



Noble intentions

The UN must ensure that the Taliban uphold human rights and give up terror tactics

As India ended its month-long presidency of the UN Security Council this week, the Government claimed a victory of sorts for chairing a session that resulted in the adoption of UNSC Resolution 2593, condemning terrorism and urging the Taliban to ensure human rights in Afghanistan. The Government has said that the resolution – sponsored by the U.S., the U.K. and France – addressed key Indian concerns, calling for the Taliban to ensure safe evacuations of Afghans wishing to leave and not allowing Afghan soil to be used for terrorist activity. The passage of the resolution was timely, practically coinciding with the exit of the last U.S. troops from Kabul, and the Taliban's declaration of complete victory. It also followed on three discussions held under India's chairmanship that have set out the expectations from the new regime in Afghanistan: the importance of upholding rights; to push for an inclusive, negotiated political settlement for government, and condemning all acts of terror, including the recent attack on Kabul airport; preventing any future attacks, and combating of the presence of UN-designated entities. However, the resolution did not contain any consequential language that would give the UNSC's stated intentions any real teeth, and appears to accept the Taliban regime as the default force in Afghanistan.

While it is very early to consider more punitive action against the Taliban for violating their commitments by using the UN Charter's "Chapter 7" mandate, that empowers the UNSC to maintain peace, it is disappointing that the India-chaired resolution does not contain language that would hold the new regime more accountable. The watered-down language was probably on account of severe opposition from Russia and China, who later decided to abstain. This divide in the P-5 nations will only prove to be counterproductive if the UNSC wants to remain "seized" of the situation, as the resolution affirms. It is hoped that the UN system acknowledges the powerful leverage it has in Afghanistan's future and actualises all mechanisms in its mandate to monitor the progress of government formation. A major tool is the India-chaired 1988 (Taliban) Sanctions Committee, due to meet soon, which needs to ensure that no designated leader of the Taliban and their associates are given recourse to funds, arms or travel permission unless they show a commitment to international principles. The renewal, on September 17, of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan's mandate is another lever. As a concerned neighbour of Afghanistan, one that could be drastically affected by an uptick in terrorism there, and a believer in the UN-led multilateral order, India still has a role in Afghan's future. While it has decided to embark on talks with the Taliban in Doha, it must continue to play that role on the world stage.

Breakthrough challenge

Vaccine makers should move to making vaccines for the Delta variants

With over 66 crore vaccines administered since the vaccination drive commenced in January, India has now inoculated at least half its adult population with at least one dose, and 16% with two. There is a small, discernible rise in the number of new infections. Kerala, which contributes the bulk of infections, also has among the highest proportions of the population who are double vaccinated. This apparent paradox underlies concerns about the rise in 'breakthrough infections', or confirmed infections in those who took the second dose at least two weeks earlier. A recent study by CSIR scientists found that nearly a quarter of 600 fully vaccinated care workers were reinfected. Earlier studies from the CMC Vellore, and PGIMER, Chandigarh, too have reported between 1%-10% of fully vaccinated health-care workers as having been infected. However, less than 5% of them have required hospitalisation and no deaths have been confirmed, indicating the effectiveness of vaccines in preventing severe sickness and death. Internationally too, the trend is clear. Israel and the U.S. in spite of high vaccination coverage, continue to report new cases; though here too, the infection rate is much higher in the unvaccinated. The prime suspects, internationally as well as in India, are the Delta variants and related sub-lineages that are believed to form the bulk of coronavirus infections. The Indian SARS-CoV-2 Genomics Consortium (INSACOG) that tracks mutations in coronavirus strains has said that the breakthrough infections reported so far are within "expected" numbers. That is, vaccines in large, controlled clinical trials had demonstrated 70%-90% efficacy but lost considerable ability to reduce symptomatic infections when confronted with the Delta variants, and so a certain fraction of those fully vaccinated would continue to be vulnerable.

While it is a fact of evolution that viruses would mutate to be able to avoid antibodies, and vaccines, therefore, would have to keep being upgraded, it seems that the moment appears to have come too soon. A country like India, in spite of being a major vaccine producer in the pre-pandemic era, has only now managed to get production lines to deliver one crore vaccines a day. While other vaccines are in the pipeline, all of them are designed on the Wuhan-virus platform and although companies claim that the strength of mRNA and DNA-based vaccine platforms lies in the ability to quickly tweak them to accommodate new variants, there are no reports yet, anywhere in the world, of vaccine makers specifying a timeline for vaccines that are tuned to the Delta variants. Vaccine makers who may have got emergency-use authorisations but are a while away from launch, should ideally move to making vaccines for the Delta variants and not rely on their existing pipeline.

A hydro onslaught the Himalayas cannot take

There is rock solid scientific evidence to demand the cancellation of many upcoming and approved hydel projects



MALLIKA BHANOT & C.P. RAJENDRAN

In normal circumstances, when a mistake is understood and suffered, one tends to learn from it and not repeat it. Unfortunately, this does not hold true in the case of the policymakers who are bent upon permitting projects and large-scale infrastructure in the already fragile and vulnerable Ganga-Himalayan basin. Recurrent disasters in the last decade in the State of Uttarakhand have been studied and analysed. And in every disaster, the increasing anthropogenic pressure in this area has been found to be a direct or an indirect contributor. The most recent example is the Rishi-Ganga valley disaster, in February this year which claimed over 200 lives as the river turned into a flood carrying a heavy load of silt and debris and demolishing hydropower projects along its course. While science and logic tell us to press on with conservation and protection in these sensitive areas, our Government has decided to go in the dangerous and opposite direction.

The background

The affidavit filed recently by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) in an ongoing matter in the Supreme Court of India has recommended the construction of seven partially constructed hydroelectric projects in the Uttarakhand Himalaya. This essentially goes against the core mandate of the Ministry – which is to conserve the country's natural environment – and one of the prominent electoral promises of the Government, the rejuvenation of one of the country's major rivers, the Ganga. After the Kedarnath tragedy of 2013, in *suo motu* cognisance by the Supreme Court, an expert body (EB-I) was constituted to investigate whether the "mushrooming of hydro-power projects" in the State of Uttarakhand was linked to the disaster. In its findings, EB-I said there was a "direct and indirect impact" of

these dams in aggravating the disaster. Paving the way for the projects, the Ministry formed committee after committee until it got approval for these projects with some design changes.

This affidavit, dated August 17, reveals that the Government is inclined towards construction of 26 other projects, as in the recommendation of the expert body (EB-II; B.P. Das committee). The conclusions of the first expert body (EB-I), chaired by Ravi Chopra, that had flagged the incalculable environmental risks of such structures have been conveniently sidelined and overwritten by EB-II whose mandate has been to pave the way for all projects through some design change modifications. Politicians in cahoots with private developers are bent upon going ahead with such projects for short-term monetary gains despite the dire warnings of climate change threats and environmental challenges. It must be noted that the latest report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has special significance in the context of fragile mountainous ecological regimes.

Dangerous reversal

The aforementioned affidavit submitted by the MoEFCC conceals the Ministry's own observations and admissions given in its earlier affidavit dated May 5, 2014 which admitted that hydroelectric projects did aggravate the 2013 flood. Interestingly, the recent affidavit also conceals the minutes of the meeting and decision taken by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) on February 2, 2019 in this regard. The minutes of this meeting make the policy decision of there being "no new hydropower projects" on the Ganga along with the cancellation of those that have not reached at 50% of its construction. This in itself is a bizarre demarcation because on one hand there is an acceptance of the devastating impact of the dams (and the decision not to have more) while on the other, there is a push to still pursue them on an unfounded logic of money having been spent on them. Should we continue with a mistake made or make amends?

The sustainability of the dams in the long term is highly questionable as hydropower solely relies



THE HINDU PHOTO ARCHIVES

on the excess availability of water. Climate change models are clear about the cascading impacts of global warming trends on the glaciers of the Himalaya – the main source of water in the region that sustains the drainage network within the mountain chain. Temperatures across the region are projected to rise by about 1°C to 2°C on average by 2050. Retreating glaciers and the alternating phases of floods and drought will impact the seasonal flows of rivers.

The most crucial aspect is the existence of sediment hotspot paraglacial zones, which at the time of a cloud burst, contribute huge amounts of debris and silt in the river, thereby increasing the river volume and the devastation downstream. The flash floods in these Himalayan valleys do not carry water alone; they also carry a massive quantity of debris. This was pointed out by EB-II alongside its recommendation not build any projects beyond 2,000 metres or north of the MCT, or the Main Central Thrust (it is a major geological fault). The existing fully commissioned dams in the region are already indicative of the fact that these high-capital intensive ventures have negatively impacted local communities and their livelihoods. It is high time the MoEFCC formulated a written position on climate change adaptation with respect to the hydropower sector, after a thorough public discourse.

'Risk-laden artifacts'

Amelie Huber, a political ecologist who has conducted extensive research on the hydropower development in northeast India, says that the dams in the mountainous regions that are exposed to earthquakes, floods, extreme rainfall, avalanches and landslides, are "risk-laden artifacts" (<https://bit.ly/3t8u6EE>). The dominantly

clichéd discourses on hydropower as a renewable source of green energy promoted by the dam lobby, deliberately ignore the contentious externalities such as social displacement, ecological impacts, environmental and technological risks.

Factor of climate change

These discourses assume great significance in the Himalayan terrains as these projects exacerbate ecological vulnerability, in a region that is already in a precarious state. The intense anthropogenic activities associated with the proliferation of the hydroelectric projects in these precarious regions accelerate the intensity of flash floods, avalanches, and landslides. The additional element of climate change makes these scenarios much worse. About 15% of the great earthquakes (of magnitudes greater than 8) of the 20th century took place in the Himalaya and many of its segments are likely to see a period of intense earthquake activity in the future, as studies show. The 2015 Nepal earthquake is a case in point. Several dams were damaged in that event destroying a third of Nepal's hydropower.

The recent events such as the Rishi Ganga tragedy and the disasters of 2012 (flashfloods), 2013 are examples of how hydroelectric projects which come in the way of high-velocity flows aggravate a disaster and should be treated as a warning against such projects in the disaster-prone Uttarakhand river valleys. The proliferation of dams is not restricted to Uttarakhand. By 2007, Sikkim had entered a contract with private public sector players for development of 5,000 MW and Arunachal Pradesh signed memorandum of understanding in 2010 for 40,000 MW. As Ms. Huber points out, "these agreements thrived on speculative investments and political brokering.... Private companies... often partner with public companies – have minimal accountability or experience in the courier and logistics, real estate, steel fabrication, and tourism sectors".

She cites the example of the 510 MW Teesta V hydropower plant in central Sikkim, commissioned in 2008. The local communities have

been complaining about the sinking of mountain slopes, drying up of springs, development of fissures and increased incidents of landslides. The construction and maintenance of an extensive network of underground tunnels carrying water to the powerhouses contribute to the failure of mountain slopes.

Several people in the Tapovan Vishnugad hydroelectric project were washed away earlier this year, while scores were buried in the debris of the 2013 floods aggravated by the Phata-Byung and Singoli-Bhatwari hydroelectric projects of the Kedarnath valley. Many lives and livelihoods were lost in the Ukhimath flash floods of 2012 where the Kali-Ganga and Madmaheshwar dams are located. The dangers of an impending earthquake or flash flood loom large over the highly vulnerable Chamoli region where Vishnugad-Pippalkoti is based. We are already aware of the massive impact of the Tehri hydroelectric project, if an unfortunate catastrophe strikes this gigantic structure.

The river must flow free

These are the projects that have been approved by the Government with no science backing them but with several scientific truths demanding their cancellation. A preposterous amount of money is being wasted in the construction of these dams that will always function much below their efficiency, cause the loss of water and forests, and render the area fragile. By the time they are constructed, the cost of electricity generated will also be phenomenally high and would have no buyers. Considering the environmental and cultural significance of these areas, it is imperative that the Government refrains from the economically challenged rapacious construction of hydroelectric projects and declares the upper reaches of all the headstreams of the Ganga as eco-sensitive zones. It must allow the river to flow unfettered and free.

Mallika Bhanot is a member of Ganga Alvaan, a citizen forum working towards conservation of the Ganga and the Himalayas. C.P. Rajendran is an adjunct professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru

There has to be space for Bharati, and Bama too

The Delhi University undergraduate syllabus review case is a setback for pioneering academic freedom and thought



APOORVANAND

The decision of the authorities of the University of Delhi to remove the texts by Dalit writers Bama Faustina Soosairaj, Sukirtharani and Mahasweta Devi from the undergraduate courses of English literature should worry the academic community for the reasons given and the manner in which it was done.

Consultative syllabus drafting These writings were part of different papers of the undergraduate programme. The syllabus was drafted through a long process of consultation with the teachers of the undergraduate programme and approved unanimously. There was no dissent note even from any of the faculty members. The established norm requires the courses to be endorsed by the academic council, which comprises teachers from all disciplines and is the apex body of the university for academic matters. Usually, the council respects the academic decision of the department concerned. But the University of Delhi has created another layer of an oversight committee to look at the syllabus cleared by the department before

putting it up for discussion by the academic council. It consists of nominees of the authorities. One need not say that this is an unnecessary arrangement as there is another standing committee of the academic council to look at any objections to the courses.

It is this committee which ignored and overruled the collective academic wisdom of the department of English and arbitrarily removed these texts. And the members of the academic council, ignoring the protests from their colleagues from the English department, seconded the decision of the oversight committee. They know well that these writings must have been chosen after a long debate and discussion among the faculty members teaching these courses. There are certain departments which take this task seriously and there are some which do not bother about the rigour of the process. The department of English cannot be faulted for a lack of rigour at least.

This insensitivity of the academic council towards the intellectual labour put in by their colleagues of the English department is a sign of lack of collegiality in the apex body. It is disturbing that a majority of the members of this body, most of them nominees of the Vice-Chancellor and ex-officio members, choose to follow the wishes of the authority. This is not their role. They abdicate their responsibility by not engaging with



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

academic arguments and simply toeing the line of the authorities.

The FYUP rollback case

One must also note that this very academic council also took a momentous decision of introducing the four-year undergraduate programme (FYUP) without any discussion. The casual approach of the academic council in a matter such as this explains why it did not care about this 'small' issue of three texts. We had witnessed the same pusillanimity when the academic council had approved the FYUP in 2012 and then withdrew it in 2014 at the instance of the Government. The academic council showed no embarrassment in rolling back what it had termed as a historic and revolutionary step only two years earlier! I remember asking the then head of my department the reason why he had voted for FYUP and he nonchalantly told me that it was for the 'people above' to think and not his concern.

We, as teachers, do need to introspect about this internal, moral

weakness for which only we are responsible. We make those bodies, be it departmental committees or faculty bodies or the academic council. It is we who fail the students and the university by not performing our role as members of these crucial committees. We forego our freedom of thought for the comfort of being on the 'right' side.

Patronising approach

Dismissing the criticism of the censoring of the syllabus the University said, "The university subscribes to the idea that the literary content forming part of the text in a language course of study should contain materials which do not hurt the sentiments of any individual and is inclusive in nature to portray a true picture of our society, both past and present. Such an inclusive approach is important for the young minds who imbibe the teaching-learning emanating from the syllabus in letter and spirit. Therefore, the content of the syllabus depicts the idea of inclusiveness, diversity and harmony."

The patronising approach towards young minds aside, need one repeat that the role of the department of literatures is precisely this: to understand how emotions and sentiments are formed, to examine the claim of a sentiment to be universal, the question of whether the 'subalterns can speak', not only for themselves but for others too, and why the

question of representation and voice is important? It is not enough to have space for the empathic and nationalist voice of Subramania Bharati. It is equally important to have the space for the assertive voices of Bama and Sukirtharani. The chairman of the committee is free not to look at things in terms of caste but he is not at liberty to erase the reality of castes. The removal of Draupadi and the refusal to have any text by Mahasweta Devi reveals the political bias of the committee. The story depicts the resistance of an Adivasi woman despite her being ravaged by the security forces, who confronts the 'nation' with the nudity of body. Obviously, it leaves the claim of the nation shamed.

It is dismaying

The department of English of Delhi University was one of the first to diversify and Indianise its syllabus by opening up to the writings from languages. In this process, it discovered many Indias, the silenced ones, those who are laying claim over this India, and exposed its students to them. It is sad that the process is now being reversed and that too by those who have no academic authority to do so. Even more dismaying is the fact that the larger academic community of the university watches this silently while this butchering takes place.

Apoorvanand is a teacher and writer

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.

Back to school

There are parents, of well-to-do schoolchildren in particular, who have been sceptical about the opening of schools by claiming that schools cannot enforce standard COVID-19 protocols and that their children would be at risk. To such parents, I have a question. Why do they not see the same risk when they take their children to known and unknown leisure spots, malls,

multiplexes, social gatherings and other public places? Even in normal times schools should have all the basic facilities such as clean drinking water, washrooms and so on. The transport arrangements and commuting with parents also need to be safe. Hygiene is the most important aspect in a school whether private or government run. What is new now is that the children should be taught

to follow COVID-19 protocols. It is important for parents to follow these at home and set an example for children to follow. At this time, both parents and school managements need to cooperate to run schools safely. Teachers can play a primary role in instilling confidence among children.

N. NAGARAJAN,
Secunderabad

■ It is good that many States are beginning to reopen

schools. Eighteen months of not having schooling is a major setback for any child in the process of his learning. Though an online class is no match for a physical classroom, it is also not available to a majority of students. Schools should be allowed to run following strict adherence to standards of COVID-19 appropriate behaviour. Teachers have a very crucial role to play.

Dr. D.V.G. SANKARARAO,
Nellimarla, Andhra Pradesh

Bona fide press

As a remedy, the direction of the Madras High Court to the Tamil Nadu government to form a State Press Council may prove worse than the disease of removing fake journalism. It could end up being used by the ruling party to pack the council with its 'yes pressmen' to reap huge political dividends. A workable solution is to cancel, in the form of a judicial order, the passes and

special privileges enjoyed by the journalists who indulge in malpractices and who discard ethical principles. Large and time-honoured news houses should not accept political advertisements very often and strive to uphold the highest standards of the profession by reporting unbiased news.

K. CHELLAPPAN,
Chennai

To read more letters online, scan the QR code

