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On a positive note in Myanmar

Owing to geopolitics, the PM did not raise the Rohingya issue

Finding the balance between India's democratic ideals and security interests has always proven to be hard when it comes to Myanmar. This was more than evident during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's state visit to India's easternmost neighbour. New Delhi skirted the issue of Myanmar's horrific

treatment of its Rohingya Muslim minority but was able to persuade Naypyidaw to allow India to launch a large-scale aid programme in Rakhine province, the home of the Rohingyas and the epicentre of the present violence. Many feel India has said and done far too little on behalf of the Rohingyas. However, this is probably the best that can be expected given the overriding security and geopolitical interests India has with Myanmar. New Delhi, in any case, is hardly in a position to give lectures on humanitarianism when it has rhetorically spoken of expelling of Rohingya refugees and passed the matter to the Supreme Court.

India's primary interests in Myanmar can roughly be summed up in the following order. One, to build an economic and security relationship that prevent Myanmar from inexorably slipping into the orbit of China. Part of this strategy requires Naypyidaw's cooperation in building road, port and other transport links between the two countries. Two, ensure the Myanmar military's continuing cooperation in preventing various Northeastern militants from using Myanmar as a safe haven. Three, support the country's stuttering transition into a full-fledged federal democracy. Four, seek to ameliorate the plight of the Rohingyas as well as ensure the tense relations between Bangladesh and Myanmar do not spiral out of control. Each of these is an ambitious policy goal, and has to be pursued recognising that the dominant ethnic Burmese are sensitive to external pressure.

It helps to see Myanmar as a novice nation-state as far as international norms are concerned. India should seek to make Myanmar think increasingly like most other countries and hope that as it becomes more economically integrated, more democratic and less suspicious of the world it will become more accepting of international norms regarding its internal affairs.

No closure for the 1993 Mumbai blast victims

Masterminds Dawood Ibrahim and Tiger Memon still remain at large

It was one of the deadliest terror attacks on an Indian city. Thirteen blasts tore through Mumbai, the commercial capital of the country, on March 12, 1993, killing 257 persons. On Thursday, more than 24 years after the incident, an anti-terror court sentenced two convicts to death and three others to between 10 years and a life term in jail. This marks the end of the second leg of the longest-running terror trial in the country.

The trial of these accused — Abu Salem, Mustafa Dossa, Karimullah Khan, Firoz Abdul Rashid Khan, Riyaz Siddiqui, Tahir Merchant and Abdul Quayyum — was separated from the main case, as they were arrested at the time of conclusion of the main trial in 2007. While gangster Abu Salem and Mohd Taher Merchant were deported from Portugal, Dossa was brought by the CBI to face trial from UAE. They faced charges including criminal conspiracy, waging war against the government of India and murder. The allegation against extradited gangster Salem was that he transported arms and ammunition from the Gujarat coast to Mumbai. According to CBI, Dossa, Merchant and Feroz Khan, were "main conspirators".

While Thursday's verdict brings closure to the case as far as the arrested accused are concerned, for the relatives and survivors of the terror incident, the case is far from closed. They believe that the 1993 blast case cannot be closed unless the masterminds behind the attack — global terrorist Dawood Ibrahim and Tiger Memon — who fled the country after the incident, are brought to book. While India has repeatedly asserted the presence of Dawood in Pakistan, Pakistan has denied it. Before this, in 2007, the main trial had ended when the Tada Court convicted 100 accused of various offences. Twelve of the accused were awarded death and 20 sentenced to life imprisonment. But in 2015, deciding the appeals finally, the Supreme Court upheld the death penalty for Yakub Memon. He was hanged on July 30, 2015.

No serious challenge to PM Modi

For the present, the Opposition lacks a centre-forward and for that matter even a goalkeeper



CHANDAN MITRA

Some years ago riled by uncomfortable questions from journalists, a member of one of India's most prominent families angrily retorted: "Are you serious? Are you serious?" repeating this rhetorical response half-a-dozen times. Since this was caught on cameras, it went viral on TV and social media and is still etched in public memory.

But if asked if the Opposition in India has found a leader who can galvanise the disparate parties and pose a challenge to the BJP and persona of its leader, Narendra Modi, people will be excused for questioning "Are you serious?" a few times over.

When Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar was toying with the idea of a nationwide mahagathbandhan by bringing together the entire gamut of regional parties, it was conceivable that such an Opposition alliance could materialise. In terms of its vote share in the 2014 general election, the BJP is in a minority as against the combined votes of the Opposition.

But when he dramatically switched over to the NDA hitting out at the bundle of corruption charges facing his erstwhile ally Lalu

Prasad and his family, the prospects of an all-encompassing alliance against the BJP got well and truly torpedoed.

Kumar's party, the JD(U) is not a major player in India. In fact even in Bihar, it was junior partner in the alliance with Prasad's RJD. But the Bihar CM's asset was his image as an incorruptible leader and firm administrator. It is because of his image and consequent public acceptability that Prasad had to make him face of the alliance. That worked as a springboard for Kumar's ambition to emerge on the national stage.

It is possible that he jumped the gun and jumped ship in a hurry in order to remain CM of his own state, in accordance with the 'a bird in hand...' principle. It is speculated that he was miffed by the refusal or delay on the part of the Congress in proposing him as leader of a future alliance. It seems he attributed this reluctance to the Congress' persistence in pushing Rahul Gandhi as the leader of the combine.

Irrespective of the veracity of such speculation, he must have been aware that the testy relations between UP's stalwart leaders, Mulayam Singh and Mayawati, besides the undependable reputation of several other potential members of the proposed mahagathbandhan would make the alliance's viability questionable.

The episode, which ended with Kumar categorically asserting that none could aspire to defeat Modi in the 2019 general election, has sounded the death-knell of a possible Opposition alliance in the foreseeable future.



Narendra Modi remains the tallest leader with high acceptability, outstripping even his party's popularity

It hardly merits recalling that in order to be acceptable to the electorate a party or alliance needs to have a strong organisational base and also a formidable popular leader. Although best placed among non-BJP parties, the Congress' organisational clout has been eroding steadily in recent years. It has been virtually wiped out in most of north India by powerful regional formations that have steadily taken over the non-BJP space, particularly in UP.

The Congress' second handicap is its leadership which has failed to energise the cadre (or whatever remains of that) as well as the general public. Any political observer today will conclude that Modi remains the tallest leader with high acceptability, outstripping

even his party's popularity at a national level.

With most elections in India having become almost presidential in nature, it is essential for parties to ensure a strong, popular face. Consequently, all regional parties have become virtually family-run organisations, dependent on the popularity of the patriarch or matriarch. While there are strong regional leaders in non-BJP parties — Mamata Banerjee in Bengal, Mulayam/Akhilesh Singh in UP, Chandrababu Naidu in Andhra Pradesh and till recently, M Karunanidhi in Tamil Nadu to name just a few — they are all restricted to the confines of their respective states.

Till some years ago, the sentiment against the party ruling at the Centre was strong enough to enable relative lightweights like HD Deve Gowda to be chosen prime minister by a motley group of parties. For that matter Manmohan Singh was no political heavyweight and ruled for 10 years only because he had Sonia Gandhi's unstinted backing, while the Congress was not in the kind of moribund state it is today.

But whenever there is a strong leader at the helm in the Centre, he or she can be electorally ousted either by fierce unpopularity as in the case of Indira Gandhi after the Emergency or by matching popular appeal. Looking at the gallery of regional leaders today, none fits the bill.

But politics abhors vacuum. Although it may take some time, a powerful leader is bound to emerge in the coming years to pose a serious challenge to the BJP and Modi. But for the present, the Opposition lacks a centre-forward and for that matter even a goalkeeper.

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GLOBAL CRISIS



Climate change is leading to extreme weather events

This means that the country must learn to cope with twin challenges: Excessive rainfall and drought



SUNITA NARAIN

The Indian monsoon is never really 'normal'. It is variable and unpredictable. But now the definition of what is 'normal' is changing. The fact is that the monsoon is becoming more extreme and more variable. In this way, the new normal is flood at the time of drought.

This year, even as 40% of the districts in India face prospects of drought, close to 25% districts have had heavy rainfall of more than 100 mm in just a matter of hours. This year, even as the overall average rainfall in the country is below normal — deficient — large parts have received much more than their share of rain and worse, this rain came down in a matter of hours.

Chandigarh was recently submerged in water. It had deficient rainfall till August 21, and then it got 115 mm of rain in 12 hours. It drowned. In other words, it got roughly 15% of its annual rain in just a few hours. Bengaluru hardly had any rain and then it poured. It got 150 mm of rain in one day, which is close to 30% of its annual monsoon rain. It is no wonder that the city drowned. This Mumbai got some 300 mm of rain — some 15% of its annual in just hours.

This should not surprise us. Models have predicted that the first impact of a changing climate would be on increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events. It was also predicted that South Asia would be worst hit by extreme rain events. It is happening. What should worry us is that models have predicted that this would only get worse as temperatures rise.

On the one hand, we are getting our water management wrong — we are building in floodplains, destroying our water-bodies and filling up our water channels. Mumbai or Chandigarh or Bengaluru did not drown

IT IS TIME TO ACCEPT THAT WE ARE BEGINNING TO SEE THE IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE. IT IS TIME TO DEMAND THAT THE WORLD CHANGE ITS WAYS TO MITIGATE EMISSIONS. IT IS ALSO IMPORTANT TO CHANGE OUR WATER STRATEGY

only because of extreme rain. They drowned also because all drainage systems have been destroyed. Now, the changing climate will make this mismanagement even more deadly. Just consider the facts. This year, up to mid-August, India has had 16 extremely heavy rain events, defined as rainfall over 244 mm in a day and 100 heavy rain events defined as rainfall between 124 to 244 mm in a day. This means that rain will become a flood. Worse, in meteorological records, the rain will be shown as normal, not recognising that it did not rain when it was most needed for sowing or that the rain came in one downpour. It came and went. It brought no benefits.

It is time we understood this reality. This means learning to cope with twin scenarios. This means being obsessive about how to mitigate floods and how to live with water scarcity. But the good news is that doing one can help the other. But we need to stop debating, dithering or dawdling. We know what to do. And we have no time to lose — climate change will only increase with time as weather and rainfall will only get more variable, more extreme and more catastrophic.

The answer to floods is what has been discussed for long. In fact, it was practised in these flood-prone regions many decades ago. It requires planning systems that can divert and channelise water so that it does not flood land and destroy life. It means linking rivers to ponds, lakes and ditches so that water is free to flow. This will distribute the water across the region and bring other benefits. It will recharge groundwater so that in the subsequent months of low rainfall, there is water for drinking and irrigation.

It is time to accept that we are beginning to see the impact of climate change. It is time to demand that the world change its ways to mitigate emissions. It is equally important we change the way we deal with water. The opportunity lies in making sure that every drop of the rain is harvested. Since rain will come in more ferocious events we must engineer for its storage and drainage. This does mean that every water body, every channel, drain, nullah and every catchment has to be safeguarded. These are the temples of modern India. Built to worship rain. Built for our future.

Mitigating floods and droughts has only one answer: Obsessive attention to building millions and millions of connected and living water structures that will capture rain, be a sponge for flood and storehouse for drought. The only question is: when will we read the writing on the wall? Get on with it. Get it right.

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It is wrong to link the cost of disasters with emissions

If we want to limit future flooding damage, global carbon cuts are a poor method. Much more needs to be done



B JORN LOMBERG

While the world focuses on the devastating storms in South Asia and the US, it is timely to ask ourselves two broad, related questions. First, how do we prevent such disasters from being so devastating in the future? And second, how do we best help the vulnerable people who are most affected?

When big weather events happen, often the first thing talked about is climate change. Perhaps it's a matter of trying to pin blame for a natural disaster. This claim has some justification, but points us in the wrong direction. Despite the devastation of recent weeks, it is incorrect to link the increasing costs of disasters with the emission of greenhouse gases. The UN, in its latest extreme weather report, found that losses adjusted for population and wealth "have not been attributed to natural or anthropogenic climate change" and "the absence of an attributable climate change signal in losses also holds for flood losses." This does not mean that climate change caused by humans is not real or of genuine concern. But it means that many commentators and campaigners — and even journalists — seem to ignore these relevant scientific findings.

This matters, because if we want to limit future flooding damage, global carbon cuts are a very poor method. Even if carbon cuts like those promised between now and 2030 in the Paris treaty are successful, they would reduce heavy rain increases by a tiny fraction. The lesson from the US and around the world is that a much more effective policy is to look at where societies are allowing construction to take place. Unabated construction on flood plains and coastal areas means that there are more people at risk. And urban planners paving over floodplains and denuding forests make matters worse. A city with

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lakes, ponds, and open spaces is not only more pleasant, but it is better prepared, because all of these features allow water to drain away. Many affected cities have poor drainage and outdated storm water systems that clog with debris and rubbish. This — and a lack of pumping stations and floodgates — make cities more vulnerable to flooding. And having poor or no early warning systems means that people aren't given the information they need to help them escape.

The majority of deaths in Mumbai's floods occurred in shanty town slums. Indeed, it is a cruel reality that natural disasters often afflict the poorest the most. This means that efforts to reduce poverty are also an "anti-flooding" measure. Flood death rates both in India, Asia and globally are declining, because less poverty is making people less vulnerable. Over the past half century, the flood death rate in India has almost halved: In the 1960s, India saw 2.1 flood deaths per million people per year, whereas 2010-16 has seen 1.1 deaths, the lowest yet. So while we need to address policy issues of flood infrastructure, planning, and disaster preparedness, another policy needs to be considered: How to continue making society's most vulnerable better-off.

A vast amount of state and national spending as well as international development funds are devoted to this purpose. Tools like cost-benefit analysis can help prioritise the policies that will have the biggest absolute impact for a city, state or nation. At a global level, we already have answers on how to lift people out of poverty. Copenhagen Consensus commissioned economists to study the international development agenda and identify the approaches that would make the biggest impact for every dollar spent.

The panel identified 19 policies that would be transformative. Among these, achieving universal access to contraception and family planning and cutting tuberculosis by 90% would save many lives. Ending fuel subsidies (which cost India \$16.9 billion a year in 2013 and 2014) would be good for the environment and free up public funds. And introducing freer global trade would, in the longer term, have the biggest impact on poverty. It is understandable that we focus on the immediate response to disaster. The rebuild is going to take a considerable amount of time and resources. But we also need to look at the bigger picture, and invest both in smarter policies and more poverty reduction to reduce the impacts of future floods.

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