugging off an unsuccessful taekwondo stint and embracing tennis-ball cricket before getting noticed by a neighbourhood cricket coach. Amidst strife and curfews, endemic to many Northeastern states, he was fascinated by the magical swerves and patterns of the hard, red leather ball. The rest of his game he developed watching YouTube videos. He was fortunate that his emergence coincided with the inclusion of his state in the Ranji Trophy, consequent to the board adopting Justice Lodha's recommendations.

Rex has busted the popular prejudice that the inclusion of newcomers from a non-cricket playing region would dilute the competitiveness of the league. These players might not match or challenge the traditional cricketing powerhouses, in infrastructure, talent or the quality of the game, but exposure would only encourage talent. They must be allowed time to blossom. Now they have a poster boy to adore and emulate. The path from the Northeast to the Indian cricket team is no longer too long.



KHALED AHMED

ADIL AHMAD DAR, the 20-year-old school dropout who led the suicide attack at Pulwama in south Kashmir on February 14, was a Jaish-e-Muhammad "fedayee" warrior, trained for the job in the Valley. He was inspired by Burhan Muzaffar Wani, commander of a Kashmiri militant group Hizbul Mujahideen, earlier killed by the Indian army; and he was also inspired by the "defeat" of America at the hands of the Taliban.

One feared the inevitable: India will associate Pakistan with Dar and Jaish-e-Muhammad, the terrorist organisation that Pakistan stupidly allows to survive in Bahawalpur, south Punjab. A lot of anti-Pakistan rage will be manufactured in India after assuming that Dar actually crossed over into Pakistan, took instructions and money from the ISI. Indian commentator Rahul Bedi's comment came as a relief, reminding India and Pakistan to take joint action instead of getting into another war of words: "Most militants in Kashmir are now homegrown."

Jaish-e-Muhammad is banned in Pakistan but its leader, Masood Azhar, is allowed to live in peace in his hometown, in his madrasa Usman-o-Ali, Bahawalpur. His terrorist group was earlier called Harkatul Mujahideen, associated closely with Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda. It became Jaish after an internal division. "Maulana" Masood Azhar had the ability

A LOOMING CRISIS

Pakistanis are sick of so-called mujahideen and want India, Pakistan to cooperate

to raise funds all over the world. In 1993, al Qaeda was involved in the killing of 24 Pakistani soldiers in Somalia while performing duties under the UN auspices, about which Osama bin Laden was to boast later. While in disguise in India — and up to no good in Kashmir — Azhar was captured in 1994.

In 1999, an Indian civilian aircraft was hijacked after take-off from Nepal by a group of terrorists led by Azhar's brother, Ibrahim. The plane was taken to Afghanistan where the Taliban government, recognised by Pakistan, arranged for a swap of Indian passengers with the two al Qaeda terrorists, Umar Sheikh and Masood Azhar. After their release, both came to Pakistan and began operating freely. Sheikh, now in a jail in Hyderabad Sindh, came to Lahore, and Azhar went to the most powerful seminary in Pakistan, Jamia Binoria in Karachi, from where he issued threatening statements against President Pervez Musharraf.

Azhar damaged Musharraf more effectively after 9/11 when he attacked the Indian Parliament and caused a military stand-off between Pakistan and India that lasted almost a year. He was put under house arrest in his hometown, from where he had a way of vanishing from time to time. In 2009, according to a report published in London's *The Telegraph*, Jaish-e-Muhammad had acquired

a 4.5-acre compound outside Bahawalpur in addition to the madrasa Usman-o-Ali inside the city. While local authorities acknowledged that Jaish had spread out of the city, they denied that the new acquisition was anything more than a cattle farm.

In February 2014, Pakistan decided to break the unspoken embargo Azhar's movement and got him out of his ISI-protected madrasa to speak to a public gathering of thousands in Muzaffarabad. His job was to castigate India for unfairly killing Afzal Guru, a "freedom-fighter" hanged in India for allegedly helping Jaish mount an attack on the Indian Parliament in 2001.

Most Pakistanis are tired of the so-called mujahideen and want India and Pakistan to cooperate instead of notching up bilateral terrorism, India feeling righteous about the Jaish threat and Pakistan preening on having captured RAW agent Kulbhushan Jadhav "red-handed". Even if it wants to, India will not listen to good sense before the polls and Pakistan will be the hobby horse to beat up on. And Pakistan, economically belly-up and subliminally dying to "normalise" through the Kartarpur corridor, will go on mysteriously tolerating terrorists on its soil who kill its children.

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FEBRUARY 16, 1979, FORTY YEARS AGO

INDIA-CHINA TALKS
THE CHINESE FOREIGN minister, Huang Hua, will visit New Delhi this year to continue discussions on the border and other issues. Indian pilgrims may be allowed to visit Mansarovar and Kailash because the Chinese have agreed to consider an Indian proposal on these lines. Chinese leaders have confirmed a hands-off policy as far as the problems of the Nagas and the Mizos is concerned. Throughout the three rounds of talks with India's foreign minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, in Peking totalling nearly eight hours, Huang did not make any negative reference to India's relations with the Soviet Union.

AFGHAN CRISIS
THE US STATE Department said that Soviet advisers present at the Kabul Hotel where the US Ambassador to Afghanistan was killed "failed to heed repeated requests" by US officials that force should not be used against the kidnappers. The acting Secretary of State Warren Christopher summoned the Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin to the department to "express in the strongest terms the shock of the US government" over the alleged Soviet role in the death of Ambassador Adolph Dubs. Dubs was killed by his four kidnappers when the police charged into the hotel room, reportedly after officers fired automatic weapons.

UP CM QUILTS
UP CHIEF MINISTER Ram Naresh Yadav resigned after losing the confidence of the Janata legislature party. He resigned after receiving instructions from Deputy Prime Minister Charan Singh. Yadav said there could be no compromise or cooperation with such communal organisations as the RSS.

JANATA PREZ ON UP
JANATA PRESIDENT CHANDRA Shekhar said every effort would be made to have a person acceptable to all sections as leader of the UP Janata legislature party. The election of Ram Naresh Yadav's successor should not be on the basis of group alliances, he added.

15 THE IDEAS PAGE

J&K and the AfPak hyphen

US-Taliban engagement in Afghanistan has emboldened groups like Jaish and Lashkar-e-Taiba. The jihadist project has also been helped by the political vacuum in the Valley



NIRUPAMA SUBRAMANIAN

IN 2008, CANDIDATE Barack Obama angered India by suggesting that the road to peace in Afghanistan ran through Kashmir. He made the case in several interviews before his election as US President that if India and Pakistan would only resolve their differences, the Pakistan army would be more inclined to heed the American call to go after its assets in Afghanistan. Some months later, when President Obama appointed Richard Holbrooke as the Special Envoy for India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, India lobbied with determination to keep itself from being hyphenated with Af-Pak, and succeeded in keeping itself out of Holbrooke's mandate.

Almost exactly a decade later, as security experts piece together Thursday's devastating suicide attack on a CRPF convoy at Awantipora on the Jammu-Srinagar highway, it appears as if that hyphenation may have returned to haunt India, albeit in a different way.

In a pre-recorded video released by Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), the group that claimed responsibility for the attack, the Kashmiri youth at the wheel of the car bomb seemed to suggest that he had been inspired by the "success" of the Taliban over US forces in Afghanistan. Reports in this paper have shown that even before the US began pushing a peace deal with the Taliban, three years ago, youth in South Kashmir spoke of how the Taliban's "victory" over US forces had showed them that they too could "defeat India". As the US-Taliban engagement gathers pace, and Pakistan claims bragging rights for bringing them together, the emboldening of the jihadist project in Kashmir, and of Pakistan-based fellow travellers of the Afghan Taliban such as JeM and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), is something India has to be ready for.

The links between the JeM and the Taliban are well-known. On October 2001, when the JeM was listed under UNSC 1267, the reasons given were that it was "participating in the financing, planning, facilitating, preparing or perpetrating of acts or activities by, with, under the name of, on behalf or in support of, supplying, selling or transferring arms and related materiel to or otherwise supporting acts or activities of al-Qaida, Usama bin Laden and the Taliban". According to the UNSC, al Qaeda, Taliban and other extremist organisations provided finances to Maulana Masood Azhar to set up the JeM. As a member of the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, Azhar had also fought in the first Afghan war, and the JeM is believed to have participated in Taliban operations against US forces.

After it came into existence in 2000, it was active in the Kashmir Valley for a couple of years, and in 2001 carried out a massive suicide attack with a car bomb, similar to Thursday's strike, at the Jammu & Kashmir assembly. But the JeM lost favour with the Pakistan army, which was under US pressure after 9/11, and the group then turned against its patrons, twice even attempting to assassinate then military ruler General Pervez Musharraf.

Its comeback to the Valley in 2015 coincided with the taking shape of a new, indige-



CR Sasikumar

nous militancy in J&K, which had its origins in the 2008 Amarnath land row, followed by the 2010 anti-Machil protests, and the 2012 hanging of Afzal Guru. Its operations since then have included the terrorist strike at Pathankot Air Force base and the attack on the Uri Brigade headquarters. The unrest in the Valley since the 2016 killing of Hizbul Mujahideen militant, Burhan Wani, gave the JeM the foothold it had been looking for since 2001. Some of the confidence and triumph of the Taliban, which is hoping to make a comeback in Kabul by the middle of this year, is sure to rub off on its friend JeM as well as the LeT.

At this moment, it is all too easy for politicians to demand and promise revenge against Pakistan, but any military adventurism could have unforeseen, unintended consequences. The post-Uri surgical strike exposed the military limitations of that particular instrument. It brought no positive changes. Instead, the LoC remained hot, and Indian civilians and soldiers continued to die. Any military operation would have to go beyond the surgical strike, even for political optics, and it may still not achieve any strategic objectives. Worse, it may spin out of control. What worked in the government's favour in September 2016 was that Pakistan chose not to respond militarily. In fact, it even denied there had been any military operation of the kind that the Indian Army announced it had undertaken across the Line of Control. It may not be the same again.

What India still has is the higher moral ground against a state that is addicted to the use of terrorist groups as proxies against its neighbours. A day before the attack in Awantipora, there was an almost identical attack in Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province, which borders Afghanistan and Pakistan's Balochistan province. A suicide bomber drove a car loaded with explosives into a bus carrying troops of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) near the provincial capital Zahedan, close to the Pakistan border. The attack killed 27 troops and injured a dozen other troops of the elite IRGC, close to

At this moment, it is all too easy for politicians to demand and promise revenge against Pakistan, but any military adventurism could have unforeseen, unintended consequences. The post-Uri surgical strike exposed the military limitations of that particular instrument. It brought no positive changes. Instead, the LoC remained hot, and Indian civilians and soldiers continued to die. Any military operation would have to go beyond the surgical strike, even for political optics, and it may still not achieve any strategic objectives. Worse, it may spin out of control. What worked in the government's favour in September 2016 was that Pakistan chose not to respond militarily.

the Iran-Pakistan border. The Jaish al-Adl, a successor to the anti-Iran Jundullah, claimed responsibility for the attack.

There is no overt link between the two attacks except their striking similarity. But both the JuA and JeM are Sunni extremist groups. Both are based in Pakistan. Both have flourished in the same enabling ecosystem provided by the Pakistan army. The Indian security establishment even believes that the JuA is a front of the LeT. While Iran blamed the US and its allies for the attack, it also asked Pakistan to stop sheltering the JuA. In a thinly veiled statement after the attack, the Iranian foreign ministry said the group "receives military, financial and intellectual support from certain regional states", hinting both at Saudi and Pakistan backing for the group, while the IRGC commander was more open in his call to Pakistan to shut down the group.

Whether or not the government succeeds in getting China to shed its opposition to listing Masood Azhar under UNSC 1267, and achieves its stated goal of "isolating" Pakistan internationally, what India needs to do more urgently is to acknowledge that it has failed in Kashmir, that the situation in Kashmir is much worse than it was in 2014-15. Not just because of terrorists, with or without help from Pakistan. It is so because despite being in the ruling coalition in Jammu & Kashmir, the BJP and the Modi government refused to engage with Kashmir, creating a political vacuum in the Valley. Leading lights of the BJP as well as some security experts bragged that the situation in the 1990s was so much worse that bringing the present crisis under control was going to be a walk in the park. "A three-and-a-half district militancy", they called it. It is painfully obvious now that this is not the case. Clearly, something else is required if Kashmir is not to get hyphenated with Afpak. And it is not the security forces who can provide that something to pull the Valley back from the abyss.

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WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"More than most countries, Pakistan knows full well the wages of extremism." —DAWN

Rash U-turns, half-baked plans

Social policy is in danger of getting lost in electoral histrionics



JEAN DRÈZE

AS THE COUNTRY inches towards parliamentary elections, a deep confusion pervades the realm of social policy. When the Narendra Modi government came to power five years ago, there were high expectations of a rollback in welfare schemes. The previous government, so went the story, had gone overboard with social spending, and Modi would set this right. In fact, the UPA government had only initiated a much-needed re-vamping of India's underdeveloped social sector, with some important results (as we learnt later from the fourth National Family Health Survey and other sources). But corporate-sponsored think tanks, generally hostile to social spending, preferred to argue that it was time to rein in the welfare state.

Until recently, the Modi government seemed to abide by that script. It showed little interest in social policy during the last five years. The 2015-16 Union Budget gave dramatic expression to this indifference, with deep cuts in allocations for many social programmes. True, these could be partly justified on the grounds that the states were receiving a higher share of the indivisible pool of taxes. But the cuts went further, and the axe fell particularly heavily on children, with initial cuts of around 36 per cent and 50 per cent for midday meals and the Integrated Child Development Services respectively. When I asked a very senior finance ministry official, one year later, how this happened, he first said that he was not aware of it, and then explained that the cuts had been made at the last minute, without paying much attention to the details. This speaks volumes.

There are many other examples of the indifference if not hostility of the central government to social policy in the last five years. Maternity entitlements, a legal right of all Indian women (except those already covered in the formal sector) under the National Food Security Act 2013, were ignored for years and are brazenly violated to this day. The rights of workers employed under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act have also been undermined by budget crunches, erratic wage payments and the vagaries of technocracy. The central government's contribution to social security pensions for the elderly has been frozen at a measly Rs 200 per month, despite repeated appeals for more from 60 eminent economists, among others. With the partial exception of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, there have been no major initiatives in the social sector in the last five years. Most of the government's efforts have gone into promoting Aardhaar and saving money rather than protecting people's entitlements.

However, the NDA government seems to be changing gear if not making a U-turn. Suddenly, it has rediscovered that millions of poor people in India desperately need public support for their survival and wellbeing. As a starter, the government announced a grand health insurance scheme, Pradhan

Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana, which claims to cover up to Rs 5 lakh of health expenditure every year for 10 crore families. It is another matter that this is actually a hospitalisation insurance scheme, with a tiny budget. In the same vein, the finance minister recently announced a mega scheme for contributory pensions in the informal sector. Here again, the claims and promises are out of gear with actual budget commitments (just Rs 500 crore for now), but they could serve the real purpose — winning votes. Meanwhile, the budget for non-contributory pensions for widows and the elderly was quietly reduced by more than Rs 600 crore.

The finance minister did allocate big money (Rs 75,000 crore) for the new scheme of direct cash transfers to farmers. This is the most tangible sign of the NDA government's U-turn on social policy. Perhaps the scheme is better than nothing — the poor in India do need income support and this is one way of going about it. But is this the best way? Quite likely, many well-off farmers (or business owners who also happen to have a little land) will take advantage of the scheme while many vulnerable groups, starting with landless labourers, are left out.

The net result of this pre-electoral frenzy is an ill-thought assortment of second-rate social programmes. The Opposition parties, alas, are adding to the confusion. The Congress, in particular, seems to be committing itself to a very strange "minimum income guarantee" scheme. The idea, according to statements from Rahul Gandhi and P Chidambaram, is that if you earn less than the minimum income, the government will pay the difference. This makes no sense. For one thing, it is wholly impractical — how is the government supposed to estimate this income gap, household-wise? For another, it would mean that anyone who earns less than the minimum income might as well give up working, since the government is supposed to fill the gap anyway.

According to some media reports, this odd idea has the support of top development economists such as Angus Deaton, Thomas Piketty and Abhijit Banerjee. This is just hot air. On further enquiry, it turns out that none of them are backing a specific proposal, sympathetic as they certainly are to various forms of income and wealth redistribution in India.

Meanwhile, no major political party has proposed bold initiatives in the fields of health and education. These are just as important as income support. In fact, India desperately needs a big national initiative for universal quality education. This is essential not only to help people out of poverty but also to deal with the country's oppressive web of economic and social inequalities. A leap towards universal healthcare, going well beyond the histrionics of Ayushman Bharat, is long overdue.

It is good both the government and the Opposition are sparing a thought for the poor. But the current scramble to win their votes is in danger of breeding half-baked plans and expensive stunts. What India needs is a well-thought-out effort to consolidate the foundations of a lasting social security system.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SHOCK CIRCUIT

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The nation mourns' (IE, February 15). The Pulwama terror attack proves beyond any doubt that the surgical strikes across the LOC to avenge the Uri Army Base attack has not deterred terrorists. It had little impact on the ground in the Valley, particularly in south Kashmir. In fact, by announcing the surgical strikes to the whole world, we got no appreciation from the global community — it only equated India with Pakistan for violations across the border instead. The Modi government should have carried on conducting surgical strikes and also denying them at the same time — which is precisely what the ISI is doing. P L Singh, Amritsar

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The nation mourns' (IE, February 15). At this crucial juncture, we should exercise patience and restraint. The Pulwama terror attack is a heinous crime and the perpetrators must be punished after prudent preparation. All national and regional parties should cooperate to chart further course of action. Subhash Vaid, Noida

BLURRED LINES

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Crossing the Laxman Rekha' (IE, February 15). At a time when standards of public discourse hit a new low every alternate day, this article endeavours to draw a line between acceptable and unacceptable

LETTER OF THE WEEK

POPE'S WAY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'When the road darkens' (IE, February 9). Pope Francis's acknowledgment of the sexual offence charges against the Church is a positive sign for Christianity. Whenever any wrong happens, the best way to deal with it is to accept mistakes and take corrective actions. Cover-ups do injustice to victims and the religion. Nishant Parashar, Chandigarh

able talk in public life. Over the last decade, political debate in India has been reduced to rhetoric, mudslinging and personal insinuations. Reading this article reminded me of a debate in Parliament in the mid-90s. It was a verbal duel between the then PM Narasimha Rao, and leader of Opposition and BJP patriarch, Atal Bihari Vajpayee. They also represented two different ideologies. However, the political debate between the two was witty and loaded with information. Above all, one gave space and respect to the other's viewpoint. Compare this with the language used by political leaders now. Rishi Kaushik, Jamshedpur

Reconciliation with honour

What Ayodhya needs now is healing, not compromise



RAJMOHAN GANDHI

WHILE APPRECIATING FRIEND Apoorvanand's strictures ('A rotten compromise', IE, February 6) following my suggestion, IE, February 6), a new mosque', IE, February 6) for a possible settlement in Ayodhya, and welcoming his comment as a valuable contribution to a necessary debate, I must also respond frankly to him.

Let me reproduce, word for word, the core suggestion which I had advanced in the context of the Supreme Court reading itself to hear Ayodhya's land-title dispute: "The bare bones of a settlement are not hard to identify. One, the Hindu side admits the error in demolishing the mosque. Two, the Indian state admits its failure to prevent the demolition. Three, the Muslim side acknowledges the Hindu community's wish to see a Ram temple rise on the site as also the Hindu community's belief that a temple had once stood where the Babri Masjid was built. Four, not far from the site, and yet not too close to it, space for a new mosque is made available by the Hindu side and the Indian state. If necessary, the four steps can be simultaneous. In this dream-like scenario, acknowledgment of wrongdoing and restitution leads to justice as well as reconciliation... Will Ayodhya's disputing sides voluntarily come together as I have imag-

ined? Very unlikely. But the Supreme Court can direct them to do so."

To the question that has been asked — which (or what) is the Hindu side or the Muslim side that I speak of — the answer is at two levels. For the Supreme Court, the Hindu and Muslim disputants before it would represent the two sides. In the nation generally, those Hindus who want a temple constructed at the site where the mosque had stood until 1992 represent "the Hindu side" in the dispute, and those Muslims who want a mosque rebuilt on the site represent "the Muslim side".

I recognise that a great many Hindus and Muslims in the land would agree to any settlement irrespective of where a temple or mosque is built or rebuilt, but it is the divide between the Hindu and Muslim "sides" as defined above that needs to be bridged.

An impossible goal? Perhaps. But not more impossible than the other aims that are routinely discussed — for example ending pollution, corruption, hunger and disease.

It should be noted that the word "compromise" was not used in my proposal, neither in the lines reproduced above nor elsewhere. The word "settlement" was employed, as also the phrase "acknowledg-

ment of wrongdoing and restitution". Equally importantly in my proposal is that the state would be a key party to a settlement and to the acknowledgment of wrongdoing and restitution.

Once the state, which would include the central government and the UP government, makes the proposed acknowledgment and restitution, it would simultaneously reaffirm its commitment to prevent a reenactment anywhere (in Mathura, Kashi or anywhere else) of what happened in Ayodhya in December 1992.

By making the proposed acknowledgment, the state would underline and reiterate India's Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act 1991 which "prohibits conversion of any place of worship" and "provides for the maintenance of the religious character of any place of worship as it existed on August 15, 1947". It is well known that only the disputed Ayodhya site was left out of the purview of the 1991 Act.

Acknowledgment of wrongdoing is never easy. Nor is it necessarily fruitless. A Hindu litigant admitting to the Supreme Court, "What was done in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992 was wrong", would be a significant statement and could contribute to a better climate in the land.

The state acknowledging that it failed to prevent the tragedy in 1992 would also not be easy. Yet that could send a critically important message to future rulers. And the state and the Hindu side joining hands in finding adequate space for a new mosque could, God willing, turn out to be healing steps of restitution.

For the Muslim side to let go of the disputed (and despoiled) site would be very hard. Apoorvanand is perfectly right in stating that an honourable compromise is one where the stronger side yields to the weaker. But the need of the hour may not be compromise so much as healing.

I am not so naive as to think that my proposal will be accepted by Ayodhya's disputants, or by the two "sides" in the nation as I have tried to define them, or to imagine that the Supreme Court will give my suggestion serious attention.

But some individuals may perhaps ask themselves whether, as I put it in my article, it is impossible for a nation to come together to address the past's mistakes.

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