



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

BALAKOT LESSONS

IAF review of the cross LoC operation points to the urgent need to speed up modernisation of the force

TWO MONTHS AFTER the Indian Air Force (IAF) conducted the air strikes against a terror camp in Balakot following the Pulwama terror attack, it has conducted a detailed review and analysis of the operations on February 26. After the unpublished air operations in Machil sector in J&K in 2002, this is the first time IAF had been used against Pakistan — in fact, in the Pakistani mainland and not Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK) for the first time after the 1971 War. The significance of these operations can be gauged from the high level of global interest and sustained international coverage for weeks following the air strikes, which lent an extra edge to the review which is de rigueur for any military operation.

As with any military review, this one has also flagged the successes and failures of the operation, while highlighting the lessons to be learnt by IAF for the future. IAF was able to achieve strategic surprise in the manner it was chosen to be employed after the Pulwama terror attack, the selection of a madrasa at Balakot in a secluded area provided the operational surprise while deception provided by the IAF decoy being deployed towards Bahawalpur allowed the IAF to hit the targets without entering into an aerial combat with Pakistani fighter jets which were more than 150 km away. The accuracy of Israeli Spice2000 precision guided munition (PGM) was proven beyond doubt, even when multiple PGMs hit the same target at short intervals. The review also found that pilot proficiency was of the highest level. But it also brought home certain shortcomings in the operations: One of the Spice2000 PGMs did not leave the Mirage aircraft because of the mismatch caused by the drift in inertial guidance mechanism of the vintage jet, and the Crystal Maze AGM 142 munition — which would have provided the video of the hit — could not be fired by the pilots because of cloud cover. In an attempt to find a line of sight to fire Crystal Maze, the pilots in fact crossed the Line of Control which was a violation of a major rule of engagement, laid down by the political leadership for the IAF.

The lack of evidence of hitting the target and causing destruction is one of the biggest lessons learnt from a military operation with huge political import. This could have happened with better weapon-to-target-matching and sending another mechanism to send the proof, which would have quelled all doubts that have been raised since. With this review, the IAF has discovered the lack of its technological asymmetry with Pakistan, which tied its hands after Pakistani jets targeted Indian military installations on February 27. IAF had first asked for more modern aircraft after the Kargil War, and two decades later, it is still awaiting the first Rafale. This lack of modernisation has happened under both the NDA and UPA governments, and unless that is redressed on priority, any government will find it tough to use the IAF against Pakistan in a similar scenario in the future.

THE PRAGYA BAILOUT

NIA clean chit and BJP's endorsement of Pragya Thakur fly in the face of what the court says

THE SPECIAL COURT has rightly dismissed a plea seeking a bar on Sadhvi Pragya Singh Thakur from contesting the Lok Sabha election on the ground that elections did not come under its ambit. However, it pulled up the National Investigation Agency (NIA), which reiterated that there is insufficient evidence to prosecute Thakur in the 2008 Malegaon blast case. The court said it framed charges against Thakur and other accused because it "found some prima facie evidence in the chargesheet filed by the ATS (Anti-Terrorism Squad) though investigation was taken over by the NIA".

The stand-off between the court and the NIA on the evidence raises a question mark over what course the law will take. The court and the NIA seem to disagree on the quality of the evidence gathered by the ATS. The NIA, in its supplementary chargesheet in 2017, had found the evidence weak whereas the court held it was sufficient to proceed against the accused. Beginning with the prime minister, the ruling party's leaders have been arguing that Thakur is innocent and the case has been foisted on her. As if to restate its claims of her innocence, the BJP has fielded Thakur as a candidate and upheld the NIA submission as proof. Such open canvassing for an accused on bail after the court has repeatedly stated that she needs to be proceeded under the UAPA sends a message: Party and ideological interests are above the considerations of law and due process.

The defence of Thakur by the Sangh Parivar has to be seen in the larger political context. The BJP and Sangh Parivar have for long attributed political motives to terror cases in which members of Hindu groups have been arrested. Investigators had claimed that Hindutva groups and activists were behind some of the terror incidents reported in the last decade and booked many of them on terror charges. Since 2014, when the government at the Centre changed, there has been a marked change on the part of the prosecution towards these cases. One after another, the cases have fallen apart in the courts. In high profile cases, including blasts at the Mecca Masjid, on Samjhauta Express, in which 68 persons died, the courts held that the prosecution could not prove the charges against the accused. On its part, the prosecution seems untroubled by the lack of convictions in the terror cases, while being lenient towards the bail pleas of the accused. It shows how political will subverts due process. The court needs to step in to uphold it.

UNFOLLOW THE LEADER

Donald Trump is upset about losing followers on Twitter. It is a populist's refrain

SPARE A THOUGHT for Jack Dorsey. Even under normal circumstances, dealing with the bratty petulance of entitled rich kids can be a trying experience. But when the said sense of entitlement emanates from the White House, explaining the basics of social media and technology has much higher stakes. On the eve of his meeting with the Twitter CEO on Wednesday, Donald Trump tweeted that "they (Twitter) don't treat me well as Republican... very discriminatory... hard for people to sign up". At his meeting with Dorsey, Trump reportedly repeated the allegation.

The US President's refrain against Twitter is not new. For over a year, the social media platform has been "cleaning up" fake accounts and bots, which has led to a drop of about three million followers for Trump. In February, Twitter faced a similar outrage in India after Youth for Social Media Democracy first protested and then made a submission to Anurag Thakur, BJP MP and chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Information Technology, complaining about the platform's "anti-right wing attitude". The committee subsequently summoned Dorsey. Ensnared in San Francisco, he did not fly down for the summons.

Twitter has consistently maintained that its algorithms are politically agnostic, and pointed out that as the microblogging site is cleared of bots, figures across the ideological spectrum have lost followers. But spare a thought for Trump. His braggadocio relied heavily first on his ratings as a reality TV host, and then on (often inflated) boasts about the number of followers he has on social media. Many might wonder why politicians who ultimately have to face the ballot as a test of their popularity are so worried about losing a few followers. The answer lies in the way populists communicate with the people, and in some cases, feed their egos. Social media represents a direct point of contact, unmediated by the pesky problems of its old school counterparts — questions in interviews, fact checks et al. In that scenario, losing followers is losing relevance.



CHERAN RUDHRAMOORTHY

IN THE EVENING of April 20, Asylum Theatre Group, a theatre group I am part of, performed a verse-play, *Photographs of Children, Women and Men*, in Toronto, Canada. The play is about the plight and impact of war on children. Among others, four children acted in the play. The play ended with a hopeful note for all the children in the world.

The next morning, I woke up to the devastating news of the Easter Sunday bombings in Colombo, Negombo and Batticaloa in Sri Lanka that killed more than 350 people including 46 children. Among those killed was George Chandrasekar. His daughters Sophia (15) and Gloria (17) were badly injured. The George family, like thousands of other families in the Kochikadai and Mattakuliya area in Colombo, were regulars at St Anthony's Church. George's wife Lojini, a Hindu, would always go to church with her family, but she did not attend on that fateful day. George, Lojini and their daughters were like family to us. Of all the places on the earth, George, like many others, would never have imagined that the church he considered his sanctuary, solace and hope would be turned into a site of carnage.

St Anthony's Church is one of the unique churches of Sri Lanka. It was clandestinely established by a priest from Kochi during the Dutch colonial period for the benefit of fisherfolks, seafarers and other people of every class, caste and religion. Legend has it that Saint Anthony is the saviour of the oppressed and a miracle healer. Tamils, Sinhalese, Burghers, Christians of all denominations, Muslims and Buddhists prayed at the St Anthony's Church. The location of the church and the church itself is a symbol diversity. When I was living in Mattakuliya in the '90s, the buses I travelled to and from work would stop at the church and I would get a few minutes to look at the statue of St Anthony, one of a few masculine Catholic saints depicted tenderly holding the Christ child.

We do not know why the suicide bombers selected this church as one of their targets. It could be because of the large gatherings for the morning prayers or to coincide with other bombings at the luxury hotels a few kilometres away during the popular breakfast time there.

Wages of inaction

The Easter Sunday bombings points to Colombo's failure in bridging communal faultlines

There have been no incidents of attacks on Christians by the Islamic groups in Sri Lanka in recent history. The relations between the Christians and Muslims have been cordial. The 35 years of civil war was mainly fought along ethnic lines. However, after the end of the war in 2009, attacks on Muslims and Muslim-owned businesses and churches by Buddhist extremists and a group called *Bodu Bala Sena* (BBS), implicitly supported by successive governments, have increased. For example, in the first 14 weeks of 2019, at least 13 Christian churches were attacked or the services violently disrupted by Buddhist extremists. However, most of these incidents did not make it to the mainstream media, in Sri Lanka and elsewhere. The only exception, perhaps, was the widely reported attack on the Methodist Church Centre in Anuradhapura by Buddhist extremists, on April 14, 2019, which was a day of religious significance for Christians. Violations against Christians have occurred regularly in Sri Lanka since 2010 under successive governments. Some of the Buddhist fundamentalist groups have reportedly been protected and assisted by sections of the government.

According to a report by *Verite* Research in 2014, state institutions were the key perpetrators of religious violence against Christians in 175 incidents (18 per cent) out of 972 incidents examined. Many of these have been documented for years by the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka and human rights organisations. Muslims and their business establishments have been increasingly under attack in Sri Lanka since the end of the civil war. The worst violence against them was in Aluthgama in 2014 and Digana in 2018. There has been widespread anger and resentment among the Muslim communities and youths in the past several years. This has fuelled and strengthened the radical and fundamentalist Islamic groups that emerged in 2012 with financial support from West Asia.

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bombings. However, the NTJ expelled Sahran Moulavi in 2017 from the organisation and he formed his own splinter group.

It is significant to note that there were protests by the Muslim people in Kattankudi, in 2012, in the Eastern province where Sahran Moulavi was based. The government was informed about his activities, but apparently no action was taken. A prominent politician in Sri Lanka has confirmed that Sri Lankan intelligence services and the former defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, brother of Mahinda Rajapakse and a man with presidential ambitions, were given all the information regarding radical Muslim groups. The president of Sri Lanka, who unconstitutionally holds the ministry of law and order, and a few other others, received detailed information about possible attacks by Islamic fundamentalists on April 11. The information was not shared with the prime minister and the cabinet. It is also widely reported that the government of India provided vital information to the government of Sri Lanka. It is no secret that a prolonged conflict between the prime minister and the president in Sri Lanka has complicated the political process in that country.

It is the impunity that has served as a licence for continued violence against religious minorities and all other crimes against humanity and war crimes in Sri Lanka. Despite compelling evidence, there has been a reluctance to use the existing legal framework to arrest and prosecute those responsible for attacks on Muslim and Christian institutions by Buddhist extremists. Ironically, the ICCPR Act was recently used to imprison a writer and suppress free expression based on complaints by a Buddhist group that the writer has caused "pain of mind" to Buddhists. However, the same Act has not been used to arrest and prosecute those responsible for serious violations against Christians, Hindus and Muslims. With the involvement of ISIS, the inaction of the government of Sri Lanka raises even more questions.

Cheran is a Tamil poet and associate professor at University of Windsor, Canada. He was one of the founding members of the Free Media Movement in Sri Lanka



SAMA KHAN

WITH THE COUNTRY'S urban population rising and cities being seen as engines of economic growth, urban policy is gaining currency as a marker of political will. Hence, it is important to understand the strength and weaknesses of our urban programmes.

The Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) was launched as a continuation of the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM). But AMRUT focused only on big cities as opposed to the JNNURM that covered smaller towns as well. Even though the JNNURM was criticised for favouring big cities over small towns, it covered a wide variety of sectors from roads and transport to water and sanitation. AMRUT covers roads, transport, water and sewerage, but waste management was transferred to the massive sanitation programme — the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM).

JNNURM also uncovered the lack of capacity of local governments with small and medium towns struggling to complete projects. JNNURM intended to promote self-governing cities and that's why it included governance reforms, much like AMRUT. Even though, AMRUT was envisaged as a continuation of the previous regimes' urban transformation project, it seem to have learnt very little from its predecessor's experiences.

A major achievement of the current urban programme, though, has been in decentralising the project sanction process — it was cen-

VISION FOR OUR CITIES

New government must learn from successes and failures of past urban schemes

tralis under JNNURM. But this has hampered project monitoring, which, in turn, affected the dissemination of information. The Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) was launched to build one crore houses for the urban poor. The scheme includes components that enable the construction of houses through public-private partnership (affordable housing partnership, AHP) and empowers beneficiaries to build and upgrade their houses (Beneficiary-Led Construction). The AHP component of PMAY is similar to the previous regime's Basic Services to the Urban Poor (BSUP) scheme that focused primarily on building houses on the peripheries of cities. AHP will, therefore, raise similar issues of non-occupancy and ineligible beneficiaries. Improvement of existing settlements is a far more sustainable option that considers actual improvement in people's living conditions along with safeguarding their employment opportunities. The Smart Cities Mission (SCM) was launched as a "bold, new" initiative to cater to the ambitions of the urban middle class, escalate the country's digital transformation and justify the current government's commitment to the eternal aspiration of modernity. But the mission largely covers traditional infrastructure projects which are already eligible under AMRUT, with only a few projects relying on new information and communication technologies.

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cial purpose vehicle for the implementation of the mission is at the cost of empowering local governments, which are seen as inefficient even in the delivery of basic services.

The Swachh Bharat Mission was widely publicised as the government's flagship idea to improve the sanitation situation. It was meant to cater to every section of society as sanitation is a basic human right. Its focus primarily was on toilet construction. The larger gamut of sanitation services were included under AMRUT. The understanding that the sanitation cycle requires the proper functioning of several elements was missing from the programmes.

Deep rooted inequalities have hampered project implementation and outcome. The efficiency of local governance holds the key to resolving this issue. Decentralisation should be encouraged but needs effective monitoring. The Centre will have to undertake timely data reporting protocols to ensure the proper functioning of its schemes. Moreover, one approach cannot work for urban areas of different sizes. We also need to reconsider the simplistic rural-urban binary in formulating policy. A graded urban policy that addresses the needs of the smallest urban settlements will be more effective in catering to every section of society.

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APRIL 26, 1979, FORTY YEARS AGO

MEDICAL REVOLUTION
THE UNION GOVERNMENT has prepared the draft of a national medical education policy which, if adopted, will not only radically change the pattern of medical education but the modes of medical treatment. The joint conference of the Central Councils of Health and Family Welfare, which is starting its three-day session here on April 27, will consider the draft. The draft policy, which has just been finalised, aims to thoroughly restructure the pattern of medical education so that it may be "in tune with the needs and aspirations of the Indian community". It wants to take medical education out of its city and hospital-oriented irrelevance, and put it in the villages where it

really belongs. The draft says the present system of medical education is heavily hospital-oriented and has "very little relevance to actual Indian situations."

A-I UNDER SCANNER
THE PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE on Public Undertakings has unearthed serious irregularities committed by Air India officials and some officials of the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation to benefit foreign airlines. Apart from officials of Air India, suspicion has also been voiced about an agreement signed by the former Civil Aviation Secretary R P Naik with the British government in 1977. According to this agreement, Air India paid

British Airways a lump sum of Rs 1 crore. The committee held this agreement was signed in "undue haste". "This smacks of malpractice and requires investigation for necessary action," the committee report says.

PRESSURE ON PAK
PRESIDENT CARTER HAS reportedly assured External Affairs Minister A B Vajpayee that the US is doing everything to persuade Pakistan not to manufacture atomic weapons. President Carter has sought India's cooperation in this regard. At his meeting with the president, Vajpayee pointed out that India's policy was not to make nuclear weapons.

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

“Washington and its followers should be brave to acknowledge the BRI’s success, and to build relationships with the BRI and jointly shape the future.”
— GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA

Logic of diminishing fear

Many Muslims have exhausted their capacity to feel fear. Hope has taken over them, buttressed by efforts to improve their overall condition



IRENA AKBAR

PRAGYA THAKUR, AN accused in the 2008 Malegaon blasts that killed six people, is contesting the general elections. As a Muslim, am I scared by this development? No.

Am I worried Maneka Gandhi won't offer work to Muslims if they don't vote for her? Far from it. I am actually amused by her 'threat'. Am I offended when Yogi Adityanath compares 'Ali' with 'Bajrang Bali'? Yawn. I wish he could find better rhymes.

Am I angry with most TV anchors for their pro-Modi stance? No, I feel sorry for their inability to practise the courage that journalism requires.

I, the Indian Muslim, have come a long way from feeling a sense of fear, anger or resignation over the politics of hate that has been directed against me in the last five years.

Since it was elected to power in May 2014, the Modi-led government has left no stone unturned to corner Muslims — it has rewarded mob violence against members of the community, its leaders regularly spew anti-Muslim rhetoric, it has directed the media to further its divisive agenda, it has allowed the WhatsApp rumour factory to flourish, peddling the imagined fear of “Hindu khatre mein hai”.

The government's attempts have met a degree of success, with Muslims often acting on fear, such as not carrying meat in trains, not driving or walking too close to a cow, not giving their children “too Muslim sounding” names.

But every emotion, including fear, has a threshold, beyond which it begins to wane, and eventually ceases to exist. Each adversity also carries an opportunity within. Around 2017, by when Mohsin Sheikh, Akhlaq, Junaid and Pehlu Khan were headed to death, Muslims began channelising their fear, their alienation into a need to strengthen their community from within. From lamenting “what we fear”, Muslims began talking “what we must do”. These were not just living-room conversations. Muslims are on the field today, in a slum or in a village, working towards empowering their more vulnerable coreligionists.

A group of Muslims in my hometown, Lucknow, for example, has adopted a village in adjoining Sitapur district. There, they counsel parents to send their children to the local government school, they have launched adult education classes, hired Hindi and English teachers for the village madarsa, installed a clean drinking water facility, and formed self-help groups for women.

A Muslim woman, who is a PhD in management, has opened a school in her hometown, Balrampur, in eastern UP. Her team goes door to door to convince underprivileged Muslim families to send their children to school.

A group of Muslim women in Lucknow

runs a kitchen that employs needy co-religionists so that the latter can spend on the uplift of their children.

These initiatives are self-financed, free from state or political intervention, and their common objective is to ensure long-term socio-economic empowerment of the community. I cite examples from my hometown, but I wouldn't be surprised by similar initiatives elsewhere.

Economic laggardness has made Muslims vulnerable to political attacks and contributed to their unpopular (unfair as that may sound) image. Fixing their financial standing, Muslims feel, is the primary way to protect future generations from demonisation by the media, the state and political parties.

It's not as if Muslims in the past did not undertake long-term community initiatives. In Lucknow, at least three privately-owned institutions — a university, a medical college and a law institute — were established by Muslims some decades ago. But a sense of urgency has set in over the last five years. Every Muslim I know wants to “do something” for the community — an emotion previously limited to a few visionaries. Ordinary Muslims are doing what they can — some are giving money, others their time or ideas — to local, grass roots projects within their reach. This attitude contrasts the earlier approach of ordinary Muslims, where consolidating as a community meant voting against the BJP during elections. Indeed, many Muslims have begun to see the opportunity in the adversity, the strength in the weakness, the hope in the fear.

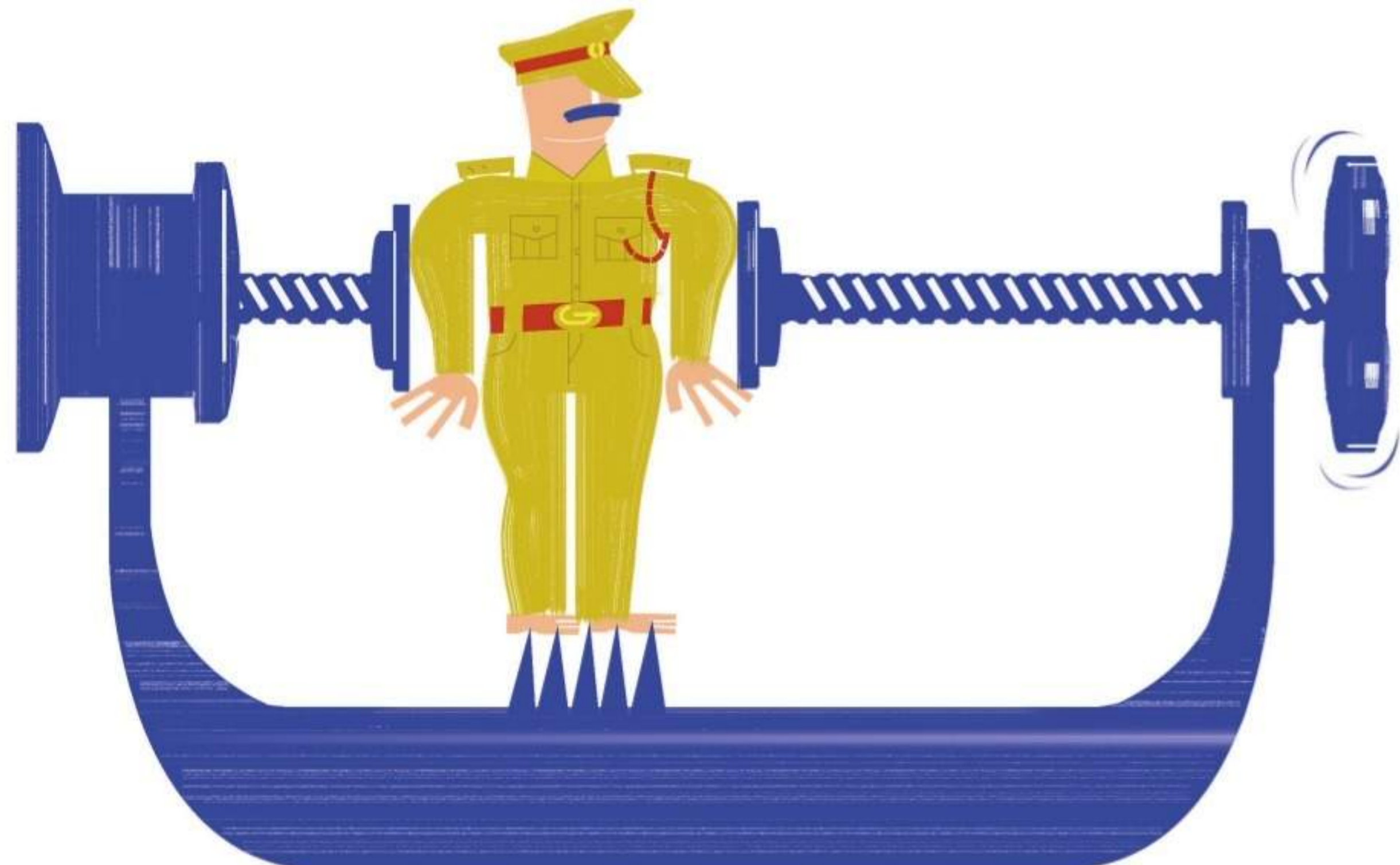
This positivity is a surprising yet natural outcome of the politics of the time. The Modi government, by spreading its communal agenda over sporadic episodes of lynchings and hate speeches, cleverly applied the logic of diminishing outrage: With each successive lynching or hate speech, the public outrage diminished. Pratap Bhanu Mehta correctly wrote in his article “the silence be damned” (IE, June 27, 2017): “big riot would concentrate the mind, make a damning headline. A protracted riot in slow motion, individual victims across different states, simply makes this appear another daily routine. This makes opposing it harder; it makes holding onto the outrage nearly impossible.”

For the besieged community, the logic of diminishing fear applies. It is difficult, impossible to hold on to fear for too long. Many Muslims have exhausted their capacity to feel fear. Hope has taken over them, buttressed by efforts to improve overall condition.

Alienating Muslims, of course, has only been an appendage to the government's larger project of developing a misplaced sense of Hindu pride - one that depends on the demonisation of Muslims. As an ordinary Muslim who has outgrown her fear, I hope the ordinary Hindu too has outgrown the anti-Muslim hate her conscience has been fed with in the last five years.

Like fear, hate can't be held on to for too long. Both have an expiry date. My fear has expired. Has your hate too?

Akbar is a Lucknow-based entrepreneur and a former journalist with The Indian Express



CR Sasikumar

The curse on the cops

Sadhvi Pragya Thakur's vituperative comments on a celebrated officer raises the larger question of society's attitude towards the police



PRAKASH SINGH

SADHVI PRAGYA HAS been in the news recently. In a highly controversial statement, she claimed to have cursed Hemant Karkare, chief of Mumbai's Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS), and, according to her, that led to his death. “Tera sarvanash hoga” (you will be destroyed) is the shrap (curse) she is said to have given to Karkare for allegedly torturing her while she was in custody. Karkare, as is known, was one of the senior police officers killed by terrorists on 26/11 in Mumbai. He sacrificed his life while engaging the terrorists who had unleashed mayhem in India's biggest commercial hub. Karkare was later awarded Ashok Chakra, India's highest peace-time gallantry medal.

Sadhvi's statement was outrageous, to say the least. Firstly, she is at all capable of invoking the curse of gods, as she boasted? Only a spiritually evolved person has such powers. Judging by her past record and present conduct, she is anything but that. If she had such powers, why did she not use those to destroy Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, the mastermind behind the terrorist attack in Mumbai or Masood Azhar, whose Jaish-e-Mohammed was responsible for the attack on CRPF convoy in Pulwama? The country could perhaps dispense with the services of RAW if we had a couple of sadhvis like her. It is indeed unfortunate that a number of persons masquerading as sadhus and sadhvis are bringing disrepute to the saffron cadre by their acts of omission and commission.

Faced with strong reactions to her statement, Sadhvi retracted it and apologised, though she prefaced her apology by stating that she was taking back her statement because the “enemies of the country were being benefited from it”. It was thus a conditional apology and she continues to spew venom. One may not question her credentials for a parliamentary ticket, considering that all the parties are guilty

of fielding disreputable characters who should be in jails rather than given an opportunity to enter Parliament. According to the National Election Watch and Association of Democratic Reforms, of the 4,450 candidates in the first three phases of the poll, whose affidavits could be analysed, 804 (18 per cent) have criminal cases against them while 543 (12 per cent) have serious criminal cases registered against them. It is a matter of concern that political parties continue to give tickets to persons of questionable — even criminal — background. The democratic structure is gradually getting eroded in the process.

The question of torture raised by Sadhvi is, however, relevant. Policemen are in the habit of using third degree methods on persons in their custody. What is the truth in this allegation? Sadhvi Pragya, an accused in the Malegaon blast case, was in jail for almost nine years from October 2008 to April 2017. In August 2014, the National Human Rights Commission ordered a probe into Sadhvi's allegations of torture. The Commission, while closing the case in 2015, noted that the charges were “not substantiated by facts or evidence collected by the inquiry commission from the prison, courts, and the hospital where Pragya was admitted”. Earlier, the Supreme Court had also remarked in 2011 that Pragya had been examined by doctors at two hospitals and that they did not find any injury marks on her. So, the allegation of torture is not substantiated. It is unfair that a person who is no longer alive to defend himself is being faulted on this count.

The storm over Pragya's vituperative comments on a celebrated police officer would blow over after some time, but it raises the larger question of not only politicians' but even society's attitude towards policemen who are working under extremely hazardous conditions in the disturbed theatres of the country 24x7. State police and central armed police forces' personnel operating in the Northeast, Jammu and Kashmir, central India against the Maoists and against various shades of lawless elements in different parts of the country are putting their lives at risk day in and day out, while maintaining law and order. They are actually defending the country against terrorists and insurgents of different shades. It is estimated that more than 35,000 policemen have sacrificed their

lives since Independence. In no other country of the world, policemen die in the performance of their duties in such large numbers. And yet, an average policeman finds that he is getting brickbats, proverbially and physically, most of the time. Bouquets are reserved for the privileged few.

Not that the policemen are keen to get bouquets. What causes them anguish is that they do not get the kind of respect and recognition which their sacrifices entitle them to. What is worse, as happened in Sadhvi's outburst against Karkare, even their sacrifice is trivialised. The political class needs to realise that candidates with such sharp tongues would alienate large sections of people.

Let us, for a moment, forget about respect and recognition also. Give policemen at least the necessary resources, equipment and the working environment so that they are able to deliver services. There are huge deficiencies of manpower. Infrastructure is pathetic. Forensic support is inadequate. And, on top of all that, the politicians and the bureaucrats are breathing down their necks all the time, asking them to arrest X, exonerate Y, not pursue disproportionate case against Z, and so on. In the process, we are confronted with the reductio ad absurdum of a person charge-sheeted yesterday and given a clean chit today. Why can't we rise above parochial considerations and allow the investigating agencies to pursue cases without any extraneous pressures? Why can't we enforce even the directions given by the Supreme Court?

If the present façade continues, we may in the not too distant future see the death of democracy in the country. Already, people are beginning to wonder whether we have genuine or fraudulent democracy. Politics has become murky. Language is abusive. Cash and liquor are in abundant supply to bribe the voters. Election Commission is effective only by fits and starts in performing its mandated functions. In such an atmosphere, when the Rule of Law tends to get substituted by the Law of Rulers, the policemen do not know what to do and whom to look up to. And then, there are people ready to rub salt into their wounds.

The writer is chairman, Indian Police Foundation

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THE Urdu PRESS

SRI LANKA HORROR

URDU TIMES ON April 23 has an editorial titled *Shak ki Sui*, or the 'Needle of suspicion'. It writes that whatever happened on Easter in Sri Lanka is so horrific that all will condemn it. “How can any defend this terror or tolerate the loss of innocent lives?” It evokes the recent killings in two mosques in New Zealand where worshippers were victimised. The editorial is of the view that the difference lies in the terrorist in New Zealand identifying himself, trying to telecast the whole thing and whip up hate. In Sri Lanka, (the editorial was published before the perpetrators started getting identified) there is no clear identification so far. But, it says “what is clear is that an attempt was made to get maximum victims, and in this matter, the needle of suspicion points to certain Muslim groups”.

Rozanama Rashtriya Sahara, on the same day, has an editorial titled “*Ajab nahi ki yeh tanhaaiyaan phi gal jaayein*” — no surprise if isolated places like these get hit, referring to poet Sahir Ludhianvi's work *Parchhayiyaan*, which calls for the blood of innocents not to be spilt and the need to raise one's voice against such barbarity. The editorial starts by

saying that “this time it is not India, Pakistan, Paris, Australia or New Zealand. Terrorists attacked Sri Lanka. On Easter, churches and five star hotels were attacked and more than 300 persons died. So who were those who died?” The editorial then invokes Sadat Hasan Manto to say we should not say that so many Hindus or Muslims were killed, but say so many human beings have died. The blasts were heard not only in Sri Lanka but around the world. “the question is, who gains by spilling the blood of innocents?”

TERROR AND POLLS

INQUILAB, ON APRIL 22, has an editorial titled ‘The bid to turn India into Pakistan’. Speaking of the candidature of Pragya Thakur, an accused in the Malegaon terror attack, the newspaper writes that she has not been acquitted but is out on bail in the matter. The move to make her a candidate by the ruling party is an “attempt to push India willfully down the path of Pakistan”.

On the previous day as well, *Inquilab* had, in its editorial, mentioned the need for the BJP to clarify which side of the terror question it was on after their choice of can-

didate for the Bhopal constituency. The expression of anger was especially directed at Thakur's terming Hemant Karkare (the Maharashtra ATS chief who died in the line of duty during the 26/11 attacks) a traitor. “The BJP must clarify whether it is against terrorism or with those accused of terrorist activity. Because both things cannot go together. How can the BJP, which took credit for the ‘watan wapas’ of Wing Commander Abhinandan, stay silent at this insult to Karkare,” the editorial asks.

COURT'S CREDIBILITY

AKHBAR E MASHRIQ, ON April 24, has an editorial on how the “Chief Justice of India (CJI) must face the law”. The editorial writes that the Supreme Court, the last resort of the “fariyadi”, is in the dock. It says that “the CJI's statement that the complaint is meant to upset the credibility of the Court is a weak plea”. The editorial goes on to say that “all are equal under the law and if a woman has accused the CJI of sexual harassment, he must be treated as a common citizen... This would be exemplary and his stature would rise.”

Mere Watan, on April 23, takes a different

view with an editorial titled, ‘The Indian judiciary is in danger’. It says that “after the BJP got elected to office, all aspects of life in India were threatened. And now, this. About 125 crore Indians trust just the judiciary and if faith in that institution is weakened” then much is lost. It concludes by saying that if after accusations like this, even the sole source of trust for so many Indians comes under a cloud, “our future will be in danger”.

EVM QUESTIONS

MUNSIF, ON APRIL 16, says that it is tough for the Election Commission to reconcile competing demands of so many Opposition parties in a country like India. But if all the Opposition parties are saying the same thing — questioning the EVMs — they must take heed and be transparent and fair.

Inquilab on the same day says that sidelining the concern over EVMs by 21 parties means being indifferent to the 70 per cent of Indians that they represent. That is why the parties “have knocked at the doors of the Supreme Court again”.

Compiled by Seema Chishti

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

BRAVO BILKIS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Justice for Bilkis’ (IE, April 25). An unlettered woman fought for justice and not revenge. Her simple statement expressing satisfaction only after the judgment was pronounced proves her purity of motive. Bilkis's stature is enhanced by her announcement that she intends to use part of the compensation to help victims of rape and communal violence.

RK Vijay, Jaipur

GANDHI'S OPENNESS

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘Denial by distortion’ (IE, April 25). Gandhiji met various people, including his critics and opponents, who did not hold with his ideology of non-violence. But he never hated them. Rather he appreciated the positive aspects of their work. In this manner, he met various RSS leaders as. It does not mean that he favoured or supported their ideology.

Anil Kumar Jain, Jaipur

GRAND IDEA

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘Faith vs spectacle’ (IE, April, 25). As a devout Hindu who has visited Varanasi on several occasions, I can state with conviction that what the authors call iconic cultural landscape is actually a matter of great shame. In comparison, religious places of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Sikhism look much better, height-

LETTER OF THE WEEK AWARD

To encourage quality reader intervention, The Indian Express offers the Letter of the Week award. The letter adjudged the best for the week is published every Saturday. Letters may be e-mailed to editpage@expressindia.com or sent to The Indian Express, B-1/B, Sector 10, Noida-UP 201301. Letter writers should mention their postal address and phone number.

THE WINNER RECEIVES SELECT EXPRESS PUBLICATIONS

ening the religious experience of a visitor. While the authors correctly pointed out some acts of omission in the implementation and design of the Kashi-Vishwanath Corridor, they also have displayed their small mindedness by opposing what is essentially a grand idea. For Lord Vishwanath's sake, please keep your political ideologies out of this project.

HN Bhagwat, via email

TELLING NUMBERS

In five years, over Rs 100 cr spent on renovation, furnishing of ministers' bungalows, offices



YOUR RIGHT TO KNOW
AN EXPRESS RTI APPLICATION

SPENDS ON MINISTERS' HOMES, OFFICES

Year	Total expenses on Renovation and Furnishing
2014-15	22.97 crore
2015-16	24.44 crore
2016-17	24.29 crore
2017-18	13.74 crore
2018-19*	16.33 crore
TOTAL	101.8 crore

**Until the end of February*

SHYAMLAL YADAV
NEW DELHI, APRIL 25

THE CENTRAL Public Works Department (CPWD) has spent more than Rs 100 crore on the renovation and furnishing of the bungalows and offices of Union Ministers over the last five years.

In response to an RTI application filed by *The Indian Express*, CPWD, which is the executing agency for these works, stated that Rs 93.69 crore were spent on renovation, and Rs 8.11 crore on furnishing of the bungalows and offices of the Ministers.

There are 70 Ministers in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Council of Ministers (not including the Prime Minister himself), of which 25 are Cabinet Ministers, 11 Ministers of State (Independent Charge) and 34 Ministers of State.

The *Indian Express* had asked the CPWD to provide the "details of expenses made on the renovation/fur-

nishing etc of the offices and residences of Union Ministers and Union Ministers of State during 2014-15, 2015-16, 2016-17, 2017-18 and 2018-19."

Information was sought for individual Ministers, but the CPWD provided only cumulative figures in its response.

These figures are from April 1, 2014 to February 28, 2019. The government took oath on May 26, 2014; it is possible, therefore, that a small part of these expenses were incurred in the last 56 days of the UPA government. However, not much new work is generally taken up by CPWD once Lok Sabha elections are announced.

TIP FOR READING LIST

STRIKING A BALANCE ON CLIMATE CHANGE

AMID THE many books on the climate change apocalypse, here's one that brings hope — sort of. *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?* by environmentalist Bill McKibben starts out by declaring "This volume is bleak." A little later, however, he says: "I think we're uniquely ill prepared to cope with the emerging challenges. So far we're not coping with them. Still, there is one sense in which I am less grim than in my younger days. This book ends with the conviction that resistance to these dangers is at least possible." A review in *The New York Times* divides

the book into three parts — the first elaborating the dangers to civilisation from climate change, the second discussing the "forces opposing solutions to the problems laid out in the first part", and the third, offering reasons for hope — "foremost among these are solar panels". McKibben's book is "much more about grounds for fear, which take up some 18 chapters, than about grounds for hope, which take up five"; however, it is possible, says review, that his book would strengthen the motivation of those who already believe that all is still not lost.



SIMPLY PUT
Taking stock of Belt and Road

The second Belt and Road Forum is under way in Beijing. What has changed in this massive Chinese initiative since the first forum two years ago? How does Beijing see the BRI today — and how does the world see it?

SOWMIYA ASHOK
BEIJING, APRIL 25

THE SECOND Belt and Road Forum (BRF) that began Thursday in Beijing will serve as a stock-taking exercise for China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, which has come to dominate the country's foreign policy over the last five years. This "21st Century Silk Road", which is often referred to as China's Marshall Plan, has managed to get more countries to sign up since the first forum was held in May 2017.

The BRI, or *yi dai yu lu*, is made up of a "belt" of overland routes and a maritime "road" connecting Southeast Asia to Eastern Europe and Africa. President Xi Jinping's ambitious "Project of the Century" will impact countries that account for half the world's population.

Xi will deliver the keynote address Friday in the presence of 37 Heads of State or Government, including Russia's President Vladimir Putin and Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan, and 5,000 representatives from 150 countries. While the United States is expected to send lower-level delegates, India is once again giving the forum a miss.

Xi will also chair a leaders' roundtable Saturday. A high-level meeting and thematic forums will also be part of the three-day BRF.

BRF 2017 vs BRF 2019

When it was announced in 2013, the BRI was an initiative focused solely on building infrastructure projects; it now has a much broader framework, which includes financial and humanitarian aid projects. In the first BRF in 2017, China said, more than 60 countries and international organisations were involved. That figure, according to official statements, is now "126 countries and 29 international organisations". New countries such as Italy and Luxembourg have brought into the project, concerns raised by other European Union countries notwithstanding.

The funding model has also undergone changes. While initially funds were sought from the China-headed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and several other financial institutions within the country, Beijing is now pushing for "third-party market cooperation" under which investments are shared by more than one country.

China is also re-examining the ways in which the initiative is presented to overseas



37 foreign Heads of State or Government are attending the second BRF in Beijing. AP

audiences. It often blames the international media for providing "flawed" or "ill-informed" coverage of the BRI.

Progress of the project

Since being formally introduced into the Communist Party's constitution in 2017, the BRI has evolved into a comprehensive strategy for China, with greater involvement in projects with a humanitarian aspect.

Last week, Chinese Foreign Minister and State Councillor Wang Yi said at a press conference that in the six years since the launch of BRI, "the trade volume between China and countries joining the BRI has surpassed 6 trillion US dollars, with more than 80 billion US dollars of Chinese investment in those countries". He also said 82 overseas cooperative parks had been jointly built by China and the countries along the route, creating nearly 300,000 jobs for local people.

However, voices of criticism — from opposition parties and civil society groups — too, have become louder in some BRI countries over the last two years. Several governments have been rethinking and renegotiating the costs of BRI projects. Hambantota served as a cautionary tale, grabbing international headlines after Sri Lanka was forced to lease the port to China for 99 years. The complete suspension, and then a rethink, of a billion-dollar railway project in Malaysia, and re-thinks on projects costs in the Maldives,

Ethiopia, and even Pakistan, have been setbacks for the BRI.

The problems that have emerged as projects have progressed from the planning to the execution stage, has prompted a recent report by a Chinese think tank, advising Chinese enterprises to change their strategy.

In its April 2019 report, the Grandview Institution, which also serves as a government advisory research body, noted that Chinese enterprises have "operational problems" in overseas port projects linked to the BRI. There was, the report said, a "premature mentality" in the commercial evaluation of investment projects, "serious inadequacy in debt evaluation, a lack of information transparency and a lack of evaluation on the impact of regional social culture".

Concerns overseas

Besides the concern over China's so-called "debt-trap diplomacy", several countries including the US, Japan, Germany, Russia, and Australia have expressed unhappiness about the impact of Beijing's moves on their own economic and political interests. EU countries banded together last year to accuse the BRI of hampering free trade, and giving Chinese enterprises an unfair advantage.

Italy's decision to join the BRI in March this year drew sharp criticism, especially from Germany. Italy and China signed an MoU totalling 29 deals worth 2.5 billion eu-

ros in which they intend to work together to develop Italy's port infrastructure, transport and logistics. Although 13 EU member states are already part of the BRI, Italy is a major western power whose action has jolted Western leaders.

India's position

Amongst the first countries to oppose the project, India had signalled its strong displeasure ahead of the first BRF over the inclusion of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as a BRI project. The CPEC passes through Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir, and is the main reason for India not participating in the BRI.

"Regarding the so-called 'China-Pakistan Economic Corridor', which is being projected as the flagship project of the OBOR (One Belt, One Road), the international community is well aware of India's position. No country can accept a project that ignores its core concerns on sovereignty and territorial integrity," the then Ministry of External Affairs official spokesperson Gopal Baglay had said in 2017. "Connectivity projects must be pursued in a manner that respects sovereignty and territorial integrity," Baglay said. India's position has not changed since then.

While China has painted CPEC as a commercial project, it has also deployed security personnel over the years to protect the corridor. This makes it an active participant in domestic politics in the subcontinent.

Pakistan and BRI

While China and Pakistan remain "all-weather allies" who loudly proclaim their friendship, Prime Minister Khan has expressed concern over his country's excessive reliance on foreign debt. Pakistani officials have voiced concerns over Chinese companies receiving tax breaks, and undue advantage in negotiating CPEC projects.

China's focus is on the Gwadar port, which will bring the Arabian Sea close. "The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, however, plans not to limit Gwadar to a connecting port only, but enrich it as an economic hub that will cater to the local population by improving their livelihoods. Projects planned for the Gwadar Port City aim at capacitating Balochistan to its full economic, social, technical, and energy potential, and closely integrating it within the economic framework of Pakistan and China," says the CPEC website.

Producing speech from brain signals, here's how



Neurologist Dr Gopala Anumanchipalli holds an array of electrodes similar to those used in the study. University of California, San Francisco via *The New York Times*

ACCIDENT OR combat injuries, strokes, or neurodegenerative disorders like amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) disable the ability to speak in some people. Scientists have reported that they have developed a virtual prosthetic voice to help them — a system that decodes the brain's vocal intentions and translates them into mostly understandable speech.

The research, published in the journal *Nature* Wednesday, represents proof-of-principle, and a report put out by *Nature* News warned that the technology isn't yet accurate enough for use outside the lab. The trial was carried out by Gopala K Anumanchipalli, Josh Chartier and Edward F Chang of the University of California, San Francisco, on five people who were in the hospital being evaluated for epilepsy surgery.

Virtual speech aids developed earlier work by decoding the brain signals responsible for recognising letters and words, the verbal representations of speech. The physi-

motor commands guiding vocal movement during speech — the tap of the tongue and the narrowing of the lips — and generates intelligible sentences that approximate a speaker's natural cadence.

Previous implant-based communication systems have produced about eight words a minute. The new programme generates about 150 words a minute, the pace of natural speech, the researchers said.

In the trial, the researchers implanted electrodes on the surface of the patients' brains as part of their epilepsy treatment, and recorded brain activity as they read sentences aloud. The researchers then combined these recordings with data from previous experiments that determined how movements of the tongue, lips, jaw and larynx created sound.

The team trained a deep-learning algorithm on these data, and then incorporated the programme into their decoder. The device transforms brain signals into estimated

movements of the vocal tract, and turns these movements into synthetic speech. People who listened to 101 synthesized sentences could understand 70% of the words on average, the report in *Nature* News said, quoting corresponding author Edward F Chang.

Speech created by mapping brain activity to movements of the vocal tract and translating them to sound is more easily understood than that which is produced by mapping brain activity directly to sound. But it is unclear whether the new speech decoder would work with words that people only think, the *Nature* News report said, quoting two scientists.

The researchers also found that a synthesized voice system based on one person's brain activity could be used, and adapted, by someone else — an indication that off-the-shelf virtual systems could be available one day, said a report in *The New York Times*.

THE NEW YORK TIMES, NATURE NEWS

AN EXPERT EXPLAINS

Why some are concerned about the undergraduate 'LOCF' curriculum



ANISH GUPTA

EIGHTEEN-YEAR-olds entering college in a couple of months from now will follow a new curriculum for undergraduate courses that the University Grants Commission (UGC) believes will improve, among other things, their employability. What is changing, why, and why is a section of teachers — most vocally at Delhi University — opposed to the idea?

The new curriculum will be modelled on the UGC's 'Learning Outcomes-based Curriculum Framework', or LOCF, guidelines. What is it?

On August 7, 2018, UGC issued a public notice followed by a direction to all central institutions, to form subject-specific committees for the implementation of the Learning Outcomes-based Curriculum Framework. "The fundamental premise of LOCF", the UGC said, "is to specify what graduates completing a particular pro-

gramme of study are expected to know, understand and be able to do at the end of their programme of study". The LOCF approach "makes the student an active learner; the teacher a good facilitator and together they lay the foundation for lifelong learning".

The idea behind LOCF is to decide the desired outcome within the framework of the current Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, and then design the curriculum to obtain these outcomes. The outcomes will be determined in terms of skills, knowledge, understanding, employability, graduate attributes, attitudes, values, etc., gained by students upon the completion of the course.

So, why are some teachers opposed to this idea?

Teachers at Delhi University (DU) are agitated about the frequent changes in the undergraduate curriculum. The coming change will be the fifth in the last nine years at the university. In 2010, the undergraduate programme switched from the traditional annual mode to the semester mode. In 2013, the semester mode was changed to the Four Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUP), only for FYUP to switch back to semester mode the following year. And in the year after that (2015), the CBCS kicked in. Each of these "reforms" was announced

without warning, and implemented the very next year. Each change was introduced with the objective of improving the quality of education and scaling up DU's world ranking, but the outcome, critics say, has been the opposite. Each change has disrupted the functioning of the system, and caused confusion and trauma among students, they say.

According to critics, the committees formed to recommend changes in the 2019-20 curriculum (in line with LOCF) have major problems.

First, the CBCS pattern of the undergraduate programme itself is faulty — and the committees are supposed to bring changes in the curriculum within this faulty framework. Second, the subject-specific committees formed by DU were given only three months to submit their reports, and all stakeholders were not consulted. Third, LOCF is to be implemented immediately, and there is inadequate time for preparation. Finally, while all departments have been asked to assign this work to their three "best teachers", no criteria were decided to assess and rank teachers.

What are the main features of the CBCS pattern of education?

UGC wants to replace the "marks or percentage based evaluation system, which obstructs the flexibility for the students to study the subjects/courses of their choice



New system kicks in from 2019-20 File

and their mobility to different institutions" with CBCS, which "not only offers opportunities and avenues to learn core subjects but also exploring additional avenues of learning beyond the core subjects for holistic development of an individual".

CBCS, according to UGC, provides "a 'cafeteria' type approach in which the students can take courses of their choice, learn at their own pace, undergo additional courses and acquire more than the required credits and adopt an interdisciplinary approach to learning".

The Generic Elective (GE) course has to be compulsorily taken from an unrelated discipline/subject. All Honours students

must choose one Generic paper from options offered by disciplines other than their own in semesters 1-4. Students of non-Honours courses must choose one generic paper from a discipline other than their own in the last two semesters.

What is the criticism of the CBCS?

Critics point to three major problems: a repetition of papers, highly heterogeneous classes, and the creation of situations in which students don't acquire much knowledge about a subject.

Consider Commerce in DU. The CBCS syllabus offers the following GE papers: Microeconomics (semester 1), Macroeconomics (semester 2), Business Statistics (semester 3), Indian Economy (semester 4). Students of any Honours course other than B.Com (Hons) can opt for these.

However, the same papers are offered as Core (compulsory) papers in the Bachelor in Business Economics (BBE) course, mostly in the same semesters — and it has been noticed that most students who opt for Commerce as GE are from BBE.

A similar situation is seen with students of Economics (Hons), Bachelor of Business Administration (Finance and Investment Analysis), and Bachelor of Management Studies who opt for Commerce Generic. Their choice doesn't add to their knowledge,

and they do so mainly to lessen their burden.

Again, when students of different disciplines opt for a GE of a particular discipline, it creates a class of students who are very different from each other in attitude, knowledge, aptitude, and exposure. Teaching a Commerce Generic to a student of Mathematics is different from teaching it to a student of English.

The lack of synchronization in interdisciplinary syllabus formulation has made teaching-learning more difficult. For instance, prior to the introduction of CBCS, four compulsory papers of Economics were being taught to students of B.Com (Hons), but post CBCS, there is no compulsory Economics paper. Students who choose to not take Economics as their Generic Elective paper often face problems in semester 4, when they have to study Business Mathematics as a compulsory Core paper, which requires a basic knowledge of Economics.

Such problems are not limited to Commerce or Economics. Many other streams have been facing similar issues since the inception of CBCS. Critics argue that without a re-look at the CBCS framework, changes in the curriculum through LOCF will end up being another futile exercise.

(Anish Gupta teaches Economics at the University of Delhi)