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A bridge from Kolkata to Dhaka

The impasse is a result of the state government's opposition to the Teesta

The Indian government laid out all the symbolic and financial gifts it could think of for the visiting Bangladesh prime minister, Sheikh Hasina Wajed. Understandably, Dhaka is at the centre of any number of crucial programmes of the Narendra Modi government whether it is the political stabilisation and integration of the Northeast, the east-west land connectivity projects designed to link India to Myanmar and beyond, and the ambitious plans to make India's eastern shoreline a trading hub again. Bangladesh is also at the forefront of India's security concerns given the increasing attempts by any number of Islamicist terror groups to make inroads in that country. Which is why it is all the more unfortunate that the Modi government was unable to provide Sheikh Hasina what she needed the most: a credible roadmap towards an agreement on the Teesta river waters. With her own elections coming up, the Awami League leader has been banking on such an agreement to deflect the inevitable criticism that will arise over her closeness to New Delhi. She will at least be able to show off the land border agreement and maritime border settlement — but Teesta would have helped seal a remarkable turnaround in Indo-Bangladesh relations.

The present impasse over Teesta is largely a consequence of the opposition of the West Bengal government and, vicariously, the problems it has with Sikkim over the same river. It is a strong reminder why successive attempts to establish a permanent rapprochement between India and its smaller neighbours have failed: the fact that State governments are important and often difficult stakeholders in such relations. The most extreme example of this was the manner Tamil Nadu politics severely distorted New Delhi's attempts to handle the Sri Lankan civil war. A more recent example is how a fear that Madhesi opposition to a flawed Nepalese constitution would lead to a political overspill in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar led to India to support a de facto blockade.

Prime Minister Modi has the political capital to resolve the river dispute to the satisfaction of all three sides. Presumably he will seek to do so when the opportunity arises. In the meantime, he is right to boost Sheikh Hasina at home by making it clear how important she is to India. Nonetheless, he should not expect her to wait forever. Which means the real bilateral diplomatic challenge is working out the differences between New Delhi and Kolkata.

A solution on the table

Chief minister Yogi Adityanath's proposed cut-price canteens could help lessen urban distress

When the Yogi Adityanath government began the controversial "anti-Romeo" drive, many — fearing vigilantism — remarked that the CM should instead spend his energies on devising an 'anti-hunger' drive. It seems the CM has heard them: The UP government is planning to start cut-price canteens for the poor. Under the 'Anapurna Bhojnalya', the government will provide meals priced at ₹ 3 and ₹ 5 respectively. The idea of such a scheme is not new: Former Uttar Pradesh chief minister Akhilesh Yadav launched a pilot project for providing subsidised meals to labourers at construction sites. However, it did not take off.

While the Uttar Pradesh government has not come out with the final plan for cheap canteens, logistically speaking, the outlets would probably be in the urban areas, at least in the initial phase. In fact, targeting the urban poor is of critical importance since the overwhelming focus in India seems to be on the rural poor. But increasingly urban poverty is becoming a serious problem across the world. This trend is especially pronounced in India, where the World Bank estimates that up to 55% of people lived in urban settings in 2010, far more than the official rate of 31%. The problem is that while people come to cities hoping for employment and a better quality of life, most end up with low-wage jobs in the unorganised sector, and live in slums, which have little or no access to basic services such as water, sanitation, power and waste management.

Reports also suggest that a higher proportion of rural residents are covered by social safety nets than urban ones. For the urban poor, expenses on food comprise a large share of their total expenditure, but they are mostly dependent on the vagaries of informal employment. In such a scenario, putting a safety net in place for the urban poor, as the Uttar Pradesh government is planning, is a positive move, which, if implemented properly, can work wonders to alleviate poverty.

Shifting sands in the Valley

The unrest is moving towards villages, making south Kashmir the new centre of militancy, writes DAVID DEVADAS

The mass revolt against the by-election process, in which at least eight persons were killed by security forces on Sunday, gave another distressing glimpse of how far removed from the ground reality intelligence agencies are — not to speak of the political class in Kashmir. A tour through the most sensitive areas in south Kashmir last week revealed that it was common knowledge that the elections would trigger revolt and violence. Yet, politicians were building castles in the air. And former J&K chief minister and National Conference president Farooq Abdullah played with fire.

It is time our rulers realise that the stage is getting set in Kashmir for hostilities more intense than any since early November 1947 — when tribesmen from Pakistan were pushed back from Srinagar. The tactics are more sophisticated than those tribesmen's. The heavy casualties that resulted last month when the army was lured into a trap with false information gave a glimpse of a multi-pronged strategy. Worse could lie ahead, for group messaging services have urged young people to use apps to inform militants about security forces' movements.

Warnings to local policemen since 2015, to resign or at least take desk jobs, are now being followed through: some policemen's homes were recently trashed. This trend could at some point have a major impact on the morale of the force. The contours of a psychological war are emerging.

Grassroots political activists too have been targeted. The recent discovery of the tortured body of a former panch, who had been an enthusiastic public activist, terrified many Kashmiri officers. They fear that the arena of politics has become a death trap. Although the majority in Kashmir still do not want the new militancy to escalate, such targeting of those whom terrorists label as 'collaborators' will coerce

co-option.

The most challenging current pattern is the rallying of neighbourhoods to defend militants during their encounters with soldiers — and stone-pelting to prevent army cordons. The trend was bound to push the army to fire at those crowds. That first happened on 14 February 2016, a year after this pattern emerged. Firing has now become more common.

Geographically, the most significant new pattern is a shift to the outback. Kupwara district, for instance, has become a hotbed of unrest over the past year. Apart from the Lolab area, Kupwara during the 1990s was rarely more than a route through which militants infiltrated, or Kashmiri youth crossed the Line of Control for training. South Kashmir is the new centre of militancy. Nawa, for instance, in the north of Pulwama district, was over the past few years the base for such key militants as the Pakistani Abu Qasim — whose body two villages sought for burial, and whose funeral thousands of truculent youth from three districts attended in November 2015.

The unrest that followed the killing of militant commander Burhan Wani was centred in such hamlets and villages, rather than cities. In fact, as spring brings the promise of a new season of earnings and education, many residents of Srinagar are resisting calls for shutdowns. Some even abuse the 'leaders' in whose names these are called.

During the post-Burhan uprising, a complex set of nodes was established to decentralise command and control. Local leaders of Hurriyat outfits took control of many areas. In some, activists of the Jamaat-e-Islami did. The command abilities of all these having been tested, many of them will call the shots this year too — coordinated by whichever shadowy figures are in charge overall.

Syed Ali Shah Geelani and Mirwaiz Umar Farooq are not



■ A group of youth pelting stones on security forces. It is time our rulers realise that the stage is getting set in Kashmir for hostilities even more intense than early November 1947 — when tribesmen from Pakistan were pushed back from Srinagar

in charge. They have become masks of leadership. A key part of the unfolding strategy was to force the publicly acknowledged faces of the freedom struggle to 'unite'. After prolonged and intense pressure from Pakistan, this was achieved a little before Burhan was killed. That closed the door for negotiations — as a delegation of MPs discovered last September. Other kinds of unity were brought into place during the post-Burhan uprising. In many places, Ahle-Hadith, Jamaat-e-Islami, 'Barelvi' and other sects began to pray together. In the chief minister's native Bijbehara, for instance, these various sects jointly took over the town's Jamia mosque, ousting the Imam whose family had presided over that mosque for four generations with patronage from the state establishment. Some of these sects have mushroomed over the past decade. Their rivalries could have stymied the current mobilisation, but have effectively been put on hold.

Even more striking is the united functioning of militant groups, mainly the Jamaat-e-Islami-affiliated Hizb-ul-Mujahideen and Hafiz Sayeed's Lashkar-e-Toiba. Not only do they operate jointly, both now seem to have local as well as foreign militants — generally in a 2:1 ratio.

Predictably, locking up thousands of youth last September has not helped. Scores of fresh youth in south Kashmir have taken up arms since Burhan was killed. Many of them, even 'commanders,' are teenagers. Many more would join their ranks if an adequate supply of arms became available.

The die is now cast. The government seems to have frittered away the opportunity to develop effective counter-strategies during the pause this winter. Like a robot, it is shuffling into the cul de sac of having to use heavy duty tactical options. This is a dangerous turn of events.

David Devadas is a senior journalist based in Kashmir. The views expressed are personal.

newsmaker

LALU YADAV, Rashtriya Janata Dal leader

▶ HALF OF THE SHARE IN THE MALL BEING BUILT WILL BE OF THE BUILDER, WHILE THE REMAINING HALF WILL BE THAT OF THE COMPANY. THEY [HIS SONS TEJ PRATAP AND TEJASWAI YADAV, ACCUSED OF GRAFT IN PATNA MALL SCANDAL] HAVE THE RIGHT TO DO BUSINESS BECAUSE I DON'T WANT THEM TO DIE IN POVERTY.

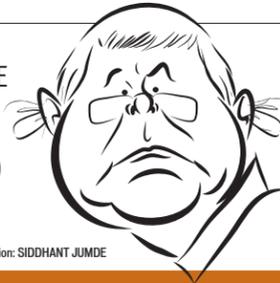


Illustration: SIDDHANT JUMBE

THINK IT OVER »

THE MOST REWARDING THINGS YOU DO IN LIFE ARE OFTEN THE ONES THAT LOOK LIKE THEY CANNOT BE DONE.

ARNOLD PALMER

We don't need an Indian propaganda channel

Vidya Subramanian

Apparently there's a conspiracy afoot in the "international media" to defame the glorious land of India. Hacks in "elite English media" just want to talk about the rise of Hindu extremism and the increased number of murders being committed against people from minority communities on the suspicion of beef-eating and cow smuggling. Also, these foreigners seem to hate it when we democratically elect Hindu hardliners to positions of authority, writing editorials about the "perilous embrace of Hindu extremists" like the *New York Times* did.

To rectify this mudslinging on the nation, the Prasar Bharati is considering establishing a Goebelsian propaganda apparatus in the form of a digital channel to tell the "India story" to challenge "the anti-India narrative in foreign media". This will presumably enable us to put out "alternative" narratives about the many great things that are happening in the country that are not about Hindu terrorists. It will not be, for instance, about

racist attacks on black students living in Greater Noida or the fact that the voter turnout in a Kashmir by-election was only 6%.

An initial estimate puts the cost of this new digital channel at over ₹75 crore, and it is pegged to be India's "answer" to foreign news media channels such as the BBC, CNN, and Al Jazeera. Prasar Bharati chairman A Surya Prakash has been quoted as saying, "We must begin to see the world through an Indian lens. We need a digital platform that will help us find our place among major news channels of the world, which have their own agenda," an agenda to malign us, obviously.

A different 'answer' to international criticism of the cow problem plaguing India could have been to actually do something about the spate of violence that we have seen in recent times by *gau rakshaks*; and invest a fraction of the ₹75 crore earmarked for propaganda in enforcing the law and putting the fear of the Constitution into these mobs masquerading as protectors of Hinduism.

But the Prasar Bharati obviously believes that nothing is going to be done to assuage

the insecurity among minorities by the state or central governments. Because if there could be stories of strong government action against Hindutva hooligans, there would be no need for pushing 'alternative' narratives.

This seeming need to be constantly patted on the head by the 'international media' betrays an insecurity that cannot be resolved by putting out propaganda. For a country plagued by fundamental problems such as poverty, malnutrition, unemployment, a terrible education system, deep rooted caste problems, and an increasingly communalised public discourse to invest a substantial amount of money to seek international media approval for being a "diverse and vibrant democracy" is problematic.

As the largest public broadcasting agency in India, the Prasar Bharati would do better to focus on awareness campaigns within India for better sanitation, healthcare, and rural issues; than as an Indian government propaganda machine for the English-speaking western world.

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innervoice

Love symbolises compassion and empathy

PP Wangchuk

That love is the most powerful thing in the world is undisputed. Love symbolises compassion, sympathy, empathy, help and all other good things. The other day, while travelling, I heard some people talking about the magic of love and how it is the only 'medicine' for all kinds of ills on this planet. The more you give, the more you get in terms of satisfaction, contentment and happiness.

The significance of the word 'love' can be understood from its antonym, 'hatred'. While hatred consumes us like cancer, love makes us bloom into a sensible, compassionate, forgiving and perfect human being.

Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, had said: "Unless the personality (within us) has love, it sickens and dies. The more love and goodwill you emanate and exude, the more comes back to you."

Long ago, I got to understand the importance of love in a very 'touching' way. I was told that dogs understand our feelings when they are close to us. If you have love for them, they will love you too. And, if you have hatred and desire to harm them, they will start barking and attacking you! Poet Robert Browning says love is all that matters because, "without it, our earth will be just a tomb." That means it is love that makes life for us meaningful, purposeful and enjoyable. Therefore, our first and foremost duty is to walk the path of love because that is the only truthful walk. That is why Canadian poet Wayne Chirisa says: "To model the path of love is to model the representation of God..."

Inner Voice comprises contributions from our readers.

The views expressed are personal

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mixedbag

Draft rules won't undermine the RTI Act

Everyone has a right to get the information sought by an applicant, even if that person were to die

Shailesh Gandhi

The government issued a circular on March 31 proposing changes to the right to information (RTI) Act. Most citizens and the media have shown considerable concern at these and there has been a feeling that the government is trying to emasculate RTI. Most people and institutions hail transparency for others, but are reluctant to give information about themselves. For this reason, I am suspicious when changes are sought to be made in RTI.

In the draft rules the most controversial is rule 12, which proposes that a second appeal can be withdrawn by the appellant and it would abate on the death of an appellant. This appears to be in the belief that when the seeker of information does not want the information it need not be given. By the same logic when she dies, it cannot be given to the applicant.

It has not been appreciated that the

information sought in RTI belongs to all citizens since they own the government and information held by it. Thus everyone has the right to get the information which is sought by an applicant. Allowing withdrawal of RTI appeals would be a direct encouragement to undesirable pressure on applicants, and deal making. This proposed rule should be modified to state that when an appeal is withdrawn or an appellant dies, the information sought shall be placed on the website.

Some have made the charge that the rules increase the fees. When a large amount of information is sought, it is reasonable if the applicant pays for the postage. Similarly there has been some concern at the information seeking being restricted to 500 words. From my experience I can state that this is adequate for most cases. In some rare cases where there is a real need for a longer RTI application two applications could be filed, which

would lead to an additional fee of ₹10.

The draft rules have a provision for the commission to convert a complaint into a second appeal. This is a positive provision. However, Section 13(1)(i) requires that a RTI application must accompany every complaint. This requirement should be removed.

The rules require an appeal or complaint to be made to the commission in double spacing. This should be changed since it would lead to wastage of paper. On the balance, this does not appear to be a move to consciously dilute the law and its efficacy. If rule 12 is changed to mandate placing on the website information sought by any appellant who has died, it would be a balanced set of rules.

(For a full version of this article visit www.hindustantimes.com)
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The views expressed are personal