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comment

Add safety to scholarships

India's soft power path can work only if African students feel safe

India continues to be a study in contrast in its relations with Africa and Africans. The human resources development minister, Prakash Javadekar, announced at the recent African Development Bank annual meeting in Gujarat that India would double the number of scholarships it offers to Africans to an impressive 50,000 over the next five years. He should have also considered announcing that India would counter deep-seated racist sentiment against Africans present among many Indians.

The scholarships will help Indians win hearts and minds in Africa, a continent that is becoming economically and strategically ever more important to India. There are already a number of long-standing programmes of scholarships, technical education and military training between India and many African countries. These have been highly rated by Africans and have helped India leave a positive image with African elites. Three of Nigeria's presidents are alumni of India's military academies. It is not uncommon to find cabinet ministers in English-speaking African countries who have spent time in Indian institutes of research and education. Unfortunately, much of this goodwill is subsequently frittered away by periodic stories of Africans being attacked by mobs of Indians — in a few cases, some of them even being killed. A more insidious effect is the social ostracisation, verbal abuse and petty discrimination that Africans living in India face on a daily basis.

Africans are unfortunately often the recipients of discriminatory behaviour across the world. The World Values Survey, however, rates India as the second-most racially intolerant society in a poll of 80 countries across the world. Over 43% of Indians say they would not live next to someone of a different race. Not even Pakistan and Bangladesh rate as badly as India does. India may pride itself as representing an ancient civilisation, home of the some of most advanced moral philosophies ever developed but in the 21st century it needs to do much more to accept and counter its own dark side.

Patriarchy is forcing women out of jobs

To ensure growth, the State must explore ways to get them into the workforce

The World Bank's India Development Report, which was released on Monday, has said India has one of the world's lowest female participation in the workforce, ranking 120th among 131 countries. It added that the while overall job creation has been limited, most of the new ones have been grabbed by men given the social norms. And this is not all: The participation level of women has been dropping since 2005, despite having 42% women who are graduates.

Despite high levels of educational attainment and also declining fertility rates, women seem to be missing from the formal economy. Research done by Rohini Pande, a professor of public policy at Harvard University, sheds light on why it is critical to have more women in the workforce: Working, and the control of assets it allows, lowers rates of domestic violence and increases women's decision-making in the household. Her analysis of data shows that over a third of women engaged primarily in household work want a job but they don't get or are not allowed to do thanks to "persistence of India's traditional gender norms, which seek to ensure "purity" of women by protecting them from men other than their husbands and restrict mobility outside their homes". The other challenges include: Lack of access to traditional male-dominated job networks and also the fact that women often end up in lower-paid and less-responsible positions than their abilities would otherwise allow them — which, in turn, makes it less likely that they will choose to work at all.

In the recent times, the discussion in India has been overwhelmingly on lack of jobs. While that is a real challenge, policymakers must also invest energy to figure out ways to ensure that women have the opportunity to undertake rewarding work — "work that will allow them to determine the course of their own lives, those of their families and that of their country," as Ms Pande writes in an article.

Modi is here for another seven years

The PM is probably even more popular today than he was when he was first elected

VIR SANGHVI

In October 2013, several months before the Lok Sabha elections were due, I wrote, on this page, that Indians had already decided that Narendra Modi would be the next prime minister. Now, with the next Lok Sabha poll still two years away, I'll make another prediction. Most Indians believe that Modi will win the next election and, therefore, a second term as prime minister.

This is not an overly extravagant claim. Opinion polls by various research agencies published over the last week suggest that there is no anti-incumbency factor. Modi is probably even more popular today than he was when he was first elected. The latest survey suggests that if a general election were to be held now, the NDA would win 48% of the vote (far more than in 2014) and over 300 seats. In the two years that remain before polls are due, can the Opposition reverse this state of affairs? In theory, yes. But in practice, it is difficult to defeat Modi.

There are several reasons for this, many of

which the Opposition either does not see or fails to recognise.

The first and most important is leadership. It is no accident that Modi rose to national prominence in 2011/12 at a time when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh seemed especially ineffectual and uninspiring. Sonia Gandhi was ill and had gone abroad for treatment. And it was not clear what Rahul Gandhi's role was.

In the five years since then nobody has seemed like a credible challenger to Modi's charisma and aura of strength. The public mood is anti-dynasty (at election after election, dynasts from all parties have been trounced), no new leaders have emerged and the one politician who offered a fresh alternative — Arvind Kejriwal — has seen his aura fade. The second reason for Modi's continuing popularity is that he has not betrayed the central theme of his appeal: Anti-corruption. Few people believe that the prime minister is personally greedy and there hasn't been one significant, corruption scandal during the life of his government.

But the Opposition's main problem is that Modi is a far shrewder politician than his rivals. We forget now how different a prime minister he is now from the man who first took office. Then, he wanted to be an international statesman, sought to make peace with Pakistan and moved legislation that benefited Indian industry. That kind of prime minister



Swiftly and deftly, Narendra Modi has recast his prime ministership

was easier to attack. Rahul Gandhi's best moments came when he portrayed the government as a "suit-boot ki sarkar." Others made fun of Modi's global ambitions. Nothing much came of his foreign travels, of his meetings with the Chinese and American presidents, and of his overtures to Nawaz Sharif. But swiftly and deftly, almost without the Opposition realising it, Modi has recast his prime ministership. He no longer bothers to cultivate the CII, the businessmen who once seemed close have discreetly moved away, the foreign policy ambitions have been scaled

down and his focus has moved from his original middle class core constituency to India's poor.

Economists may argue about the merits of demonetisation — as indeed they did about Indira Gandhi's nationalisation of the banks — but there is no doubt that with that one move, Modi has successfully re-invented himself as the scourge of the corrupt rich and as a prime minister who will reboot the economy while wiping out the accumulated hoards of black money.

The Opposition can argue — as it did in the 1971 election when it fought Indira Gandhi on bank nationalisation — that economic gimmicks will actually damage the economy in the long run. But nobody is listening. The battle for the public imagination has already been won.

So what is the Opposition's best hope? Well, if history is anything to go by, Modi can only be felled by unforeseen events that we have no control over. Mrs Gandhi's goodwill disappeared after the global oil price hike of 1973 which ravaged the Indian economy. Rajiv Gandhi's massive mandate was punctured by Swedish Radio's claims about kickbacks in the Bofors scandal.

So yes, it is entirely possible that something startling will come out of nowhere to damage Modi. In such situations, it does not matter who leads the Opposition: In 1977 and 1989, the victory was shared by squabbling little men. But unless that happens, we are looking at seven more years of Narendra Modi. And there is very little that the Opposition can do about it.

The views expressed are personal

DIRTY PICTURE



The Uttar Pradesh government has identified 27 polluting industrial units along the course of river Gomti, a major tributary of the Ganges

Shut all escape routes for polluting industries

The central government must not allow such companies to regularise their operations by paying a token fine

B KARTHIK NAVAYAN

The ministry of environment, forests and climate change (MoEFCC) has for three years now watered down the requirement for various industrial projects to conduct public hearings with affected communities. And they don't seem to be done yet.

Recently, the ministry announced a six-month period for industrial projects that have been operating in violation of environmental laws to effectively obtain post-facto clearances. What this means is that projects that have deliberately flouted the law can now pay a penalty and regularise operations.

Worse, it is unclear if the notification allows companies to again bypass public hearings they are required to obtain an environmental clearance (EC).

Public hearings, which were established as part of the EC process by an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) notification, are often the only avenue for people affected by projects to put forth their concerns.

However, in many cases the public hearings are not satisfactorily held. In 2015, Amnesty International India's research on three mines run by Coal India found that public consultations suffered from serious flaws. All these concerns were borne out late last year by a report of the Comptroller and Audi-

tor General of India on Environment Clearance and Post-Clearance Mining. The report found widespread deficiencies and irregularities in 62 out of 196 of developmental projects that received environment clearance. The fact that nearly a third of the projects examined did not conduct public hearings properly displays the callousness of authorities.

The March notification is not the first attempt by the MoEFCC to dilute public hearings. Under the last few years of the UPA government, public hearing requirements for several projects were done away with. The trend continued with the NDA. In 2012 and 2013, the ministry issued office memorandums (OMs) that sought to provide post-facto environment clearance to companies. The National Green Tribunal (NGT) quashed OMs stating that they were executive instructions that could not replace the requirements of the EIA notification and that they amounted to permitting what was otherwise prohibited by law. The NGT upheld the spirit of the EIA notification. However, the present notification is another attempt to dress up the OMs in different clothes.

The MoEFCC must clearly mention that public hearings are compulsorily held even where post-facto environmental clearances are sought to be given. Otherwise, the notification undermines environmental safeguards, and jeopardises the rights of the communities. Punitive action must be taken against projects operating without environment clearances, and adequate remedy provided to affected communities.

B Karthik Navayan is manager, business and human rights, Amnesty International India. The views expressed are personal.

Traditional politics gasps for breath in Kashmir

If the situation is allowed to drift, the Hurriyat could be overrun by a parallel, fanatically uncompromising force

VINOD SHARMA

A little improvisation on a Noam Chomsky quote explains best Kashmir's diametrically held images in the Valley and in mainland India: "The general population doesn't know the problem and it doesn't even know that it doesn't know."

In the obtaining conflict of sentiments, of emotions bolstered by partisan accounts, waging conflict is easier than waging accord. On offer are two relative truths; choices driven by predilections influenced by propaganda. Dialogue that is essential isn't easily acceptable.

Saner elements in the Valley recognise the need for reaching out to people beyond the Banihal Pass. But to them the wall of distrust — mortared each night by jingoistic television accounts — seems impenetrable. A worrisome fall-out from it is the inexorable demise of traditional politics in Kashmir.

Dialogue apart, there isn't a semblance of engagement between opposing voices except in studio wars. Regional forces such as the PDP and the National Conference are losing ground. Even the separatists we've known over the past quarter-century stare at irrelevance in the face of militancy's Islamic edition.

The evidence of what could be in store was Zakir Musa's threat to behead Hurriyat leaders who described Kashmir as a political dispute. There are unmistakable signs of the ousted Hizbul Mujahideen commander's religious pitch finding traction among sections of alienated youth. Ranks of stone-pelters are joined by children from affluent families. They do it out of conviction, revenge or disdain for the security forces. Not for money.

Officials with whom I spoke in the Valley agreed that if the situation was allowed to drift without political intervention, Hurriyat could be overrun by a parallel, fanatically uncompromising force. The choice, so

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to speak, is between the devil known and the devil unknown!

The separatists' decimation or fall in popular esteem could prop up entities that'll make Syed Ali Shah Geelani seem a moderate.

The distrust for dialogue is equal and mutual. On one side, public opinion is driven by 'excesses' symbolised by the human shield episode; on the other by mobs stoning security forces. Wariness rooted in history makes even the talk about talks an act of treachery. A leader ruefully remarked that the Jammu and Kashmir he knew was now "Jammu versus Kashmir."

But there has to be a way out of the blind alley. Kashmir's tragedy is aggravated by the absence of statesmen-politicians who could pull it out of the quick-sands in which it has sunk. Geelani, who's well-regarded in the Valley, is disregarded by New Delhi for his extra-territorial leanings.

The ageing separatist is a maximalist, not a terrorist. He could, if the Centre willed, be of use the way the NSCN(I-M) leaders were in Nagaland, in at least cooling tempers down. He's in the twilight of his life — like the late Isak Chishi Swu at the time of the 2015 'framework' pact.

Only a miraculous shift away from majoritarianism in the Centre's Kashmir policy can make the impossible happen. It's desirable but unlikely. In the outside chance of Geelani softening up to Modi's "Hindu" India, his fate could be similar to Punjab's Harchand Singh Longowal.

That leads one to Mehbooba Mufti. Her presence at the helm, as I wrote earlier, is the buffer the Centre needs. But her ability to absorb shocks cannot be in excess of the freedom she has as a chief minister in coalition with the BJP.

Her short-term salvation could be in reaching succour to people from corruption and police excesses — stories about which abound in Srinagar's social circles.

The canker of militancy grows as much on joblessness. The state's agriculture sector has vast potential to absorb youth searching for livelihood in an economy hit by the dip in tourist arrivals. A serious push in that direction could contain the spread of home grown terror besides giving the regime an image makeover it requires.

The 2015 experience of Pakistani flags at Geelani's post-release meetings makes the CM circumspect about allowing Hurriyat leaders to meet and discuss Governor NN Vohra's request of help for a peaceful Ramadan, Eid festival and the fruits season.

But the risk is worth taking for a peaceful Ramadan followed by a smooth Amarnath Yatra, which is source of livelihood for more than one lakh Muslim families. In these difficult times that'll be a sobering reminder of Kashmir's syncretic past.

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IN A RELATIONSHIP, ONE MUST ALWAYS LOOK AT THE POSITIVES

Himika Chaudhuri

One of my closest friends has a problem. She may be in the prettiest place, but it's always the pinch of dust here or a little dirt there, that catches her eye. She just doesn't seem to be able to see beyond that.

As she shared this with me, with some angst, it got me thinking that the same perhaps holds true for our relationships. Be it a relationship with our partner, or one with our parents or even colleagues, we often tend to focus on what's missing or

amiss, than what's positive about them.

A love that started on a high, can never remain on the same pitch. When the response to your message isn't immediate or an offer to go out on a date is turned down, the thoughts often are: "This is going nowhere". That's because in that instant we have decided to put all the good memories of that relationship in the background and are choosing to focus on what may well be a temporary slip.

Think about it like this: When we are driving on a road, there are potholes that

make the journey a little bumpy. But that's just a small part of the road, the rest of it is firm and fine and good enough for you to ride to your destination. But it's really our choice whether we want to focus on the parts of the road that's missing, or the part that is there. As long as the focus is on the positive, we are on the right track.

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