



## The Indian EXPRESS

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RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

# The Howdy moment

Modi government ought to recognise that diaspora diplomacy is double-edged



C RAJA MOHAN

## BOOSTER SHOT

The bold push to cut corporate taxes could boost investment, encourage compliance and lead to a simplified tax architecture

FINANCE MINISTER NIRMALA Sitharaman's move to slash the corporate tax rate to 22 per cent from 30 per cent is a bold move and marks a departure from the incremental approach to economic reforms the government has pursued until now. Sitharaman has also lowered the tax incidence on new companies that will commence production before March 2023 to 15 per cent, hoping to spur fresh investment. With these measures, the government has moved India's corporate tax rates in line with its regional competitors, increasing the country's attractiveness as an investment destination. This should incentivise firms relocating from China to set up manufacturing units in India. Coupled with the decision to do away with the surcharge on capital gains on listed securities, these measures will go a long way in shoring up sentiment. Indicative of this, the BSE Sensex ended the day 5.32 per cent higher than its previous close.

The government's latest measures appear to be designed to push growth through an increase in investment rather than consumption. Though the increase in profitability could help existing firms launch fresh investment, increase dividends or deleverage, to the extent that higher tax rates were a deterrent for investment, these cuts could spur fresh investment. Also, by providing corporates the option of choosing a lower tax without taking advantage of exemptions and incentives, the government seems to be moving towards a simplified tax architecture which would help reduce tax litigation. Bigger firms facing a higher effective tax rates will be more inclined to switch to this simplified structure, while those with lower effective tax rates currently will shift once the sunset clauses for exemptions expire. However, lower tax rates for new manufacturing firms will put existing firms at a disadvantage. This may incentivise existing firms to set up "new firms" to take advantage of the tax differential. Though this could be kept in check through the General Anti Avoidance Rules (GAAR) provisions, it does open up the possibility of further rate rationalisation in the future.

The finance minister has stated that the revenue forgone on account of these tax cuts amounts to Rs 1.45 lakh crore. And though the government is hopeful that lower rates will increase compliance, offsetting some of the revenue loss, meeting the fiscal deficit target will be a tall order. The advance tax figures aren't encouraging. Both direct and indirect tax collections are well short of expectations. Bond yields surged 15 basis points on Friday in anticipation of an increase in government borrowing to finance the higher deficit. To plug the widening gap, the government must opt for a more aggressive disinvestment programme.

## TEST OF JUSTICE

On Jammu and Kashmir, it is now incumbent upon the courts to produce the body of evidence affirming its good faith

IT HAS COME to light that from the abrogation of Article 370 on August 5 amidst a crackdown on communications and personal freedoms, 252 writs of habeas corpus have been filed in the courts of Jammu and Kashmir. On September 3, one petition was filed, on average, every hour, challenging the summary detention of citizens. Of the petitions, 147 suggest that orders of detention under the Public Safety Act (PSA) were passed by the administration in bad faith. Sixteen state that even the reason for detention was not communicated, rendering these arrests completely arbitrary.

But the judiciary comes off looking even worse than the administration and the political dispensation. The writ of habeas corpus exists because it is assumed that political and executive power can run amok. It is a weapon in the hands of the judiciary to rein it in, in the defence of the people. In the past, to improve India's human rights record, judicial activism had focused on sharpening the courts' response to writ petitions concerning fundamental rights. The writ of habeas corpus is the last line of defence against arbitrary attacks on these rights, requiring the accused to be produced immediately, instead of being held without charge, as has been done under the PSA. But tardiness in seeking due process of law is seen in the J&K High Court. In the 11 cases where orders have been passed and details put online, for instance, one was filed on August 23 and will be heard, following a delay, on October 9. In another matter where the court issued a notice to the government, it allowed four weeks for the latter to respond. This is the sort of time-lag that is expected in a trivial civil suit like a tenancy matter, not a case involving the possible suspension of human rights without cause being provided.

This state of affairs is particularly embarrassing for the judiciary because the Supreme Court was kept in the dark while hearing a clutch of petitions on the situation in J&K. On September 16, Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi had called for a report from the chief justice of the J&K High Court about allegations of difficulties in accessing justice. All eyes will now be on the Supreme Court, which itself has become an affected party for lack of prior information. Its response will be read as evidence of its commitment to the people and their rights.

## GOLZOW, GLOWING

A new home for refugee families from Syria, a new future for German village with an ageing population

FOR THOUSANDS OF years, humans have roamed the earth, creating civilisations, language and art. But the world today appears to be a hostile place for people on the move, especially those escaping lands ravaged by war and climate strife. Nation-states are only a few hundred years old, but borders are being reinforced ruthlessly by xenophobic nationalism, resulting in purges of millions — those deemed stateless, refugees and "illegals". But, as a village in Germany has shown, the answer to the crisis of this century does not lie in the high walls of massive detention centres. It could lie in the open doors of a school in need of children.

Golzow is a village in what was once communist East Germany, with a depleting young population. In 2015, its mayor decided to welcome 16 Syrian refugees into the village. The local school got a set of new students, lovingly called the "new children of Golzow". While Germany, like many European countries, is not immune to paranoia about the loss of jobs and resources to outsiders, Golzow turned out to be an example of a silent integration. The German village is not an outlier. The experience of several First World countries, grappling with falling birth rates and a large geriatric population, show that migrants are like a surge of fresh blood in old arteries, giving new life to economies and cultures. It is the dangerous proof that the populist leaders of the world do not ask for: You could embrace the other, and be the richer for it.

But the example of Golzow goes beyond the utilitarian claims of mutual material benefit. It demonstrates that the commonality of human experience is of loss, violence and ultimate resilience. What could be common between a village of ageing East Germans and the youngest of Syrian refugees? Both flinch at firecrackers going off — it reminds them of exploding grenades.

THIS WEEKEND'S GATHERING of the Indian American community in Houston, to be addressed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Donald Trump, is likely go down as a special moment in India's diaspora diplomacy. It is but rare that an American president joins a foreign leader in addressing a diaspora event. For Modi, the Houston engagement is a continuation of his extraordinary political investment in engaging the Indian diaspora. It is based on the recognition that a large and very successful diaspora has widened India's footprint and can contribute to achievement of India's domestic and international goals.

The Indian diaspora (including non-resident Indians and persons of Indian origin) is estimated to be more than 30 million and growing. Its substantive concentration is in the Anglo-American world, the Gulf and the former colonies of the British empire. Its presence is growing beyond these traditional areas. So has its political and economic influence in the host nations.

But nowhere is the presence of the diaspora more expansive than in the US. As a rich and accomplished minority, the Indian-American community has become influential in all walks of life in the US. Within the US, Texas, California, New York and Illinois are among the states that host large Indian-American communities. And Houston, where the diaspora event is taking place, is among the top 10 American cities hosting the Indian American community.

Thanks to the significant Indian migration — both labour and capital — during the 19th century, the diaspora became an important part of the emergence of India as a nation in the first half of the 20th century. But the fear in many newly independent nations that the Indians might become a potential fifth column was real. So was the widespread resentment in some parts of Afro-Asia against the privileged economic positions that Indians held in the colonial era.

The nationalist backlash against the Indian communities in Africa and Asia in the 1950s and 1960s saw Delhi consciously distance itself from the diasporic communities. As India turned inwards, Delhi also took a dim view of the "brain drain" as many well-trained Indians began to look for opportuni-

ties elsewhere. It was only in the late 1980s that Delhi began to rethink its approach to the diaspora.

Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was the first to appreciate the potential role diaspora could play in advancing national development and improving India's ties with the US. As he launched the reform era, P V Narasimha Rao sought investments from the diaspora. Atal Bihari Vajpayee formalised India's engagement with the diaspora by institutionalising the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas. But few leaders have showered the kind of personal and political attention on the diaspora that Modi has.

Modi finally buried India's defensiveness about the diaspora, which in turn was ready to take pride in a rising India that was poised to play a larger international role in the world. Modi went beyond demanding that the diaspora do more for India. He promised that India would do more for them as well. Delhi and its foreign missions have never been as solicitous of the welfare of the individuals and communities in the diaspora as they are today.

The political role of the diaspora has been valuable for Delhi in the US. In the last decade for example, the diaspora generated much needed political support in the US Congress for changing the American non-proliferation laws and facilitating civil nuclear cooperation with India. Today, the diaspora might once again have a critical role in informing the Congress and the wider public about the situation in Kashmir and explaining the historic context and the logic behind India's recent actions.

Modi's visit to the US will also showcase some of the emerging problems with India's diaspora diplomacy. First, Islamabad's imitation of Delhi in the mobilisation of Pakistani diaspora is certainly flattering. While it is reasonable for Pakistan to get its diaspora to support the improvement of US-Pak relations, Islamabad is also firing at the Modi government from the shoulders of the Pakistani diaspora. Besides galvanising the Pakistani-Americans, Islamabad is also mobilising the Muslim American communities on Kashmir and other issues. Pakistan is expected to organise protests against Modi in both Houston and New York. As India's outreach to the diaspora strengthens, Modi must also give some

thought to a broader strategy of connecting with all people of South Asian origin.

Second, India's domestic political fault-lines have, unsurprisingly, begun to envelop the diaspora. As in India, so in the US, many liberal sections of the diaspora have become sharply critical of the Modi government. Together, they are having an impact on the leadership of the diaspora, including some US Congress members of Indian origin, as well as the general public discourse within the US on India. Delhi has much work to do in engaging the liberal American critics of India.

Third is the danger of getting drawn too deep into the domestic politics of the US. The Houston event reflects the growing weight and prestige of the Indian community in the US as well as Trump's own electoral calculus for the presidential elections next year. While the Indian-American community tends to lean towards the Democratic Party, Trump might be betting that the celebration of the India-US partnership with Modi might let him make a dent in the community.

While India welcomes the opportunity to serenade the American president in front of the diaspora, Delhi should be careful about not crossing some red lines. China, for example, is getting into trouble in many countries for turning its relationship with the diaspora into an active intervention in the domestic politics of the host nation. Given the current polarisation of US domestic politics and the profound hostility towards Trump among the Democrats, Delhi has to be careful not to be seen as tilting in favour of one side.

In his embrace of the Indian American community at Houston this weekend, the PM has an opportunity to fine-tune his diaspora diplomacy by reaffirming the commitment to inclusive development of all Indians, irrespective of their caste or creed and emphasising the new possibilities for the collective progress of the Subcontinent as a whole. Modi must also underline that the main purpose of India's diaspora engagement in America is about elevating the strategic partnership with the US to a higher level.

The writer is director, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore and contributing editor on international affairs, The Indian Express

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KHALED AHMED

## TALE OF TWO PRISONERS

Swapping of Aafia Siddiqui for Shakeel Afridi has been in the works for a while

IN JULY 2019, Prime Minister Imran Khan visited Washington and told the Americans that Pakistan would like to exchange terror-convict Aafia Siddiqui, serving a long sentence in America, for Shakeel Afridi, also serving a long sentence in Pakistan for "sneaking" on Osama bin Laden — and thus helping the Americans kill Laden in Abbottabad in 2011.

Why should Pakistan ask for Siddiqui back? An MIT-trained Pakistani neuroscientist, she "was accused by the United Nations and the United States of being an al Qaeda member and named one of the seven most wanted al Qaeda figures by the FBI", according to veteran Pakistani journalist Zahid Hussain in his book, *The Scorpion's Tail* (2010).

Hussain writes: "Aafia had disappeared from Karachi in March 2003 after the arrest of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the alleged mastermind of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, with whom she had close ties. After divorcing her first husband in 2003, she had married a nephew of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed who himself was later arrested and sent to the US government's Guantanamo Bay detention camp." That she was "adopted" by al Qaeda and its subsidiaries was clear going by the number of terrorist acts after which demands for her release were raised.

Khan should have realised that he was asking for the release of a terrorist whose backers had killed Pakistanis to vent their anger at her arrest. In March 2012, two po-

licemen were killed in Peshawar. In 2013, the "fidayeen" attack on the Judicial Complex in Peshawar killed four and injured 50-plus — and it was done by the known Aafia Siddiqui Brigade. The brigade is an outfit of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), in revolt against the state, has reportedly been doing this for al Qaeda.

In December 2010, a top al Qaeda ideologue Abu Yahya al-Libi released a propaganda tape calling on Muslims to wage jihad to avenge Siddiqui. In July 2011, the TTP's deputy Ameer Commander, Waliur Rehman Mehsud said he had ordered the kidnapping of a Swiss couple in Balochistan who would only be released if the Americans freed Siddiqui. Waliur Rehman said that the Swiss couple had not been tortured, but if Siddiqui was not freed, a Taliban court will decide the fate of the couple. In April 2012, the Afghan Taliban too got into the act, demanding \$1 million and the release of 20 Afghan prisoners along with Siddiqui in exchange for the release of an American soldier, Bowe Bergdahl, who had been taken hostage in June 2009 in Afghanistan.

A certain Dr Usman, leading a 10-member gang of "fidayeen" terrorists, attacked the General Headquarters (GHQ) of the army in Rawalpindi in October 2009. Holding the heart of the Pakistan army under siege, the assailants presented a list of demands: Release a hundred Pakistani and Afghan

Taliban commanders being held by the security forces; and release a woman named Aafia Siddiqui facing trial in a New York court charged with attempting to kill US soldiers in Afghanistan.

At the other end of the spectrum, Hein Kiessling in his 2016 book, *Faith Unity Discipline: The ISI of Pakistan*, writes: "Dr Afridi was sentenced to 33 years' imprisonment by a special tribunal, for his cooperation with the CIA in the detection of Osama bin Laden. His release, which will still take some time, would most probably be in exchange for the US-imprisoned physician Dr Aafia Siddiqui."

No doubt, PM Khan is swayed by some crazy TV advocates of this "daughter of Pakistan". One such advocate is Zaid Hamid, whose rants on TV had to be ended because of the sheer disconnect from the Pakistani reality. Hamid came on TV to tell Pakistan why Americans were after Siddiqui. This was his crazy quilt of lies: She was a neurologist who had biological weapons' knowledge that the Americans were afraid of, and that her Indian MIT students were complicit in the frame-up and even went to question her in jail in Afghanistan. He even asserted that her children were killed by the Americans while the fact is, that they are with her family in Karachi.

The writer is consulting editor, Newsweek Pakistan



## SEPTEMBER 21, 1979, FORTY YEARS AGO

**INDIA-NEPAL BOND**  
INDIA HAS GREAT interest in helping Nepal harness its river resources and in purchasing the surpluses that cannot be utilised within Nepal. This was stated by President Sanjiva Reddy in his banquet speech in honour of King Birendra and Queen Aishwarya. President Reddy said: "We have great interest in co-operating with you to make your projects viable." The president's remarks are consistent with much of Indian diplomacy, even as Kathmandu has often shown an inclination to bring in such bodies as the World Bank to prepare feasibility reports for some such projects. He also applauded the king's decision to hold a national referendum.

**BENGAL ELECTIONS**  
IN SPITE OF the disadvantages associated with a ruling party, especially when it has failed to solve the power crisis which has disrupted the economy, the CPM in West Bengal finds itself in a happy position vis-a-vis the upcoming parliamentary election. Parties and leaders of diverse hue are making approaches to the Marxists for alliance and seats. Apart from the constituents of the broad national alliance, HN Bahuguna, Union finance minister, is reported to have made discreet inquiries, if a seat could be offered to him in West Bengal. He would prefer a constituency in Burdwan since his ancestors had migrated to UP from this district.

**CHINA'S AGGRESSION**  
AS VIETNAM POURS fresh troops into Cambodia in preparation for a coming dry season offensive against the remaining Pol Pot guerillas, China is informing foreign visitors that it may have to "teach Hanoi a second lesson". China analysts are studying recent movements which suggest that the people's republic may be planning its own style of offensive in the dry season to put Vietnam under maximum pressure. Mass starvation has already hit the isolated Khmer Rouge areas in southwestern and northeastern Cambodia. Even in Phnom Penh, reports reveal widespread malnutrition in Vietnamese-controlled regions.

# 11 THE IDEAS PAGE

## Fix the fundamentals first

High growth cannot be sustained in India till the country makes adequate investments in infrastructure and human capital



S MAHENDRA DEV

INDIA'S GDP GROWTH rate slowed down to 5 per cent in Q1 of FY20 and is expected to be around 6 per cent or below in this financial year. As former Reserve Bank of India governor Y V Reddy mentioned recently, a combination of cyclical and structural factors have been responsible for the slowdown. One example is the auto sector. There seems to be a collapse of aggregate demand in the economy. Global uncertainties have added to the problem. In the last few weeks, the government has announced several measures to improve both consumption and investment in different sectors and for the economy as a whole. The announcement of reduction in corporate tax rates announced on Friday may help in reviving the sentiments of the private sector but the tax revenue may also decline and put pressure on fiscal deficit. These stimulus and structural measures and monetary policy may help reviving the economy to some extent in the near future. But, these measures alone may not help in getting higher growth. The Chief Economic Advisor also mentions that we need long-term structural reforms for investment-led growth. Among other things, we need to focus on three structural issues: Physical infrastructure development, raising human capital and revival of rural economy for a long-term growth of 7 to 8 per cent and attaining \$5 trillion economy by 2024.

In a recent book Dani Rodrik et al discuss two challenges faced by countries like India. The "structural change challenge" is focused on moving resources from traditional low-productivity activities into modern, more productive industries or activities. The "fundamentals challenge" relates to development of broad capabilities such as infrastructure and human capital. We can't have higher growth without tackling this fundamental challenge.

Generally, it is said that we need three things for higher growth. These are infrastructure, infrastructure and infrastructure. This will help both cyclical and structural factors. Late I G Patel indicated in the early 2000s that we should aim only for 6 per cent GDP growth till we improve infrastructure. Hope we have not come back to I G Patel growth rate of 6 per cent or below in the medium term. In one of his speeches, Y V Reddy also mentioned that infrastructure could be a constraint for higher growth. A lot of progress has been made in all infrastructure sectors. However, almost all indicators score poorly if one looks at India's urban and rural infrastructure particularly compared with South East Asian countries and China.

However, in the present context, some kind of pump priming from the government is necessary to take care of both cyclical and structural factors. This can be done without compromising much on fiscal deficit targets. Disinvestment, reducing non-merit subsidies, removing exemptions, increasing tax base and shifting from revenue to capital expenditures are some of the measures for raising government investment. The government seems to be fast tracking public capex, encouraging public sector enterprises (PSEs) to invest more and trying to clear the pending bills for the corporate sector and MSMEs. The announcement of Rs 100 lakh crore over five years for infrastructure by the government is an important measure. However, details on how to get finance, the roles of public and pri-



CR Sasikumar

private investment, the contract structures like PPPs are not clear. The Vijay Kelkar committee's recommendation on PPPs would be useful. The private sector's role is equally important. Spending on infrastructure will have multiplier effects in the overall economy including stimulating private investment, aggregate demand and jobs. In fact, construction sector was an important source of job creation during 2004-05 to 2011-12. This sector has to be revived in order to create growth and employment.

NSS employment data shows that the shares of agriculture, industry and services in total employment were 44 per cent, 25 per cent and 31 per cent respectively in 2017-18. But, the share of manufacturing employment was only 12 per cent in total employment. There is a need for rise in infrastructure investment, structural reforms in land acquisition and a favourable exchange rate for exports to revive the manufacturing sector, which showed a 0.6 per cent growth in Q1 of this fiscal.

The second structural issue is raising human capital for higher growth. Health and education achievements are essential for human capital. Yet the country's progress on both these aspects leaves much to be desired. We also have great quality dichotomy in both these sectors. There are islands of excellence that can compete internationally in education while vast majority of them churn masses of children with poor learning achievement and unemployable graduates. One has to fix this dichotomy in health and education. Few years back, the Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore cautioned about school education in India. He said: "Schools are the biggest crisis in India today and have been for a long time. Schools are the biggest gap between India and East Asia. And it is a crisis that cannot be justified." Skill deficiency of workers is well known. The Niti Aayog says that only 2.3 per cent of Indian workers have formal skill training compared to 70 to 80 per cent in other countries.

Promotion of technology and knowledge economy will add to growth. One can't have a "demographic dividend" for growth with low human capital. In order to have structural change from agriculture to non-agriculture and from the unorganised sector to the organised sector, education and skill development are needed. Women's labour participation rates have been low and declining. Raising women's human capital and participation rates can improve economic growth. We may also not achieve high human capital and productivity with 40 per cent of our children suffering from malnutrition.

Lastly, we can't expect demand to increase as 70 per cent of our population lives in rural areas and has stagnant incomes and wages. There is a need for revival of the rural economy with infrastructure investment and structural reforms. Agricultural marketing reforms should be a priority. For better price discovery, agriculture has to go beyond farming and develop value chains comprising farming, wholesaling, warehousing, logistics, processing and retailing. Agricultural exports should be promoted with various policies. Similarly, rural infrastructure and water management are other priorities. Stimulus and structural reforms can raise farmers' prices and wages and rise in demand for manufacturing and services.

Both immediate and long-term structural reforms are needed to achieve higher economic growth. Physical infrastructure development, tackling Dani Rodrik's fundamental challenge of raising human capital and stimulus and reforms in rural economy are needed to achieve a sustainable 7 per cent to 8 per cent growth. The Centre has to work closely with states similar to GST council for achieving higher growth. The massive mandate of the new government will help such coordination.

The writer is Director and Vice Chancellor, IGIDR, Mumbai

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Both immediate and long-term structural reforms are needed to achieve higher economic growth. Physical infrastructure development, tackling Dani Rodrik's fundamental challenge of raising human capital and stimulus and reforms in rural economy are needed to achieve a sustainable 7 per cent to 8 per cent growth. The Centre has to work closely with states similar to GST council for achieving higher growth. The massive mandate of the new government will help such coordination.

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## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Hong Kong is not a country. Hong Kong has no major political disputes, and life in Hong Kong is freer than in Western societies. Western anti-China forces and Hong Kong's extreme opposition have politicized the city."

— GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA

## State versus Hany Babu

The conspiracy that is being woven around the Bhima Koregaon incident has one purpose: To silence the dissent emerging from universities



APOORVANAND

MY FATHER CALLED to inform me that a Delhi University professor has been raided in connection with the Bhima Koregaon case. I asked him if it was Hany Babu. Soon after, I started getting messages which proved my fears true. Why was this so predictable?

Is it because Babu is involved in some conspiratorial activity to overthrow the state, to which I am privy? No, his involvement with the campaign in the defence of G N Saibaba is the reason I feared for his safety. Saibaba, who has 95 per cent disability and is also a teacher at our university, is wasting away in Nagpur jail. He would have slipped out of our collective mind but for the dogged campaign led by Hany Babu. Saibaba has been labelled a Maoist and, therefore, in the statist common sense, he does not deserve to live.

It needed some courage to be the voice of this campaign, given the viciousness with which the word Maoist is used in our public discourse. You need not be a supporter of the Maoist politics to uphold the right of people to follow or practice it. Even the Supreme Court finds it legitimate and lawful if you are not involved in any violent act. Saibaba has been sentenced to life imprisonment.

The Pune police has confiscated Babu's computer and hard drive, in which his academic work is stored. Now, his social media account and other contacts are with the police. The police did not even have search warrant when they raided his home. It is complete lawlessness from the keepers of the law which a citizen is confronted with. You need to be extremely lucky, like Sudha Bharadwaj, that too briefly, to be able call the police's bluff. How does it matter if his research work is gone? What is it, when compared to the safety of the state?

The credentials of Hany Babu, the teacher and scholar, are irrelevant for the police. But we must not ignore what his peer like Ayesha Kidwai has to say about the potential items on his hard drive:

"Hany Babu has said many controversial things as a linguist. He has claimed, contra Jayaseelan and Amritavalli, that Malayalam has a past tense. That -unnu can occupy either a lower or higher position in the functional architecture of the Malayalam clause, and that the Malayalam cleft does not have an existential presupposition. He also split the CP in his doctoral dissertation quite independently of Rizzi. All these are naturally very serious crimes in the eyes of the Pune police. Worse still, Hany has also argued against the three-language policy and said, 'We need to overhaul the language policy in education in such a way that all children have access to primary education in their mother tongue (and not in the dominant language of the state)... Therefore, what we need to move towards is a two-language pol-

icy. You learn your own language, and a dominant language that everyone else in the Union learns. And if Hindi is unable to fit the bill, then we need to find another language that opens for us a window not just to other Indians but to the world at large.' No wonder the Pune police is so incensed, because his work may make them think."

It is his scholarship and dedication to his profession of teaching which brought his colleagues and students to the road spontaneously, protesting the raid. No small thing, as even an association with him can land one in trouble.

This is the latest thread in conspiracy theory that the police is weaving around the Bhima Koregaon incident. We have completely forgotten the origin of the case. It was the large-scale violence on the participants, mostly Dalits at Bhima Koregaon near Pune, which warranted investigation and action. But the alleged instigators and organisers of that massive violence are roaming free. They seem to be shielded by the feeling of honour that the prime minister has for at least one of them in his heart. The disinterest of the police in this mass crime is evident. Instead, the police has turned the whole case on its head by "unearthing" a conspiracy to assassinate the prime minister. It spread its net wide, across India and raided and arrested 10 lawyers and activists. Some of them can be called Maoists, which is not crime. But arresting people like Sudha Bharadwaj and Mahesh Raut is sending out a signal to those who believe that even Maoists have human rights which need to be defended. The flimsiness of the theory of the police has been exposed by several writers. But that has not prevented the police from going ahead with its fantasy by implicating scholars like Anand Teltumbde and now, Hany Babu.

The idea seems to be to persuade the people that there is a large network of "respectable" people who are planning acts of terror. It is not a coincidence that a campaign against "Urban Naxals" has been unleashed on us and media houses and ministers of the central government and the leaders of the ruling party are a part of it.

In democracies, it is the state that individuals are pitched against. University teachers are in a unique position as they have the freedom to do this, unlike other government servants. Corporate houses cannot afford to do this despite the power of money. Therefore, the government seeks to silence academics by bringing in the Civil Services Conduct rules for them and the police uses draconian laws like UAPA to disable them.

The government feels threatened by independent minds as they have no vested interest in the system, which would hold them back. They assert the autonomy of the mind and the individual. People like Hany Babu, with the confidence of their scholarship and the integrity of their profession, can talk to the state with their heads held high. Statism cannot succeed as long as they are free. So, it is important to frighten them into silence or make them do the rounds of courts to secure their freedom. It is for us to think if they should be left to fend for themselves.

The writer teaches Hindi at Delhi University

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### A LINK LANGUAGE

THIS REFERS TO the article, "The Hindi scare" (IE, September 20). The writer reduces the BJP president's exhortation to increase the use of Hindi as a tool of national unity to a 60-year old debate of Hindi versus English. The basic argument against the use of English as a link language is that it is a foreign language. China, Japan, European Union, and Russia communicate in their own languages and this has not come in the way of their domestic or global dealings. It time we stopped condemning Hindi and Sanskrit and directed our efforts to make one of the Indian languages the common vehicle of communication — Bengali, Telugu, any.

YG Chouksey, Pune

### THE ROOT CAUSE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Vapourised' (IE, September 20). E-cigarettes are addictive and come with health hazards. As a measure to prevent health-related risks, banning nicotine products is not problematic. And to give the government a benefit of doubt, let's even assume that its intentions behind the move to ban e-cigarettes were genuine — concern for public health. But if the government feels a ban is a possible solution to India's alarming tobacco consumption levels, why not attack the root rather than the secondary cause? All cigarettes are injurious to health; the ones more injurious can stay, others must be banned.

Srishti Mathur, Ujjain

### LETTER OF THE WEEK

#### AN EQUAL ORDER

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Quota question' (IE, September 13). Debates must be encouraged on all topics, no matter how controversial. However, reservation policy is not against the principle of equality. It is about ensuring equality in society. Before we jump on to the conclusion that the reservation must be economically based, we must look at the occupational structure in our society. Do we not find the priests in the temples belong to one group and the manual scavengers to another?

Vinay Saroha, Delhi

#### BRACE UP FOR RCEP

THIS REFERS TO the article 'Forging trade alliances', (IE, September 20). Regionalisation is becoming a wide-spread feature of international trade. RCEP will be just another free trading bloc, but a more ambitious one. It does give Indian business an opportunity to access a large market and the country better not miss the bus. India's export basket is limited and the businesses need to be more competitive to take advantage of any multinational arrangement.

Sudip Kumar Dey, Kolkata



ANURADHA MASCARENHAS

## My father's healer

Surgeon Ketan Khurjekar was killed by rash driving. His loss is widely felt

DAD TURNED 80 this September. A milestone, yes, but a precious one as not two years ago, family members had to decide on a crucial spine surgery which would either help him walk or perhaps leave him confined to the bed for the rest of his life. A dilemma that consumed our every waking moment.

"What if..." were the two words that left us distraught about the outcome of a surgery, either he would walk again or then face life with disposal bed pans, pressure relief mattress, food table, IV stand and adult diapers.

Come September, we sent a heartfelt prayer for the well being of this spine surgeon who breathed new life into an 80-year-old body. While most did advise the conventional route for treating a complex compression fracture of the lumbar spine, Sancheti hospital's chief spine surgeon, Dr Ketan Khurjekar, helped clinch the deal for us. We opted for a spinal correction and two years after the surgery, dad can walk and even visit the barber for his weekly shave all by himself.

On Monday, a stunned lot woke up to the grim news of Khurjekar and his cab driver killed after they were hit by a speeding bus on the Pune-Mumbai expressway. Khurjekar was in Mumbai over the weekend to attend a workshop, give lectures on spine surgery and

was looking forward to celebrating his 44th birthday with his family and patients on September 16. While returning from Mumbai on Sunday night, they had halted on the roadside to change a puncture when a speeding bus rammed into them.

He was among the lot of spine surgeons to revolutionise the concepts of rehabilitation of spine surgery and instrumental in driving away fear about such surgery from the minds of several people. Most of his patients were road accident victims.

According to the Association of Spine Surgeons of India's past president Dr S Rajasekaran at least 1.6 lakh people die on Indian roads every year. In Maharashtra, state highway safety patrol have reported over 600 fatal accidents along the Pune Mumbai expressway in the last five years. Road traffic accidents have become the biggest killer in the country with at least 30 major accidents occurring every three minutes. Any casualty department of large hospitals is likely to have trained surgeons handling difficult cases.

For Khurjekar, a personal connect with his patients always took the conversation to the next level, where he advised relatives and friends on the use of seat belts even while seated on car's backseat. He was not only a

good story teller with unending examples of how lives could have been saved, but also helped economically challenged patients cope by raising funds for them.

At the Association of Spine Surgeons of India, experts talk about the Indian spine revolution that took off in the mid-90s. Gone are the days when paraplegics and quadriplegics had to die a slow miserable death. Spine surgery progressed slowly till the 70s and very rapidly in the 1980s and spine surgeons in India have kept pace. The country has some of the best spine surgeons and spine surgery training centres in the world, writes RD Mulukutla of the Department of Spine Surgery, Udaya Omni hospital, Hyderabad in the September issue of the *Indian Spine Journal* — official journal of the Association of Spine Surgeons of India

It's a cruel irony that when our young surgeons are increasingly becoming capable of handling trauma and complex surgeries that a bad road takes one of the best among them. Trained in India and abroad, Khurjekar has been practising spine surgery for over 25 years and was a motivational teacher. His colleagues remember him as an innovative and skillful surgeon with the maximum number of surgeries, also performed on children and young adults suffering from a spinal disorder, scolio-

sis. Khurjekar was keen on a school-level screening programme to pick up cases of scoliosis (sideways curvature of the spine) — a medical condition that affects 10 million people in the country — at an early stage.

Rough estimates, according to the Pune Association of Spine Surgeons, indicate that an approximate 1,000 surgeries are performed every month to treat spine ailments across hospitals in the city; Khurjekar was among the most prolific surgeons. That he touched so many lives was evident when the family members of 97-year-old Bhanudas Deshmukh, who had a severely crushed spine and was operated upon or 71-year-old Maruti Sakhare, whose son was paralysed after an electric shock and was treated, call from far-away locations in Maharashtra desperate to get a final glimpse of their healing doctor before he is laid to rest.

While spine surgeons across the country have yet to come to terms with this huge loss, among the stream of patients, shocked and saddened at this doctor's life being snatched away, is a face — my dad's — that recollects being told, "Arre kaka mala ghari kadi bolavata (Uncle, when are you inviting me home?)".

anuradha.mascarenhas@expressindia.com