



Life after death

India must seize the opportunity to start a political dialogue to resolve the Kashmir issue

Syed Ali Shah Geelani was more an Islamist than a Kashmiri nationalist, and his demise at the age of 92 brings down the curtain on a phase of separatist politics in the Valley. He represented a strident pro-Pakistan stream of Kashmiri separatism. Geelani inspired armed rebellion and remained a steadfast barrier for any potential political dialogue between New Delhi and Kashmir separatists. He opposed a settlement of the Kashmir question that the former dictator of Pakistan, Pervez Musharraf, had helped formulate. Geelani's recalcitrance only hardened with age, but his death did not stir any public outpouring of Kashmir grievance even when heavy policing and communication restrictions in the Valley are accounted for. But there can be no denial of the fact that people have grown wary of the relentless cycle of conflict. Geelani's brand of politics was losing mass support even before the Indian crackdown on separatists acquired a new aggressive edge after the Pulwama suicide attack in February 2019. The Narendra Modi government abandoned negotiations in Kashmir, not only with separatists but even with mainstream political parties, save a half-hearted initiative in June this year. After the erstwhile State of Jammu and Kashmir was stripped of its autonomy and reorganised into two Union Territories in August 2019, the decline of separatists including Geelani was evident.

The volatile situation in Afghanistan, and Pakistan's euphoria about the return to power of the Taliban in Kabul will have an impact on the situation in Kashmir. The Taliban have said they would 'raise voice for Kashmir Muslims' and Pakistan has always maintained that peace in Afghanistan is connected to a resolution in Kashmir. Global Islamists are exulting over the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan. With Pakistan emerging as a key influencer in Kabul, the U.S. will have to seek new terms of engagement with it. New Delhi has been in self-congratulatory mode over Kashmir. Far from secession, even autonomy questions have been rendered irrelevant in conversations on Kashmir, which now revolve around restoration of its full statehood. However, the relative calm and silence in the Valley should not be mistaken for acquiescence. Political parties have expressed frustration over the fact that the June dialogue between them and Mr. Modi was aimless and not followed through. The political dialogue with mainstream parties must be carried ahead in full earnest. The chaos in Afghanistan presents challenges for India, especially in Kashmir, which need wider deliberations with the international community. But Geelani's death could be an opportunity to set the stage for new conversations with various Kashmiri outfits. The Government must use this moment to initiate a comprehensive dialogue to find a way forward for a future of the people of Kashmir as an integral part of India.

True mettle

India needs to develop infrastructure and improve access for differently-abled athletes

India saw another fortnight of good tidings in sports from Tokyo. Close on the heels of the recent Olympics there, in which India claimed an overall tally of seven medals inclusive of a lone gold, the country's differently-abled athletes extended this tale of excellence into the Paralympic Games. The quadrennial event, which concluded at the Japanese capital on Sunday, witnessed an exemplary show by these athletes representing 2.2% of India's population, who are differently-abled. India finished 24th in the table with 19 medals that featured five golds, eight silvers and six bronzes. This was India's finest outing at the Paralympics and eclipsed the previous best of four medals at the Rio de Janeiro edition in 2016. In a nation where sporting culture is sacrificed at the altar of academic excellence, any news about success on the turf has to be treated as a system-altering result. The challenges for the differently-abled are tougher, considering the body's limitations that these athletes first cope with through sheer willpower, and then there is the secondary task of overcoming society's innate scepticism. A simple access-audit of India's urban buildings would reveal how even a ramp essential for the differently-abled is either missing or added as an after-thought. In 2016, an audit initiated by government agencies did not find a single building that was completely accessible to the differently-abled.

Seen in that context, what India's paralympic contingent achieved is mind-boggling. This was a leap of faith mounted on endless hours at grounds and inside gymnasiums while sharpening muscle-memory. The Indian contingent reflected life's vicissitudes with athletes having personal stories steeped in tragedy: accidents, polio-afflictions or genetic issues. Yet, they strove towards excellence with an effervescent smile in place. Be it athletics, where javelin throwers are the toast of the month, or badminton or shooting, India had its moments of splendour. The five gold medallists – Sumit Antil, Pramod Bhagat, Krishna Nagar, Manish Narwal and Avani Lekhara – led from the front, and the last named 19-year-old shooter also won a bronze. India drew a blank in shooting at the preceding Olympics, but the differently-abled added five medals. The coaches, the Paralympic Committee of India and Sports Ministry played their parts while India excelled in a championship held in the shadow of a pandemic. Since its first medal at the 1972 Paralympics, India was a marginal presence until now. A reflexive-rewards exercise is on from various governments, and the corporate sector. If a percentage of those riches are allocated to improve sports infrastructure for the differently-abled, India will have more reasons for cheer in the coming years.

Reaching out to the 'undesirables'

Conflict resolution is not always a morally black-and-white business, as the example of the Taliban shows



HAPPYMON JACOB

Shedding its past hesitations, the Government of India has started an open, formal engagement with the Taliban who, by all accounts, will form the next government in Afghanistan. Until the recent India-Taliban meeting in Doha, India's engagement with the Taliban was through secret channels (for several years now), open but 'unofficial' (i.e., when New Delhi sent two retired diplomats to a meeting in Moscow in which the Taliban were present), or quiet and unpublicised (an undeclared meeting of Ministry of External Affairs officials with the Taliban in Doha in June this year). Engagement with the Taliban is useful in both securing India's interests in Afghanistan (to the extent possible) and to potentially moderate Taliban's internal and external behaviour (again, to the extent possible).

Beginning the process

Should a Taliban government, when it gets formed, be recognised? Given that a Taliban-led government is a foregone conclusion now, the international community must only accord such recognition as part of a negotiated process, a process aimed at moderating Kabul's new rulers. UN Security Council Resolution 2593, adopted at a meeting chaired by India, emphasising that Afghan soil should not be used for terror activity is a good beginning internationally. The international community should eventually recognise a Taliban-led government in return for guarantees that the latter will abide by norms governing terrorism, human rights, among others.

However, the question about engaging, and eventually recognising, the Taliban which has a terrible human rights record, and has literally captured power in Afghanistan through sheer force, has

been widely debated from a moral perspective. So it might be useful to reflect on the various moral aspects of engaging with undesirable elements (terror groups, insurgents, etc.) in general and the Taliban in particular.

Geopolitics and morality

Moral judgements in the conduct of international relations rest on a slippery slope for several reasons. For instance, are moral judgements/prescriptions devoid of power politics? How much does geopolitical power shape the boundaries of morally acceptable/unacceptable behaviour in international relations? Consider, for instance, phrases such as 'axis of evil' or 'rogue states' used by past United States administrations against states they disagreed with or wanted to isolate. Notwithstanding whether one agrees or disagrees with the policies of the target states, the point here is that such framing is a product of the ability of the United States to dictate a certain global moral standard. As historian E.H Carr argues in *The Twenty Years' Crisis: 1919-1939*, "It is a familiar tactic of the privileged to throw moral discredit on the under-privileged by depicting them as disturbers of the peace; and this tactic is as readily applied internationally as within the national community."

While all states use moral arguments in the pursuit of their respective national interests, it is the moral logic used by the powerful states or coalitions that tend to win over the weaker ones, thereby becoming the standards of behaviour. Put differently, morality is often a product of power even though there are other sources of morality than just power. Arguments stemming from moral universalism should, therefore, be challenged not only because they are patronising, but also because crude national interests often masquerade as moral universalism. Moral universalism may be desirable and even useful in certain contexts and for certain purposes, but it must be viewed with a critical eye. At the same time, one must also be careful not to fall victim to extreme arguments from moral re-



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lativism. Indeed, a healthy conversation between universalism and relativism could produce politically useful moral arguments. In short, moral questions governing the behaviour of states cannot be divorced from the geopolitical power and location of those states.

Range of 'undesirables'

The second question is who the rightful object of our moral opprobrium should be. Should they include only non-state actors and individuals, or also states? In general, there are degrees of behaviour that are generally considered reprehensible – ranging from freedom struggle, insurgency, state-sponsored terror to terrorist violence. While deciding to condemn, we routinely use a selective application of morality. Let us take the example of the Taliban. They have an irrefutable history of indulging in terrorist violence, human rights violations (especially those of women), and religious intolerance. But so have many countries with an equally dishonourable history of violent behaviour and proxy wars. Whether those states are held accountable or not depends on essentially two factors: their military power to dissuade potential disciplinarians (North Korea is a good example), and their ability to justify their actions in a 'morally acceptable' manner. Legitimacy and sovereignty accorded to states provide them with an added layer of protection.

The point here is about how we routinely single out certain actors as fit cases of our moral opprobrium which is a function of power and geopolitics. The Taliban's culpability is beyond doubt, as is that of many states. But why add another entity (Taliban) to the mix of powerful wrong-doers, you might ask. Here is why.

The key to revitalising India's reservation system

A socio-economic caste-based census becomes a necessary precondition to initiate any meaningful reform



SUPRIY RANJAN

Hoardings and posters lauding the Narendra Modi government for introducing reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) examinations and a renewed debate on caste census have once again brought the debate on affirmative action in the limelight. The affirmative action programme that was envisaged during the founding moments of the republic is indeed one of the remarkable provisions to have been worked out by our Constitution makers. It has been historically significant in enunciating the principle of justice in a deeply unequal and oppressive social order such as ours.

Still no equity

While it is undeniable that these provisions have been one of the protagonists of Indian democracy's success stories, these have also accumulated a fair share of problems and call for immediate policy attention and debate.

Through reservation of seats in political and public institutions of the state, it was thought that the hitherto marginalised groups – which have suffered generations of

oppression and humiliation – would, finally, be able to find place in the power sharing and decision-making processes. However, this strategy of removal of disabilities has not translated into an equalisation of life chances for many groups in our heterogeneous society.

Problems with current policy

There is now a strong demand from those who have not been able to accrue the benefits of reservations from within the marginalised sections, to devise some policy option which may be able to supplement the existing system of reservation.

The fact that the current system suffers from the "problem of reification" is not just wishful thinking, but a hard fact.

The data released by the Justice G. Rohini Commission's report on the sub-categorisation of OBCs gives a good synoptic view to understand this. Based on the last five years' data on appointments in central government jobs and OBC admissions to central higher education institutions, the commission concluded that 97% of central OBC quota benefits go to just under 25% of its castes. As many as 983 OBC communities – 37% of the total – have zero representation in both central government jobs and admissions to central universities. Also, the report states that just 10% of the OBC communities have accrued 24.95% of jobs admissions



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(<https://bit.ly/3h3L2rh>).

Clearly, the assumption that the disadvantages of every sub-group within each category are the same is severely misplaced.

It is important to note that the Rohini Commission's data are based just on the institutions that come under the purview of the central government. We hardly have any legible data on the socio-economic conditions of varied social groups at more local levels of State and society.

Consequently, asymmetrical distribution of reservation has severely deterred political projects of unified subaltern solidarity. Parties that were once able to build large Bahujan solidarities are now finding it difficult to garner such support. This should give us hints about the extent of the problem rather than ruling them out as mere conspiracies of breaking lower caste unity.

Insufficiency of data

As underlined above, there is a dire need of accurate data pertaining to the socio-economic condi-

The possibility of potential state socialisation is why we must engage with organisations we disagree with. There are many examples of individuals and organisations shunning violence and joining mainstream politics as a result of negotiated settlements, power sharing, or simply because of state socialisation (the process of learning the international political culture and how to live within its normative boundaries). Put differently, we engage violent outfits in the hope that the process of conflict resolution may change them; states are potentially more amenable to reason and normative arguments especially when they socialise with their peers which forces them to 'be like a state'.

Let us take the case of the Taliban again: military force could not defeat them, and given the suboptimal performance of sanctions (i.e., Iran, North Korea, Cuba, etc.), what options does the international community have when it comes to dealing with the Taliban? While engaging with the Taliban may or may not nudge them to moderate their behaviour, given the absence of other options, the international community might as well engage them to potentially socialise them into behaving like a normal state. Let me put that argument somewhat differently. We have three choices now *vis-à-vis* the Taliban: continue to militarily fight the Taliban, isolate and sanction the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, or engage and socialise them. The U.S.-led forces tried the first option for two decades without success, and the second option is what we used from 1996 to 2001 which led to disastrous consequences. So, we are basically left with option three.

The point of diplomacy, after all, is also to engage with the undesirables to try and change their positions. As a matter of fact, entities, individuals and states do change as a result of sustained negotiations. Whether or not legitimacy and recognition will temper an outfit with a violent past like the Taliban is indeed a challenging question. But one will have to make a call based on available al-

ternatives and potential outcomes; not based on quixotic notions of moral universalism.

There are serious moral questions being raised about New Delhi's recent outreach to the Taliban. Critics have argued that it is morally reprehensible for India to engage with a violent outfit such as the Taliban just because they are on the verge of statehood. While I do appreciate the moral logic of such criticism, let us keep in mind that international politics is not a site of perfect moral choices. More so, moral choices are also a product of geopolitical contexts and the historical location of a country. For India, located where it is – amidst a geostrategically challenging environment – its ability to make a 'morally perfect' choice *vis-à-vis* the Taliban is rather limited. It is imperative for New Delhi, therefore, to make an already bad situation somewhat better by engaging with an entity it otherwise would not have desired to engage.

A difficult art

Finally, there is a larger argument for reaching out to undesirable/rogue elements – to build peace and resolve conflicts. Notwithstanding what they say, democratic governments have routinely negotiated with terrorists, secretly or openly. Consider examples from the British government's secret talks with the Irish Republican Army (IRA) while the IRA was still carrying out attacks against the U.K., to the Spanish government's talks with the Basque Homeland and Freedom even after the latter's violence killing civilians, to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam-Sri Lankan government negotiations in the 2000s. Talking to the undesirables is a time-tested phenomenon. More importantly, peace-building is not always a morally black-and-white business. Often enough, the process of conflict resolution can be morally challenging, politically complicated and involves difficult choices.

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Stranger than fiction

The background story of high-profile criminal Suresh Chandrasekhar ('Ground Zero' page, September 4) has outstripped detective novels in every sense. That he was able to have a free run, wield untrammelled powers and wear many hats with no fear of the law, is a clear reflection of poor surveillance by multiple agencies. This is nothing but one more instance of a gross mockery of India's criminal justice system that

is already sliding.

V. JOHAN DHANAKUMAR,
Chennai

■ That the law and order officials were sitting ducks before a youngster who could effortlessly and inexplicably operate expansive criminal activities while within the four walls of a prison is worrying. His methods speak volumes of the extent bribery plays its part in high places. Surprisingly, multiple instances of spoofing were 'undetected' or conveniently

ignored. Surely, he is not the only one of his tribe. And that does not augur well for the nation.

SANATH KUMAR T.S.,
Thrissur, Kerala

Estate mystery

The mystery of the Kodanad murder-burglary case needs to be solved. Matters concerning the case have been drifting which has raised much suspicion in the minds of the common man. The DMK's announcement of a probe is an opportunity for the Tamil Nadu police to

probe the case without a biased mind.

THARCIUS S. FERNANDO,
Chennai

At Tokyo

It has been a super outing for India at the Tokyo Paralympics. Each day brought better news, to end in a stunning performance. The Indian contingent and its support system deserve wholesome praise and to have kept the Indian flag flying high from the start.

VINAY MAHADEVAN,
Dubai, U.A.E

■ The Paralympic Committee of India should allocate more resources to search, support, encourage and train differently-abled sports persons. There should be a completely new infrastructure. The Indian contingent has been a source of great inspiration for youngsters.

ANDREA JASPER,
Chennai

A surprise

I was in dread of undergoing the ordeal of renewing my passport, but was in for a

very pleasant surprise. I received my new passport in five days from the date of application. Years ago, it was an endless wait. This time, the Passport Seva Kendra office was a revelation – courteous behaviour and quick decisions. This change needs to be taken forward, with such a transformation in our local bodies, where the ordinary citizen is still a victim of inaction.

V. ANANTHA SUBRAMANIAN,
Chendamangalam, Kerala