

It's more than a natural disaster

To save the N-E from floods, rethink the idea of development

In what appears to have become a recurring annual problem, Assam and other northeastern states are once again in the grip of an "unprecedented" flood. The situation has yesterday taken an even more grim turn as Union minister of state for development of north eastern region (DoNER) Jitendra Singh confirmed that a total of 58 districts have been affected due to floods and landslides in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Manipur where around 80 lives have been lost so far. **ourtake** Estimates suggest that more than 17.43

lakh people in 26 of Assam's 32 districts continue to remain affected by rising water levels. In the Kaziranga National Park, home to the rare one-horned rhinoceros, nearly 75% of the site has been inundated, forcing animals to take shelter on higher ground.

In spite of the fact that this is an annual occurrence with rivers in this region, which flood every monsoon, the loss of life and property that should be avoidable by taking adequate precautions is also becoming a regular feature. The Brahmaputra river, which is second only to the Amazon in size, eats into the cultivable land in Assam, as it erodes more land every time it floods. While this is a natural occurrence, a large part of the blame for the recurring devastating floods must also go to deforestation in Assam and neighbouring states. While it is commendable that the government has decided to direct authorities to use experts from space technology and ISRO to assess the damage caused by floods and landslides; it is once again, a measure to assuage the damage rather than prevent it.

The Brahmaputra routinely breaches the embankments built to rein it in. The idea that the river can be held in place by building an embankment around it has been proven a bad idea time and again, in flood-prone states such as Bihar. Rampant construction on the floodplains, and a degeneration of other wetlands increase the pressure on the main river, come the monsoons. With the reality of climate change bringing with it an increasing number of extreme weather events, the situation in the future can be reliably expected to get worse. It is time for the government to rethink the paradigm of development, in which infrastructure is built at great cost on the floodplains; only to incur its loss once the flood hits.

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BARKHA DUTT



In a week of tragedy, four reasons that give me hope in Kashmir

Rajnath Singh, Mehbooba Mufti, Salim Sheikh and the people of the state make one optimistic

It is an odd moment to talk about hope and reconciliation in the Kashmir Valley in a month when a shameful terror attack on the Amarnath yatra tailed another moment of horror a few weeks earlier — the lynching of policeman Mohammad Ayub Pandith outside Srinagar's Jama Masjid mosque by a mob shouting slogans in favour of Jihadist terrorist Zakir Musa.

Yet, despite my initial sense of utter hopelessness when the news of the terror strike came in, watching how the week has unfolded, for the first time in a year, four things give me some hope.

Mehbooba Mufti: There were glimmers of the old Mehbooba (she had retreated into a shell of silence all these months) who lost no time in hot-footing it to the hospital in Anantnag late at night where the injured pilgrims were being treated. She offered compassion, made no political statements and was unequivocal in her words. "The head of every Kashmiri hangs in shame," she said, in an approach that was both firm and empathetic. This was the hands-on Mehbooba of the past, much more a feisty grassroots worker than an ivory-tower administrator, who had single-handedly built the party her father launched. Though I have gone from being an early supporter of the BJP-PDP alliance (I believed soft separatism and hyper-nationalism would moderate each other) to a critic of its ideological dissonance, Mufti redeemed a lot of her reputation with her clear-headed and deep-hearted response to the terror strike. Over the last few months it seemed as if governor's rule was inevitable and an imperative. Now Mehbooba Mufti has bought her government breathing time. What she does in this time will be critical.

Rajnath Singh: The home minister is the other leader who rose well above the inchoate noise and toxic finger-pointing that followed the Amarnath attacks. He was mocked and viciously trolled — by his own party base — on social media for invoking 'Kashmiriyat' and the syncretic history of the state. All because he made the point that the spontaneous, across-the-board condemnation in the Valley proved that Kashmiriyat was alive and well. Not just did he hold his own; it was left to him to say what should never have needed to be said: "All Kashmiris are not terrorists." Of course it can be argued that politicians reference 'Kashmiriyat' only during crises. And one must not look away from a creeping radicalisation in Kashmir and the romanticisation of Caliphate-supporting militants like Burhan Wani. But as one of the senior-most ministers in the government whose job was to de-escalate tensions and make sure there was no further fallout on the street, in Jammu or elsewhere, it was incumbent on Singh to use his office to provide a measured and mature response. That he did so in the face of venomous backlash is even more laudable.

Salim Sheikh: The heroic bus driver from Gujarat who drove fifty 'Yatris' to safety through a blizzard of gunfire has already won hearts. His quiet courage and modesty was perhaps the most affirmative story to emerge from an otherwise bleak week. But in an age of strident beef politics, depressing headlines about the lynching of mostly-Muslim cattle traders and a social media discourse that often descends into blatant communalism, Sheikh was a reminder, that when people are left to themselves, basic humanity supersedes any religious divide. And finally, the hope of renewal came



■ Gujarat chief minister Vijay Rupani and his deputy Nitin Patel meet Salim Sheikh in Surat, July 11. Sheikh was driving the bus that was attacked by militants during the Amarnath Yatra in Jammu and Kashmir

from the people of Jammu and Kashmir. In the last year I've been alarmed at the massive turnout for the funerals of slain terrorists, the targeting of Kashmiri policemen and the disruption of encounters between security forces and terrorists by street agitators who throw stones, and sometimes attempt to snatch weapons. I've argued with Kashmiri friends that extremists and Pakistan-backed Islamists have delegitimised even genuine political grievances. I have been saddened by how grief has become a contested narrative, with even the loss of innocent lives debated on the basis of ideological affiliations, instead of elemental sadness. So, it has been uplifting to see the

unambiguous condemnation of the attack on the Amarnath Yatra (and before that the lynching of Ayub Pandith) across the spectrum — mainstream political parties, separatists and of course civil society. Every Kashmiri I know is repulsed by what happened and perhaps this could be the small beginnings of a pushback against militancy. That the people of Jammu did their bit to hold the peace also merits appreciation.

In a week of tragedy, these glimmers of hope offer an opportunity. Let Delhi not waste this chance. It may not come again.
Barkha Dutt is an award-winning journalist and author. The views expressed are personal

far&near

KANISHK THAROOR



For once, Trump cannot blame it on fake news

His credibility is now not just in tatters, but non-existent, thanks to the emails released by Trump Jr on Russian ties

If anything about Donald Trump has impressed me in the past year, it has been his rather incredible imperviousness to scandal and error. Each week of his election campaign seemed to produce another embarrassment, culminating in the leaked audio recording of him bragging about sexually assaulting women. To his critics, that tape confirmed everything we imagined about Trump the human being: a man who was crude, grasping, and more than a touch psychopathic. Many commentators were convinced that Trump's bid for the presidency was doomed.

A few weeks later, he won the election. Winning the presidency didn't stop the parade of gaffes or dispel the air of farce. From his obsession with turnout figures at his inauguration to his amateurish conversations with world leaders, his administration has lurched from clumsy spectacle to clumsy spectacle. His policy agenda has faced constant rebukes, in the form of principled federal courts (defying his Muslim "travel ban"), a fractious and uncertain Republican party (still struggling to pass any bill on

health care), and reality (there's no way Mexico will pay for a "border wall").

And that's all before we consider the overriding theme of his young presidency, the subject that eats up all media oxygen in the United States: Trump's alleged ties to Russia. Since the beginning of the year, it's become clear that many of Trump's associates maintained contacts with representatives of the Kremlin. The US intelligence community is in no doubt that Moscow attempted to disrupt the American elections. The suspicion that Trump and his lieutenants may have been in cahoots with Russia has raised the spectre of "collusion".

Sofar, Trump has weathered the drip-drip revelations and fever-pitched news cycles with a kind of manic defiance. In every instance, Trump pushed back unapologetically, dismissing the whole saga as "fake news" drummed up by the media.

This tactic worked because it pandered to his right-wing base. While Trump's approval ratings are abysmal for this early stage of a presidency (hovering around 40%), upwards of 85% of Republicans still think he's doing



■ Donald Trump Jr. with his father Donald Trump. On Thursday, Trump tamely defended his son's conduct

well. For a large section of the American public, the Russia investigations are malicious noise, the hyperventilation of elites in New York and Washington.

Like other rulers in the strongman mould, Trump relies on polarising the public. He enjoys dividing the country between the virtuous patriots who back him and the craven, effete cosmopolitans who want to do him down. He is far happier grandstanding at rallies (which he still holds) than immersing himself in the warp and weft of governance. His fury at treatment by the media allows his presidency to remain in this declarative

mode, with only gestures at performance. That is why the emails released this week to and from Trump's son were so damning. They showed that members of Trump's campaign were willing to meet representatives of the Russian government, that they were aware that Russia wanted to help Trump against Hillary Clinton, and that both Trump's son and son-in-law Jared Kushner were closely involved in building connections to Russia. What Trump had so adamantly waved away as "fake news" was, in fact, rather real, and spelled out in his own son's emails.

For the first time, Trump supporters have begun expressing concerns about the administration's handling of the Russia imbroglio. "Strong support" for Trump has halved in many polls. Many loyalist pundits on Fox News haven't tried to defend Trump. In an internal message, a top editor at the right-wing website Breitbart suggested that the emails raised the prospect of that dreaded word: "collusion."

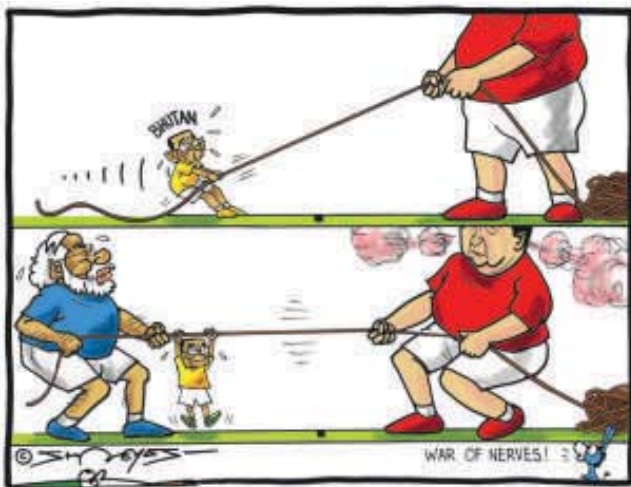
To his credit, I suppose, few other politicians could survive the distortions, stupidities and cruelties that Trump has made routine in his short political career. But in Paris on Thursday, he cut a bit of a dejected figure. He tamely defended his son's conduct. There was very little of his usual bluster, and one couldn't help feeling that for once he was shaken.

At this stage, further investigation may pull up more damning evidence of Trump's Russia ties. Or it may not. Regardless, the Trump administration's credibility is now not just in tatters, but non-existent. His presidency has taken a hard punch to the face — not from the media or the opposition, but from itself.

Kanishk Tharoor is the author of Swimmer Among the Stars: Stories. The views expressed are personal

bigdeal

SHREYAS NAVARE



anotherday

NAMITA BHANDARE



Gynaecologists are doctors, not nannies

She panicked when she thought she might be pregnant. She couldn't tell her parents; had heard horror stories about doctors. "I was too scared to even buy a DIY pregnancy kit," says the unmarried, final year college student. Those harrowing days were finally dispelled with the arrival of a late period.

Not every story ends so happily. In a country where sex is taboo and virginity is prized, unmarried women who have to

visit the gynaecologist often end up receiving large lashings of judgment.

Are you married? Are you having sex with your boyfriend? Do your parents know? Beta, girls from good families don't do these wrong things.

Sometimes it isn't even about sex but 'protecting' virginity.

Gayathri, who asks that I use only her first name, talks of going to a posh Delhi hospital for an invasive vaginal examination for a diagnosis of polycystic ovary

syndrome and being 'advised' by the lab technician to opt for just a superficial examination. The technician was worried that the invasive test could rupture her hymen. "He was trying to be nice," she says wryly.

In a country where sex education is practically absent and parents are loathe to have that conversation with their children, the result of a disapproving encounter between patient and medical professional is not humiliation so much as the patient's health.

Most women, married or not, will only see a gynaecologist when they are — or trying to be. Our bodies, vessels for delivering new generations of babies, are deemed worthy of a trip to the doctor only when we're fulfilling our roles as mothers. For most — even those with the means to healthcare — the idea of a routine checkup or health screening is alien.

Yet, India has 132,000 new cases of cervical cancer a year and WHO estimates that by 2020, 1.24 lakh women will be affected by breast cancer. Can we really afford to be squeamish?

"If you're young, you're shamed for having sex. If you're older, you're shamed for not having kids," says Paromita Vohra, film-maker, writer and founder of Agents of Ishq that aims to create positive conversations about sex, love and desire.

There are exceptions. A crowd-sourced list maintained by Delhi-based activist Amba Azaad has a directory of trustworthy, non-judgmental gynaecologists.

Elsewhere, Haiyya, an NGO has an on-ground campaign and online petition for the right to safe medical services for everyone, regardless of marital status.

The next step, says campaign manager Mrinalini Dayal: getting doctors to agree to various 'commandments' including respecting patient confidentiality and treating adult unmarried women as capable of making informed decisions about their bodies.

It is not an unreasonable demand. Doctors need to be reminded they are medical practitioners, not the moral police.

Namita Bhandare writes on social issues and gender. The views expressed are personal

Empathy is a virtue that is rare to find and tough to inculcate



Vijai Pant

Empathy is the ability to recognise, perceive and experience the outlook or emotions of another being within oneself, a sort of emotional resonance. Empathy not only makes us understand the feelings and perspective of the other people but also guides us in our actions. A person having empathy has an overriding desire to alleviate the suffering of others. Empathy is the balm for discomfiting souls and the source of all-round happiness. Have you ever noticed that doctors

with empathy heal us faster? Unfortunately, the extremely busy and self-centred lives of the present times discourage empathy. We have no time for softer emotions that we want to show beyond our near and dear ones. Consequently, we are bereft of feelings of empathy for our acquaintances and neighbours. Without empathy, acts of kindness are few and far between. Moreover, we often mistake pity for empathy.

Pity as opposed to empathy insulates us from the victim whereas empathy is grounded in a sense of connect. We should strive to make empathy an inherent part of our character as it has the power to turn our lives around.

(Innervoice comprises contributions from our readers.) The views expressed are personal Innervoice@hindustantimes.com