



## Evasive Mayawati

Her sense of friends and foes is predicated on winning back the larger Dalit spectrum

Bahujan Samaj Party chief Mayawati once again asserted this week she is a contender for the post of Prime Minister, though she will not be contesting in the Lok Sabha polls herself. She also lost no opportunity to position herself equidistant from the Congress and the BJP, the two national parties at the opposite poles of the electoral contest this year. Much more than her alliance partner for the parliamentary election in Uttar Pradesh, the Samajwadi Party, effectively led by Akhilesh Yadav, she has discounted any need to seek Congress support to give greater ballast to the fight against the BJP. Unlike Mr. Yadav, she has refrained from giving the impression that she too considers the BJP a bigger threat to their social justice politics, relative to the Congress. The BSP-SP-Rashtriya Lok Dal alliance in U.P. will not contest in Amethi and Rae Bareilly, the constituencies of Rahul Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi, respectively. When the Congress sought to reciprocate the gesture by announcing it would not field candidates against the senior leaders of the alliance, the BSP chief was stinging in her rebuff. Positioning herself politically vis-à-vis the Congress at a time when the BJP is dominant has not been easy. For the Assembly elections in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan last year, Ms. Mayawati's pre-poll negotiations with the Congress were half-hearted and doomed. The BSP ended up with an alliance with Ajit Jogi's Janta Congress Chhattisgarh that cut into the traditional Congress base in the State. The Congress, though, compensated for the loss with support from other communities and won the election.

Ms. Mayawati, however, felt compelled to quickly offer support to the Congress, which was short on numbers in M.P. and Rajasthan, citing the need to keep the BJP out. Last month, she termed the BJP and the Congress as having the same character. At the heart of her political projection is her battle to win back a larger spectrum of Dalit support. While her core Jatav base is largely intact, the strain of Ambedkarite politics she inherited from mentor Kanshi Ram is being challenged in the overall churn. The Hindutva upsurge under Narendra Modi appeals to a section of Dalits while the emergence of new outfits and leaders such as Chandrashekar Azad in U.P. and Jignesh Mevani in Gujarat indicates a yearning for assertion among sections of Dalits. The Congress's efforts to woo Dalits are also discomfiting for her. Ms. Mayawati's success in gaining power in U.P. on earlier occasions depended on stitching alliances with backward castes and upper castes, either through tie-ups with the SP or the BJP or by creating an equivalent social coalition under the BSP banner. After the great debacle of 2014, when the BSP did not get even one Lok Sabha seat, she is anxious that her primacy as a Dalit leader is secured. This, more than a continuing aspiration for the PM's post, explains her evasive politics.

## The Kerala alert

There needs to be greater surveillance across India for the West Nile Virus

The death of a child in Kerala's Malappuram district has drawn attention to the epidemiology of the little-known West Nile Virus in India. Though awareness is low, the virus is endemic to several States. The first documented WNV case in Kerala was in Alappuzha in 2011, with the numbers then growing. However, official records do not reflect this, given the difficulty of diagnosing WNV in its acute phase. This microbe is serologically similar to the Japanese Encephalitis virus, which means a go-to test, ELISA, often fails to differentiate JE antibodies from WNV antibodies. More tests are typically needed to confirm WNV, and while the results appear in journals, they don't always make it to State surveillance systems. This is why, though a 2014 *Journal of Clinical Virology* paper identified the 2011 Alappuzha outbreak as WNV, with around six deaths, Kerala's health department is calling the Malappuram death the State's first. The confirmation triggered an alert, but it doesn't mean Kerala did not have WNV deaths before.

Nevertheless, the alert is a welcome move. It means that State health authorities will look harder for the disease. Historically, wherever Indian researchers have looked for the WNV, they have found it. The first sign of its presence came from positive antibody tests among residents of Bombay in 1952. Thereafter, it began showing up in encephalitis patients in many of the places it was tested for, including Maharashtra, Assam and Madhya Pradesh. In Malappuram too, the rapid diagnosis was driven by heightened surveillance in Kerala following the 2018 Nipah outbreak. Patient samples were sent to the Manipal Centre for Virus Research, which deployed the Plaque Reduction Neutralisation Test, more specific than ELISA. If more States used such diagnostics, it would help determine just how widespread WNV is in India. There is a good chance the virus is a significant cause of Acute Encephalitis Syndrome, the infamous basket of illnesses with no known aetiology that affect over 10,000 Indians each year. Still, WNV rarely kills. In less than 1% of infections, the virus travels to the brain, triggering potentially fatal encephalitis. Otherwise, it merely causes a mild flu-like illness. This could change. Viruses are known to adapt for both greater virulence and more efficient transmission. Urbanisation and land-use changes are bringing the virus's zoonotic hosts, such as birds, in more frequent contact with humans. Given increased mobility, viruses can hitch a ride to new regions via infected humans and vectors. All this makes the WNV a formidable foe. India's best defence is better surveillance, which will help doctors reach patients early to prevent complications. Kerala could not prevent the death in Malappuram, but other States should adopt its model of heightened surveillance.

# Next stage in the Great Game

Defeatism will hurt India's interests more than the Taliban's return to Kabul could



SUHASINI HAIDER

As international talks with the Taliban leadership gain momentum, India's foreign policy establishment has gone through the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. After the initial denial that several countries, including the U.S., Russia, U.A.E., Qatar and Saudi Arabia, were engaging with Pakistan in order to bring senior Taliban leaders to the table in late 2017, India protested against being cut out of the talks. It then negotiated to join them, followed by expressions of deep misgiving over where the talks would lead. And finally this has given way to acceptance today that the talks have not only progressed, but are being given priority over every other process in Afghanistan.

### Valid concerns

The misgivings are well placed, and confirmed by the results of the last round of talks between U.S. Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and Taliban leaders in Doha (February 25-March 12). The talks appeared to be held on the Taliban's terms, and at a venue of its choice. Therefore, while clear agreements have been forged on the withdrawal of foreign forces and on not allowing Afghan soil for use by foreign terror groups, agreements on a comprehensive ceasefire and an intra-Afghan dialogue, once considered the minimum "redlines" or starting point of engaging with the Taliban, have now been made the last priority. These talks have also broken

the most important redline, that of being led by, or at least held with the full backing and knowledge of, the democratically-led government in Kabul. This became evident a few days ago. During a visit to Washington on March 14, Afghan National Security Adviser Hamdullah Mohib lashed out at Mr. Khalilzad for "delegitimising" the Ashraf Ghani government by carrying out talks in the dark.

Another reason for New Delhi's disquiet is that these talks continue without acknowledging a role for India, despite this being an expressly stated goal of Mr. Trump's South Asia policy. This week, Mr. Khalilzad's conference at the U.S. State Department to discuss "international support for the Afghan peace process, the role each party can play in bringing an end to the war, and progress to date in peace talks" included only special envoys from Russia, China and the European Union.

Finally, there is the uncertainty for Afghanistan's future that these talks have wrought that worries India. When talks with the Taliban began, the objective was to try to mainstream the insurgents into the political process, and at least have a working ceasefire by the time presidential elections, scheduled for April 2019, were held. The reality is far from that. The Taliban continues to carry out terror attacks in Afghanistan even as its leadership talks with the U.S. Despite the Ministry of External Affairs issuing a statement on the importance of holding the presidential elections, the Afghan vote has been further postponed to September 28. This makes Mr. Ghani's continuance more tenuous under the constitution, which could mean an interim government will be installed, something India has been opposed to as well. New Delhi is worried about the



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prospect of chaos and civil war, akin to the scene after the previous U.S. pullout in the early 1990s that cut India out and brought the Taliban to power in Kabul with Pakistan's support. Despite the restricted room for manoeuvre, however, there are several steps New Delhi can and must take in the present scenario to ensure both its own relevance in Afghanistan and stability in the region.

### Talks with Taliban

To begin with, there is the question of talks with the Taliban, which India has thus far refused. In the recent past, the Modi government has shown some flexibility on the issue, by sending a "non-official" representation to the Moscow talks with the Taliban. After a visit to Delhi in January by Mr. Khalilzad, Army Chief General Bipin Rawat even suggested that India should "jump on the bandwagon" of engaging the Taliban.

However, direct, open talks between India and the Taliban at this point would serve little purpose for either side. For India, it would mean casting aside a consistently held moral principle and speaking to a non-state actor that espouses terrorism. While backchannel talks between intelligence agencies and the Taliban have been conducted for years, recognising

the Taliban as a legitimate interlocutor for India at this point would be a betrayal of India's values without any visible gains. India's policy for the past two decades is to deal with the government in Kabul, and this will hold it in good stead if the Taliban were to eventually be a part of the government there.

The truth is, 2019 is not 1989, and much has changed inside Afghanistan as it has in the world outside. While Afghan security forces have suffered many losses in the past year, it is unlikely that the Taliban would today be able to overrun and hold Kabul or any other big Afghan city as it did before. It also seems inconceivable that a "full withdrawal" of U.S. troops will include giving up all the bases they hold at present. Given technology, social media and the progress in education in Afghanistan since 2001 (the number of secondary graduates rose from 10,000 to more than 300,000 in 2015), it is also unlikely that the Taliban will be able to control the hearts and minds of Afghans if it were to revert to its brutal ways. Nor could it run policies that endanger Indian interests in the country, given the special place India enjoys, amongst thousands of Afghans who have studied in India, youth and women supported by Indian development projects, and hundreds of military officers trained in the country.

Every one of the 17 presidential tickets announced also has an "India-friendly" face on it, and India must leverage its influence across the spectrum. With presidential elections put off for the moment, India could work with these Afghan leaders to support a 'Grand Jirga' that ensures that the maximum number of representatives from across Afghanistan articulate their post-reconciliation vision. India is also host to a sizeable

population of Afghans who live, work and study in the country, and an outreach is important. After all, when the Vladimir Putin government brought Taliban representatives and Afghan leaders to the table for the 'Moscow process', it was under the aegis of an association of Afghans resident in Russia. It was public support for talks with the Taliban that gave the reconciliation process legitimacy, and it is necessary that public opinion on issues like democracy, women's rights, education and the media also be allowed to hold sway. The world must see Afghans as they see themselves, and not according to the often-skewed ideas generated at conferences on Afghanistan's future that sometimes don't even include an Afghan representation.

Finally, both India and Pakistan have a shared responsibility in building a dialogue over Afghanistan post-reconciliation. It is necessary that officials on both sides find a way to sit across the table on Afghanistan some day.

### Take the long view

Despite all the many reasons for despondency, it is necessary that Indian strategists don't lose sight of the bigger picture — India's long-standing relationship with the people of Afghanistan. This is a relationship nurtured by every government in New Delhi, with more than \$3 billion invested by India since 2001, which has reaped manifold returns in terms of goodwill and friendship across Afghanistan. Defeatism or a lack of ambition for the India-Afghanistan relationship at this juncture would be much more detrimental to India's interests than anything the Taliban's return to Afghanistan's political centrestage can do.

suhasini.h@thehindu.co.in

# Revolutionary ideas that live on

Bhagat Singh's intellectual bequest should be a beacon of light to build a new India



S. IRFAN HABIB

Bhagat Singh went to the gallows, along with two of his comrades, Sukhdev and Rajguru, on March 23, 1931. Bhagat Singh stands out in bold relief as someone who, at a young age, defined nation and nationalism for us. He had an alternative framework of governance, which is strongly reflected in the corpus of writings that he has left behind. Sadly, we hardly care to revisit this serious intellectual inheritance and only venerate him as a martyr. This veneration is laudable but incomplete.

### Incisive commentary

Singh was barely 17 when he published his first article, in 1924, in *Matwala*, a Hindi magazine from Calcutta. The subject was 'Universal Brotherhood', which was not a very easy issue to write on at such a young age. He imagined a world where "all of us being one and none is the other. It will really be a comforting time when the world will have no strangers." All those who are busy "othering" and

creating strangers out of their own fellow citizens need to grapple with Bhagat Singh's views, instead of merely glorifying him as a martyr. He emphatically exclaimed that "as long as words like black and white, civilized and uncivilized, ruler and the ruled, rich and poor, touchable and untouchable, etc., are in vogue there was no scope for universal brotherhood". He went on to say, "We will have to campaign for equality and equity. Will have to punish those who oppose the creation of such a world." Among the heroes of our freedom struggle, he was perhaps the only one who had this vision at such a young age.

His strongest critique was of untouchability and communalism, which continue to torment us as a nation. He was fiercely frank and bold enough to critically comment on the politics of senior leaders such as Lala Lajpat Rai and express his differences. He was also conscious of the international revolutionary struggles and ideologies, which is evident in a series of articles he wrote on 'Anarchism'.

In 1928, he wrote, "Our country is in a really bad shape; here the strangest questions are asked but the foremost among them concerns the untouchables... For instance, would contact with an untouchable mean defilement of an upper caste? Would the Gods in



SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

the temples not get angry by the entry of untouchables there? Would the drinking water of a well not get polluted if untouchables drew their water from the same well? That these questions are being asked in the twentieth century, is a matter which makes us hang our heads in shame." He was aghast that we claimed to be a spiritual country, yet discriminated against fellow human beings while the materialist West had done away with such inhuman obscurities long ago.

### Inclusiveness came first

The decade of the 1920s saw a rise in communal politics, from both Hindu and Muslim groups. However, Bhagat Singh steadfastly remained committed to the idea of a plural and inclusive India. He founded the Naujawan Bharat Sabha in Lahore in 1926, whose manifesto said, "Religious superstitions

and bigotry are a great hindrance in our progress. They have proved an obstacle in our way and we must do away with them. 'The thing that cannot bear free thought must perish'."

In 1928, Bhagat Singh was acutely conscious of the divisiveness of mixing religion with politics and he wrote, "If religion is separated from politics, then all of us can jointly initiate political activities, even though in matters of religion we might have many differences with each other. We feel that the true well-wishers of India would follow these principles and save India from the suicidal path it is on at present." None cared to listen to this voice of sanity then. Even now, many of us continue to peddle religion to promote political prospects.

Bhagat Singh expressed his disenchantment with the politics of Lala Lajpat Rai, whom he and other youth otherwise venerated. He was not even remotely close to the political stature of Lalaji yet he had the courage and the conviction to publicly disagree with him. Not many can do such a thing now. Bhagat Singh referred to Lalaji's growing proximity to the Hindu Mahasabha and other communal forces during the 1920s, and the older reader reacted to this in his speeches when some youth joined Bhagat Singh in expressing their

concern.

Singh was aware of international revolutionary struggles as well. His three-part article on anarchism (1928), appeared before he authored his masterly essay, 'Why I am an Atheist'. Thus we can see here the evolution of his ideas on politics, society, religion and even faith in god. While writing on anarchism, Bhagat Singh observed: "Our retrogressive thinking is destroying us. We keep ourselves entangled in futile discussions about God and heaven, and remain busy in talking about the soul and God. We are quick to dub Europe as capitalist and don't think about their great ideas or pay any attention to them. We love divinity and remain aloof from the world." This is what an anarchist stood for, Singh reaffirmed; he was not a blood-thirsty young man who believed in the bomb and the pistol, as the colonial government labelled all revolutionaries.

Today, we need to remember his revolutionary ideas. Mere valorisation of his nationalism and ultimate sacrifice is true but sadly incomplete. In these rancorous times, his intellectual bequest should be a beacon to build a new India.

S. Irfan Habib is a historian who recently edited 'Inqilab: Bhagat Singh on Religion and Revolution'

## 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.

### Free speech

The writer (Editorial page, "When free speech is truly free", March 22) has made many valid points. However, when those who listen to a speech take objection to what a speaker is saying, they too are exercising their right to free speech. The art of putting across one's point of view in a way that makes the listener or reader pause and think rather than react strongly is not easy. It involves restraint on the part of both sides. The second point the writer has failed to address is the current trend of protesting vociferously and repeatedly on all available fora, that one's opinion alone is right.

M.R. RAGHUNATH,  
Bengaluru

### Terror and labels

The writer (Editorial page, "Beyond the 'us-them' binary", March 22) has exposed the hypocrisy in

the media as well as civil society on the issue of branding extremists as terrorists. Terrorism, by definition, is the use or threat of use of violence in order to instil fear in a particular or general segment of the populace. If that is what the term means, one cannot find any difference between the acts perpetrated by the Islamic State and the attacker in Christchurch. However, the phrase is applied only in the case of the former. This pattern can be seen even in attacks on Rohingyas and the branding of those killing in the name of cow as "vigilantes" instead of "terrorists". It is time the media called a spade a spade.

AMAL BAHULEYAN,  
Thiruvananthapuram

I was under the impression, till last Friday, that statesmen were extinct. However, with her words

backed by action, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has given the world tremendous strength. There was something extraordinary in her every action — reaching out to families, the Muslim community, consoling them and reassuring them that they very much belonged there. There was no cheap sloganeering or ugly politicisation. New Zealanders must be lucky to be led by a leader of this stature. One could not but help compare her unmatched style of governance with that of the leadership of some of the big powers. The conclusion is inescapable. Having such leaders can make the world a better place to be in.

M. JAMEEL AHMED,  
Mysuru

### A mirror to five years

The cartoon (OpEd page, March 22) has captured the achievements of the current

regime over its five-year tenure. The biggest problem with the Prime Minister is that he has been in 'election mode', and still is, from day 1 after coming to power. He appears content with his oratorical skills, coining new phrases every other day and there is not much on the ground in terms of concrete action. Our leader lives in a world of his own with a strong 'I-am-the-government' attitude. He has refused to take the Opposition's criticism in the right spirit. The 'abuses-turned-ornaments' have been ugly; we have had demonetisation, GST implementation and cow vigilantism to count. Hate speeches by some in the ruling party and also affiliated fringe outfits have been a highlight of the five years so far. The Prime Minister has answered the media's questions and has only revealed his mind using 'Mann kiBaat' which is only a monologue. The common

man is waiting to vote and the ruling party could be in for a surprise.

A. JAINULABDEEN,  
Chennai

### Failing businesses

In India, we have fed the story that the private sector is infallible and has the answer to economic problems while it is the public sector that is the albatross around India's neck and which needs to be phased out. However, it appears to be anything but this. In the past few years we have seen the collapse of various and big industrial

groups; many have failed and are in debt. What is worse is that it is public money that is being wasted to save them ('Business page', "Banks should not be running Jet Airways", March 22). Governments and bankers should study the reason for such spectacular failures. The relevant ministries also seem helpless in taking action. There needs to be close monitoring of the situation and action taken to save public money.

DEEPAK SARAFA,  
Bathinda, Punjab

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### CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

"Modi gets Varanasi again, Shah replaces Advani in Gandhinagar" (Front page story and its continuation, March 22, 2019) erroneously referred to a list of 21 seats released by the BJP in Uttar Pradesh. It should have been 28 seats. In Kerala, the party has allied not with the Bharth Jana Sena Party but with the Bharath Dharma Jana Sena.

It is the policy of The Hindu to correct significant errors as soon as possible. Please specify the edition (place of publication), date and page. The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300 (11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday); Fax: +91-44-28552963; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in; Mail: Readers' Editor, The Hindu, Kasturba Buildings, 859 & 860 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002, India. All communication must carry the full postal address and telephone number. No personal visits. The Terms of Reference for the Readers' Editor are on www.thehindu.com