



A reality check

The move on Azhar in the UNSC is welcome, but India must continue to engage with China

The U.S. move to take a listing request for Jaish-e-Mohammad founder Masood Azhar directly to the UN Security Council is an indicator of the frustration of a majority of the Council's permanent members with China's refusal to budge on the issue. The many obvious reasons to ban Azhar have been repeated often: the JeM was banned in 2001 with a listing at the UNSC that names Azhar as its founder and financier; he was accused of working with al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden; and he was seen by the entire world on TV screens as he was exchanged for hostages at Kandahar following the 1999 Indian Airlines hijack, after being released from an Indian prison where he was held on charges of terrorism. Since 2001, the JeM and Azhar have claimed responsibility for several terror attacks that resulted in the deaths of dozens of innocent persons, including, most recently, the February 14 attack on a CRPF convoy in Pulwama. Even so, China has used its veto on Azhar's listing at the 1267 UNSC Sanctions Committee four times in the past decade, evidently to protect Pakistan. Its stand on Azhar is at variance with the otherwise tough stand on terror in Xinjiang province. Also, it has allowed terrorists and groups based in Pakistan to be listed at the UNSC since 2001 and agreed to "grey list" Pakistan at the Financial Action Task Force for terror financing. Just on Thursday, it joined other UNSC members in passing a resolution against terror financing.

With the latest proposal, the U.S. plans to "shame" China by bringing the Azhar listing to a public debate at the UNSC. And if that fails, it is reportedly considering a UN General Assembly statement condemning Azhar. The listing of Azhar is an unfinished task India is justified in pursuing. However, the latest U.S. move comes with some concerns. To begin with, there is no indication that China is ready to change its stand, particularly in the face of coercion or threat from the U.S., and it could veto this proposal as well. There appears to be little to be gained at present by forcing China further into Pakistan's corner, especially as New Delhi has said it would pursue the Azhar listing with China with "patience and persistence", in keeping with its desire not to sacrifice the bilateral relationship over the issue. It is equally unlikely that a world power like China would be moved by the threat of public humiliation. New Delhi must applaud the strong support the U.S. and the other UNSC members have provided on the issue of cross-border terror threats, and on the vexed issue of Azhar's listing. But it must be careful not to stake too much on an immediate win at the UNSC vis-a-vis China, and keep its expectations realistic.

A stop sign

India must raise its ambition on reduction in carbon emissions

It is no surprise that the International Energy Agency found that India's carbon emissions grew by 4.8% during 2018, in spite of the national focus on climate change in energy policy. There is wide recognition of the fact that Indians are not historically responsible for the problem, and it is the rich nations led by the U.S. that have pumped in the stock of carbon dioxide linked to extreme climate impacts being witnessed around the globe. As the IEA points out, India's emissions have grown, but per capita they remain less than 40% of the global average. Equity among nations is therefore at the centre of the discussion on energy emissions, and the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities is central to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Reassuring as this may be, the universal challenge of climate change has grown to such proportions that urgent action to sharply cut carbon emissions is crucial, and all countries, including India, must act quickly. Intensive measures in key sectors — scaling up renewables to raise their share in the energy mix, greening transport, updating building codes and raising energy efficiency — will help meet the national pledge under the Paris Agreement to cut energy intensity of GDP by 33-35% by 2030, over 2005 levels.

At the global level, renewable sources of energy grew by 7% during 2018, but that pace is grossly insufficient, considering the rise in demand. Moreover, it was China and Europe that contributed the bulk of those savings, in large measure from solar and wind power, indicating that India needs to ramp up its capacity in this area. In fact, as the founder of the International Solar Alliance, India should lead the renewables effort. Yet, in spite of falling prices and rising efficiency, the potential of rooftop solar photovoltaics remains poorly utilised. It is time State power utilities are made responsible for defined rates of growth in the installation of rooftop systems. A second priority area is the cleaning up of coal power plants, some of which are young and have decades of use ahead. This process should be aided by the UNFCCC, which can help transfer the best technologies for carbon capture, use and storage, and provide financial linkage from the \$100 billion annual climate fund proposed for 2020. India's record in promoting green transport has been uninspiring, and emissions from fossil fuels and the resulting pollution are rising rapidly. The Centre's plan to expand electric mobility through financial incentives for buses, taxis and two-wheelers needs to be pursued vigorously, especially in the large cities. Inevitably, India will have to raise its ambition on emissions reduction, and participate in the global stocktaking of country-level action in 2023. It has the rare opportunity to choose green growth, shunning fossil fuels for future energy pathways and infrastructure.

Pathways to an income guarantee

There is a compelling case for spending ₹3.6 lakh crore on the poor, but it must be done carefully



RAM SINGH

The idea of a minimum income guarantee (MIG) has caught up with political parties. A MIG requires the government to pay the targeted set of citizens a fixed amount of money on a regular basis. With the promise of the Nyuntam Aay Yojana (NYAY) by the Congress party, it is clear that the MIG is going to be a major political issue for the coming general election. A limited version of the MIG in the form of the PM KISAN Yojana is already being implemented by the NDA government at the Centre. State governments in Odisha and Telangana have their own versions of the MIG.

NYAY is the most ambitious of these MIG schemes. It promises annual income transfers of ₹72,000 to each of the poorest five crore families comprising approximately 25 crore individuals. If implemented, it will cost the exchequer ₹3.6 lakh crore per annum.

Important questions

Several questions arise. Is there a case for additional spending of such a large sum on the poor? The answer is yes. Can government finances afford it? No. Even if the government can mobilise the required sum, is the scheme a good way of spending money on the poor? No.

Many landless labourers, agricultural workers and marginal farmers suffer from multi-dimensional poverty. Benefits of high economic growth during the last three decades have not percolated

to these groups. Welfare schemes have also failed to bring them out of destitution. They have remained the poorest of Indians. Contract and informal sector workers in urban areas face a similar problem. Due to rapid mechanisation of low-skill jobs in the construction and retail sectors, employment prospects for them appear increasingly dismal.

These groups are forced to borrow from moneylenders and *adhatiyas* (middlemen) at usurious rates of 24-60% per annum. For instance, for marginal and small farmers, institutional lending accounts for only about 30% of their total borrowing. The corresponding figure for landless agricultural workers is even worse at 15%. There is a strong case for direct income transfers to these groups. The additional income can reduce their indebtedness and help them get by without falling into the clutches of the moneylender.

However, the fiscal space is limited. The Congress's scheme will cost about 1.92% of the GDP. No government can afford it unless several existing welfare schemes are converted into direct income transfers, or the fiscal deficit is allowed to shoot up way above its existing level, 3.4% the GDP.

Shape of the scheme

The welfare of the poor and downtrodden trumps concerns over the fiscal burden. Nonetheless, the form of an income transfer scheme should be decided carefully. We know very little about the aggregate effects of unconditional cash transfers at the large scale conceived under NYAY.

On the one hand, income transfers will surely reduce income inequalities and help bring a large number of households out of the poverty trap or prevent them



K. ANANTHAN

from falling into it in the event of shocks such as illness or death of an earner. The poor spend most of their income, and a boost in their income will provide a boost to economic activities by increasing overall demand. On the other hand, large income transfers can be inflationary, which will hurt the poor more than the rich.

The effect of cash transfers on the workforce is also a moot point. In principle, the income supplement can come in handy as interest-free working capital for several categories of beneficiaries such as fruit and vegetable vendors and small artisans, and promote their businesses and employment. At the same time, large cash transfers can result in withdrawal of beneficiaries from the labour force. A MIG can also provide legitimacy to the state's withdrawal of provisions of the basic services.

There are very few studies on these issues. Existing studies have dealt with limited income transfers to only a small set of the poor. In the absence of empirical evidence regarding the aggregate effects of large income transfers, it will be irresponsible to dismiss the concern over such issues as elitist.

For one, the scheme should be launched in incremental steps. An income support of, say, ₹15,000 per annum can be a good start. This amount equals 30% of the an-

nual income of marginal farmers; and more than one-fourth of the average consumption of the poorest 40% of households. Studies show that even a small income supplement can improve nutrient intake at high levels of impoverishment. Besides, it can increase school attendance for students coming from poor households. This would mean improved health and educational outcomes, which in turn will make the working population more productive. Moreover, with a modest income support the risk of beneficiaries opting out of the workforce will also be small.

Besides, a moderate income support can be extended to a larger set of poor households. For the lowest 40% (about 10 crore households), income is less than their consumption expenditure. In other words, on an average these households have to borrow to meet their expenses. These people can surely do with additional income support.

Identifying beneficiaries

According to the Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) 2011, around six crore households suffer from multidimensional poverty. These include the homeless, tribal groups, the landless, families without an adult bread-earner or a pucca house. Within this group it is almost impossible to exactly identify the poorest five crore households to be covered under the NYAY.

However, the SECC along with the Agriculture Census of 2015-16 can help identify a larger set of poor based on verifiable criteria; namely, multidimensional poverty, landlessness and the marginal farmer. Together, these criteria cover the bottom 40%, approximately 10 crore households. Drawing upon the experiences with the

poor-centric welfare schemes such as MNREGA, Saubhagya and Ujjwala and PM-KISAN, datasets can be prepared and used to update the list of needy households.

For these 10 crore households, to start with, the scheme will require ₹1.5 lakh crore per annum. The PM KISAN Yojana can be aligned to meet a part of the outlay. Moreover, the tax collection would need to be increased by reintroducing the tax for the super-rich. Nonetheless, the required amount is beyond the Centre's fiscal capacity at the moment. Therefore, the cost will have to be shared by the States. Still the scheme would have to be rolled out in phases, as was done for MGNREGA.

Not a substitute for services

All considered, no income transfer scheme can be a substitute for universal basic services. The direct income support to the poor can deliver the intended benefits only if it comes as a supplement to the public services such as primary health and education. This means that direct transfers should not be at the expense of public services for primary health and education. Moreover, universal health and life insurance are equally important, and so is the case with crop insurance. Each year, medical shocks and crop failures push many families into the poverty trap. The scope of Ayushman Bharat needs to be expanded to include outdoor patient treatments. The PM Fasal Bima Yojana can be made more comprehensive by providing free and wider insurance coverage.

There is a strong case for spending ₹3.6 lakh crore on the poor. But let's do so carefully.

Ram Singh is a Professor at the Delhi School of Economics

The irrelevance of secularism

The formula that the state must remain equidistant from all religions is proving to be unworkable



MOHAMMED AYOOB

A debate has flared up, especially after the Supreme Court's Sabarimala judgment, on whether the state should leave religion alone. I believe in the Indian context, it is more pertinent to ask whether religion can leave the state alone. The relevance of this question is underscored by the unique definition of secularism espoused by the founding fathers of the Constitution, namely that the Indian state must be equidistant from all religions while allowing religions equal space in the public sphere.

Question of definition

For several reasons this definition of secularism has created a lot of confusion as to what the term stands for. First, the formulation was impractical, given the huge numerical disparity in the religious composition of the Indian nation. This demographic inequality paved the way for the intrusion, and now proliferation, of majoritarian religious symbols, idioms and practices in the state's domain.

Second, given the congenitally religious nature of Indian society and the consequent political import of identity based on religion,

political parties, almost without exception, found it convenient to use religious sectarianism to advance their fortunes. The success of the Muslim League in hiving off Muslim majority areas from the rest of the country in 1947 on the basis of a religio-sectarian agenda gave a major fillip to Hindu nationalist organisations, such as the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Three parties were already active in the pre-Partition political arena but were of marginal importance during the freedom movement. The demographic transformation of independent India, as a consequence of Partition, into a Hindu majority of around 80% paved the way for the emergence of Hindu nationalist parties spawned by the RSS — first the Jan Sangh and then the BJP — as major political players in the country.

The Congress itself had a Hindu nationalist component that had been overshadowed by the ideology of composite nationalism because of the towering personality of its leading exponent, Jawaharlal Nehru. This ideology began to decline from the early 1960s with the deterioration in Nehru's health. The decline was temporarily halted in the late 1960s during the first few years of Indira Gandhi's tenure as Prime Minister by the influence on her of her mentor, P.N. Haksar, an uncompromising secularist. But it became clear that she was not above playing the religio-sectarian card. She did so success-



AFP

fully in order to return to power in 1980.

Rajiv Gandhi continued in his mother's footsteps in the aftermath of her assassination by giving a free hand to marauding mobs that massacred thousands of Sikhs in Delhi. He subsequently followed a policy of dual appeasement: first getting Parliament to overturn the Supreme Court's ruling in the Shah Bano case and then by opening the Babri Masjid, which had remained closed since 1949, to allow Hindu religious rites to be conducted in its premises.

Nonetheless, despite the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the Atal Bihari Vajpayee interregnum that saw the Gujarat massacre of 2002 (in picture), the fiction of the secular state was maintained as long as the Congress remained in power in New Delhi. The accession to power on its own steam of the BJP in 2014 removed the secular veneer almost totally. The intrusion of religion into the state's arena in the form of donning of religious garb by state

functionaries while carrying out state duties and participation in religious rites while acting in their official capacity has now become common. The proliferation of cow vigilantism and the anti-Muslim rhetoric of some of the BJP's leading lights provide further evidence of this trend.

Blatant appeals now

The appeal to religious identity, always a part of India's political landscape, has now become much more blatant. The Congress, impressed by the electoral success of the BJP apparently based on its Hindu nationalist agenda, has become the B-team of the latter by embracing soft Hindutva as compared to the BJP's hard Hindutva. Congress president Rahul Gandhi's flaunting of his caste and religious affiliation while visiting dozens of temples in States where elections were held recently are indications of how far the Congress has changed from its heyday under his grandfather.

One cannot blame politicians of either the BJP or the Congress for taking recourse to majoritarian nationalism for this is what currently sells in the electoral market. Politicians are, above all, interested in attaining power and the route to power today seems to lie through Hindu nationalism, whether hard or soft. If one needs someone or something to blame, it is the definition of secularism, or lack of it, adopted at the time of Independence.

The framers of the Constitution, Nehru and B.R. Ambedkar included, failed to erect an unbreachable firewall between state and religion that would clearly prevent the intrusion of religious idioms, practices and agendas into the political arena and insulate the state from the religious sphere. One can understand why they failed to do so. The innate religious nature of Indian society and the after-effects of Partition on religious grounds precluded this option. However, in this context, to call the ideological foundation of the Constitution secularism, although the term was not explicitly included in the document until 1976, has done great harm to the concept. It has done even greater disservice to the country by thoroughly confusing the public as to what the term denotes.

The formula that the state must remain equidistant from all religions, the unique Indian definition of secularism, is clearly unworkable. The sooner we realise this reality the easier it will be for all concerned to come to terms with the current trajectory of Indian politics. It is time to jettison the use of the term rather than confound the Indian public even further as to what 'secularism' really means.

Mohammed Ayoob is Senior Fellow, Center for Global Policy, Washington, DC, and University Distinguished Professor Emeritus of International Relations, Michigan State University

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.

Gift of the gab

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has the gift of the gab, but he is also a gifted demagogue ("Is Modi the best communicator of them all?" March 29). His speeches are full of animosity towards his adversaries and Pakistan. He denounces all of India's former Prime Ministers, except Atal Bihari Vajpayee. What is most unfortunate is that any proclamation is made not through the concerned Ministry or agency, but only by Mr. Modi. This dilutes not only their importance but also his own stature.

DEEPAK SINGHAL,
Noida

While Mr. Modi has

successfully reached out to the masses, Manmohan Singh was never a people's Prime Minister. The difference probably stems from the fact that while Mr. Modi rose from the grassroots level, Dr. Singh became Prime Minister by accident. In the last five years, Mr. Modi has succeeded in using his communication skills to put India on the world map, which is a remarkable achievement.

C.M. UMANATH,
Kozhikode

Mr. Modi's speeches sound like soliloquies. He hardly seems to be aware that there is an audience that is listening and watching. And he does not have a pan-

India appeal. He certainly does not have the kind of appeal in the south that he has in the north. If anything, his popularity across India seems to be declining. At a time when the country is facing a slew of problems, the Prime Minister should be a doer, not an empty rhetorician.

ABDUL ASSIS P.A.,
Kochi

The Opposition's aim

Many intellectuals have charted out strategies for the Opposition ("An Opposition narrative for 2019", March 29). All of them seem to agree that it's a mammoth task to unseat the current dispensation. The primary aim of the Opposition seems to be to

defeat the BJP. But what about the quality of governance that the Opposition parties have to offer? These parties constantly talk of defending secularism, democracy, etc., as if these issues were born in the past five years. The average citizen is only looking for stability. So unless they are truly united, they can't do much. No one wants to vote every two years.

RAMDAS NAIK,
Chennai

Raids in Karnataka

The timing of the IT searches has raised many questions ("Income tax searches trigger political storm in Karnataka", March 29). What is the need to

conduct raids immediately after the announcement of elections? The Centre may say that the Department is acting independently, but departments like the IT, CBI and ED have unfortunately gained the reputation of acting in a manner that suits the powers that be.

S.V. VENKATKRISHNAN,
Bengaluru

Low political discourse

Mr. Modi's comments in U.P. were in bad taste ("PM's sharab comment upsets Cong.", March 29). Mr. Modi also constantly calls the Opposition parties anti-national and Pakistani agents. This only makes India a laughing stock in front of the world. If world leaders see the Prime

Minister fighting the election using Pakistan's name, why would they take India seriously when it talks of Pakistan-sponsored terror on Indian soil? Mr. Modi must learn from former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who, despite being attacked by the Opposition, never used such language. Such a low political discourse is what emboldens young leaders to say that to be anti-Modi is to be anti-India, which is no different from Dev Kant Barooah's remark that 'Indira is India, India is Indira'. No leader can be equated with the nation.

N. NAGARAJAN,
Secunderabad

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