

## **Terrible Thursday**

As investigations into the Pulwama attack begin, Pakistan must act against the Jaish

s India mourns the death of 40 CRPF personnel in Thursday's terrorist strike in Jammu and Kashmir's Pulwama district, it is clear that the attack was meant to provoke. The Jaish-e-Mohammed, the Pakistan-based terrorist organisation which has orchestrated numerous strikes in the Kashmir Valley, has taken responsibility for what is now the highest toll of security forces in any attack in the State. Investigations should yield a better picture, but it is a matter of extreme concern that a suicide bomber could time his attack to hit a security convoy. There is no question that Pakistan bears the onus to explain why Masood Azhar, the leader of the Jaish-e-Mohammed, enjoys such freedoms on its territory, if not outright support from the establishment. Certainly, diplomatic backing by Pakistan and China has been crucial in defeating efforts at the United Nations to put Azhar on the list of banned terrorists. Early details indicate that a sports utility vehicle laden with a huge quantity of explosives targeted the convoy of 78 buses carrying about 2,500 soldiers from Jammu to Kashmir. The video of the presumed suicide bomber too hints at an altered standard operating procedure meant to provoke and escalate tensions. Forensics teams have already begun work and answers to the disturbing questions the attack has raised on intelligence gathering, dissemination and coordination in the Valley must be pieced together.

However, if the terrorists have acted from an updated playbook, New Delhi's response must not play into their plans with reflexive and precipitate official action. India has withdrawn the Most Favoured Nation status to Pakistan in a signal that it will not wait for preliminaries in the effort to isolate Pakistan. Coercive diplomacy is likely to continue, but to be effective the effort needs a wider net, especially at a time when the U.S. is seeking Pakistan's help in firming up a deal with the Afghan Taliban. Beijing too must not, and cannot, evade questions about its previous blocking of action at the UN, specifically against Azhar. Post-Uri, after terrorist attacks the air is always thick with calls for retributive cross-border strikes. The past history of limited, if any, returns from such precipitate action must serve as a cautionary check. Instead, the effort must be to isolate Pakistan for its support to the Jaish and seek substantive action, to effectively upgrade intelligence and plug security gaps, and to win the confidence of the local population in the Valley. Thursday's attack was meant to provoke and polarise the country. New Delhi's response must, instead, be to isolate the perpetrators and keep the peace on Indian territory.

## Forever president

Sisi stands to extend his reign if Egypt's draft constitutional changes go through

**¬**gypt's proposed constitutional changes to extend presidential terms are a huge setback to the coun try's democratic progress. Re-elected last year, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the military leader who seized power in 2013, would be allowed to begin afresh a six-year term in 2022 under the new amendments. Another provision envisages a political role for the military as a guardian of the Constitution. Thursday's parliamentary vote initiating these changes will have to be ratified in a popular referendum, but few doubt the establishment's capacity to secure it. The 2018 general elections were held without a serious challenger to Mr. Sisi, whose rival was in effect handpicked by the regime after other contenders were forced to quit the race. The economy has returned to a growth trajectory following an International Monetary Fund loan in 2016, in exchange for cuts in public subsidies. But soaring prices and double-digit unemployment have dimmed the government's overall appeal. In the past five years, the popular upsurge that began with the overthrow of the three-decade-long autocratic rule of Hosni Mubarak in 2011 has subsided. The military crackdown has vengefully targeted Islamists from the Muslim Brotherhood government of former President Mohamed Morsi, who has since been convicted. The media and political activists anxious to consolidate the gains from the 2011 Tahrir Square mass protests have not been spared the authorities' wrath either.

Egypt had begun nominal attempts at ushering in a multi-party system in 2005, when Mr. Mubarak got himself elected for a fifth term. But within a few months, he declared himself President for life. Attempts to switch to popular representative government in the latter part of his tenure were merely cosmetic. Within years, in 2011, followed the mass protests that demanded the overthrow of the Mubarak regime and formed the epicentre of the 'Arab Spring'. Today, events have turned a full circle under Mr. Sisi's firm grip on the levers of power. The military has been never so powerful since the rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser. As with several autocrats today, the Egyptian leader has leveraged the American and the Russian governments effectively, while they seem indifferent to the military's excesses. Egypt similarly benefits from the strategic partnership it signed with China, bringing trade flows and investment. But above all, China's politically hands-off approach is a win-win for both regimes. While such diversification may be smart diplomacy, it begs the question about Cairo's long-standing position as the leader of the Arab world. There is a simmering anger among sections of the youth contending with unemployment and the absence of avenues for dissent. The Arab Spring is nearly a decade behind, but the conditions that brought the multitudes to Tahrir Square still prevail.

## Hindutva 2.0 is in crisis

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's winning formula of 2014 is under severe stress; can he refresh it?



VARGHESE K. GEORGE

month ago, on January 18, Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) general secretary Bhaiyyaji Joshi said in Nagpur: "When the temple will get constructed on Ram Janmabhoomi in 2025, this progress (of India) will gather further momentum... Once the Ayodhya temple is built, the country will gain the capital required for the next 150 years."

The idea that the construction of a controversial temple at the site of a demolished mosque can lead to the formation of capital in the country could be intriguing for the uninitiated. For the proponents of Hindutva, however, this notion is integral to their idea of development and progress. The proposition is that an aggressive assertion of the collective Hindu identity is an essential precondition for India's development. This is a point that pro-market supporters of Prime Minister Narendra Modi self-deceptively overlooked ahead of the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, though he himself had made his position clear. Asked whether he was "pro-business" or a "Hindu nationalist," he said in 2013: "There's no contradiction between the two. It's one and the same image."

#### Three contradictions

While this has been a core component of Hindutva thought for decades, it was Mr. Modi's reign in Gujarat that made it acceptable, and popular. If enough people still thought Mr. Modi's 2014 campaign was jettisoning Hindutva for development, it was convenient for

Hindutva politics over the years had suffered from three inherent contradictions that stunted its growth: friction between pro-market segments and Hindu traditionalists in the Indian right wing; contradictory requirements of the centralised, disciplinarian, ideologically rigid core of the RSS and building a mass mobilisation through a political wing; and consolidating a Hindu vote bank among a people hierarchically and oppressively divided by the caste

Mr. Modi's innovation to Hindutva politics since 2002 has been in reconciling these three contradictions in a sufficient measure, initially in Gujarat and then in other parts of the country to win a Lok Sabha majority in 2014. That is Hindutva 2.0 – where material progress is married to a religious social agenda; disciplined organisation and mass mobilisation are balanced; and the lower rungs in the caste hierarchy are enlisted as part of an omnibus Hindu identity in which they are offered social acceptance and political representation. All these factors that worked in Mr. Modi's favour are now unravelling, and Hindutva 2.0 is in cri-

The circle that admiringly described Mr. Modi as pro-market has shrunk very fast, and most of those who still call him so do it derisively, often accusing him of having promoted crony capitalism, and failing to deliver on job creation. Those who spoke of his managerial skills, many as a cover to mask their own bigotry, are now disappointed over the government's handling of the economy, especially demonetisation and poor implementation of the Goods



not be cheering for anyone else, but they are no longer saying Mr.

Modi is the saviour. On the other hand, the religious right is happy. They have pushed the temple agenda to the back-burner with a new deadline of 2025, giving Mr. Modi breathing space, and have begun to rally forces behind his 2019 campaign. Yet, the marriage of material prosperity and religious nationalism is not exactly made in heaven, and is teetering.

#### Caste break-up

Enrolment of a critical mass of Dalits and backward caste populations into the Hindutva politics that is widely perceived as a project for the nourishment of upper caste dominance was Hindutva 2.0's second success. Mr. Modi presented himself as a lower caste leader and sought to appropriate Dalit and backward caste figures ranging from B.R. Ambedkar, Sree Narayana Guru to Ayyankali and even Mata Amritanandamayi into his politics. The idea of Hindutva is based on the premise that there is a collective interest for the community common to all caste groups. Given the social, economic, linguistic, cultural diversities within Hindus, a common thread that could unite them all is the image of a common enemy. Cow protection has been the convenient

tool here. In the 2015 Bihar elections, Mr. Modi urged Yadavs to not vote for Lalu Prasad, who he said was insulting the cow-worshipping community by supporting beef eating. In his home State of Gujarat it was 'white revolution,' and cow protection, while in Bihar it was pink revolution, or a proliferation of slaughter houses, he said.

But the same cow protection that helped Hindu unity soon enough fractured it as Dalits became targets of vigilantes. "If you want to attack, attack me, not the Dalits. If you want to shoot, shoot me, not the Dalits," Mr. Modi said in August 2016, as instances of cow vigilante attacks on Dalits increased. Moreover, the gravest impact of the collapse of livestock economy is in States where the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) did well in 2014, and within them, on backward castes and Dalits.

While Hindutva 2.0 offered a lot of rousing rhetoric for Dalits and backwards as quoted above, it also demonstrated an unprecedented hostility towards autonomous lower caste mobilisations. Brazenly partisan police action and the continuing police oppression of Dalit groups which organised protests, such as at Bhima Koregaon in January 2018, are signs of this intolerance of lower caste mobilisation against the Hindu right. The BIP governments in power also emboldened sections of the upper castes to seek to recapture the space lost to lower caste politics in earlier

The policy impact of the Modi government, ranging from the overall underperformance of welfare schemes for the Dalits, and the recently announced reservation for economically backward upper castes, is yet another source of friction. Pursuit of unity without

questioning caste hierarchy is vintage RSS, but is not very attractive to the majority among the Hindus. These contradictions are showing in regions where the BJP did well in 2014.

The iron grip of the RSS on the BIP, and the former's search for ideological purity have not only contributed to constant friction between the two, but historically also limited the electoral successes of Hindutva. For instance, while the RSS did not entirely trust Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who was often accused of being a closet Nehruvian. the more ideologically pure BJP leaders did not have any significant mass appeal. With Mr. Modi at the helm, Hindutva 2.0 overcame this dilemma, combining mass appeal and uncompromising Hindutva credentials in his persona. The synergy between the RSS and the BJP has never been stronger than its is today. But this disciplined march towards the goal of a Hindu Rashtra under the command of a 'strong leader' has created a new friction within. BJP legislators, Ministers and leaders who feel suffocated and powerless, despite being technically part of the ruling dispensation, now have a limited stake in Mr. Modi's continuation in power. A large number of sitting members of the Lok Sabha are likely to be denied tickets in 2019, if Mr. Modi continues on the 'Gujarat model' for beating anti-incumbency.

None of this is hidden from Mr. Modi and his tactician, BJP president Amit Shah, and they are bound to seek measures to reverse these trends. The extent of their success remains an open question. What is, however, clear is that the three critical components of Hindutva 2.0 are under severe stress.

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# Heralding a new dawn

India and Saudi Arabia are poised to dramatically deepen the bilateral relationship



SAUD AL-SATI

n April 2016, under the leadership of the Custodian of the LTwo Holy Mosques, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia gave itself a goal and a promise in the form of Vision 2030. The Saudi citizen has become the focal point for sustainable development with massive projects directed towards building a vibrant society, a thriving economy and an ambitious nation. The entire foundation of our Kingdom's economy is being transformed towards a post-oil age with the aim of attracting \$427 billion in private investments over the next decade to diversify the economy and create 1.6 million new jobs through the National Industrial Development and Logis-

**Powered by reforms** According to World Bank's 'Doing Business 2018' report, Saudi Arabia has instituted the largest number of business reforms among countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region as of July 2017. With its platform Meras, starting a business in the Kingdom now requires only one step and one day! The single-window platform Fasah has also been

launched for customs clearance and import and export procedures. The 'Doing Business 2019' report has ranked Saudi Arabia as the fourth-largest reformer within the G20. In 2018, Saudi Arabia saw foreign direct investment rise by 127% year-on-year. Global confidence in Saudi Arabia's ascent has further solidified with the International Monetary Fund forecasting increased growth for Saudi Arabia in July 2018.

The Kingdom's construction formers every year by 2030, immarket is set to touch \$96.52 billion in 2025, up from \$45,33 billion in 2016. There are three gigaprojects underway - smart city project Neom, Qiddiya entertainment city and the Red Sea Tourism Project. In 2018, we also launched FekraTech, a national initiative for digital ideas, aimed at making Saudi Arabia a global innovation hub. The Saudi Intellectual Property Authority is also working towards transforming Saudi Arabia into an advanced knowledge-based economy built on innovation and entrepreneurship.

A \$100 billion planned investment in transport projects will also occur over the next decade as we expand the railway system and introduce new light rail mass transit projects in Riyadh, Jeddah, Makkah and Madinah. The grand expansions of the Holy Mosque in Makkah and the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah have increased their capacity for accommodating millions of worshippers. One of the most important goals of the Vision 2030 is to increase our capacity to welcome 30 million Umrah per-



prove their experience and enrich it further

Since a majority of the Kingdom's population is below the age of 30, education is a key component of Vision 2030. Over the decades, Saudi Arabia's education system has gone through an astonishing transformation. Due to generous scholarships from the Kingdom, a large number of Saudi students study overseas. By 2030, the Kingdom intends to have at least five Saudi universities among the top 200 in international rankings. Education reforms have also led to an increase in women's literacy and participation in the work-

force. With the Kingdom at the heart of the Arab and Islamic world, the changes taking place on the Saudi soil are creating positive influences for the entire Arab region. Saudi Arabia remains committed to the social, economic and political stability of the region and will continue playing a leading role in countering terrorism and establishing peace as demonstrated by the Kingdom's contribution towards

the historic peace accord signed between Ethiopia and Eritrea in Riyadh in 2018. We continue to stand by our Yemeni brothers and support the Palestinian cause. Our dream is of a peaceful, progressive and a prosperous world.

In our common pursuit for development and stability, Saudi Arabia sees India as an important partner. Our ties trace their roots to the third millennium BC. Trade, science, arts, literature, languages - the exchanges between our civilisations have indeed been profound. India holds a special place for us. Nearly 3 million Indians form the largest expatriate community in the Kingdom. India has also seen its Haj quota of 1,36,020 increase consecutively during the last two years to a record 1.75.025.

India and Saudi Arabia have more opportunities today to tap into than ever before. The bilateral trade for 2017-18, in excess of \$27 billion, will accelerate as Saudi Arabia and India engage in a host of new areas such as information and communications technology (ICT), health care, defence, biotechnology, education and infrastructure among others. India is one of the top countries on the Kingdom's preferred list with great potential for investment in organic and food processing industries.

#### **Expanding cooperation**

The energy partnership between the two countries is also finding new grounds. As of October 2018, Saudi Aramco has nearly \$2 billion in material-service sourcing with Indian companies, and investing in India's value chain from oil supply, marketing and refining to petrochemicals and lubricants is a key part of its global downstream strategy. The \$44 billion integrated refinery and petrochemicals complex at Ratnagiri in Maharashtra, being jointly developed by Saudi Aramco, Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) and a consortium of Indian public sector units (PSUs) consisting of Indian Oil Corporation Limited (IOCL), Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited (BPCL) and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited (HPCL), is vet another milestone.

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman met Prime Minister Narendra Modi in November 2018 on the sidelines of the G20 summit and both sides agreed to set up a highlevel mechanism to boost concrete actions in terms of investment, technology and manufacturing across various sectors.

As formidable economies of MENA and Asia, Saudi Arabia and India have a historic opportunity to collaborate in shaping the future of our regions, for a better tomorrow full of prosperity and promise. Combining our respective strengths will pave the way for endless possibilities and accomplishments for the benefit of our two peoples and the region. The forthcoming state visit of the Crown Prince to India presents another historic opportunity to expand collaboration between our two friendly nations.

Saud Al-Sati is Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to India

### $LETTERS\ TO\ THE\ EDITOR\ \ \text{Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.} in \ must \ carry\ the\ full\ postal\ address\ and\ the\ full\ name\ or\ the\ name\ with\ initials.$

Carnage in Kashmir It is saddening that paramilitary personnel were caught unawares despite surveillance and close monitoring (Page 1, "37 CRPF men killed in J&K suicide attack", February 15). Neither Governor's rule nor President's rule appear to have resulted in any significant change in the State of Jammu and Kashmir as far as curbing terrorism is concerned. The people in the State seem to have no hope of peace. Eliminating terrorists is going to be difficult as terror elements appear to be working in isolation. N. VISVESWARAN,

■ Evidence points to security and intelligence lapses. Where were the explosives

sourced from? It is time the international community came together and pledged to root out terror or act against terror centres. SACHIN V.K. JADHAV,

■ If there is incontrovertible proof of terror outfits being involved, India should step up its efforts to have in place a comprehensive convention on international terrorism. This must be at the level of the United Nations. Reports of Kashmiri youth now being a part of terror are deeply disturbing. Sincere efforts should be made to bring them back to the mainstream. P. ALARMELMANGAI,

■ It is unfortunate that even after being admonished

of outrageous aggression, the forces backing terror have not mended their ways. The incident has also brought to light the vulnerabilities in India's counter-terrorism defences against fidayeen attacks. Lawmakers must address the lack of an institutional arrangement for the management of India's The country can ill-afford a loss of precious lives at the hands of a few extremist

publicly and warned of

surgical strikes for any form

■ One is at a loss for words and one's heart goes to the families of all those who have lost their lives. Defence officials must now ensure a calibrated response so that

forces.

SHREYANS JAIN,

anti-India elements do not dare to touch Indian soil. DEBASISH BARUAH,

■ One fears that people in the Valley will suffer for a terrible crime perpetrated by a few. Of course passions are high and cries of "blood for blood" are heard. Yet we still hope that even now there will be officials at the senior levels who will have their heads on their shoulders and proceed with patience and caution. Before furious retaliation is unleashed. there must be a dispassionate inquiry. INDERJIT SINGH JAIJEE,

#### Chandigarh Safe blood

It is unfortunate that there are some people donating their own blood for

perhaps to make both ends meet. This practice, on the face of it, is morally and ethically incongruous, defeating the noble cause of blood donation (Editorial page, "Every drop matters", February 15). The panacea is to involve the community at large. If blood collection booths are accessible across the country, people may voluntarily opt for donation. There needs to be greater awareness of "blood donation day" DEEPAK SINGHAL.

pecuniary considerations.

■ How can one forget the incident in Tamil Nadu, of a youngster who donated blood that transmitted infection to a mother. Blood banks and transfusion units need to be better monitored and staff need to be enthused about their responsibility. SACHIN V.K. JADHAV, Lakhala, Washim, Maharashtra

#### Subtle message? The well-caricatured

depiction of Samajwadi Party patriarch Mulayam Singh Yadav prodding his son and SP leader, Akhilesh with a "nose push", in presence of the architects of the Opposition's mahagathbandan and the Prime Minister and BJP president, speaks a thousand words. One waits to see the political fallout after the unexpected "gesture of goodwill" in Parliament (OpEd page, February 15). B. GURUMURTHY,

MORE LETTERS ONLINE:

# On the Silk Route trail

The Silk Route was an unhindered stream of trade that built bridges between cultures, until it was broken up by the rise of national borders. A Russian plumber and a German nurse capture its romance by retracing the route. **Peerzada Ashiq** reports

oored to the banks of the Dal lake in Srinagar, 'New Shahenshah' is not a fancy houseboat. An immersion rod hisses in a makeshift washroom set up on a wooden plank outside the houseboat. Tourists Roman, 47, a Russian plumber, and Anne, 31, a German nurse, are looking forward to their mid-day bath, and understandably so. Following heavy snow and landslides, they had been stranded for two weeks on the Zoji La, a pass which connects Kargil in Ladakh with Srinagar, their final stop.

When Roman and Anne met for the first time three summers ago in Tibet, they decided to do a special trip in 2018: retracing the famous Silk Route. They would explore the overland route that once connected Central Asia, Asia and Europe via the high mountain passes of the Pamir, Tian Shan, Hindu Kush, Karakoram and Kunlun mountain ranges.

Says Roman, "It was our dream to travel along the Silk Route, which was once an unhindered flow of different streams of cultures. Today it's a series of watertight chambers due to national borders."

#### On a military truck

It was in the late 18th and early 19th century that British archaeologist Sir Aurel Stein organised the first major expeditions to explore what German geographer Baron Ferdinand von Richthoven had in 1877 named the 'Silk Road'. Stein undertook eight expeditions along the ancient trade route that links China and the Mediterranean. On at least one expedition, Kashmir was Stein's starting point for a journey to explore a second century Buddhist site in China's Xinjiang province. The excavations made by Stein between 1900 and 1915 helped throw some historical light on this part of Xinjiang, which was once a part of the mysterious Kroraina kingdom.

But in the post-colonial era, the consolidation of borders and hostility between neighbouring countries snapped the last remnant linkages of the Silk Route in the Kashmir region. The incorporation of Xinjiang into China in 1949 sealed it. But Roman and Anne managed to break through the 'sealed route' after 71 years, as they navigated through some of the world's toughest border posts.

In July 2018, Anne hired a military truck fitted with a modular kitchen and a two-bed arrangement in the back. It was a vehicle that could withstand temperatures as low as minus 50° Celsius. It was what helped Roman and Anne survive when they were stranded in Ladakh for 15 days. Recalls Roman, "Even the vehicle's fuel got frozen many times at the Zoji La Pass. If you stepped out, there was a good chance you'd freeze to death."

It was his idea to hire a military truck, preferably a World War II-era vehicle. He says, "Anne managed to find one with a 5,200 cc engine in Germany. We wanted a vehicle that could negotiate mountains of this height and magnitude and withstand its vagaries. Thankfully, it did."

Anne drove the vehicle all the way from Germany to Romania across many states of Europe, and finally to Ukraine. "It was a memorable journey. One could see the stark contrast between two kinds of lifestyles. On the one hand were people pinned down by the modern idea of life, and on the other, a whole set of communities untouched by modernity, living a comparatively primitive life on the mountainside," says

Roman had once travelled overland from India to Russia via Tibet. Now he was all set to drive down from Russia to Kashmir along the Silk Route. Commencing the Silk Route leg of their journey from St Petersburg, they took the traditional land route through Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan, halting at the Silk Route's famous stopovers of Bukhara, Samarqand, and Badakhshan. From Kyrgyzstan, the vehicle made its entry into China.

#### **Getting into Xinjiang**

He adds, "This time, travelling to China was not easy. Our entry into Xinjiang took around 28 hours at the customs, where all the data from our phones and laptops was downloaded." Anne was unlucky. The Chinese customs officials spotted her pet cat – foreign animals are not allowed into China – and refused her entry.

However, this did not deter Roman from continuing his journey along the Silk Route in China. He drove the truck alone through the famous marketplaces of Urumqi and Kashgar of Xinjiang, before taking the arduous mountain stretches towards Karakoram in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). His road journey took him close to the famous Pangong Lake that straddles India and China in Ladakh.

Entering the Karakoram mountains through the Khunjerab Pass at an elevation of 16,010 ft, Roman steered his vehicle into Gilgit-Baltistan's Hunza valley in present-day PoK. Explains Roman,



Self-drive: "We wanted a vehicle that could negotiate mountains of this height and magnitude and withstand its vagaries. Thankfully, it did." Roman (left) and Anne in Srinagar after completing their journey along the Silk Route. • SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



"At the Balti Fort, I saw an 18th century Russian samovar (copper tea pot). Variants of it are used in Afghanistan and Kashmir." He decided to pick up a 100-year old antique Afghani 'samovar' (a word of Russian origin) from Pakistan's Peshawar. "'Sam' means 'self' in Russian and 'Var' means 'cook'," he explains.

Samovar is a copper teapot with a chimney at the centre for charcoal. While the Russian samovar has a knob at the bottom, the Kashmiri one has a teapot-like nose at the top. Roman adds, "This is a living example of how much we still have in common despite the borders that have come up."

Roman and Anne met up in Pakistan for the onward journey to India through the Wagah border at Amritsar, and from there to Ladakh via Manali in Himachal Pradesh. The Silk Route journey would have remained incomplete unless they covered Ladakh's Leh and Kargil towns, which were once bustling stopovers for silk-carrying merchants from China. Despite inclement weather in November (snow had already covered the passes connecting China with Gilgit-Baltistan and Himachal Pradesh with Ladakh, while the day temperature hovered below freezing point), Roman was determined to carry the antique samovar for the Central Asian Museum in Leh.

Says Roman, "I feel elated to have brought a samovar for the Leh museum. It would highlight the broken link. In Leh, I realised that the Russian word 'aksakal', which means 'white-beard' and 'wise man', had become the designation for the customs officer who used to check the caravans on the Silk Route in the past. The words and the utensils used here make one feel as if it was only yesterday that the region was open for trade."

#### A spark in the cold desert

The timing of Roman's offering of an antique samovar to the museum in Leh could not have been more opportune. Ladakh is sparsely populated. Its twin districts of Leh and Kargil have a combined population of just 2.74 lakh people (as in Census 2011) spread across a vast cold desert. Yet the region is astir with people's movements demanding a revival of the old trade routes. The setting up of the Central Asian Museum in Leh, in 2016, on the premises of a 17th

century mosque, stands testimony to the people's attempt to reclaim the past, with an eye on the future.

Back in 2004, in Kargil town, around 200 km from Leh, two brothers, Gulzar Hussain Munshi, 48, and Ajaz Hussain Munshi, 42, decided to sort out the artefacts hidden in their grandfather's inn. The inn had been set up in 1920 and was then known as the Aziz Bhat Sarai. The three-storey building also doubled as a depot for goods, with the ground floor accommodating a stable for traders' horses. The Munshi brothers converted the only surviving inn of the Silk Route in Ladakh into a museum. Gulzar became its director, while Ajaz is its curator.

Named the Munshi Aziz Bhat Museum of Central Asia and Kargil Trade Artefacts, the house of the Munshis has become a major attraction for tourists interested in learning more about the Silk Route. It houses over 30,000 artefacts from the 19th and the early 20th centuries. These include turquoisestudded silver necklaces and engravings from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Khotan and Kashgar, and 17th century carpets from the weavers of Yarkand and Kashgar in Xinjiang. There is also a 17th century gold-plated saddle strap from Yarkand. Early 20th century artefacts include western toiletries such as soap, toothbrushes, and shaving brushes dating back to 1903, 1905, 1926, and 1939 all imported from England, Germany and the U.S.

Says Ajaz, "After reaching the Mumbai coast, these toiletries travelled all the way to Central Asia through Yarkand, the cold desert of Khotan, and

I am the first Balti woman to take up singing, as it is strongly discouraged by our conservative culture. One day I would like to meet my fans across the LoC.'

SHERINE FATIMA BALTI, Bogdang, Leh Kashgar. From the other side, silk and carpets would reach Indian and Western markets." His grandfather, Munshi Aziz Bhat (1880-1950), was a prominent owner of a Silk Route enterprise, Munshi Aziz Bhat And Sons. He adds, "It traded in a number of goods, including silk, rubies, gold, and spices, with its business extending 'in all the four directions'"

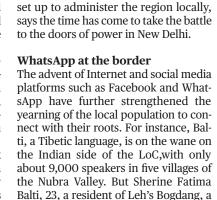
Says Ajaz, "I do not see my private museum as a mausoleum of the Silk Route. I see it as heralding a fresh start. The time has come for Kargil to open itself up to Baltistan and Xinjiang again. If travellers like Roman and Anne can make the travel happen again, why can't we, who were to the Silk Route what blood is to a body?"

Hajira Begum, the 104-year-old grandmother of the Munshi brothers, still has letters from 1933 containing details about the stocks of gold, rubies, and silk carried by the horses arriving from different directions. Says Begum, "One horse would carry 40 kg of gold dust. It used to cost ₹12 per kg. I can still smell the spices that criss-crossed these mountains."

The Munshis have already been approached by the Chinese Embassy in India for help in establishing a museum dedicated to the Silk Route. Says Ajaz, "China seems equally interested in reviving the links. They are in touch with us for the museum."

Hunderman village, the nearest Silk Route point to Kargil town, still bears a great deal of resemblance to Kashgar bazaar in China's Xinjiang. It connects Kargil to Baltistan's Skardu area in PoK, which is less than 5 km from Kargil's main market. For the families here, retelling old tales and legends about trade and travel is a popular pastime on dark winter evenings. These stories, frequently told and retold, have also played a role in sparking the current political movement seeking a renewal of the Silk Route's old linkages.

Sheikh Nazir Mehdi Mohammadi, president of the Anjuman Jamiyat Ulla-



far-off village in the Nubra Valley, has

emerged as a singing sensation for the

2.9 lakh Balti-speaking population of

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ma Kargil, a local socio-religious group,

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routes. He says the people of Kargil are

being denied their due. Says Mohamma-

di, "People would be compelled to

march towards the Line of Control

(LoC) if the Kargil-Skardu and the Tur-

With each passing day, the move-

ment is gaining momentum and sup-

port. Feroz Ahmad Khan, chairman of

the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Develop-

ment Council (LAHDC)-Kargil, a body

tuk-Khapolu roads are not reopened."

body?"

Baltistan on the other side of the LoC. Says Sherine's father and a contractor, Ahmad Shah, 52, "My daughter is followed by 57,000 people on Facebook. Over 90% of her followers are from Baltistan." A comment from Manzoor Hussain Balghari and Ehsan Ali Danish, two well-known lyricists from Baltistan, on Sherene's Facebook page started an unusual musical jugalbandi (union) online. Says Shah, "Balghari and Danish now share their lyrics online with Sherine. She sings them and uploads the videos, which then go viral in Baltistan. Her songs are even aired on the local radio stations there." In January this year, Sherine was conferred the Jammu and Kashmir State Award for Performing Arts.

Adds Shah, "Other Baltistan-based lyricists have also started sharing their lyrics for Sherine to sing." One popular song written by Balghari and sung by Sherine is about the yearning to meet a dear one. "At the end of the day, the sky meets the earth; why can't we too," go the lyrics

Sherine's songs, 'Grifshat Sula Beik' and 'Tsertragi Jusay Jusay', are runaway hits in PoK. Sherine says, "I am the first

Balti woman to take up singing, as it is strongly discouraged by our conservative culture. One day I would like to — meet my fans across the LoC."

Sherine's family, like the 12,000 other families that got divided into Jammu and Kashmir and PoK after Independence, saw the boundary redrawn after the 1971 war. And families again got divided. Says Shah, "Baltistan is just 4 km from Bogdang village. In 1971, we were part of Pakistan for six months during the war before India won us back. It took many divided families 47 years to cover this 4 km distance. Our past is painful. Opening the Turtuk-Khapula road will go a long way in healing the wounds of war here."

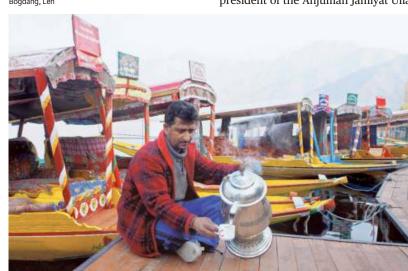
Today, WhatsApp helps the divided families exchange videos and see each other by cell phone. It also heightens the longing for a real reunion. For instance, the family of Ghulam Hussain, 42, a social activist, belongs to Thyakshi village in the Nubra Valley. They became residents of India only in 1971. when the Indian Army annexed 804 sq km of territory from Gilgit-Baltistan. Ghulam Qadir, Hussain's uncle, got separated from his family in 1971 and stayed back in Ghanche district on the other side of the LoC, while his wife remained stranded here. Says Hussain, "It took over 12 years to secure a meeting between husband and wife. Now we rely on online video conferencing to see my uncle and aunt, which is not enough." For people in nearby Bogdang village, Hussain's Thyakshi village remained a "mini-Pakistan" for many years.

Locals want tourism to pick up at Turtuk too, like it has at the Wagah border. Says Hussain, "Opening the roads will liberate us. During the winter, it is easier to ferry vegetables from Baltistan than from Leh town."

Ironically, the twin routes of Srinagar-Muzaffarabad and Poonch-Rawlakote that were opened in 2005 for the divided families of Jammu and Kashmir were of no use for those in Ladakh. Pakistan treats PoK and Gilgit-Baltistan as two separate entities. Says Hussain, "The bus service was limited to the divided families of PoK. So we could not avail it to reach Gilgit-Baltistan."

Kargil saw another shutdown on February 8. Since the announcement of the decision last November to open the Kartarpur Corridor between India and Pakistan, there have been three major rallies in Kargil town, with the protesters pressing for similar arrangements in this region.

Meanwhile, Anne and Roman, having successfully concluded their Silk Route adventure, have already shipped their military truck back to Germany from a Mumbai port. Says Roman reflectively, "Traditions live longer than regimes. Culturally, it will mean a great deal if people are allowed to move freely. I'm sure it will happen sooner or later."



A Kashmiri Samover, at the Dal lake. • GETTY IMAGES