

The Indian **EXPRESS**

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

A few sacks of rice

That's what the government's policy towards the Rohingya boils down to — imprudent, myopic, untenable



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

HEAL THYSELF

Medical education scams continue unabated under the MCI's stewardship. But merely replacing it is not the solution

THE REGULATOR OF medical education is itself in need of regulation. The ongoing spate of scandals show that nothing has been learned since the arrest of Medical Council of India (MCI) chairman Ketan Desai in 2010 for barefaced corruption. The latest is the arrest of a former high court judge and his associates, for agreeing to help an under-equipped college make the grade in court. Days earlier, a colonel of the Army Medical Corps was arrested for passing on sensitive information about inspections to a medical college in Puducherry.

Apart from the unchecked spate of education scams, the volume of litigation that the MCI faces concerning issues of policy, admission and examination suggest that the regulator is neither in command nor perceived to be so. While it has rightly imposed a uniform benchmark for admissions at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, different syllabi set by states and the diverse languages they are taught in tilt the playing field. The suicide of Anitha. S, a Dalit aspirant from Tamil Nadu, forcefully drew national attention to this problem earlier this month. Besides, while the MCI is standardising entrance tests, it is spectacularly failing to assure uniform, quality education for entrants who qualify. The implications for the health of the nation are sobering, and the lucrative promise that India holds as a destination for medical tourism and education stands compromised.

In terms of the growth of medical colleges, India is the world leader, and a transparent accreditation process guided by checks and balances conferring credibility should have been the priority. Examination reform could have followed. The National Medical Commission Bill of 2016, which proposes to trifurcate the functions of the MCI to reduce opportunities for corruption, may prove to be cosmetic. It would eventually leave the monopoly in accreditation intact, and opacity would remain a problem. If even the Planning Commission could be summarily decommissioned, there is no credible argument against euthanasia for the MCI, or a similar body under another name. However, it would be silly to throw out the baby with the bathwater, since handing over the regulation of medical education to professionals instead of administrators established a progressive principle. However, corruption has stood in the way of an efficient technocracy, and only functional reform can strike at the root. The intersection of private enterprise and medical education and practice is laden with incentives for corruption. The scarcity of seats and their marked-up price tag incentivise brutally quick recovery, the marketing of pharmaceuticals and equipment exert unhealthy influences, and the inspection of teaching hospitals is a scandal, with doctors and even patients being "rented" for the day. Merely replacing the MCI will not suffice. Its successor must be armed with rules-based transparency to prevent rent-seeking.

BEYOND THE BULLET

The Tral attack is yet another pointer that peace in Kashmir can't be won with the gun alone

THE GRENADE ATTACK in Tral town in south Kashmir that killed two people on Thursday was a despicable act. Thirty others were injured when the grenade was thrown at the motorcade of Naeem Akhtar, the state minister for public works, who was leaving after visiting the area. As the minister said, those behind the attack are neither friends of Kashmir nor Islam.

The attack has come at a time when the government was making some attempt to address two concerns: One, the huge governance deficit in the state; and two, the political leadership's bunker mentality that has served to cut it off from the people, leaving a political vacuum on the ground that militants have occupied. Earlier in the week, Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti spent a day in Pulwama, reaching out to the local populace and listening to their complaints and grievances. Akhtar was likewise in Tral to take stock of public works, and there was a huge response to his visit too, in a place that no politician has visited since the July 2016 killing of the local boy-turned Hizbul Mujahideen commander, Burhan Wani. It is said the grenade was intended for the minister. Clearly, the perpetrators are fearful of political activity or any attempt by the government to attend to the needs of the people.

The Hizbul Mujahideen and Lashkar-e-Toiba were quick to disown the attack because it killed two passersby. Would either have claimed ownership had the victims been different? Counter-factual aside, this attack, and another in which a Sashastra Seema Bal officer was killed in Banihal along the Jammu-Srinagar highway the previous night, show that while the police, army and other security forces have been soldiering on against militants, eliminating many top leaders, militancy cannot be removed by the gun alone. The security forces, working as they are among an alienated population, know this only too well. Which is why BJP general secretary, Ram Madhav's remarks in Srinagar that the "doors are open" for talks with "everybody", and that there would be no preconditions provide some hope. Read along with the prime minister's Independence Day "*goli aur gaali sey nahin, galey milney sey*" statement, and Home Minister Rajnath Singh's conciliatory remarks during his visit to the Valley, there finally seems to be realisation that without dialogue, the situation in Kashmir can only worsen. The Centre must now act on its stated intentions.

KINDLY ADJUST

Brexit may have birthed a new language for Europe — different from the Queen's English and with American spellings

THE OLDSODS had it coming, didn't they? Serves them jolly well right for pressing the exit button on the European Union (EU). Now, they can't possibly complain, when they have no control on how the Queen's English is spoken in Europe. The French were the first to sense an opportunity. They objected to this upstart of a language as a *lingua franca* of EU. But not everyone was willing to show this most useful link language the door, simply because Old Blighty had walked out on them.

A recent study, carried out in Gavle University, Sweden, reports that "Euro-English" is already evolving as a distinct form of the language — and its use will probably become more widespread in the absence of the British laying down the rules. If the Brits were gutted when the Indians chutnified their English, they better hold on to their beer. In many parts of Europe, "eventual" is now used as a synonym of possible or possibly. The "blue-eyed" boy no longer refers to the class teacher's favourite but a naïve student out of touch with the new world. Much worse is the possibility that Euro-speak will look to the abomination of American spellings to define their system. In 2017, Jeremy Brown, the English teacher of the legendary sitcom *Mind Your Language* might be out of his job: Or at least out of step with time if he objected to his student, Ranjit Singh, saying: "I am coming from Punjab". In Euro-English, that's as good as saying "I come from Punjab".

Bollocks, did you say? Well, too bad. Languages have never known to prosper if they harden into dogma. In India, we have preponed our visits, reverted to emails, and enquired after the good names of strangers, ever since the British left our shores. That has been the way of embracing the language. To those who nitpicked, we have simply shrugged and asked to "kindly adjust". To the new Euro-English speakers, we say: "Welcome, we too are like that only."

THE INDIAN GOVERNMENT'S stance on the Rohingya refugees from Rakhine state in Myanmar is from a security point of view, imprudent; from a historical point of view, myopic; and from a moral point of view, untenable. In its legal and political statements, the Indian government has, for all practical purposes, declared the Rohingya to be illegal immigrants not refugees, threatened their deportation and has declared them to be a security threat. These claims have rickety foundations.

The current debate in India is being constructed as one between humanitarian obligations and national security. Those advocating a more accommodative stance towards the Rohingya are being cast as bleeding-heart moralists with no concern for India's security. This way of constructing our choices is an intellectual mistake and already loads the dice in favour of the Indian government's stance. No sensible person will deny that India has to, first and foremost, look after its own security. But treating the Rohingya as illegal migrants will diminish rather than enhance India's security for a number of reasons.

It is clear that the Rohingya are being subjected to something that is moving closer to ethnic cleansing. The Myanmar government has been using a hugely exaggerated pretext of radicalisation to unleash violence and expulsion on a whole ethnic group. If there is one thing we know from recent history it is this. Radicalisation grows when three conditions obtain: Groups are subjected to political violence and marginalisation, not democratic incorporation. States lose control over territory partly because their own repression destroys the normal fabric of civil society. And other states that side with the repressing state also evoke resentment and become a target. Even in Europe, the Bosnian wars were a trigger of radicalisation in other parts of the world. By basically condoning the Myanmar government's actions, by not securing assistance for stateless people, India, in effect, might help create the conditions for greater radicalisation. By also declaring a

whole refugee community as a national security threat, largely on communal lines, it is also aligning itself with the states that are deepening communal conflict.

India has also implicitly put all its eggs in the basket of the Myanmar government. This is a mistake. It is increasingly clear that states do not find it easy to control territories in the aftermath of deep violent conflict. We are relying on Myanmar's promise to rehabilitate the refugees, when it is precisely that government's policies that are, in substantial part, creating the push factor in the first place. It is not clear that the Myanmar government will have the ability to deliver stability in our border areas since it has allowed the situation to fester in the first place. We will not be able to contain the spillovers across our porous borders if we have alienated communities living on our borders. So, pinning all hopes in a government that may not be able to control the situation is imprudent from a security point of view.

Finally, there is a talk of radicalisation amongst the Rohingya; they are also being linked to terrorist threats. Let us for a moment suppose that there is some possibility of small sections being tempted in that direction. It is precisely to isolate them that you need a more imaginative refugee policy. Such a policy in all likelihood will ensure that their numbers will not grow. A proper system of identification, rehabilitation, and possibly reporting in India, which might allow you to actually understand the dynamics within the community, will be better than pushing them to a wall, where they are crushed between two states. There is this rather curious matter of how a group of Rohingya refugees ended up in Jammu in the first place. This has now become an issue in domestic politics; and the government often gives the sense that the policy is more about catering to its core ideological constituency than it is about addressing a serious problem. If we actually had a proper asylum law, and better processing mechanisms for refugees, even this situation could have been avoided. In short, there are prudent security

reasons, for treating the Rohingya with more dignity and political finesse than our security mandarins seem to muster.

Our stance is historically myopic, since of all countries, India understands the dynamics of ethnic conflict more deeply. India has been exemplary in the way it accommodated refugees from Tibet, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. It is right to say that the West should not lecture us. But India aspires to be a great power. Its biggest asset is the way it has been the significant open society of the region. In the larger scheme of things, India had escaped radicalisation in large part because of its success in democratic incorporation, and it was not identified with persecutory ideologies of the state or of other states. The political construct we have put around the Rohingya weakens the ideological projection that has been India's greatest security strength. India is, in a sense, betraying its own historical heritage.

Finally, our stance is morally obtuse. As Devirupa Mitra of *The Wire* pointed out, India has now changed its stance on an important moral principle: The principle of non-reoulement. This principle stops nations from returning people to a country where they might be at risk of severe persecution. Even if India is not a signatory to International Refugee Conventions, it takes a very pinched up moral imagination to forcibly send back people who will in all likelihood face persecution. There is something disquieting about a country that wants others to have open borders for its rich and privileged, but will not help those who show up at its door because of palpable threats to their lives. In humanitarian terms also, Indian policy is a pittance. To put it somewhat rhetorically, a few sacks of rice to Bangladesh is now what passes off as a humanitarian strategy.

The problem with our current strategy is not that it is placing security over humanitarianism. It is that it is doing so in a way that is imprudent and likely to be self-defeating.

The writer is vice-chancellor, Ashoka University. Views expressed are personal

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POWER FOR ALL, ALWAYS

Smart technology, involving people in operations could make 24x7 electricity a reality



ABHISHEK JAIN

TWO YEARS AGO, in his Independence Day speech, Prime Minister Narendra Modi promised to provide electricity to the 18,500 villages, which did not have electricity then, in 1,000 days. This Independence Day he highlighted that more than 14,000 have been electrified since then. While 99.5 per cent of our villages are deemed electrified, a fifth of the country's population still awaits an electricity connection and many more suffer due to poor power supply. Hence, the government has moved beyond village electrification to 24x7 power for all by 2022.

The central government has set out this ambitious goal by focusing on household electrification and reliable power supply. As per the Ministry of Power statistics, 43 million Indian households are yet to be electrified. India will take nearly 20 years to electrify the existing unelectrified households if it continues with the current rate of household electrification, about 2 lakh households per month. In order to achieve the target by 2022, we need to increase the rate of household electrification by at least four times. However, even if we manage to achieve the feat, providing 24x7 electricity will remain a problem.

In 2015, the Council on Energy, Environment and Water in collaboration with Columbia University conducted the largest energy access survey of its kind in India, ACCESS, covering 714 villages in six major rural electrification deprived states — Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and West Bengal. The study showed that an electricity connection does

not guarantee electricity access. Fifty per cent of the electrified rural households across these six states did not receive even 12 hours of supply in a day. The situation was much worse in UP, Bihar and Jharkhand, with three-quarters of electrified households receiving less than 12 hours of supply in a day. Similarly, during evening hours, particularly important for basic lighting needs, half of the electrified households received less than three hours of supply. No surprise that a third of electrified households in these states still rely on kerosene as their primary source of lighting. Reliability and voltage instability are also major challenges.

A majority of these challenges pertain to the operations and performance of state electricity distribution companies. Challenges in infrastructure planning, deployment, as well as maintenance lead to unreliable and poor supply at the local level. Thirty per cent of the rural electrified households in the six states did not have electricity supply for 24 hours on more than four days a month. This indicates a frequent breakdown of the infrastructure as well as delays in repairing them. Only about half the electrified households in the six states had a metered connection, with the situation much worse in UP that had only 15 per cent metered connections. Unmetered connections with flat fees provide no incentive for households to be judicious about energy consumption, discouraging distribution companies to supply reliable power. DISCOMs in these states often struggle with limited or non-performing staff to effec-

tively operate and maintain services in rural areas. A fourth of the metered households either received either a fixed bill or no bill at all, indicating that DISCOMs did not have the capacity to read meters and generate bills regularly. Electricity theft and payment defaults pose further challenges for the DISCOMs.

We need innovative solutions to address the electricity access challenges posed by rural India. Village-level entrepreneurs could be contracted to operate and maintain the local distribution while generating bills and collecting revenues from the customers. Banking on community relationships, these entrepreneurs could improve compliance on payments as well as curb stealing of power. Recruiting and training local youth could help address maintenance issues. This will also help in creating more skilled jobs and entrepreneurs in rural areas. Pre-paid and smart metering systems are other ways to encourage payments. Many such solutions need to be piloted and tested.

As the government races to meet the 2022 target, it must also focus on designing robust and innovative tools to measure and monitor the progress on a multi-dimensional level, rather than just counting the number of connections. A new India should also embrace a new electricity system, built on the smart technologies and decentralised approaches offering resilience, flexibility, and above all, inclusiveness.

The writer is senior programme lead at the Council on Energy, Environment and Water

SEPTEMBER 23, 1977, FORTY YEARS AGO



PELE IN CALCUTTA
A 27-MEMBER NEW York Cosmos soccer team led by Pele, arrived in Calcutta from Peking. Pele and his colleagues were received at the airport by the West Bengal PWD minister, Jatin Chakravorty and Dhiren Dey, secretary of Mohun Bagan club.

PAK CJI SACKED
ANWAR-UL-HAQUE HAS BEEN appointed new Chief Justice of Pakistan. The appointment coincided with the announcement by the chief martial law administrator, General Zia-ul-Haque, that all amendments to the constitution introduced by the previous government which affected the integrity and in-

dependence of the judiciary have been nullified. Anwar-ul-Haque will be sworn in by the president, the radio added. Zia dismissed the CJ Yaqoob Ali Khan, when naming Anwar-ul-Haque. Justice Khan had admitted a petition challenging the detention of the former prime minister, Z.A. Bhutto.

MORARJI IN MADRAS
SPEAKING IN MADRAS, Prime Minister Morarji Desai drubbed critics of India's industrial policy with reference to foreign policy and declared that "foreign capital will be welcome so long as it does not interfere with the country's economy". When the prime minister's attention was drawn to the doubts

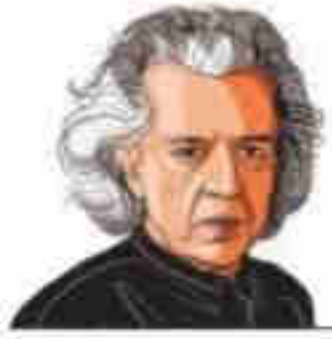
expressed by some industrialists and foreigners about lack of clarity in the country's industrial policy, Desai reacted sharply. "I do not know what is the confusion about it... We are products of mixed economy. There is no question of your doubting it," he said.

J&K ON CENTRAL LAWS
THE KASHMIR GOVERNMENT has appointed a six-member sub-committee with the deputy chief minister, Mirza Afzal Beg, as chairman, to "examine" those central laws which have been made applicable to the state since 1953, announced state finance minister, Devi Das Thakur, in the assembly.

15 THE IDEAS PAGE

Shooting in the dark

The Bullet Train project is economically unviable, will not lead to a transfer of technology and serve only a minuscule proportion of rail passengers



ANIL DHARKER

IS THE BULLET Train a white elephant or will it leap-frog India into a new era of advanced technology? If you consider the question rationally, there is only one possible answer.

Japan introduced its high-speed Shinkansen line between Tokyo and Osaka as long ago as 1964. Its top speed then was 210 km/hr; it's now 350 km/hr. Since the first Bullet Train made its debut, 10 other countries have developed a high-speed network, the biggest being China's (89 tracks covering 26,783 km against Japan's 17 tracks covering 3,041 km). Other countries with high-speed trains include France, Germany, Italy, Spain, South Korea and even Turkey. None of them uses the Shinkansen system — so is Japanese technology really the best? There seems to have been no technical evaluation comparing other available systems, so are we embarking on a project of over Rs one lakh crore on blind faith?

But even assuming that the Shinkansen system is comparable to any other technology on offer, how does it help Indian engineering to take a big leap forward as has been claimed by government sources? There is an interesting comparison here. It is said that some years ago, Japan offered to build the high-speed network for China. After much negotiation, the talks stalled on one point: The refusal of the Japanese to transfer technology, as is generally done in large-scale projects after an agreed period.

Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis's statement the other day is significant: "Where will the raw materials and labourers for the project come from? Obviously from India! Everything that needs to be used in the project, right from services to provisions, will have a great potential of creating revenue." There is more of this in the same vein from other politicians. Note, there is no mention anywhere of transfer of technology — and so far, none from any government source. Is that because the Japanese have said they will guarantee safety only if they build the complete system? Presumably, this condition will also apply to bullet train projects which are proposed to connect major metros in the future. So how exactly are we taking a technology jump upward?

If there was no technical evaluation and no transfer of technology agreement, was there at least a viability report? Apparently, yes. What are the details? No one knows because officialdom has refused to share the report even in response to RTI applications. We, however, do have the example of Taiwan which installed the Japanese Shinkansen system. In the early 1990s, a consortium of private companies was formed to install a high-speed train system on a Build, Operate and Transfer (BOT) model. The system became operational in 2007 with an investment of \$14.3 billion. By 2014, the rail operator was bankrupt with cumulative losses of \$1.5 billion. Because a rail network is for the public good, the Taiwanese government bailed out the consortium by injecting \$1 billion of public money and reduced the operator's share



C R Sasikumar

by 60 per cent. In India, the BOT model was not even floated as a trial balloon for the very good reason that no private company would have bid for the project — the failure of the much less capital-intensive Metro project (BOT) is very much on everyone's mind.

The BJP government in Delhi has embraced (and claimed as its own) many of the UPA government's ideas like GST. So it's worthwhile to know that the UPA government had rejected the Bullet Train project as being completely unviable. In fact, the then Finance Secretary Rakesh Mohan had said that he would not approve the project even if Japan gave a grant instead of a loan. That's probably because projections show that the Mumbai-Ahmedabad train service will need to carry nearly one lakh passengers a day to keep fares at a reasonable level. The current traffic is only about 18,000 per day, which means that either fares will have to be raised well above air fares, or that the system will have to be subsidised in perpetuity.

Much has been made of Japan's loan being "virtually interest-free". The Japanese are giving a 50-year loan of Rs 88,000 crore of the total project cost of Rs 1,10,000 crore, the rest coming from the central government and state governments of Gujarat and Maharashtra. If the interest rate offered to India of 0.10 per cent sounds benign, consider this: The interest rate on 10-year Japanese government bonds is 0.04 per cent and other interest rates can even be negative. That should put Japanese benevolence in its place.

The difference in interest rates between India and Japan (our 10-year government bonds yield 6.5 per cent), has another, serious and long-term implication. According to a fi-

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nanial analyst, if we consider average Indian inflation at three per cent, and Japanese at zero per cent, the rupee will depreciate three per cent every year vis-a-vis the Japanese yen. So over 50 years, the sum to be repaid will not be Rs 88,000 crore but could be well over twice that amount. In short, the Bullet Train is a bullet to the head of our future generations.

And apart from fulfilling the prime minister's dream, what other pressing objective does the Bullet Train project serve? According to Bibek Debroy, who is a railway expert and a member of NITI Aayog (so not in any anti-government camp), 95 per cent of rail users in India do not use even the Rajdhani or Shatabdi trains. So only five per cent of Indians use our present super-fast trains because they find the extra fares beyond them. In short, bullet trains are going to make travel faster for five per cent of the population, which already has the option of air travel.

Let's look at the big picture. The Bullet Train project is going to cost Rs 1,10,000 crore; in last year's rail budget, the total outlay for the entire Indian railway system was Rs 1,21,000 crore. The Bullet Train will serve a small percentage of people travelling between two cities; the Indian railway system, with over 13,000 trains running every day, carries more than eight billion passengers per year plus 1,000 million tonnes of freight over the whole country. The cost for the two, as the figures show, is virtually the same.

So take your pick. What does India really need? A big bang bullet for the few, or a large, improved, safer system for all? You really think that question needs an answer?

Dharker is a writer and columnist

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"President Trump, unlike Barack Obama, brought lots of fury to the General Assembly and hardly a hint of compromise or interest in negotiating."

— THE NEW YORK TIMES

Seedbeds of radicalism

Religion-based education in Pakistan has made universities a fertile ground for extremists



KHALED AHMED

PAKISTAN IS IN the grip of terrorism unleashed by university-educated youth who kill in the name of Islam. A Karachi gang that was recently nabbed was found to have connected with university-level teachers and their students who were on the take from the Islamic State under the banner of *Ansarul Sharia* (friends of the Islamic way). The gang is busted and even the police, specially targeted by them "for publicity", were traumatised when told who they were. In the photographs that appeared on TV, they look divine with their facial hair styled like the Old Testament prophets. If you met them on the street you would go down on your knee and kiss their hand.

According to the Sindh police's counter-terrorism department, of the 500 prisoners it had studied, 64 held master's degrees and another 70 had bachelor's degrees, proving that their indoctrination came from the country's own textbooks. A girl from a well-to-do family devoted to Islamism in Hyderabad had actually run away to Syria to be trained as a suicide-bomber but was caught in time before she could kill fellow Muslims in Pakistan.

Education has produced terrorism. It sounds shocking but it is true: The kind of religion-based education given in Pakistan. Such influence doesn't end even after students join engineering and medical university. Universities turn out nuclear scientists who claim they can make electricity for the whole of Pakistan from a single *djin*. The textbooks don't let go of nationalism which in Pakistan is India-centric and is useful among Pakistanis for judging each other too because judgemental is what you become instead of being inquisitive.

Finally, you end up doing nothing to India but doing a lot of harm to fellow-Pakistanis. India can pay an Islamist in Pakistan to kill fellow-Pakistanis. Particularly vulnerable are liberal Muslims who tend to defend the minorities, just as liberal Hindus don't like it when Hindutva street power goes after Muslims for handling slaughtered cows.

But are Muslims anywhere else better-off? Surveys tell us that the entire Islamic world is abysmal when it comes to education: It is either the idea of jihad — constant warfare — or rivalry within the religion which makes normal education redundant. *Teaching Islam: Textbooks and Religion in the Middle East*; Edited by Eleanor Abdella Doumato and Gregory Starrett (Viva Books, 2008) makes the point quite clear.

In 1947, Muslim leaders were British-Raj-educated but led populations who had received much of their religious instruction

in the mosque and madrasa. In 1949, they agreed to plan a constitution based on the Quran and the Sunna, in other words, the cleric. This is the point where the Muslim leader in Pakistan abdicated his right to draft a modern constitution.

The rest of the Muslim world went through the same kind of pattern: People lived according to the worldview of the mosque while "modern" dictators ruled them by decree postponing the pledge of Quran and Sunna. Just as Pakistan thought of democracy in 1947 and pledged Quran and Sunna, the Arab Spring agitation against "modern" dictatorship too thought of Quran and Sunna — the banner in Egypt's Freedom Square said "*na'am lil-sharia*" (yes to sharia) — and when elections were held and the Islamic party won, it turned out that the new rulers were interested only in religious law which they thought was pure democracy.

The leave-it-to-the-masses approach adopted by the founding fathers of Pakistan allowed the religious parties who didn't win elections to retire to the seats of learning. Non-clerical parties fought and won elections by paying lip-service to Islam. They ignored the fact that religious parties were steadily winning college and university union elections and thus dominated the campuses. The "modern" rulers went to the United Nations and signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights thinking all rights mentioned in the charter must be Islamic because how could Islam be opposed to human rights? It took half a century, and rule by an Islamist general in Pakistan, to realise that Pakistan had signed a charter allowing the right to change religion which Islam punishes with death.

With the passage of time, and the movement of the population from the village to the city and its elevation to the middle class, what was marginal in the shape of religious parties started becoming mainstream. Pakistan accelerated the process by opting for deniable jihad, in the process empowering the madrasa and its "mufti" leaders. The politicians delayed the process of rolling back democracy through religion by adopting Islamic rhetoric and stuffing the constitution with Islamic injunctions. They started saying *Al-Hamdu-Lillah* and *Masha-Allah* and allowed street power to trickle away to the non-state actors.

Last year, when the killer of governor Punjab was hanged, the clerical show of strength was frightening: The clerics held the killer had murdered a blasphemer and was therefore a saint for whom they built a mausoleum overnight. Today, university campuses are middle class; so is the army. And education is helping them look for the enemy within rather than without, within the Muslim community and within the Islamic world, as Pakistan goes on killing the Shia Muslims of Quetta after the Afghans have finished with them.

The writer is consulting editor, 'Newsweek Pakistan'

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

FIX SCHOOLS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The missing jobs' (IE, September 22). It's disturbing that more than half of the students in government schools in class VIII are not able to solve simple maths problems or read simple sentences in English. Given this state of affairs, the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) seems unlikely to succeed. Unless the government focuses on basic education, it is unlikely to create a population that is employable.

Kulbhushan Gaur, Kanpur

A DIVERSION

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'Myanmar tapped into communal divide, fear, paved way for violence in Rakhine' (IE, September 22). It seems the story has cleverly diverted attention away from the massive, brutal repression by the Myanmar army of the Rohingya in the Rakhine area by harping on peripheral Hindu-Muslim tensions in that region.

Jawid Laiq, New Delhi

BLAME CONSUMERS

THIS REFERS TO 'Miles to go' (IE, September 21) by Shailaja Bajpai. The only aim of Indian television is to make money. The reason for the poor quality of programming is that it is what the people want. Somehow, we have accepted that young men can have their romantic aspirations fulfilled if they apply a particular deodorant. The elephant in the room: If a man wearing orange is selling you sub-standard products, he is still honest and his products are the best. Programming and advertising will evolve only once its consumers do.

Deepanshu Upadhyay, Hapur

LETTER OF THE WEEK

DEBATING NEET

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'A fairer test' (IE, September 18). Given significant disparities in school syllabi and evaluation patterns across states, a single national school education board on the lines of the CBSE is need of the hour. Education being a state subject, this demand seems untenable. However, a consensus can be envisaged towards homogenising the syllabi for natural sciences and mathematics whilst leaving it to the states to decide on the curriculum of social sciences and cultural studies. An up to date homogenised syllabus and standard textbooks for science subjects will ensure a level-playing field for all aspirants competing for engineering and medical entrance tests.

Mohd Zubair Khan, Delhi

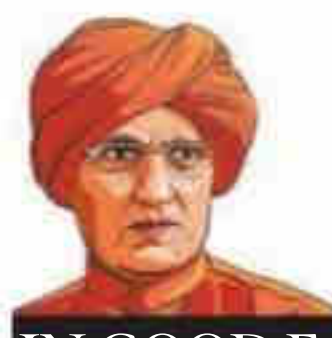
ILOGICAL DECISION

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Scrap the test' (IE, September 22). It is surprising that at the university level, students, who have not studied Hindi are being compelled to do so. Delhi University's decision to introduce a compulsory Hindi qualification defies logic. A congenial environment, which allows students to concentrate on and pursue courses of their choice will not only benefit them but the society at large.

Krishan Kumar Chug, New Delhi

Superstition caricatures God

Light of the Vedas is an antidote to ignorance



IN GOOD FAITH

BY SWAMI AGNIVESH

A CENTURY after Maharshi Dayananda Saraswati blazed the spiritual landscape of the Indian sub-continent, there are many who don't have a clue as to why he issued the battle cry: "Back to the Vedas!". The need to urge the people to return to the Vedas arose because they had strayed from its light. Now, perhaps more than then, it is true that those who pass for Hindus — in myriad forms of that religious identity — are ignorant of and alienated from the Vedas. This is ironic since "veda" means knowledge. You cannot be a Hindu and yet be ignorant and certainly, not ignorant of the Vedas.

Ignorance is the greatest peril for humanity. It is not merely an absence of knowledge. There is a knowledge more dangerous and condemnable than ignorance: The knowledge of what is evil, wrong or untrue. Many there are who have an uncanny genius for the things of darkness. While the spiritually enlightened see — or endeavour to see — everything in the light of truth, the wicked see everything in the darkness of falsehood. They hate the light of truth. The irony is that even the followers of Dayananda fall into this trap. He put all his emphasis on the duty to know, embrace and live by the truth because it was his mission to liberate human beings from superstition. He firmly believed that the Vedas are the most effective antidote to

superstition.

Religions are the most fertile breeding grounds for superstitions. There are secular superstitions but they are nothing compared to religious superstitions. Superstitions are to religion what stupid children are to a wise and noble mother. They point to our incapacity to think and act rationally. Superstitions inhibit what is good and noble in our nature and anchor us in what is subhuman.

Superstitions thwart our ethical development. This is obvious from the operating strategies of our fraud godmen. Do we know a godman who does not claim to perform miracles? Miracles belong to the domain of blind faith. When does someone blindfold you? Isn't it when he does not want you to know where you are being led? In whose interest is such an arrangement?

All superstitions thrive in darkness. All merchants of superstition hide themselves. Fraud godman Gurmeet Singh needed his *gufa*. Every godman creates a world of impenetrable secrecy around himself; lest he is seen as an ordinary human being. Every superstition is a blatant contradiction of truth and the light of spirituality

Superstitions caricature God. If anyone spends a few minutes considering the idea or image of God that superstitions imply, he would be shocked. To think of the Creator

and Sustainer of the cosmos in terms of this petty image — especially assuming that God can be bribed to be partial towards you — is laughably atheistic. If we have a modicum of love for God in us, we will realise that we insult God by casting the muck of superstitions at him/her. Superstitions are manufactured and popularised mainly to hold people back from God, which is essential if they are to be manipulated.

The deadliest superstitions are, therefore, those that pertain to God. Whatever misrepresents and insults God can only be harmful to human beings; because God is the source of our life and the destination of our destiny. Any idea of God as partisan to a person, group or country is superstitious.

The second deadliest superstitions aim at fragmenting the human family and sowing seeds of hate and cruelty. We have to be particularly stupid, Maharshi Dayananda would say, to believe that we can serve or honour God by hating and hurting our fellow human beings. Maharshi was open to people of all kinds. He used to hold spiritual disputations with scholars of all religions, including Christian missionaries. Of course, this was represented by the merchants of religious obscurantism. But he pursued his spiritual mission undeterred by opposition and calumny.

The third most unfortunate set of super-

stitions comprise those that seek to subjugate the gullible to the wiles of a priestly class. The idea that you can wash away your sins by taking a dip in a river and then return to your old ways until the season for the next dip comes insults God but profits priests. Superstitions of this kind help to degrade religion into an industry.

To all Indian citizens — irrespective of our different religious traditions — the worry is that superstitions inhibit the rise and spread of scientific temper, which is not only a constitutional imperative but also a spiritual need. The Vedas are scientific, though not in the sense that some feats of modern science are symbolically prefigured in them. They are scientific in the sense that they see the spread of knowledge, of light, as the means for human ennoblement and *moksha*.

The hope for India does not lie in securing American endorsement. Or in massive digitalisation. Or by attaining "super-power" status. The destiny of India can be fulfilled only if we return to the light of the Vedas. And that light is not the exclusive property of the Hindus, just as the light of the sun is not the exclusive inheritance of any group or tribe. You cannot claim to believe in the Vedas and go about your religiosity like wild beasts.

The writer is a Vedic scholar and activist