



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

KABUL CHALLENGE

Return of Taliban has implications for India — immediate challenges include evacuation of staff, rise in border tensions

THE DRAMATIC EVENTS in Kabul over the weekend have shocked India, which seemed quite unprepared like much of the world for a precipitous collapse of the government headed by Ashraf Ghani. Through the last few weeks, Delhi had stiffened its opposition to the Taliban and doubled down its support for Kabul. This was reinforced by the broader Indian elite and popular sentiment in favour of Kabul. The genuine warmth for the Afghan people and a deep commitment for their welfare might have prevented India from recognising the weaknesses of the government in Kabul. Delhi had also perhaps overestimated the domestic political support in Washington for a strong posture against the Taliban and the Biden Administration's ability to manage the end-game of its plan to withdraw all troops from Afghanistan. While a post-mortem of the developments in Afghanistan must take place at an appropriate time, Delhi's current focus must be on addressing the immediate challenges confronting it in Afghanistan.

The first is to securely evacuate Indian diplomatic personnel and other citizens from Afghanistan. This will require a major logistical effort. The government of India must also offer refuge to a large number of those Afghans who have worked with Indian initiatives and are desperate to avoid potential retribution from the Taliban. The second is diplomatic. As the world deals with new facts on the ground created by the Taliban, Delhi must make all possible efforts to get the international community to hold the Taliban to its word on letting all foreigners leave in peace, protecting the lives of all Afghan citizens, including those who worked with the government and foreign institutions, and respecting international humanitarian law. The reports from various cities in Afghanistan, including from Kabul, suggest the opposite.

As a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, Delhi will have a voice in shaping the international debate on the situation in Afghanistan. India also chairs the Taliban Sanctions Committee of the UNSC and will have an important role in framing the international response to the Taliban's demands for the lifting of all sanctions against its leaders. India also must step up its diplomatic outreach to all the major powers and key regional actors to develop political and policy coordination in responding to the dynamic situation in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, delivering international humanitarian assistance to the large number of Afghan people displaced by fighting in the last few weeks must be taken up as a high priority at the UN. The final challenge is domestic. As Islamabad's triumphalism at the successful re-installation of the Taliban begins to rise and Pakistan-based jihadi groups turn their attention to Kashmir, tensions are bound to rise on India's western borders. Delhi must maintain vigil against a resurgence of cross-border terrorism that could quickly destabilise Kashmir and escalate the conflict between India and Pakistan.

LAME EXCUSE

'Operation Langda' is of a piece with Uttar Pradesh's encounter culture. In effect, it criminalises the police force

IN 2017, A little over two months after assuming office as chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath said in an interview — "agar aap apradh karenge, toh thok diye jayenge" (if you commit a crime, you will be bumped off). Since that time, the UP police have officially shot at and injured at least 3,302 alleged criminals in 8,472 "encounters", and killed 146 people. As reported by this newspaper, the unofficial use of excessive violence by the police has a name — "Operation Langda (lame)". Given the political context, it is difficult not to put two and two together, and conclude that the subversion of the rule of law has political and government sanction.

The UP police is not the only force in the country that is accused of using excessive force. However, few state governments highlight this violence as an achievement. For example, in the run-up to Republic Day earlier this year, the Chief Secretary asked district magistrates to publicise "Ab tak 3,000" — referring to the high number of encounters — as one of the state government's primary achievements. As recently as August 3, official UP BJP social media handles shared a video of an alleged criminal after an encounter, limping and injured, pleading for help and crying out his desperate apologies. The video carried the following description: "Look, how a criminal begs for his life... this is UP." The political support for encounters and extra-judicial killings is backed, *prima facie*, by legal impunity. As of July 2020, 74 probes had been conducted into extra-judicial killings, and the police were given a clean chit in all of them.

"Operation Langda", then, is no aberration. It is of a piece with the UP government's policy towards crime and punishment, where the accused are treated as guilty and the police seem to be the agents of vigilante justice. It is also part of a political calculus that sees "hard on crime" as an aspect of good governance though, on the ground, it does the opposite. For many Indians, the police is the primary representative of the state, and the police station the most visible institution. If that basic unit of government ignores due process, replicates prejudice and inspires fear, it blurs the line between those meant to protect citizens from violence and those inflicting it. In effect, the encounter culture criminalises the police. To arrest this slide, the first step must be for the government and political class to condemn extra-judicial violence and ensure that those who violate the law are held accountable.

SABRINA'S NO

Her search for justice for sister Jessica Lall inspired a new middle-class solidarity, but she did not give in to hate

WHAT PRICE DOES a woman pay for saying no? In the case of Jessica Lall, the answer was her life. On April 29, 1999, the 34-year-old woman refused to serve a drink to the son of a Haryana Congress politician because the bar had closed. Manu Sharma pumped a bullet into her head — in the presence of several witnesses, some of Delhi's richest and shiniest. All of whom had the same advice for Lall's family: Don't mess with the powerful. She was the quieter and more diffident of the two sisters, but Sabrina Lall, who died in Gurgaon on Sunday, too, said no.

Sabrina's fight for justice exposed much that was wrong in the Delhi of the late 1990s, where a macho culture of entitlement met post-liberalisation money in a toxic rush. It exposed the brazenness with which the powerful bent justice, intimidated witnesses and bought off the willing. It shattered her family. Jessica's mother died of heartbreak in 2002. Their father died two months after the February 2006 trial court ruling that acquitted Sharma. He had not known a night's peaceful sleep since his daughter's death.

"No one killed Jessica," the headlines said, voicing the outrage of the metropolitan middle class that saw Jessica as one of their own. Prime-time TV coverage, candlelight vigils and SMS polls for justice laid a template for public protests for the next two decades — and took Sabrina, who till then had fought a lonely dispirited battle that swallowed up all her joys, by surprise. In 10 months, the verdict was reversed, and Sharma convicted. In later, less-innocent years, if protests prompted by violence against women would turn into calls for vengeance and death, Sabrina refused to walk that path. In 2020, she wrote to Tihar jail, saying she had no objection to Sharma's early release. She had won, but there was no hate in her heart.



C RAJA MOHAN

AS WE REFLECT on the rapid collapse of the Afghan government and the triumphant return of the Taliban, it is worth recalling the insight of K M Panikkar on the relationship between Kabul and Delhi. Panikkar affirmed that developments in the Kabul Valley inevitably affect the empires of the Gangetic plains. He was referring to the innumerable invaders consolidating in the Herat and Kabul valleys before attacking northern India's heartland.

Recent developments in South Asia certainly point to a recurring dynamic between Afghanistan and India. The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979 and the 2001 terror attacks on New York and Washington followed by the US intervention have had profound effects on the domestic, intra-regional and international politics of the subcontinent.

There is no question that the Taliban's entry into Kabul on Sunday marks the beginning of a new phase in the relationship between Afghanistan and India. The pattern gets more interesting when we consider the "Indus Rider" to the "Panikkar thesis". Put simply, the kingdoms of the Indus have had a powerful role in shaping the contests between alien forces and the heartland empires. That rings true when you consider Pakistan's persistent politics of balancing against India, with the help of external powers, in the post-Partition international relations of the subcontinent.

The restoration of Taliban rule in Afghanistan with Pakistan's support undoubtedly presents some very serious potential challenges for Indian security. But the gloom and doom that descended upon Delhi since the swift meltdown of the post-2001 political order in Kabul is excessive. India has seen much worse before on its northwestern frontiers. A measure of strategic patience could help Delhi cope with the adverse developments in Afghanistan and find ways to secure its interests in the near future. But first to 1979 and 2001 and how they changed the subcontinent.

At the end of 1979, the Soviet Union launched a massive military invasion to protect a communist regime in Kabul. The US and Pakistan responded by unleashing a religious jihad that bled the Russian bear and compelled it to withdraw by 1989. The 1980s would transform the region irrevocably. The jihad against the Soviet Union facilitated General Zia ul Haq's rapid Islamisation of Pakistan's polity. It also gave great impetus to violent religious extremism across South Asia. Pakistan's critical role in the Afghan war against Russia allowed Zia to

The Taliban takeover is cause for concern. But India will have opportunities in Afghanistan

secure the political cover for the country's acquisition of nuclear weapons.

The Pakistan army turned the jihadi armies to gain control of Afghanistan and launched a proxy war against India, especially in the Punjab and Kashmir regions. The turbulence of the 1990s saw deepening conflict between India and Pakistan, both countries conducting nuclear weapon tests, and the establishment of Pak-backed Taliban rule in Afghanistan.

Pakistan's triumph in Kabul, however, turned out to be short-lived. Al Qaeda, hosted by the Taliban, launched terror attacks against the US on September 11, 2001. Swift US retribution brought an end to Taliban rule and compelled Pakistan to reconsider its policies. America's ambition to undo the sins of 1979 by "draining the swamps" of international terrorism in the Af-Pak region, and Musharraf's plans for "enlightened moderation" at home, seemed to open up new pathways for the region. Tensions between India and Pakistan yielded to a productive dialogue that produced tantalising possibilities for normalisation of bilateral relations, including a resolution of the Kashmir dispute. After 2001, there has also been a significant expansion of the India-US strategic partnership.

While Delhi must fully prepare for a renewal of cross-border terror, the international conditions of the 1990s and 2020s are rather different. There is a lot less global acceptance of terrorism today than in the permissive 1990s. No major power would like to see Afghanistan re-emerge as a global sanctuary of terror. The world has also imposed significant new constraints on Pakistan's support for terror through mechanisms like the Financial Action Task Force. Unlike in the 1990s, when Delhi simply absorbed the terror attacks, it now shows the political will to retaliate forcefully.

By the end of the decade, though, Musharraf had been dethroned and the Pakistan Army had swung back to its default positions — renewed support for the Taliban in Afghanistan, expanding attacks on the Kabul government's positions, and scuttling of civilian leaders' efforts to expand the engagement with India. Pakistan also teased an increasingly war-weary Washington into a negotiation with the Taliban for a peace settlement.

Last week marks a huge triumph for Pakistan's Afghan policy. It not only ensured a swift Taliban advance across Afghanistan but also a peaceful surrender of Kabul. The Taliban leaders are also saying all the right things about letting the foreigners leave, protecting lives and properties of Afghan people, and respecting the rights of women. Reports from the provinces, however, point to gross human rights abuses by the Taliban. If the new Taliban dispensation demonstrates a better record in Kabul, it might encourage the world to respond positively. That of course is a big "if".

For Delhi, a bigger question mark will be about the Taliban's renewed support for international terrorism and Pakistan's re-direction of jihadi groups that have allegedly fought with the Taliban towards India. Delhi, however, will

go by evidence from the ground rather than verbal promises.

What about the Taliban's ideology? Like all radical groups, the Taliban will have trouble balancing its religious ideology with the imperatives of state interests. Delhi would want to carefully watch how this tension plays out.

Equally important is the nature of the relationship between the Taliban and Pakistan. Although Pakistan's leverage over the Taliban is real, it may not be absolute. The Taliban is bound to seek a measure of autonomy from Pakistan. India will have to wait a while, though, before the current chill between Delhi and the Taliban can be overcome.

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What about a regional geopolitical alignment against India after the American scramble out of Afghanistan? While the US retreat has been humiliating, there is no question that the US would have left sooner than later. It is also important to note that the US and the West will continue to have a say in shaping the international attitudes towards the new regime. The Taliban and Pakistan appear to be acutely conscious of this reality. Meanwhile, the US withdrawal compels the creation of a new balance of power system in and around Afghanistan. On both fronts, the contradictions facing the Taliban and Pakistan are real.

Structuring the internal balance of power within Afghanistan has always been hard. It remains to be seen if the Taliban and Pakistan can do any better than the last time when the Taliban ruled. A deeper Sino-Pak partnership in Afghanistan will inevitably produce counter-vailing trends. For a patient, open-minded and active India, there will be no dearth of balancing opportunities in Afghanistan.

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MANUFACTURING CHAMPIONS

A bigger talent pool in sports needs better educational and employment prospects



DHIRAJ NAYYAR

INDIA LOVES a champion in sport. It wants many more. That it requires more money and better infrastructure spread out across the country is well known and often repeated. But what is also needed is a less tangible element which is often missed out in the discourse on how to create more medalists at the highest level — empathy, love and reward for those who will never win a Gold, Silver or Bronze. India celebrates achievement, now it even embraces failure (provided it is followed by success). But it has antipathy for those who straddle the vast middle between the top of the class and those detained for a repeat year.

That may sound counter-intuitive given that the vast majority falls in precisely the "in-between" or "average" category. It's human instinct to be comfortable amongst one's own type, so it would be reasonable to assume affinity with other unexceptional people. But it is overpowered by another human instinct — the Darwinian one — to be the fittest (best). Since, by definition, it's impossible for everyone to be the best, there is vicarious comfort in seeing one's own become a champion. Society is ready to shower them with recognition and reward.

That is not particularly useful in creating champions. Rarely, if ever, do sporting greats come readymade. Raw talent needs to be nurtured. But it is only in very few individuals that

talent converts to greatness. Therefore, the bigger the talent pool, the likelier it is that more champions will emerge. However, if there is no reward for striving hard but falling short, parents are unlikely to send their children into sports. The risk is too high.

It is a folly to equate being average with being mediocre. One can strive to the best of one's ability and not become a champion. Mediocrity describes those who do not put in their best effort. Two things need to change fundamentally for India to create more champions. First, the education system needs to be more flexible to enable the young to maximise sporting ability without being treated as pariah "quota" students. The choice that is usually forced upon students in the Indian system is between doing well in academics and excelling in sports. In the West or even in an emerging sporting nation like China, this is a false binary.

For those who don't become world beaters in sports, a good education would ensure a high standard of life in some other profession. There may be some sports which will never deliver the kind of monetary returns that cricket does. An alternate post-retirement career path for students who pursue such sports is also required. A second change must come from employers. It is important to recognise that people who have spent a long time playing professional or even semi-professional

sport bring certain skills like teamwork, discipline and problem solving which the bookish type with a plethora of degrees may not. They should have an equal pathway to professional success outside sports. Employers must give credit for years spent in professional sport as work experience so that they are not disadvantaged vis-à-vis those who began a professional non-sports career at an earlier age.

It is interesting how so many sports persons in India end up in clerical or relatively low level jobs in government. Before winning her Silver Olympic medal Mirabai Chanu was a ticket collector in the Railways. Some others are junior commissioned officers of the armed forces. Perhaps Subedar Neeraj Chopra will now rise up the ranks after winning an Olympic Gold, but suppose he had not, should there not have been a pathway for him to become a commissioned officer?

That even some of our non-Gold Olympic medalists have expressed their wish to get a government job above all else shows what little economic prospects there are for toiling sports persons who don't capture the nation's imagination with a Gold.

Champions exist because the rest of us are average. In the quest for gold, let us not forget the rest.

The writer is chief economist, Vedanta



AUGUST 17, 1981, FORTY YEARS AGO

BITTER FIGHT AHEAD

ON THE EVE of the Monsoon Session of Parliament, the government and Opposition appeared all set for a confrontation over the Essential Services Maintenance Ordinance promulgated last month. While Prime Minister Indira Gandhi warned the Congress (I) Parliamentary Party meeting of a stormy session ahead, Opposition leaders got together in a hurry to chalk out a floor coordination programme to oppose tooth and nail the government on the utter failure on the price front. A symposium on television, "Issues before Parliament" also gave an indication of things to come when the tone and tenor of the spokesperson of the two sides made it abun-

dantly clear that there would be a bitter fight over these issues. Leaders of major communist and non-communist parties met on August 16 and decided to mount a united attack on the government.

UP MINISTERS RESIGN

CHEDALAL CHAUDHARY, UP minister for social welfare and two ministers of state K P Tewari and Ajit Singh Sethi resigned from the state cabinet. Chaudhary and Sethi said they have resigned on personal grounds while Tewari quit after his election to the Lok Sabha. However, it is learnt that Chaudhary and Sethi were asked to quit by the Chief Minister who was not satisfied with their performance.

AFGHAN TALKS

IN A MAJOR new development in Afghanistan, the Babrak Karmal government and the Pakistan government have agreed to pursue talks with UN officials to resolve the situation in the country. Tehran has refused to participate in any negotiation till the Soviet Union withdraws from Afghanistan.

DACOITS KILLED

IN A MAJOR swoop on August 17, the Delhi Police claimed to have arrested three members of the notorious Tyagi gang responsible for gruesome killings and dacoity. Vinod Tyagi, the kingpin, was arrested earlier.

11 THE IDEAS PAGE

Her own land

Gender equal land rights remain a distant goal 75 years after Independence



BINA AGARWAL

SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS AFTER India's Independence, 65 years after the passing of the Hindu Succession Act (HSA), 1956, and 15 years after the enactment of the Hindu Succession Amendment Act (HSAA), 2005, are Indian women anywhere near equality in owning agricultural land, the most important property in rural India?

The case for women's land rights is as strong today as it was at Independence. A large global literature shows that owning land would enhance a women's well-being, improve children's health and education, reduce domestic violence, raise farm productivity, increase family food security, and empower women socially and politically. Gender-equal land rights is also a key target in SDG 5 on gender equality. Yet policy is far behind.

I first made a strong case for women having independent rights in agricultural land in my 1994 book, *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*, and traced inequalities in both law and practice across five countries. There was little prior research then. In 1956, the HSA had given Hindu women substantial rights in property, but two major inequalities remained. First, the inheritance of agricultural land devolved according to land reform laws which were highly gender unequal, especially in six northern states. Second, daughters were excluded from coparcenary rights in joint family property. In 1976, Kerala abolished joint property altogether while between 1986 and 1994, four states (Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Maharashtra) amended the HSA to recognise unmarried daughters as coparceners on par with sons. But the discriminatory clause for agricultural land remained. The HSAA 2005, however, following a civil society campaign that I led, brought about gender equality in law on both counts across all states.

What about practice? Until recently this question could not be answered, given a lack of gender-disaggregated data on land ownership. Neither the agricultural census nor the NSSO surveys on ownership holdings disaggregate by gender, and people often incorrectly cite gender figures on operational holdings as ownership figures. Some smaller data sets provide limited insights. Now, however, we have more answers. Using ICRISAT's longitudinal data (2009-2014) for nine states, I analysed with two colleagues (Pervesh Anthwal and Malvika Mahesh) "How many and which women own land in India". Our paper in the *Journal of Development Studies*, April 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2021.1887478>, does not bring good news.

Before I share the results, two points are worth noting. First, to effectively assess inter-gender (male-female) gaps in land ownership we need not one but several measures such as: What percentage of rural landowning households have women owners? What percentage of all landowners are women? What percentage of women own land and how much land, relative to men? Second, we need to ask: Which women in the family own land? Legally today under Hindu law, both daughters and widows have equal inheritance rights in a man's separate property, but daughters additionally have shares in joint family property. Although legal



C.R. Sasikumar

amendments have expanded daughters' rights, socially widow's rights have always carried greater legitimacy, since the time of the *Dharmashastras*.

In our study — the first for India — we covered both inter-gender gaps in land ownership and intra-gender differences between women. Despite significant advancement in inheritance laws, women were found to own land in only 16 per cent of the sampled 1,114 rural landowning households, and just 8.4 per cent of all females owned land, averaged across states. Overall, women constituted barely 14 per cent of all landowners and owned only 11 per cent of the land, with an average area of 1.24 ha relative to 1.66 ha for men. These figures changed rather little over 2009-2014.

Also, strikingly, most of the landowning women had acquired land through their marital families, typically as widows and not as daughters through parents, despite the legal strengthening of daughters' rights since Independence. Very few women were co-owners in joint family property, and over half the owners of both genders were aged 50 or more. Hence, even women who own land receive it too late in life to notably improve their well-being or bargaining power in families.

There are of course state-wise differences (the dataset did not include Kerala). Female landowners constituted 32 per cent of all landowners in Telangana but only 6 per cent in Odisha. Telangana's success lies in a long history of government and NGO efforts to help women acquire land. N.T. Rama Rao, thrice chief minister of undivided Andhra Pradesh, introduced policies to help women, especially Dalit women, acquire land in groups. He was behind Andhra's early amendment of the HSA

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1956 to make unmarried daughters coparceners in joint family property. But laws alone are not enough. For example, in Maharashtra, which made a similar amendment in 1994, only 11 per cent of landowners are female. What we need is a change in rigid social attitudes.

Fathers fear losing control over land if given to married daughters. Daughters fear damaging family relations if they claim their shares. Policymakers say they fear land fragmentation. But relations based on gross inequality are already damaged. And ownership need not cause fragmentation if plots are still cultivated together by families, as is common in northwest India, or with neighbours.

Looking ahead, we urgently need more gender-disaggregated data on land ownership, and innovative policies to increase women's actual ownership. Telangana's example shows that state leadership, starting with chief ministers, can make a big difference. So can civil society. Women themselves need to raise their claims more vocally, as they did in the 1930s and '40s. Notably, despite vast numbers of women joining the ongoing protests against farm laws, we hear barely a whisper about their claims in family land.

Also new ideas deserve attention, such as joint ownership and group cultivation (which can bring scale economies). Group farming by women is already practised in several states, including Kerala, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Bihar and West Bengal. The idea of group ownership still awaits attention.

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WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Today, more public sector investment, a job guarantee for the long-term unemployed and mini-furlough schemes could help kickstart and smooth the process of creative destruction."

— THE GUARDIAN

It's Congress that needs repair

Instead of disrupting Parliament and practising vote-bank politics, party must reflect on its decline



RAVI SHANKAR PRASAD

DEMOCRACY IS indeed the best form of government, in spite of some shortcomings. Debate, discussion, bipartisanship and accountability are significant traits of this form of government. However, respecting the popular mandate constitutes its cornerstone. In fact, in the last 74 years, the biggest lesson of independent India is that people know they can change a government led by any party or leader through the power of the vote. The real problem of the Congress party, including its leader Sonia Gandhi, is the refusal to acknowledge the back-to-back mandate Prime Minister Narendra Modi received in 2014 and 2019. The tone and tenor of her article, 'In need of repair' (IE, August 6) reinforces this point.

The Congress, having dominated the polity for so many years, is reluctant to reconcile with its present status: It failed to get the numbers to be acknowledged as the leading Opposition party in the Lok Sabha. Recent Vidhan Sabha elections, too, confirm the party's consistent decline. An otherwise great party has become a family concern. Curiously, Mrs Gandhi wrote her article on a day when a woman leader left her party and another leader questioned the ability of some family members to lead the party.

In his very first prime ministerial address on August 15, 2014, PM Modi gave due credit to all the previous prime ministers, including Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, besides recognising the role of other giants of our freedom struggle, like Sardar Patel and Lal Bahadur Shastri. He appreciated their role in this year's address too. However, it was surprising to see Sonia Gandhi mentioning Patel and Subhas Chandra Bose in her article. After independence, the Congress governments led by the Gandhis had ignored these leaders' contributions in the making of modern India. Patel, who unified India, died in 1950, but he was given the Bharat Ratna only after 41 years, in 1991. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, another giant of the freedom movement, died in 1958 and he got the Bharat Ratna only in 1992. The prime minister in 1991-92 was P.V. Narasimha Rao, a non-family leader. The insult meted out to Rao after his death is well known — his body was not allowed to be kept in the Congress office in New Delhi. When Mrs Gandhi talks about the need to repair institutions, she would be well advised to repair the institution that was the Congress in the past.

Yes, debates are very important in Parliament. The government had repeatedly offered to debate all the issues, ranging from the farm laws to price rise and from Covid to Pegasus. However, papers were thrown at

the Chair, members were blocked from speaking, Parliamentary staff and marshals were physically abused and documents were snatched from the Minister of Electronics and Information Technology when he was making a statement on the Pegasus issue. Many issues of national importance were not allowed to be raised. Congress members, along with MPs from other parties, climbed on the table in the Rajya Sabha and threw the rule book at the Chair and then publicly justified this. A forcible attempt was made throughout the Monsoon Session to disallow Parliament from functioning so that the government could be embarrassed.

Parliament is meant for debate, but legislative work is also important. Bills to strengthen the Juvenile Justice Act, protect small investors' investments in the banks and undo retrospective tax were all important. If the Congress could participate in the debate on the OBC Bill, what prevented them from participating in debates over other Bills?

Mrs Gandhi has to answer for her party's flip-flop on the fight against Covid. In the last session, there was a good debate in the Rajya Sabha. Why was this not allowed to happen in the Lok Sabha? The PM called the leaders of all the political parties for an extensive briefing on the fight against Covid. Why did the Congress boycott it? Is it not a fact that in the last one year, Rahul Gandhi has done his best to mock, oppose and derail the government's efforts in the fight against Covid? When a 'Made in India' vaccine is today being recognised as a global success story, did he not make fun of it? The PM personally visited the vaccine laboratories and inspired them to work harder. This shows leadership. Today, 55 crore Covid vaccine doses have been administered, an impressive figure as 25 per cent of India's population is below the age of 12.

Mrs Gandhi talks of inclusive politics in her article. Then why did a party under her leadership oppose a Bill to ban triple talaq? I need to remind you, Soniji, that in 1986, the Congress made dowry harassment a non-bailable offence (which was a good step) and in the same year reversed the Shah Bano judgment. It is vote bank and not inclusive policy that governs the Congress — be it about Shah Bano or Shayara Bano.

Today, initiatives like direct benefit transfer, Ujjwala Yojana, Digital India, Ayushman Bharat, digital payments etc, are empowering the common person. When 80 crore Indians are being given free rations without any religious bias, it shows *sabka saath sabka vikas*. Middlemen no longer play a role in the government's decisions. The way the country's safety and security has been assured and the way Jammu and Kashmir has seen the unfurling of the Tricolour in every corner shows a resurgent India under the leadership of PM Modi. Congress leaders had even questioned the courage and sacrifice of our armed forces during Uri and Balakot. Really, it is the Congress which is in urgent need of repair.

The writer is member of Lok Sabha from BJP and a former union minister

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

ROAD AHEAD

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'India's road ahead: The challenge and compass' (IE, August 16). The Prime Minister's policy slogan "*sabka saath sabka vikas*" has failed to achieve the *vikas* (development) of *sabka* (all). But his addition of "*sabka vishwas*" (trust of all) and now "*sabka prayas*" (efforts of all) aims at the involvement of the people and government together. But the PM should also realise that such a joint effort is not possible unless his governance gains the trust of every citizen and ensures full inclusiveness as enshrined in the Constitution.

Y.G. Chouksey, Pune

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'India's road ahead: The challenge and compass' (IE, August 16). On Independence Day, we were shaken by Kabul's fall to an ascendant Taliban, which in turn makes us ponder the true value of freedom. We must never forget that even the fundamental Right to Freedom of Speech & Expression is a logical corollary of the independence we wrested from the colonial powers. It pains one to see how for granted do we treat our independence, the struggles made to gain it and the ones who never cared about their lives so that we could breathe under a free sky.

Vinay Saroha, Delhi

A DEAF CENTRE

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'Next 25 years crucial for India's development: PM' (IE, August 16). When the prices of petrol are skyrocketing and people are reeling under dire financial straits, accomplishing the goals stated by the PM

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is easier said than done. Bills are rushed through Parliament sans discussion and deliberation. The government should focus on democratic decision making and not mar the world's largest democracy.

Aanya Singhal, Noida

SCIENCE & RELIGION

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'RSS chief: Will have to bow to China if dependence rises' (IE, Aug 16). Mohan Bhagwat's reference to the internet acknowledged that we don't have original technology it comes from outside — this contradicts Biplab Kumar Dev's claim that the internet and satellites existed during the Mahabharata. Bhagwat calling for mass production by masses is good, but one ought to underscore that, unlike India, China had negated religion as the opium of the masses.

L.R. Murmu, Delhi

Start up and stand tall

New ecosystem can help India become a powerhouse of global economy



BYJU RAVEENDRAN

INDIA HOLDS a unique position in the world for several reasons, and having one of the youngest populations is perhaps the most pivotal. With 62 per cent of the population in the working age group and 54 per cent below the age of 25, we have the advantage of leveraging the skill and ability of our youth to drive the nation forward through productive output and innovation.

While India has historically and culturally been an entrepreneurially-driven nation, the last decade-and-a-half has witnessed a significant change in the landscape — from the founding of new startups, to global investor interest, to the advances made in infrastructure and policies. In 2021 alone, Indian startups have so far raised upward of \$20 billion in funding, achieved unicorn statuses, and more.

The proliferation of this startup ecosystem has brought with it new business opportunities, innovation, tech-centric approaches and job creation across sectors. While the flow of investments from traditional industries into tech-focused sectors has been instrumental for entrepreneurs, India's own growing tech prowess has had an inspirational journey in the last few decades.

From 2011, when India's first private company achieved unicorn status, to being on track to have a 50-plus strong "Unicorn club" in 2021 according to Nasscom, the country now finds itself at the epicentre of entrepreneurship.

A mature startup ecosystem, with seasoned entrepreneurs and technology-led solutions, paves the way for innovation and expanding

its global footprint. And if we look back at the seven-and-a-half decades since India's independence, the economy has rapidly diversified and grown beyond agriculture to become a potential technology powerhouse, where entrepreneurs are creating world-class products and services to solve real-time challenges.

While value creation lies at the centre of entrepreneurship, Indian startups are also taking big strides in building synergies and partnerships with global entities, further demonstrating the evolution of the startup ecosystem and its appetite for innovation, collaboration and disruption.

Even amid the Covid-19 pandemic, Indian startups have so far raised upward of \$20 billion in funding, achieved unicorn statuses, and more.

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force, increased expendable income, and rising capital inflows have collectively contributed in large part. Today, India is home to more than 40,000 startups and is building a robust tech and internet infrastructure. Moreover, the ability of the young generation to take risks, move fast, and disrupt things without fear, has become our biggest asset today. The fact that Indian startups are becoming global entities by creating products and solutions for world markets is a testament to this approach.

From industrial conglomerates, banks, automobile giants, software pioneers to tech startups, India has been steadily scripting its growth story.

Global investors too are realising the potential upside in India's huge, under-penetrated market as the country steadily makes a place for itself as a leading R&D hub for many Silicon Valley companies. However, in order to transition beyond the current capabilities and achieve the demographic dividend, education, and reskilling, and upskilling of our workforce is crucial. We must also recognise and acknowledge that apart from the domestic policy environment, the global environment and technological advances are also changing, and it is imperative that India is prepared for this revolution. And so, apart from policy-level decisions that promote entrepreneurship, the onus is also on

India's corporate sector to foster entrepreneurship, and create synergies to build impactful technology solutions, sustainable and resource-efficient growth.

With Indians set to make up one-fifth of the world's working-age population in the next five years and likely to have an estimated 850 million internet users by 2030, the country stands at the cusp of unprecedented economic growth, and the opportunity to be a global game-changer. Speed, inclusion, and sustainability are key elements in this mission, as is the youth of the country. Coupled with the nation's focus on strengthening digital infrastructure in healthcare and education, and boosting employment in manufacturing, there is little doubt that India@100 will be a powerhouse of the global economy.

The collective future efforts of the public and private sectors to improve physical and digital connectivity will also help unlock the untapped potential of rural and semi-urban India to truly lead Industry 4.0 and beyond.

In view of achieving this transformation at scale, the Indian startup ecosystem must focus on developing solutions that allow businesses in key sectors to meet goals of national importance. It also must view India's economic and social challenges as opportunities for growth and leverage new technologies. While India@75 is on the precipice of change, I hope for a golden era of global entrepreneurship, technology, and innovation for India@100.

The writer is founder & CEO, BYJU'S