



A fresh warning

India must recognise the human cost of poorly enforced environment laws

The sixth edition of the Global Environment Outlook from the UN Environment Programme has come as another stark warning: the world is unsustainably extracting resources and producing unmanageable quantities of waste. The linear model of economic growth depends on the extraction of ever-higher quantities of materials, leading to chemicals flowing into air, water and land. This causes ill-health and premature mortality, and affects the quality of life, particularly for those unable to insulate themselves from these effects. The UN report, GEO-6, on the theme "Healthy Planet, Healthy People," has some sharp pointers for India. It notes that East and South Asia have the highest number of deaths due to air pollution; by one estimate, it killed about 1.24 million in India in 2017. As India's population grows, it must worry that agricultural yields are coming under stress due to increase in average temperature and erratic monsoons. The implications of these forecasts for food security and health are all too evident, more so for the 148 million people living in severe weather 'hotspots'. The task before India is to recognise the human cost of poorly enforced environment laws and demonstrate the political will necessary to end business-as-usual policies. That would mean curbing the use of fossil fuels and toxic chemicals across the spectrum of economic activity.

There are some targeted interventions that only require the resolve to reduce air and water pollution, and which in turn promise early population-level benefits. Aggressive monitoring of air quality in cities through scaled-up facilities would bring about a consensus on cutting emissions of greenhouse gases, and provide the impetus to shift to cleaner sources of energy. It is significant that GEO-6 estimates that the top 10% of populations globally, in terms of wealth, are responsible for 45% of GHG emissions, and the bottom 50% for only 13%. Pollution impacts are, however, borne more by the poorer citizens. Combating air pollution would, therefore, require all older coal-based power plants in India to conform to emission norms at the earliest, or to be shut down in favour of renewable energy sources. Transport emissions are a growing source of urban pollution, and a quick transition to green mobility is needed. In the case of water, the imperative is to stop the contamination of surface supplies by chemicals, sewage and municipal waste. As the leading extractor of groundwater, India needs to make water part of a circular economy in which it is treated as a resource that is recovered, treated and reused. But water protection gets low priority, and State governments show no urgency in augmenting rainwater harvesting. New storage areas act as a supply source when monsoons fail, and help manage floods when there is excess rainfall.

Softer, slower

Parliamentary votes give the British PM hope that a hard Brexit can be avoided

With the overwhelming vote on Thursday to seek a delay to the exit from the EU, Britain's Parliament might have actually given Prime Minister Theresa May another chance to push her existing deal for Brexit. A day earlier, a majority of the MPs decided to rule out, under all circumstances, Britain's crashing out of the EU without an agreement. With the catastrophic consequences of a hard Brexit option thus foreclosed, from Britain's perspective at least, there is good reason to think that the worst is over, although there is no clue yet to the direction of the exit. Both these proposals had been rejected as part of earlier amendments to the draft withdrawal bill, and the votes this week reflect a significant shift in Parliament's stance. Yet, a delay to the March 29 deadline to leave the EU can only bring a temporary respite from uncertainty. For one thing, Ms. May's controversial withdrawal agreement was on Tuesday emphatically rejected by the House of Commons for the second time in as many months. But a silver lining for her, despite the setback, was the smaller margin of defeat this time. Some die-hard Brexiters who voted down her deal in January have since grown increasingly concerned about the prospect of a delayed Brexit or no Brexit at all, and chose to endorse it this week. The shift has encouraged Ms. May to seek a third vote on her deal next week. The calculation in Downing Street is that with the hardliners' preferred option of a 'no deal' Brexit virtually eliminated and a looming indefinite delay, more Tories will rally behind her proposals. The group to especially watch is Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party, which props up Ms. May's minority government.

Should Ms. May's gambit next week succeed, the government intends to seek from Brussels an extension, until June, to complete the exit formalities. Conversely, another failure would risk a delay in the U.K.'s ultimate withdrawal by months. The U.K. would then have to hold polls in May to elect new Members of the European Parliament. For EU leaders, the duration of the extension is less of a concern than the potential for a concrete outcome, given the differences within and between the main U.K. parties. Donald Tusk, President of the European Council, is on record that he would recommend a longer extension, to the other 27 heads of EU governments when they meet next week. Developments this week have dealt a huge blow to hardline eurosceptics in the U.K., whose narrow nationalist delusions have made them impervious to the economic cost of disengagement from the world's largest single market. The harm they have already inflicted on the polity and society must be contained. It would be unwise of them to impede the efforts to avoid a hard Brexit.

The jawan on the border

Can a granular Opposition response be a counter to Prime Minister Modi's overarching nationalist script, post-Pulwama?



VIDYA SUBRAHMANIAM

So game, set and match to Prime Minister Narendra Modi? With just over two months left for the general election verdict to come in, the predominant sense, whether in the stock market, *satta bazaar*, street conversations or among pollsters, appears to be that it is all over, bar the shouting. What apparently remains to be seen is whether the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) would breach the majority mark on its own or with the support of its alliance partners.

The difference a month makes It was not like this a month ago. The buzz at the time was that a second term for Mr. Modi was far from being certain. With the Opposition giving the impression of nimble-footed alliances in different States, Mr. Modi and BJP president Amit Shah for once looked beaten in their own 'always one step ahead' department.

And then the Pulwama suicide terror ambush on Indian soldiers happened, followed by India's retaliatory bombing of Jaish-e-Mohammad terror base in Balakot in Pakistan, followed in turn by the latter capturing and then returning an Indian Air Force (IAF) pilot. The script changed many times in the stressful days after Pulwama, but at the end of it India had two heroes. One, Abhinandan Varthaman, the captured Wing Commander who returned home to rousing war cries and tales of stellar bravery while in the 'enemy' country's

custody. Two, Prime Minister Modi, who, in the words of his fawning followers, among them TV journalists, had done the "unthinkable" and "undoable" in ordering air strikes deep into Pakistan's territory. In this narration, the last time action had been undertaken targeting Pakistani territory was during the 1971 war, after which a succession of lily-livered Prime Ministers had allowed Pakistan-sponsored terror a free run. A TV anchor gushed that it took just "one man" to shed the pusillanimity of past regimes and show Pakistan its place.

Mr. Modi's daring seemed perfectly timed to take advantage of a slogan the government had coined to advertise its accomplishments: *Na mumkin ab mumkin hai* (the impossible is possible now). In the hands of Mr. Modi's adoring party, the slogan transformed into "*Modi hai to mumkin hai* (if Modi is there, it is possible)". To nobody's surprise, the slogan found pride of place on billboards and on the social media timelines of the Prime Minister's flag-waving fans, some of whom even ensured Twitter trended #SayYesToWar. Mr. Modi's '56-inch chest', which had receded from sight in the days after the BJP's defeat in the November 2018 round of State elections, also made a triumphant return while the BJP and the Prime Minister himself blurred the line between the armed forces and the executive.

On BJP hoardings, the Prime Minister was featured alongside IAF fighter jets and Wing Commander Varthaman. At a rally in Greater Noida on March 9, Mr. Modi pilloried the "tukde tukde gang" (euphemism for civil society and liberals) for doubting the Balakot air attacks when Pakistan was crying that "*Modi aa kar ke maar ke chala*



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gaya (Modi came here and hit us)". The Election Commission of India has ordered the removal of the offending hoardings, but who will expunge the Prime Minister's words or stop them from being circulated?

That the Prime Minister has a plethora of ways to lampoon his opponents is known, of course. In one of his jibes, he gave a spin to the terms BC and AD, saying these must now be understood as "Before Congress" and "After Dynasty". By the same token, the BJP's prospects in 2019 can probably be divided into before and after Pulwama. If preceding the Pulwama attack, the BJP seemed a little lost in contrast to the Opposition's gung-ho form, the reverse has happened after the terror attack. The BJP has appropriated the nationalist plank, all cylinders firing, leaving the Opposition looking confused and unpatriotic.

The BJP has specified the no-go areas: no doubts on the Balakot air strikes, no mention of the intelligence failure that led to the Pulwama massacre, no questions to the Prime Minister or the government, even on the Rafale deal. In a much-publicised interaction with a TV journalist, senior Cabinet Minister Piyush Goyal made it clear that the government, the armed forces and the country were to be accorded the same respect and treated as an indistinguishable whole. And anyone breaching the red lines

would be treated as a friend of Pakistan.

Adversity to advantage Mr. Modi's record shows an uncanny ability to turn adversity to advantage. He took charge as Chief Minister of Gujarat in 2001 to almost no indication of the superstardom awaiting him. He scraped through his first ever election held on February 24, 2002 to Rajkot-II, while the BJP lost other byelections held simultaneously. This was three days before the Godhra train carnage. The rest, as they say, is history. All questions on intelligence failure were buried as the State plunged into violence against Muslims. With that Mr. Modi became Gujarat's Hindu Hriday Samrat, and his career scaled spectacular milestones, paving the way for his eventual rise to Prime Minister.

Likewise with the November 8, 2016 demonetisation. The policy was a disaster in the making. Yet in Mr. Modi's mesmerising words, it became all about sacrifice, valour and nation-building. The crack-down on black money would succeed only with the sacrifice and cooperation of the people, he said, even as he drew a parallel with the "jawan on the border" who took bullets for the nation. The response to this was electric as people standing in queues to exchange their devalued currency parroted the "jawan on the border" line. By the time the severe downside of demonetisation kicked in, the BJP had won its biggest Assembly victory in U.P.

Today, the "jawan on the border" is no longer a metaphorical invocation. He is a flesh and blood figure who has shown that he will die for his country. And the BJP is once again calling upon people to rise up and support the armed

forces and the government. The election-eve political messaging, conveyed by Mr. Shah and others, is that the country's security will be in peril if Mr. Modi is defeated.

Issues versus slogans

This is not an easy script to counter. From the Opposition, Congress president Rahul Gandhi has shown an unflinching ability to engage with critical issues. He has raised the Rafale deal and hinted at intelligence failure, refusing to be deterred by the government's faux-nationalist sabre-rattling. But it is clear that the Balakot air strikes have energised the BJP cadre and changed the overall political mood to an extent where defectors to the BJP are positing Mr. Modi's 'courage' against the Opposition's 'cowardice'.

It seems the BJP's dismal record on all fronts – sinking economy, debilitating unemployment, farm distress and deepening social fissures – will be forgotten, as the party stitches up smart alliances and wins over estranged partners to deafening drum-beats of nationalism. And yet, the BJP has some hard realities to confront. In U.P. the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party, now allies, have each a base vote which adds up to about 40% of the electorate. This has held through ups and downs even in the 2014 election. The same is the case in Karnataka, with the Congress and the Janata Dal (Secular) now in a pre-poll alliance. The BJP has reached saturation performance in as many as 10 States, and there is only so much it can do in other States. Can it pull off an encore to the roll of the war drum?

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Partition, freedom and democracy

Roots of the India-Pakistan conflict can be found in a shared attitude of derision towards the past



KRISHNA KUMAR

Had Krishna Sobti, the eminent Hindi novelist, not died this January, she would have renovated our appreciation of the truth about freedom and Partition occurring together. We habitually forget this truth each time we learn it. An interview she gave to Partition scholar Alok Bhalla is one among many repositories of the insight she brought to this subject. Through her fiction too, Sobti tested the strength of the social fabric that Partition shook and tried to tear apart. Why it didn't tear completely is a question she helps us to answer.

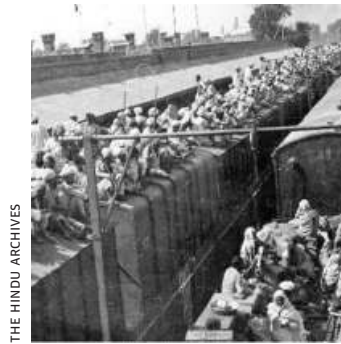
Krishna Sobti's work

Six weeks after her death, a violent conflict broke out between India and Pakistan. The immediate, ostensible causes of the outbreak are terrorism and Kashmir. Real sources lie deeper. Reading Sobti's works reminds you that the deeper roots of the India-Pakistan conflict can be found in a shared attitude of derision towards the past. Public mood shifts between indifference and disdain for the past. There is little genuine interest in the past or curiosity to figure it out. Politicians feel free and tempted to use the past to manipulate

the collective mind.

As the single most important event of our modern history, Partition illustrates the general attitude I am talking about. Across the three nations produced by Partition, there is little consensus over what it means to live with Partition. But there is a shared feeling that Partition is at the heart of many problems and behavioural reflexes. Each country looks at Partition from the perspective that the state apparatus has assiduously developed over time. The term commonly used these days is 'narrative'. It comes in handy. It is a post-modern invention signalling the decline of interest in objectivity. The relatively better educated politicians often use it tactfully to debunk serious commentary, calling it just another narrative. So, why the different nations that constitute the South Asian region bring sharply divergent perspectives to matters of shared interest is explained in terms of diversity of narratives. Are these narratives incompatible? No one seems curious to find out. Nor is anyone actively conscious that the acceptance of incompatibility means granting permanence to intra-regional conflicts. One clear reason why no one is worried is because a feeling of permanent conflict seems to offer unlimited political capital.

When SAARC was established in 1985, it created the hope that mutual understanding would be pursued as a regional political goal. For all seven members, but espe-



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cially India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, mutual understanding would have meant recognising the importance of acceptable portraits of the past. Such portraits exist in literature, but historical awareness requires more than a literary portrait. It means providing reliable resources to validate a view about what happened so that we feel more comfortable with where we are in the present. This awareness is crucial to avoid a feeling among the young that they live in a dark, noisy tunnel with no known exits. An ominous uncertainty hangs over the subcontinent, best expressed by the availability of nuclear weapons to end potential conflicts.

Partition's emotional content

Sobti had hoped that people could now recognise the complications arising out of history. In her interview with Professor Bhalla, she expressed the view that the emotional content of Partition had run out. This is not true. Though seven de-

ades have passed, there is no sign that Partition is devoid of emotional content in India or in Pakistan. In a study of history textbooks used in the two countries, I found that in Pakistan, Partition is presented as unfinished business, while in India it is still viewed as a wound inflicted by Muslims and the British. In both nations, Partition continues to serve as an inflammable memory account. The toll it took on the two nations has not sufficed to cool the coals buried under the ashes of time. Apart from the destruction and violence suffered by common men, women and children on both sides of the border, the post-Partition suspension of reason cost India the life of its greatest leader. That injury has not healed, and the ideological divide it signified continues to grow. Sobti had assumed that the Constitution would unite Indian society around its core values. That did happen to an extent, but words and statements alone don't safeguard values. Freedom and a sense of fraternity are among the values sculpted into the structure of the Constitution. Truth is not mentioned as such, but one assumes that it has an assured place in the edifice of law.

Truth and war

In this context, it may be useful to recall Mahatma Gandhi's dual commitments: truth and non-violence. The pairing of truth with non-violence suggests that truth and war are not compatible. This is why the threat of war at election

time is not good news for the practice of constitutional democracy. For now, the threat of war seems to have passed, but it could easily be made to linger as a memory relevant for voting day. In this sense, the brief outbreak of armed attacks is an ominous reminder of the fragility of the equilibrium that permits us to practice democracy. In Pakistan, democracy is even more fragile. There, it barely survives under the direct shadow of modern weaponry.

The India-Pakistan hostility is richly intersected by bad memories. It has perennial potential for shaping politics. Moreover, an activated conflict invites everyone to play politics. This kind of politics is necessarily manipulative. It helps to bypass more earthy questions which ought to be central to any election. These are questions like why economic growth offers little relief from unemployment, why the village languishes when the city prospers. One can add many more issues to this list. To call them peace-time issues or to designate them as being secondary in comparison to security will be to surrender to history, that too a history soaked in emotions. It is true that politics is a game played in the shadow of history. However, if it is dominated by history, then democracy can hardly serve the cause of progress, howsoever defined. It will always remain stuck in history.

Krishna Kumar is a former director of the NCERT

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.

Pollachi horror

In India, it takes a long time to investigate, prosecute and punish offenders in cases of sexual assault ("Horror in Pollachi", March 15). The victim is forced to visit the court many times, which tests her patience. Even cases that are extensively covered by the media have been dragging on for years. To add to all this stress is the fact that there are threats and inducements to victims to withdraw cases. It is no wonder then that many victims give up seeking justice. In such a scenario, it is crucial for courts to make it their top priority in reducing the trauma faced by victims. We can make a

beginning with the Pollachi case – it must swiftly move forward and bring justice to the victims.

Y.G. CHOUSKEY,
Pune

Bridge collapse

It is shameful that yet another pedestrian bridge has collapsed in Mumbai, this time killing six people ("6 dead as Mumbai footbridge collapses", March 15). Despite a stampede taking place and bridges collapsing earlier, nothing much seems to have changed. It is important for the State government to pay heed to the critical issue of infrastructure. People need to be held accountable and

the culprits must be brought to book. We cannot afford to lose any more lives, nor pass the buck.

NAJMUL HUDA,
Mumbai

The administration seems to have learnt no lessons from past incidents. This time the foot overbridge that collapsed was right near the BMC headquarters! The BMC had ordered a structural audit of all the bridges in the city after the Elphinstone bridge collapse in 2017, but it looks like even these audits cannot be trusted now.

RAJESH RAGHAVAN,
Thane

I travelled in overcrowded

Mumbai trains for over 30 years. The resilience shown by Mumbaiers needs to be seen to be believed. Broken steps could be found everywhere, and a misstep could cost one dearly. But there is no point in blaming the Railways, which is under strain and can do little to improve services. Decentralisation of infrastructure activities is the solution. Also, scant attention is paid by the government in putting in place alternative modes of transport. Why is Metro construction so slow? The government could also consider moving some commercial establishments from south Mumbai to other places, as

overcrowding is a problem in that area. Overbridges cannot take more than a given load.

V. SUBRAMANIAM,
Chennai

China blocks bid again

China has proved how vested interests hold more importance than world peace ("China's block", March 15). But India shouldn't be discouraged by this. After all, past experiences show that placing terrorists on a list does little to combat terrorism. India should strengthen internal security so that attacks can be prevented in the future.

DIVYA SINGLA,
Patiala

Jawaharlal Nehru has become the whipping boy for the ruling party to cover up its failures ("Nehru the original sinner, says Jaitley", March 15). In the latest instance, the Finance Minister has blamed Nehru for China's stand on Masood Azhar! As Nehru clearly replied to a question in the Lok Sabha in 1955, there was no offer made to India for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council. Neither the Finance Minister nor the Congress president should be using social media to discuss foreign policy.

N. NAGARAJAN,
Secunderabad

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