



Circumscription

Circular on using past protest record to deny jobs, passports risks further alienation in J&K

Police verification and security clearances for passport or government job applicants are a matter of routine in most parts of the country. In Kashmir, where the police have now issued a circular aimed at gathering details and denying security clearance to those involved in throwing stones and joining street protests in the past, the exercise may not be out of the ordinary, but it could result in serious prejudice to the aspirations of many young men and women. The circular, which asks CID Special Branch field units to ensure that any subject's involvement in law-and-order incidents and related crimes be specifically looked into, and also to collect digital evidence from the records of police and security forces, suggests that the administration is quite serious about preventing those with a likely link to protests in the past from either entering government service or travelling abroad. Reports suggest that the official list of street protesters swelled between 2008 and 2017 to include nearly 20,000 people. On the face of it, the decision to subject applicants for passports and jobs to scrutiny is not illegal. Under Section 6(2) of the Passports Act, 1967, passports can be denied to applicants for various reasons, including their likelihood of engaging in activities prejudicial to the country's sovereignty and integrity, or detrimental to its security. Further, those convicted in the preceding five years, or against whom proceedings are pending before any criminal court, are also candidates for refusal. There is legal recourse for those affected, as the Act allows them to approach the trial court for a 'No Objection' certificate to get a passport.

In the backdrop of the Union government's outreach to revive political activity preparatory to elections, it is quite incongruous that such a far-reaching measure that would dampen the hopes and aspirations of thousands of people is being pursued. The Government's position is that the alteration of the status of J&K in August 2019 has ushered in a new era of development and prosperity, and that it is time to strengthen grassroots democracy. It was as a part of this process that Prime Minister Narendra Modi invited leaders of the Union Territory's political parties in June for a discussion. Despite their obvious disappointment that the restoration of statehood is likely to be considered only after polls to the Legislative Assembly, the parley did create some cautious optimism about a fresh political process. Were the administration to pursue this circular zealously, there is a danger that it may revive the sort of alienation among the youth that led to the stone-pelting incidents in 2008 and 2010, and the wave of disaffection following the killing of militant leader Burhan Wani. When all efforts should be directed towards building on current gains, nothing ought to be done to make those still harbouring, for whatever reason, a sense of betrayal feel that some fresh collective punishment is in the offing.

Time and patience

India seems ready for England in cricket's longest format after extended waiting period

Just as Indian hockey's Olympic tryst draws rightful attention in Tokyo, Virat Kohli's men will don whites and play their Test series in England. The first Test commencing at Nottingham's Trent Bridge on Wednesday will kick-start a five-match joust stretching all the way to September 14. Due to bio-bubble protocols and the World Test Championship final that India lost to New Zealand at Southampton on June 23, Kohli and company have been in England since June first week. Perhaps, this is the longest an Indian squad has stayed overseas prior to an opening Test and there was adequate time to get acclimatised. After the contest involving New Zealand, the players took a break, savoured the countryside, Euro and Wimbledon, and added zest to their Instagram accounts. They then reverted to the bubble and had a warm-up fixture against a County Select XI. Meanwhile, Rishabh Pant recovered from COVID-19, an injured Shubman Gill returned home, and Mayank Agarwal suffered a concussion and was ruled out of the first Test. Even so, India is seemingly in a better head-space, an important attribute while countering England in its backyard. Ever since its maiden tour of England in 1932, India has won only three series – 1971, 1986 and 2007 – at the Old Blighty. Having ambushed Australia, India wants to replicate that feat in cricket's birthplace.

With its whimsical skies torn between the sun and feathery rain, and pitches favouring the sultans of pace, England is a hard testing ground. A cautionary fact is that India lost all its three previous tours during 2011, 2014 and 2018. It would be interesting to see who walks out along with Rohit Sharma as his fellow-opener. K.L. Rahul has a chance while Cheteshwar Pujara, Kohli and Ajinkya Rahane would constitute the middle-order. Hanuma Vihari is part of the mix with Pant lending match-altering flair. A pace-attack headlined by Jasprit Bumrah along with R. Ashwin lending his spin, augurs well and seemingly India have the right men. Yet, there are worry-lines. By their exalted standards, Kohli, Pujara and Rahane have had a lean patch, and Bumrah was not on fire against New Zealand. However, the team-management sees this as an aberration. Facing off against India, England has skipper Joe Root and the pace-combine of James Anderson and Stuart Broad to fall back upon. But there is no Jofra Archer and the exit of all-rounder Ben Stokes citing mental issues and the need for rest, is a blow to the host. Exactly 50 years after registering its maiden series victory in England, India is back for another tilt. With just the walking-wounded and its bench-strength, India stunned Australia. Kohli is banking on that memory to turn the tide.

Poverty in India is on the rise again

In the absence of CES data, the Periodic Labour Force Survey shows a rise in the absolute number of the poor



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India has not released its Consumption Expenditure Survey (CES) data since 2011-12. Normally a CES is conducted by the National Sample Survey Office (NSO) every five years. But the CES of 2017-18 (already conducted a year late) was not made public by the Government of India. Now, we hear that a new CES is likely to be conducted in 2021-22, the data from which will probably not be available before end-2022.

Meanwhile, we know that the economy has been slowing for nine quarters prior to the outbreak of the novel coronavirus pandemic. Unemployment had reached a 45-year high in 2017-18, as revealed by NSO's Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS).

Sufficient to estimate change India's labour force surveys, including the five-yearly Employment-Unemployment Rounds from 1973-4 to 2011-12, have also collected consumption expenditure of households. The PLFS has maintained that tradition. While the PLFS's questions on consumption expenditure are not as detailed as those of the CES, they are sufficient for us to estimate changes in consumption on a consistent basis across time. It enables any careful researcher to estimate the incidence of poverty (i.e., the share in the total population of those below the poverty line), as well as the total number of persons below poverty. That is exactly what we do in the table.

There is a clear trajectory of the incidence of poverty falling from 1973 to 2012. In fact, since India

began collecting data on poverty, the incidence of poverty has always fallen, consistently. It was 54.9% in 1973-4; 44.5% in 1983-84; 36% in 1993-94 and 27.5% in 2004-05. This was in accordance with the Lakdawala poverty line (which was lower than the Tendulkar poverty line), named after a distinguished economist, then a member of the Planning Commission.

Methodology

In 2011, it was decided in the Planning Commission, that the national poverty line will be raised in accordance with the recommendations of an expert group chaired by the late Suresh Tendulkar (then professor of Economics at the Delhi School of Economics). That is the poverty line we use in estimating poverty in the table. As it happens, this poverty line was comparable at the time to the international poverty line (estimated by the World Bank), of \$1.09 (now raised to \$1.90 to account for inflation) person per day.

Based on the Tendulkar poverty line, the poverty estimates for 2004-05 and 2011-12 are to be found in the Planning Commission's own estimates using the CES of those years. Hence, we have extended the 2011-12 poverty line for each State and used the consumption expenditure reported by the PLFS to estimate a consistent poverty head count ratio (i.e., incidence of poverty in the population) as well as the absolute number of the poor. We feel confident about using the PLFS, because in the absence of CES data, the PLFS can be used to estimate the incidence of poverty. It also collects the household monthly per capita consumption expenditure data based on the Mixed Recall Period methodology. Similar to the CES, the PLFS (PLFS annual report, 2019-20, page 6) also asks the household questions about expenses on health, clothing and

Relative and absolute poverty rose after 2012

Tracking poverty in India from 2005 to 2020

Incidence of Poverty	As per NSS CES data		As per PLFS data	
	2004-05	2011-12	2019-20	
Poverty Head Count Ratio (%)	Rural	41.8	25.7	30.5
	Urban	25.7	13.7	15.5
	Total	37.2	21.9	25.9
Number of poor (Million)	Rural	325.8	216.7	270
	Urban	81.4	53.1	71
	Total	407.2	269.8	348
Tendulkar Poverty Line (MPCE in ₹) All India	Rural	₹446.68	₹816	₹1,217.96
	Urban	₹578.8	₹1,000	₹1,467

bedding, education, footwear and consumer durables for a 365 day recall period – prior to the day of the survey; but for non-durable consumption goods/services – including expenses on food, housing and conveyance, etc. – its question expects a recall period of 30 days prior to the day of survey. We naturally updated the Tendulkar poverty line, using the Consumer Price Index for each State to 2019-20, to arrive at the estimate for the last year before COVID-19.

An urban and rural rise

What is stunning is that for the first time in India's history of estimating poverty, there is a rise in the incidence of poverty since 2011-12. The important point is that this is consistent with the NSO's CES data for 2017-18 that was leaked data. The leaked data showed that rural consumption between 2012 and 2018 had fallen by 8%, while urban consumption had risen by barely 2%. Since the majority of India's population (certainly over 65%) is rural, poverty in India is also predominantly rural. Remarkably, by 2019-20, poverty had increased significantly in both the rural and urban areas, but much more so in rural areas (from 25% to 30%). It is also for the first time since

the estimation of poverty began in India on a consistent basis, that the absolute number of poor has risen: from 217 million in 2012 to 270 million in 2019-20 in rural areas; and from 53 million to 71 million in the urban areas; or a total increase of the absolute poor of about 70 million.

It is important here to recall two facts: between 1973 and 1993, the absolute number of poor had remained constant (at about 320 million poor), despite a significant increase in India's total population. Between 1993 and 2004, the absolute number of poor fell by a marginal number (18 million) from 320 million to 302 million, during a period when the GDP growth rate had picked up after the economic reforms.

It is for the first time in India's history since the CES began that we have seen an increase in the absolute numbers of the poor, between 2012-13 and 2019-20. The second fact is that for the first time ever, between 2004-05 and 2011-12, the number of the poor fell, and that too by a staggering 133 million, or by over 19 million per year. This was accounted for by what has come to be called India's 'dream run' of growth: over 2004 and 2014, the GDP growth

rate had averaged 8% per annum – a 10-year run that was not sustained thereafter. By contrast, not only has the incidence of poverty increased since then, but the absolute increase in poverty is totally unprecedented.

The contributory factors

The reasons for increased poverty since 2013 are not far to seek. While the economy maintained some growth momentum till 2015, the monumental blunder of demonetisation followed by a poorly planned and hurriedly introduced Goods and Services Tax, both delivered body blows to the unorganised sector and Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises. The economic slowdown followed. None of the four engines of growth was firing after that. Private investment fell from 31% inherited by the new government, to 28% of GDP by 2019-20. Public expenditure was constrained by a silent fiscal crisis. Exports, which had never fallen in absolute dollar terms for a quarter century since 1991 actually fell below the 2013-14 level (\$315 billion) for five years. Consumption stagnated and household savings rates fell. Joblessness increased to a 45-year high by 2017-18 (by the usual status), and youth (15-29 years of age) saw unemployment triple from 6% to 18% between 2012 and 2018. Real wages did not increase for casual or regular workers over the same period, hardly surprising when job seekers were increasing but jobs were not at anywhere close to that rate. Hence, consumer expenditure fell, and poverty increased.

Poverty is expected to rise further during the COVID-19 pandemic after the economy has contracted.

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Getting back in business in the Indo-Pacific

The choreographed visits of three senior U.S. officials are a part of the Biden administration's deliberate strategic refocus



RAJIV BHATIA

United States President Joe Biden executed a bold diplomatic outreach to the Indo-Pacific region last month through carefully choreographed visits of his three top officials – Deputy Secretary of State Wendy R. Sherman, Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III, and Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken. This is part of a deliberate strategic refocus, away from the 20 years of Afghanistan and Iraq and towards maritime Asia, where COVID-19, climate change and China are the compelling challenges.

Assessing what the three American dignitaries sought and actually achieved is instructive in order to appreciate the impressive sweep of diplomacy and military strength of the world's top power, the United States. Their discussions would surely mould the geopolitical equations in the region.

In East Asia and Oman

Ms. Sherman's visit (July 19-27) was probably the most complex since it covered not only Japan, South Korea and Mongolia but also China. Throughout her trip, she reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to working with allies and partners for the promotion of peace and prosperity and upholding a 'rules-based order', the code word criti-

cal of China's behaviour. Her discussions with Japanese Vice Foreign Minister Mori Takeo, covered not only the present state of the Japan-U.S. alliance but also other issues including Myanmar and COVID-19. In addition, she participated in a trilateral meeting involving Japan and South Korea, perhaps in a bid to smoothen tensions afflicting the two east Asian neighbours.

By visiting Ulaanbaatar, Ms. Sherman became the highest U.S. dignitary to visit Mongolia since 2016. Despite its close relationship with Beijing, Mongolia looks for devices to assert its independence. So, the opportunity to discuss its needs and concerns with the new administration was valuable. In Tianjin, China, she held discussions with Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng, her counterpart, and was also received by Foreign Minister Wang Yi. Her main mission was to convey that the U.S. welcomed competition but did not seek confrontation with China. She also discussed forthrightly the dismal human rights situation in Xinjiang and logistics for a possible Biden-Xi Jinping meeting at the G20 summit in Rome in October.

Southeast Asian dynamics

The visit by Mr. Austin (July 23-30) covering three important ASEAN member-states – Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippines – turned out to be the most productive in that it reiterated the necessity for a U.S. military presence in the region. As the Pentagon chief, Mr. Austin is heard with attention, particularly when he speaks with the



candour of a veteran general. "Beijing's claim to the vast majority of the South China Sea has no basis in international law," he aptly asserted, while delivering the Fulbright Lecture on July 27 (<https://bit.ly/3CkTeMT>). He listed China's other objectionable actions, including "aggression against India". And then he sent out the key signal to Beijing: "We will not flinch when our interests are threatened. Yet we do not seek confrontation."

This seems to have resonated, as Mr. Austin's discussions with leaders of the three countries went off exceptionally well. In a joint statement, Singapore and the U.S. agreed that America's presence in the region is "vital for its peace, prosperity and stability". The U.S. side appreciated Singapore's logistical support to U.S. military aircraft and vessels (<https://bit.ly/3xmjPW7>), while Singapore benefits from the arrangement of an air force fighter training detachment hosted in Guam as well as new training facilities inside the U.S. Singapore could modulate its current inclination to move closer to China.

Mr. Austin encouraged Vietnam to develop closer defence cooperation with the U.S. A new memo-

randum of understanding was signed to resolve the war legacy issues by creating a database to accelerate the search for those still missing in action (MIA). Mr. Austin's visits to Singapore and Vietnam will be followed shortly by U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris. The Philippines leg produced a notable result as Manila agreed to full restoration of the Visiting Forces Agreement which provides the legal foundation for the U.S. military presence in that country.

In South Asia and Kuwait

Mr. Blinken's trip to Delhi and Kuwait (July 26-29; <https://bit.ly/3yq8Yvt>) drew attention for its positive outcomes. The India visit was more in the nature of a consultative, confirmatory dialogue rather than one that results in signing of new agreements. His discussions with the Prime Minister, the National Security Adviser and the External Affairs Minister brought out clearly that the areas of convergence between the two nations are expanding and the areas of divergence are shrinking. His repeated observation that the friendship with India is one of the closest that the U.S. has, was music to Indian ears.

On Afghanistan, the proximity of perceptions was emphasised, although this did not conceal the differences in their perspectives. On the Indo-Pacific, however, the convergence was clear, with the two Foreign Ministers agreeing to cooperate on a range of geopolitical and geo-economic issues without uttering the "C" word even once in their smoothly-managed

joint press conference. By clarifying that the Quad was not "a military alliance", Mr. Blinken spoke the truth, tipping his hat to India's strategic autonomy. He defined the Quad as four like-minded countries "coming together to work collectively ... on regional challenges, while reinforcing international rules and values".

The takeaways

Together, what do the three visits signal? First, that America's China policy and the Rest of the Indo-Pacific policy will run in tandem, with inner consistency ensured by Mr. Biden. Second, Washington maintains a tough attitude towards Beijing, but it desires to keep the doors open for dialogue. The relationship with China is marked by three characteristics – adversarial, competitive and cooperative – and is likely to stay that way. Third, the U.S. is willing to resist and counter China firmly, but with the full engagement of and contribution by the like-minded states of the region. Therefore, Mr. Austin's exposition of "integrated deterrence", defined as "using every military and non-military tool in our toolbox, in lock-step with our allies and partners...", assumes significance.

In short, the U.S. is back and is willing to lead – but the region will have to seriously step up too and participate actively to maintain peace and prosperity. Asia can ill-afford to be a reticent bystander.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

'Unconstitutional' laws

It is deplorable that the law enforcement agencies themselves have been transgressing the constitutional provisions by registering cases under 'non-existing' Sections (Page 1, "SC questions States on cases under 66A", August 3). Under these circumstances, what can the ordinary citizen do except wait for years on end for his case to come up for hearing? It is a mystery how courts are sending the accused to remand under these Sections without initial enquiry, and also without observing whether the Sections invoked exist

in the Statute book or not. Technology can be fruitfully utilised to ensure that cases are not registered under Sections repealed by Parliament or declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of India. All police stations may be computerised, including the registration of cases. A software programme may be developed, loaded with all the existing Sections of the law, with a provision not to accept registration of cases under Sections not provided in the system. All police stations in each State should be connected to a central server and the software should be updated

as and when a law is enacted, a Section is modified/repealed by Parliament or a Section is declared unconstitutional by the Court.

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Parliament disrupted

The disruptions to the Rajya Sabha for the tenth consecutive day show that the ruling dispensation is no different from previous regimes in taking a confrontationalist approach towards the Opposition, hiding behind adjournments and running away from its responsibility in taking up issues that the

Members of House want the Government to discuss (Inside pages, "In RS, Oppn. raises Pegasus, farm bills", August 3). As the Lower House is running on tax-payers' money, the onus is on those who run the country to see to it that it transacts business, runs smoothly and does not fritter away public money in this manner. One wonders why the Prime Minister who is an orator and talks on a myriad issues in his 'Mann ki baat' radio broadcast, is now silent on Pegasus and the controversial farm laws. This does not bode well for an elected government that

is supposed to be answerable not only to the people of this country but also to the elected representatives.

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Dispute resolution

The erstwhile Mizo hills district of Assam became the Mizoram Union Territory, and after a few years, it became a full-fledged State. Old revenue maps of Assam showing district boundaries as well as other revenue records of Assam, should be consulted to resolve the present day Assam-Mizoram boundary

dispute. It is very unfortunate that the police and the people of both States were embroiled in a dispute. I served as a General Reserve Engineer Force (GREF) Officer during 1973-77 on a major section of the Silchar-Aizawl road, that is from Bhaga Bazaar (in Assam) right up to Kawnpui (beyond Kolasi in Mizoram). The inter-State border was considered to be where the hill section starts (near about Vairengte village). It was absolutely peaceful then.

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